

Board Member Exit Interviews

Many organizations conduct exit interviews with departing staff members. Whether an employee leaves suddenly or gives ample notice, it makes sense to find out what prompted the person to resign.

The reason may be personal or work related. A conversation with a departing employee often provides a wealth of information about the organization, office practices, morale, or other personnel issues. Similarly, when board members leave – whether at the end of a term or prematurely – the board can gain valuable insight about its own affairs from the departing members, if they are willing to share their views.

Benefits of exit interviews

By chatting with a departing board member, you (as board chair or other designated interviewer) can learn about

- his or her personal experience of board service on your board. If the experience was positive, you may want to try to keep the person involved in some other way; if the experience was negative, you will want to find out why and determine if the board should consider changing the way it operates.
- his or her opinion about how the board works, whether its practices are sound, and whether the board functions as a team
- the prevailing reputation of the organization and how the community sees it
- whether the chair is perceived as efficient and motivating
- ideas for changes that would make the board experience more valuable for future board members and improve the effectiveness of the entire board

Areas for caution

If you have a disgruntled board member who is unable to be objective, the interview may turn negative. Board members, in general, do not need to abide by the advice about not “burning bridges.” But serious and constructive critique should always be welcome – even if it relates to the actions and decisions of peers. Personal attacks, of course, are not appropriate. Board members resign for a variety of reasons, including feeling that they are not heard or utilized in a meaningful way; occasionally, they may question the ethical practices of the board. Any comments they make about these areas are worthy of the board’s attention.

Who should do the exit interview?

In general, exit interviews should be conducted by the board chair, the executive committee (if you have one), or the governance committee; even the past board chair could perform this role. Trust is an issue when board members candidly share their impressions of their board experiences. The interviewer should be sensitive to the situation and prepared to hear candid thoughts, even the critical ones.

Sample questions for an exit interview

Here are some issues to tackle during the interview. Choose the questions that seem most appropriate for your board. Remember that the interview is not an interrogation but a chat with a person who (hopefully) contributed a great deal to your board and who has valuable observations that may improve board service for current and future board members. Make the exit interview a positive experience so the departing board member will continue to be a “freelance” ambassador for the organization.

Motivations

- Why did you agree to serve on this board?

Expectations

- Did you receive adequate orientation? Was your role well explained?
- Were there any major surprises? Did things happen as you expected?
- What was most rewarding about your service?
- What did you like least?
- Did you feel you were needed, appreciated, and able to use your skills?

Your peers

- Was it easy to integrate into the board?
- Did you feel everyone’s voice was heard?
- How would you describe the chair’s leadership skills?
- What was your relationship with the chief executive?

Your advice

- What advice would you offer new board members?
- What would you do differently now that you have experience serving on the board?
- How would you improve the way the board functions?
- What should be the board’s priority right now?

Future

- Would you be interested in remaining active with the organization or the board? In what ways?