

The Stay Interview Game

Following are seven scenarios representing different managers' approaches to managing their Stay Interviews. Each scenario offers a complex challenge, and your role is to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each manager's approach. Please make notes in the space provided after each scenario. Later we will ask you to rank-order each manager's effectiveness from most to least effective and then ask you to compare your answers to ours.

Please note that some of these examples represent extremes. Most Stay Interviews conducted by your company will be smoother and more congenial. But there might be a few that offer challenges that must be addressed, and the Stay Interview Game will prepare you and your managers for those challenges.

Scenario #1: We Call During Dinner

John's title at WCDD call center is team leader. The company's name is based on the initials of its four founding partners, but employees refer to the company as "We call during dinner."

John's duties are to manage a team of fifteen agents who have various levels of experience and skills. Because John has so many direct reports, most of his day is spent listening to calls and helping his agents solve problems. And oftentimes he is on the phones himself because of high turnover.

Two times each month John sits with each agent individually to conduct quality control meetings where together they listen to one of that agent's recorded calls which John has graded against the protocols the agent learned in training. The grading scale is from a low of 60 to a high of 100. Agents have learned that earning a score of 100 is nearly impossible, like Olympic scoring in that *something* is surely less than perfect.

Conducting Stay Interviews made John uneasy. He learned supervision from watching those above him, so his style is "Is everything OK?" and "Here's what you can do better." Turnover is 80 percent at John's center, and his own agents stay about as long, or short, as the rest. When one quits, John knows it is because the job is boring, the pay is low, and "that's the way young people are" . . . even though John is only 26.

John attended Stay Interview training and then told his team members what he was instructed to say, that he wanted to meet with them one-on-one to learn why they stay as well as how he could help them become more engaged and stay longer. Having never heard these types of words from John before, his team was surprised.

John's initial reluctance now turned to escape. He sought out Wendy, his manager, to explain that he was too busy to hold one more individual meeting with each agent that month so he planned to merge the Stay Interview discussion into one of the monitoring meetings. John knew this method would increase his own confidence and give him control of the discussion since he would begin the meeting telling the agent how many points she scored below 100 on the call they would listen to together. But Wendy explained that they all heard in training that the Stay Interview had to be held as a separate meeting, independent of any performance discussion. For John, playing the "busy card" did not work.

John scheduled his first Stay Interview meeting with Maria, a 4-year veteran with WCDD. John and Maria had always gotten along well, so John thought he would start with someone who would make his first meeting easy.

John began the meeting by asking Maria what she liked about her work, and Maria's answer was vanilla . . . "Job is OK; people are OK; customers get rude sometimes; commute is long when school is in session." John then asked Maria what she did not like, and Maria paused first and then said the following. "John, we all know you are having these meetings because you have to. You seem like an OK guy but none of us feel like you really care about us. We've all talked about this since you mentioned these meetings last week, and we just don't think telling you our problems is going to do any good."

John's mind flashed to Wendy first, knowing that she put him in this position because she would not let him combine this meeting with the monitoring session. But he knew he had to say something back.

"Well . . .," he began, "of course I care about you. It's just that it's so hard to show that when my job is to tell you what you can do better." John heard himself say those words and knew it was a cop-out but still hoped Maria would buy it.

She did not buy it. Maria entered the meeting knowing her years of experience made her the informal spokesperson for the team. Over the next 20 minutes, she told John that while having more "things" at work would be nice . . . "better schedules, more socials, maybe even vision care" . . . she observed that the team just wanted to feel better during their 40 hours at work and that changes in his behavior could be the answer.

"So you're blaming me for all of the problems in WCDD, huh?" John fired back. And he was just warming up. John went on to say that he could not control the pay scale, that he knew agents were expected to cram too much into calls, and that his manager and his job did not permit him time to be nice to each agent on his team. Then John drove home two points out of sheer frustration. "Besides, I

had to work under these conditions when I started, so you have to work under them, too. And when did the team ever do anything nice for me?”

Maria knew she was in too deep to bail so she made a brave suggestion. “John,” she said in a softer tone, “I think we should step back a little and think about all that’s been said here. How about if we meet again tomorrow morning and talk about ways we can make this better, for all of us? I promise I will keep all that we’ve said to myself between now and then.”

John mumbled his OK, not realizing that he had just lost control of his Stay Interview meeting.

That night John’s mind raced back to all that he said and should have said. The emotional side told him what our minds tell us when we hear bad news at work about others’ negative feelings for us . . . that our long hours are not appreciated and that we do not make enough money to take this . . . so we should flee.

Near morning, though, John knew Maria was at least a little right and that he could try harder, be nicer, reach out more, be more positive, and look for reasons to actually like the members of his team. Or at least most of them.

While John was flopping from anger to acceptance, Maria knew she had volunteered for a job with deep consequences. She could emerge as a hero to John *and* the team, or she might face “angry John” again in the morning and have hurt her relationship with him forever. And he *is* the boss.

At 9 a.m., Maria strode into John’s work area and suggested they find a quiet corner in the break room and have a cup of coffee. John followed and still did not know just what he would say. Once they settled into their table, Maria said the following: “John, I thought a lot about this last night, and I believe that you not only *can* become a caring supervisor but that you *want* to be one.”

From there the conversation went easy. Maria’s opening line made John know that *she liked him and cared about him*. John felt more human now and less of a work machine. Together, he and Maria worked out a plan of ideas whereby John would make himself more available to the team, begin each monitoring session with at least three compliments, go out of his way to learn a few personal things about each agent so he could ask about them, and focus on smiling more and frowning less. The only hard part for John was realizing that his changed behaviors would be an indicator that he had been “wrong” before, but over time he decided that was OK.

Toward the end of the meeting, John told Maria he would hold a team meeting to announce “the new John.” Not good, Maria said. Start the new ways immediately, but let each agent have his or her say in the ensuing Stay Interviews so all will have contributed to the solutions. “Besides,” she said, “you really don’t know what else you’ll hear because we all see things a little differently.”

Two months later, John was a better supervisor because the Stay Interview feedback guided him to new behaviors. He was a combination of “new John” mixed with some of “old John,” inconsistent for sure, but better. And engagement and retention improved across his team as a result.

John’s strengths & shortcomings:

Scenario #2: Tipping Cows

Brenda’s eyes glanced toward the floor when she heard her manager say she wanted to meet with team members to learn why they stay. Brenda was unhappy and was embarrassed about her problems but faked being OK day to day.

Raised and living in a rural midwestern town, Brenda caught the nursing bug early and was fortunate her parents could help her through college. After graduation, a friend-of-the-family doctor was setting up shop and asked Brenda to join. She did and helped that doctor treat her community’s patients for 23 years. Brenda’s skills were a perfect match for providing individualized, caring treatment for those who needed it.

Out of the blue, the doctor announced his early retirement. He told Brenda that the office lease would expire soon, that he had found a buyer for his equipment, and that he was confident his patients could find new sources of care. He also knew the local community hospital was expanding and certainly Brenda could find work there.

Still dazed, Brenda proceeded to apply at the hospital. She learned there were immediate openings and believed treating patients was the same regardless of the setting. Her commute was a few miles longer since she had to drive into town but that was OK. She had also been told that she would have to learn technology skills that were new to her, as the hospital had recently installed a new system for nurses to record and track their patients’ treatments and medications.

Brenda’s first week included detailed and extensive training on computers and technology. Each nurse was anchored to a laptop on a wheeled cart that they pushed from room to room. Other nurses referred to these carts as COWs for “computers on wheels.” The chuckle expression when navigating tight spaces was to say, “Don’t tip your COW!”

Brenda’s face fell when hearing the Stay Interview announcement because she struggled with technology and everyone in the room knew it . . . except her manager, Billie. Brenda’s technology

experience at the doctor's office was thin because the doctor had never invested in anything beyond Microsoft Office. Worse for Brenda, she had asked for help from so many of her peers that they were losing patience with her. It was not that Brenda was afraid to ask for help. Instead, she really believed she could never learn to use the software because technology frightened her. She feared she was too old to learn.

On "Stay Interview day," Brenda confessed. Billie had heard snippets from other nurses about Brenda's computer shortcomings and felt good that the issue was now on the table. Billie saw Brenda's need as easy to pinpoint, that she required more classroom training and a peer coach who would be open to Brenda's questions. Brenda nodded that this would help yet felt deep inside that no amount of training could help her conquer her fear. It was like a chronic illness that would never go away.

During the meeting, Brenda also surfaced a second concern about schedules. During her interviews, Brenda heard clearly that her hospital job would require working a fair share of weekends and holidays. This schedule was far removed from the doctor's office where the hours were weekdays and daylight and all after-hour emergencies were referred to 9-1-1 or to the hospital. In fact, Brenda had not worked a Friday afternoon in her life.

Brenda explained the usual reasons why weekend and holiday work was unattractive . . . family events, church, errands, overnight guests . . . but knew her peers had the same obstacles to overcome. So she proposed an advantage she could offer Billie in order to gain a schedule preference in order that she could at least pick which holidays she worked rather than have them be selected by chance.

The advantage Brenda offered was that she would agree to be the first nurse called when a night-shift nurse called in sick, as long as she was not required to work three consecutive shifts. Brenda saw this plan as a win-win, that Billie would know she had a guaranteed fill-in without straining her relationships by calling others on the team. Brenda was willing to tolerate these life interruptions to earn choices regarding holidays but she also craved the overtime she would earn as a result.

Unfortunately for Brenda, her "advantage plan" fell flat. Billie listened carefully but knew early on that she could not agree to Brenda's idea without giving all others on the team the same opportunity. Billie also knew that the scheduling plan in place was ultimately fair and that it treated everyone in an identical way, and that is the way she wanted it.

Billie explained her reasons for rejecting Brenda's idea in a clear, firm, and professional way. She smiled as she told Brenda how moving from the schedule-friendly world of the doctor's office must be hard and that she privately questioned whether Brenda could make that adjustment before hiring her.

She concluded by saying that others on the team might want the same arrangement Brenda has proposed and that she was unwilling to stir the schedule pot by advancing it.

Billie then asked Brenda if she had any other things to discuss. Brenda said no, that she was looking forward to finally grasping the technology that she had so far been unable to learn. When she got home that night, Brenda understood that the feared technology was not going away, and neither was weekend and holiday work.

One month later, Billie saw Brenda in the hall. Walking together, Brenda told Billie that the computer training had helped but that the peer mentor idea gave her the biggest boost of confidence which was what she really needed. Billie congratulated Brenda on advancing her skills and then went about her way.

Billie's strengths & shortcomings:

Scenario #3: RENRON Consulting

Two years ago, Charles took his recently earned MBA to RENRON Consulting Company, choosing RENRON over several others that made very attractive offers. Charles chose RENRON for several reasons, not the least of which was that RENRON was perceived globally as one of the top three firms of its type.

But the last year had not been kind to RENRON. A series of ethics violations and resulting lawsuits had weakened both its stock value and its international reputation. There were days when Charles regretted his choice of employer.

On "Stay Interview day," both Charles and his manager, Eleanor, knew this topic would dominate their discussion. Eleanor took the lead and began the meeting by asking Charles his most recent thoughts on the topic. Charles replied, "I have no new thoughts, Eleanor, just the same ones. How did our executives put us in this position, and what are they going to do about it?"

Eleanor had prepared diligently and read from her notes: on this date the company reiterated its statement of ethics; on another date the board appointed a special committee to review the policies that had caused the problems; and on another date the company announced all executives, managers, and consultants would take a newly designed ethics course and sign off that they would act in ethical ways on behalf of the company.

These were old words to Charles. He knew he was far too distant from the source of the fixes to feel comfortable with his future. And headhunters were calling every week.

Feeling Charles' frustration, Eleanor said the following: "I know you are frustrated, Charles, and I am too. But I'm telling you all that I know. What else can I do to help you believe RENRON is pulling itself out of the problem and will soon be on the road to full recovery? How can I assure you that we will soon be back in the top three?"

The part Charles heard was "I'm telling you all that I know." He realized that Eleanor's word was "too small" for him, that he needed to be assured by a higher source, especially one who could tell him about the problems and solutions in more detail. Subconsciously, what Charles really needed was to feel "on the inside" of the closed-door discussions, a status no one on his level had been privy to.

"I just need to hear it from someone higher," was the sentence Charles chose to express his position.

Smart Eleanor was reading the situation accurately and realized a time-out was in order. "Let me think about your concern, Charles. Can we meet again on Thursday?"

That afternoon, Eleanor asked Mitchell, her manager, if they could talk for few minutes. Eleanor suggested to Mitchell that together they identify someone for Charles to meet with whom Charles would see as an insider yet also as a person who would effectively assure Charles that everything would be OK. Mitchell pushed back, expressing a legitimate concern that Charles should receive no special treatment. Knowing Mitchell as she did, Eleanor expected this objection. After much discussion, she sold Mitchell on the idea that since she scheduled a monthly lunch meeting with each member of her team, it would be OK to invite an executive to join her lunch with Charles the following month.

The discussion then turned to which executive to choose, and Mitchell volunteered himself. Eleanor anticipated this stage in their meeting too, as Mitchell saw himself as a highly respected executive who was mentor to all. But Eleanor also knew that she needed a new face, someone who Charles knew by very strong reputation and whom he would see as flattering to meet. Thinking further, Eleanor knew she needed to secure a lunch date with someone whose very presence Charles would see as testimony to his own growing stature at RENRON.

Eleanor knew how to manage Mitchell. She proceeded to tell him all the reasons he would be a great choice and concluded by saying that she needed a new face. He reluctantly agreed, and together they decided the best choice was Mercedes who was the divisional executive for the national consulting group. Eleanor had worked closely over the years with Mercedes, and Mitchell agreed she should contact Mercedes on her own.

From this point forward, Eleanor put the finishing touches on her plan. She first briefed Mercedes on Charles' concern and secured her agreement for lunch. She then asked Charles if inviting Mercedes to join their monthly lunch meeting would give him the right opportunity to discuss his thoughts with an executive. Charles beamed and left her office with his head held high.

Privately, Eleanor knew that she was giving Charles privileged treatment over his peers and could think of no way to disguise it. Ultimately she decided that Charles was one of her best performers who had the greatest potential, so all means should be used to keep him and to engage him. Over time she might ask Mercedes to join her for other team member lunches, so she convinced herself that Mercedes' lunch with Charles was the first of many.

Two weeks later, Mercedes joined Charles and Eleanor for lunch. After exchanging pleasantries and ordering their meals, Eleanor opened the discussion by inviting Charles to state his concerns. After hearing them, Mercedes gave essentially the same response Eleanor had given Charles weeks before. She added a detail here and there that Charles had not heard, but more importantly she positioned the recent goings-on within the context of RENRON's solid history of industry leadership and ethical behavior.

After lunch, Eleanor accompanied Charles to his office and asked for his impressions. Glowing in the aftermath of a private executive briefing, Charles said he was proud to be a member of RENRON. Eleanor knew she had patched Charles' emotional need, even though he believed what he needed was more information.

Eleanor's strengths & shortcomings:

Scenario #4: Parts-Is-Parts

Robert had now completed seven Stay Interviews and had his routine down. As GM of Parts-Is-Parts Fried Chicken store #66, Robert knew the easy part about satisfying his employees was that their jobs were not complicated. So far he had fixed a few relationships among peers, learned a thing or two about his own style, and explained to one team member why the company could not pay more for her family's health insurance. With seven meetings done, Robert felt like a real problem-solver.

Robert had also completed the Stay Interviews for the most valued members of his team and was now moving into the group he considered to be "phase two." These were the passive, steady

employees who had been there forever. Next up was James, a 9-year veteran who loved to fry chicken. James had a ready smile for everyone that came straight from his heart, although it came via the exposure of a missing front tooth.

Robert began with his usual introduction, exclaiming how he wanted to build his Parts-Is-Parts store into the very best one where all team members wanted to come to work. He then asked James how he could make his job better.

James threw a curve. Smiling as always, he told Robert that he had given his all for nine full years and that it was time he got his due. James wanted to be promoted to shift leader and then within two years land a coveted spot in the Parts-Is-Parts management training program.

Stunned, Robert searched for an easy sentence that would reduce James' expectations. After an uncomfortable few seconds he settled on this one: "Why, James, would you ever want the headaches that come with managing people?"

Robert knew he had to nip this wish in the bud and resorted to telling James all of the reasons why moving up the ladder would make him unhappy. But within a minute Robert could hear himself babbling and knew he had been caught off guard. He then said the magic phrase every smart manager says during Stay Interviews that take on sudden twists: "Why don't you give me a few days to think about this, James, and let's talk again on Friday."

Robert was in a pickle he had to solve on his own. Sponsoring James upstream to the next level would lead to you-gotta-be-kidding glances and worse. Even if he found a way to promote James to shift leader, the Parts-Is-Parts management training program offered such stiff competition that James had no chance of getting in. In a way this put even more pressure on Robert because he could blame the company for James' not winning a spot in the training program, but he had no defense for not promoting James to shift leader. That decision was his and his alone.

Robert's decision became clear . . . when in doubt, stall. He wrote out six questions to ask James about why he wanted to become shift leader without ever mentioning the management training program. A few of the questions were hypothetical that used current employees as examples, such as how would you handle Alicia if she came in late two days in a row. Instead of just asking for answers, Robert asked James to act out his responses, believing James might stumble by having to say out loud the exact words he would use to solve a common employee issue.

But James' answers were pretty good. In fact, Robert realized that James was unintentionally instructing him on how to handle people-management situations by presenting approaches and

solutions Robert had never considered on his own. Somehow, beneath the cloak of this grease-stained apron was the mind of a potential people-leader.

Flummoxed again, Robert bought more time. “Let’s meet again next week,” he said. James beamed back approvingly through the gap in his teeth.

For Robert, the decision-making flowchart had become clear. Even if James had hidden talents, no one would believe it. So if he wanted to give James a legitimate opportunity to become shift leader, he had to find a way for others to see the undiscovered side of James. Robert also knew there was Plan B, which was to give James a “non-legitimate opportunity,” in other words to fake that he would help with no intentions of ever truly sponsoring him.

Robert eventually decided on Plan A, or at least a hybrid version. Since shift leader positions became available every six months or so, he had time to build his plan. Step one, he decided, was to elevate James to a minor leadership role within the store in order for James to demonstrate his newly disclosed abilities. Robert sensed that he could never promote James without finding a way to sell him in advance to his peers.

During their next meeting, Robert opened by saying the following to James: “Last week you told me some really good ideas about how you would approach team members, James, and I was pretty impressed. I have an idea for you that is a good next step, and I want to hear your opinion about it. But before I tell it to you, I want you to know that I can never promise you a promotion to shift leader or especially to the Parts-Is-Parts management training program because there are many employees in addition to you who want those jobs. But by working together, hopefully we can put you in a position to compete. How does this sound so far?”

James nodded and leaned forward. The idea, Robert explained, was for James to take on a training role in the weekly team meetings. Each week James would identify a piece of one job and provide a tip and then ask the team to contribute additional tips. For example, week one’s tip would be things to tell yourself so that you would keep smiling when a customer becomes rude. After each meeting James would summarize the ideas and post them on the bulletin board by the time clock. James would preview his comments in advance with Robert each week, and they could anticipate other good ideas they would hear from the team.

Robert knew the risks involved. A few members of his team would for sure question why James got such a plum role that made him look superior to them. This situation would lead to inevitable gossip and nonproductive chatter among the team. Additionally, Robert sometimes invited his manager to these meetings, and he expected to be questioned about his judgment.

But after much thought, Robert saw James as an employee worth investing in. His bet was that after two meetings all doubts would be dismissed and that his team and manager would see the wisdom of his decision. And once sold, he then had a legitimate choice to move James into the next shift leader position or to recommend him for the same position in another store.

Robert's best skill in responding to James was probably buying time, and he had done it again. And when the next shift leader position came open, Robert would have much more information on James to make an insightful decision.

Robert's strengths & shortcomings:

Scenario #5: Burning Bridges

Paul knew he was last on the Stay Interview schedule. Being 52, he wondered if the meeting sequence was based on age. One month ago Shirley, his manager, announced the Stay Interview process and said she would reach out to each team member individually. Since then Paul watched each of his younger peers go in and out of Shirley's office and then heard scuttlebutt regarding the promises she had made . . . usually more training that could lead to more money and promotions.

Paul did not mind being last, he told himself, because *he* might meet with himself last too. Paul was a lifer, having joined New-Age Engineering right out of college, and never made a ripple about leaving or wanting something more. "Team player" was Paul's mantra, day to day, decade to decade.

But Paul knew, too, that the recession has sapped his 401(k) and that he needed to make more money to retire in 10 years. So the timing of his Stay Interview was not nearly as important as the outcome. And he was confident he would leave with a good plan as the other employees had, since his performance appraisals had always been outstanding.

When the big day came, Paul received a text from Shirley's assistant asking if he could move the meeting to the following Tuesday. As was his way, Paul tapped back with a smiley face and said that would be fine. Come Tuesday, Paul arrived at Shirley's office early with prepared notes in hand. Though Shirley arrived late, Paul maintained his optimism.

Shirley began the meeting with a warm greeting and then thanked Paul for his years of outstanding service. She then said she was pleased that Paul was on a steady course, and his contributions were just as she needed them to be.

Paul was waiting for questions that would cue his notes, but as he listened to Shirley he feared they would never come. Finally he interrupted and said, “Shirley, I need more money, and I know I can contribute more.”

At just that moment, Shirley’s Blackberry buzzed and she checked the message. Through a thin smile she asked Paul’s forgiveness and sent a lengthy response.

Paul knew he had to lead the discussion and proceeded with uncharacteristic bravado. For most of his career, he said, he had been pigeonholed into designing bridges and similar structures. This work left him with fewer projects than young engineers who had learned in college to use various software products to do different types of work. Paul went on to say that his strongest computer-design skill was the result of a company-sponsored course. Virtually all of his college training was obsolete.

Paul knew he needed more training in order to be more valuable. His deepest fear was that the economy would hit another downturn and that he could be laid off. And in Paul’s mind, being laid off and “getting a package” brought the same dead-end result. He could not take a lump sum in place of 10 more years of work and provide for his family as he intended. And without more training he was probably not employable by another firm.

Paul explained his predicament in lucid terms to Shirley. From his perspective, the problem had a simple solution which he was leading up to. Shirley’s perspective, however, was that this meeting should already be over. Paul was “parked” in her mind and rightfully restricted to bridge design and similar projects. Her younger team members were better trained, more versatile, and cheaper to pay. Paul should be glad to coast to retirement and should hope she retained him that long.

Not knowing Shirley’s thoughts, Paul proceeded to lay out his plan. On his own he had discovered four university courses he could take by correspondence that would supplement his knowledge and therefore his contribution. Paul knew that by completing these courses and doing complementary work assignments, he would ensure his place in the workforce for 10 years or more, whether employed by New-Age or another firm. The total cost for Paul’s plan was less than \$20,000, and he asked Shirley to support him.

Shirley’s answer was no but she held off on saying it. Instead she told Paul she had planned just 20 minutes for this meeting and their time was up. “You’ve laid a lot on me, Paul. Let me get back to you with my answer. I’ll need to check this with those above me.” Paul nodded, smiled, and extended his hand in partnership before he left Shirley’s office.

During the next few days Paul’s proposal did not make Shirley’s top 10. She had many distractions about current work getting done as even the young smart ones could get off track. But

seeing Paul in the hallways and cafeteria reminded her that she had to tell him the bad news. This decision was easy for Shirley. It made no sense to invest money in Paul when she could invest it instead in someone with more potential and especially with more years to contribute. “Besides,” she told herself, “no one here really listens to Paul, so his being disappointed won’t resonate with the rest of the team. He’s a loner who has served his time and gotten just what he deserved. As long as I can keep him employed,” she reasoned, “I have been a fair manager even if he never agrees.” Shirley also knew she did not need any help from her own manager to make this decision. Her thinking and conscience were equally clear.

Nine days later, Shirley invited Paul in for a “5-minute chat.” She told Paul that she was pleased with his current contributions and saw no reason to trouble him to take additional courses. She promised to seek extra projects for him when circumstances permitted and again thanked him for all he had contributed to New-Age Engineering.

Shirley’s strengths & shortcomings:

Scenario #6: Rump Roast

“Thank you for shopping with us, m’am,” Lester said for the 37th time that day. Today was Saturday at Shamrock Supermarket, the week’s busiest day. For Lester, Saturdays just offered more of the same boring work.

Lester joined the company to bag groceries while still in high school. After graduation he stayed on and talked his way into the butcher shop where he learned the fundamentals of carving and packaging. On Saturdays he spends much of his time in the back room preparing custom orders. But Lester has found that after two years of butchering, every day seems like another serving of rump roast.

Lester told the same to his manager, Kelly, during his Stay Interview. Kelly knew this grievance would surface but also knew there were no easy answers. Many employees stood ahead of Lester for consideration for other positions. Besides, two years did not seem like a long enough time for Lester to complain his way to another position.

Kelly’s dilemma was compounded by Lester’s behavior. He came to work each day and completed more work than most. He was reliable, volunteered to help others, and was good with

customers when he got the chance. The flip side was that Lester could not manage his mouth as he constantly chattered toward anyone in reach about his life and his opinions of Shamrock.

Lester's daily menu of information included comments about his nagging wife, his unappreciative children, and his neighbor who will not cut his grass, as well as running commentaries on politics, religion, and the economy. Lester of course believed his positions were always right, and somewhere down deep he had adopted the idea that he was also entertaining. His peers would call him anything but and referred to him behind his back with names that were similar to rump roast.

Kelly knew this situation was out of control but had done nothing to stop it. Early on she thought Lester would "outgrow it," that running at the mouth was his way of adjusting to a new circumstance. Then once or twice she sent him a discouraging glance and hoped he would take the hint. But hints could not stop this man who was on a subconscious, ego-driven mission to lead others toward his every conviction.

Until now, Lester had gotten by because Kelly basically ignored him. Other members of the team had little faith that Kelly would ever confront him so they complained among themselves but said nothing to her. Kelly's position morphed into appreciating Lester's productivity and tolerating his shortcomings. Besides, she thought, nobody seemed too concerned about Lester's babbles.

But now he wanted a promotion or at least a transfer to another area. Kelly gritted inside because her one supervisory class had taught her that she needed to be strong.

As the Stay Interview continued, Kelly absorbed Lester's complaints about the redundancy of his work. Lester spoke with full-force confidence that Kelly would move him because he had only heard good things about his work. And he knew he was always right.

Kelly allowed Lester to delve into great detail about his frustrations in order to procrastinate her role in the meeting because she did not know how to approach him. When he finally stopped talking, she said this: "Lester, we have a problem we need to discuss, and you are going to have to overcome this problem before I consider you for another position."

Kelly found her spine and told Lester all that she knew and felt about his expressing his opinions. Lester responded by talking, of course, and initially defended that his opinions were right. Kelly redirected the exchange to present Lester's ramblings as distracting from work, regardless of their accuracy. This concept was hard for Lester to grasp because above all else he saw himself as an entertainer, someone who made everyone's day at work better.

After 45 minutes of verbal jousting, Lester asked Kelly why she had not told him this before. Partly to shift the blame, he told Kelly he had come into his Stay Interview to move his career forward

with Shamrock but now felt he was taking a step back. Kelly felt a brief urge to say something apologetic but instead said, “I know this is not what you came to hear, Lester, but you need to hear it.”

Lester took on Kelly’s feedback like the five stages of death. In the denial stage, he asked a few peers if his opinions really bothered them and learned indeed they did. These talks were difficult for both sides because not only did they require candor, but Lester still defended his opinions as correct.

Ultimately, Lester toned down his rhetoric and continued to do a good job. Kelly monitored his ramblings and improved a bit at delivering timely feedback. She also looked for positive things to say. For Lester, work became less fun because he had to place his mouth on guard, and he wondered if others really liked him since they had held back before. This meant they had not been straight, he told himself, including Kelly. So while he stayed in the butcher shop, he wondered if Shamrock was still the right place for him to work.

Kelly’s strengths & shortcomings:

Scenario #7: Happy Endings

The employee survey results were in, and Marvin wasn’t happy.

Marvin is the executive director of Happy Endings Nursing Home, one of many owned by Sunshine Corporation. Sunshine followed the demographic paths of retirees to build hundreds of nursing homes across the southern part of the U.S. with heavy clusters in Florida, Texas, and Arizona.

This pathway led to a shortage of nursing home employees during any economy. Because facilities are built where retirees relocate, they tend to be clustered in narrow geographic areas. Facilities then compete for local talent but much of that talent prefers to work anywhere else. Nursing home employees must have big hearts, strong wills, and high tolerance for sights, sounds, and smells that others would abandon.

Marvin was keenly aware that employee retention and engagement drove his service levels up . . . or down. Whereas the Sunshine headquarters team accepted high turnover as inevitable for the industry, Marvin monitored his carefully. During the past three years he had lost an average of 70 percent of his team each year.

Marvin's engagement survey results looked about the same as last year's. The overall engagement index was down two points. And like last year, the main employee concerns appeared to be pay, schedules, careers, and communication.

Marvin was perplexed. He could not understand how last year's solutions had not yielded better results. Sure, pay would always be an issue, and Marvin privately questioned whether any employees would reveal in a survey that they actually liked their pay. He certainly would not.

Marvin tried to make schedules better but found the smarter fix was to hire employees who *wanted* the unpopular schedules, at least he thought. For careers, Marvin brought in a local consultant to present a three-part course teaching employees to take charge of their own careers, and he promised his team that all openings would be posted immediately. Communication, he figured, was the easiest of all to fix because he needed to do a better job staying in touch with the team. So Marvin implemented town hall meetings each quarter. He even came in at 5 a.m. to meet with the night shift.

Why, then, had survey scores not gone up? And what could he do differently this year?

Enter a new idea. Always checking on new people-management trends, Marvin had heard about Stay Interviews as an alternative to surveys. What might happen, he wondered, if he designed Stay Interview questions that aligned with the weakest areas of his survey results and as a result learned the fixes employees really wanted instead of the best ones he could invent?

Marvin explained this idea to his management team and they responded so-so at best. But Marvin knew his idea was a winner and would not back off. He returned to his office and wrote out one question each about pay, schedules, careers, and communication. The next day he told his management team his plan, that he would meet with each of them to ask the four questions and that they would then in turn ask their direct reports, down to the first-line employees. From there, he told them, together they would create real solutions that worked versus ones like he implemented last year.

Marvin's team went easy on him during their Stay Interviews. They were actually a pretty pleased bunch, but they also knew Stay Interviews were Marvin's pet project and they wanted him to feel good about their meetings. The management group's interviews with their teams, though, produced real frustration. While a few wanted pay increases or career help, most wanted things that only their immediate supervisor could provide. As the Stay Interviews proceeded down the organization, a trend became clear: most employees desired changes that only a better supervisor could provide, not a company-wide program.

Marvin had told his management team that one month out they would meet to review all Stay Interview results. When that day came, the managers trudged in with stacks of data that represented all

inputs from those beneath them, up to three levels down. Marvin had given them a form to complete that listed the core subjects of pay, schedules, career, and communication. But Marvin also included a column identifying employee comments that could best be addressed by the company and another column showing comments best solved by the immediate supervisor. Marvin kept score on a flip chart in front of the room, and the final count was supervisor 62 percent, company 38 percent.

Examples where supervisors could improve included the following:

- “Provide ongoing feedback on improvement areas rather than hold it until the performance appraisal, and use the feedback as reason for a below-average raise.”
- “Tell us when the policies change on patient communications instead of correcting me after I’ve done something wrong without knowing the new rules.”
- “Give clearer instructions for doing a new procedure, so I feel good about learning on the job rather than feel bad about doing something wrong.”

Marvin then said to the group: “This is a great lesson learned. I wondered if we would all learn things about our management styles we could all do better. From what I can see, every supervisor got some healthy feedback and needs to grow from it. That is, everyone but me because none of you were open with me. So I’ve made a list of changes I’m going to make to my style, and here they are.” Marvin then distributed a page on which he had printed a form for each supervisor, top to bottom, to pledge management style changes to their team. Marvin’s form included his changes, and he read them aloud and concluded, “Now you have one more chance for input . . . but actually you can always give me input. Are these the changes I need to make?”

After reaching agreement, the management team members presented their own management changes to their teams. Each required some discussion and negotiation, but ultimately every manager and supervisor throughout Happy Endings reached agreement with their teams on daily supervisory improvements. They shared these improvement lists with their managers too, so their managers could support them . . . and check on their progress.

Marvin now felt like a savvy retention leader. As the weeks went by, he reviewed each manager’s Stay Interview results for ideas he could convert into company-wide programs. After much consideration, he chose only three and left the rest alone. He told the management team that he thought this new approach had placed more work on the managers and supervisors and that he did not want to burden them with implementing more than a few new programs. But Marvin knew his real reason: he wanted to test whether changes the supervisors made to their styles would raise next year’s scores without improving company policies or programs.

Marvin's strengths & shortcomings:
