

# Staff Engagement and Retention Stay Interview Desktop Guide

NIH Office of Human Resources

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## Purpose of this Guide

This Stay Interview Guide is a structured framework that supervisors can use to implement and conduct Stay Interviews. The purpose of this guide is to provide standardized guidance, templates, and checklists to support supervisors and leadership in the implementation of Stay Interviews and successful conversations. This guide is a tool designed to improve retention and increase engagement of employees. It is intended to provide the necessary support and framework to be successfully implemented in Institutes and Centers (IC) across the NIH.

## What is a Stay Interview?

A Stay Interview is an interview conducted with an employee to learn why the employee continues to work for the employer and what the organization can do to enhance the employee's engagement and retain them. These structured conversations are designed to strengthen employee engagement within the NIH, encourage building open and trusting relationships, and provide insight into trends occurring within the workforce. **Stay Interviews are not performance conversations** – these are conversations targeted at learning what can be done for employees to improve their experience within the IC. They are intended as a resource to increase a supervisor's awareness of what contributes to their employees' engagement and satisfaction within the organization.

Stay Interviews help supervisors identify the factors that drive an individual employee's satisfaction, engagement, and retention with the IC. During the conversation, supervisors can ask employees about their perceptions of the workplace and what they can do as supervisors to improve it. The employee might share positive work characteristics regarding satisfaction, engagement, and commitment, their concerns about the work environment, and specific actions their supervisor could take to resolve their concerns. Understanding the factors that encourage an employee's development and success while recognizing the reasons employees consider leaving is critical to creating strategies that increase commitment and reduce turnover.

ICs should standardize Stay Interview practices to provide equal and inclusive opportunities for all their employees, and across NIH, to provide feedback about their experiences and be heard. Standardization will also assist with the consistency of collecting feedback, allowing ICs to have a heightened ability to identify trends within the organization and better focus on issues concerning employees. When done correctly, Stay Interviews encourage supervisor engagement with staff and provide supervisors an opportunity to build commitment, recognize high performers, and assist employees as needed.

## Benefits of Conducting Stay Interviews

- ✓ **Increased employee engagement:** Employees who have a say in their workplace will be more engaged and invested in the IC's success. Stay Interviews recognize employees and appreciate their loyalty, factors which are positively related to commitment and engagement with the organization.
- ✓ **Targeted actions:** Stay Interviews provide specific information that can help supervisors target issues and reinforce factors that motivate their employees. They can also help identify individual development goals and training needs. Knowing what keeps employees in the IC can ensure that those practices and policies continue, while working to improve the aspects that are not working as well.
- ✓ **Improved individual effectiveness and performance:** Highly motivated and engaged employees are generally more productive. Employees who feel their input and efforts are meaningful to leadership will continue to produce high-level outcomes.
- ✓ **Fewer surprises for supervisors:** Identifying issues early can help supervisors avoid a last-minute scramble to cover duties and recruit. Stay Interviews can build positive relationships between supervisors and employees, and can encourage employees to reach out with concerns prior to looking for other positions or roles.
- ✓ **Improved supervisor/employee working relationships:** Open and honest communication builds trust between supervisors and employees. Stay Interviews demonstrate that supervisors value their employees and take the time to listen to their concerns and suggestions. They help leaders build more productive one-on-one relationships with employees that the organization has invested time and resources.
- ✓ **Improved retention rates:** Employees who are satisfied with and committed to their workplace are less likely to look for another job. Stay Interviews help uncover warning signs that indicate a key player needs more support or direction. Since new hires are most vulnerable to turnover, they can help employers address possible issues before they look for another role.
- ✓ **Proactive and collaborative action planning:** Stay Interviews help organizations understand ways to enhance the workplace that will bring employees more satisfaction and engagement in the work they do. Supervisors and employees can work together to determine viable and actionable ways to make the organization a better place to work.

## Recommendations: Standardized Elements of a Stay Interview

### When to Conduct Stay Interviews

Stay Interviews should typically be conducted one to two times a year, or as often as the supervisor feels there is a change in the workplace or a situation that should be discussed. **It should be clear that Stay Interviews are not tied to performance evaluations and discussions.** It is also recommended that a Stay Interview be conducted within the first three months of an employee's onboarding to set the tone of employment and help ensure the new employee is acclimating well. These interviews should be repeated annually and as needed to reinforce the supervisor/employee relationship, demonstrate and encourage a culture of feedback, proactively institute lessons learned, and become a more common practice within the IC.

For Divisions that will implement Stay Interviews more frequently than once or twice a year, it is recommended to balance them against the needs of the organization and set realistic goals for accomplishing them. Depending on circumstances and comfort level, these interviews can take place at more regular intervals, or be timed to coincide with important events affecting employees. Staggering Stay Interviews throughout the year allows supervisors to engage with more employees and provide an inclusive environment to the workforce.

### Who Conducts the Stay Interview?

Stay Interviews should be conducted by an employee's direct supervisor. This demonstrates the supervisor's interest in the employee's retention and provides an opportunity to improve trust between the parties. It is recommended that Stay Interviews start at the top of the organization and cascade downward, helping to set the tone and expectation of Stay Interviews for all staff from the top down.

If it is not feasible for IC leadership to conduct a Stay Interview with every employee, supervisors can start the process with top performers and staff who might seem like they are disengaged. Supervisors can also consider conducting Stay Interviews with positions that have been identified as critical for succession planning or ask for volunteers from employees who may want to participate. Additional considerations for selecting employees include retirement eligibility dates, high turnover job series, specialized positions, mission critical positions, and high-potential employees. ICs should encourage their leadership to participate with all employees in order to acquire the most accurate trend data on their workforce. It is not recommended to interview staff who are on performance management plans (PMP).

## Length of Stay Interview & Number of Questions

The typical Stay Interview should last approximately 30 minutes, consisting of roughly five to eight prepared questions with back-up questions available if needed. Sample standardized, open-ended questions are provided via the prepared [Stay Interview Sample Questions](#) within this document, but the questions selected should be individually focused on the employee's needs and circumstances. Supervisors can also select questions that will provide key pieces of feedback that they have the ability to address. The questions can be modified as necessary to fit the flow of the conversation. A supervisor may not get to ask every question planned, but it is important for the employee to feel heard, and to have follow up conversations on concerns and items raised during the interview.

## Stay Interview Data

While it is not recommended that extensive notes be taken during a Stay Interview, it is important to capture the general ideas, themes, and actionable items related to the questions asked and answers received. This information can be collected, analyzed, and used to help IC leadership make informed decisions related to their workforce, and help to proactively address themes that commonly appear or are concerning. Stay Interview data should be collected and stored in a consistent method so that Division leadership can review it if called for. Additionally, the supervisor should follow up via email with the employee after a Stay Interview on any action items discussed during the meeting.

Data can be used from the Stay Interview to make an impact at the employee level and the entire workforce level. It is important that **individual needs are met before the greater group of the workforce**. Supervisors can follow up with their employees on Stay Interview feedback during one-on-one check-ins to see if there have been any improvements over the course of the year. Additionally, supervisors can use Stay Interview data to make a large impact on the workforce by looking at group needs from multiple interviews. However, individual needs must be addressed because they are more likely to drive retention, engagement, and satisfaction.

## Key Elements of Effective Stay Interviews

### Conducted by Supervisor vs. HR

- The supervisor directly above the employee should conduct the interview to demonstrate interest in the employee's retention and increase trust in the employee/supervisor relationship.
- Each level of the workforce should interview with their direct reports, beginning with senior leadership and cascading down to first line supervisors.

## Retain employees and reassure top talent

- Let employees know that the Stay Interview is being conducted to help retain talent.
- Let top performers know they are top performers.
- Gather stay and leave reasons from all levels of performers; focus resulting actions on retaining employees with the highest impact on the organization.

## Trust is key

- Trust between supervisors and employees is highly correlated to employee retention and is critical to the effectiveness of a Stay Interview. Honest, transparent, two-way communication shows employees that their feelings and needs matter.
- Where trust may be an initial concern, supervisors should employ less invasive or sensitive questions. Provide an environment that makes employees feel safe communicating their perspectives and concerns.
- Emphasize the importance of trust in fostering an open and always honest feedback dialogue.
- Make sure actions from the Stay Interview benefit the employee and do not negatively impact elements of trust.

## Positively Focused

- Stay Interviews should focus on and reinforce the positive aspects of an employee's job.
- Conversations about issues and concerns can be explored but should not be the central focus of the Stay Interview.
- Stay Interviews help create collaborative dialogue around potential solutions to improve individual performance, commitment, and satisfaction.

## Stay Interview Process

### Supervisor's Preparation

- Enter the Stay Interview with a commitment to ask intentional questions and actively listen to the answers employees provide. Be committed to making positive changes before conducting the meeting.
- Consider the employee's style and preferences when preparing for the conversation to help establish an open environment (e.g., sharing the questions a few weeks in advance, time of day, in person or virtual).
- Utilize your knowledge of the individual employee as you select interview questions.

## Stay Interview Goals

The intention of a Stay Interview is to uncover factors that might make an employee move on. It should focus on what motivates employees to stay with the organization, how their work experience could improve, and how they envision their careers within the organization.

The goal for supervisors is to build trust between themselves and their team, engage with their employees to show them their opinions are valued, and learn why each employee wants to continue working for the IC or why they might want to leave. Supervisors should strive to identify something actionable (an issue, a motivator, a goal, etc.) that they can work on with the employee and create a plan. When done correctly, Stay Interviews allow supervisors to identify and solve concerns before they become problems.

## Setting Expectations

Ensure that supervisors understand the purpose of Stay Interviews and can clearly communicate it with their employees. The conversation will focus on the employee and the areas their supervisor can influence. Not everyone within the organization is capable of directly affecting the organization's vision, but suggestions can be pushed upward, feedback can be delivered to the appropriate parties, and consistent trends from employee feedback can be identified and focused on.

Supervisors should inform their employees about how, when, and why they are conducting Stay Interviews. Without this step, employees could go into the interview fearful that it is designed to eliminate positions, count towards performance reviews, or otherwise be tied to their jobs. **In addition to telling employees why the interviews are being conducted, supervisors should give them a broad idea of what will be discussed or share some of the questions the supervisor would like to ask.** This gives employees time to consider their perspectives beforehand, thus, allowing them to provide deeper, more productive insights and information than impromptu responses. It also ensures that they don't go into the interview worried that their answers will have negative repercussions on their career.

Supervisors should share that employees will have an opportunity to discuss any concerns or to ask any questions they may have during the interview. Additionally, they should inform employees that while they will be discreet with any information provided and treat all feedback with the utmost respect, they cannot guarantee confidentiality in the discussion; each employee is encouraged to speak honestly, only to the extent they feel comfortable. Trust is critical in Stay Interviews because the more genuine and honest the feedback is, the more productive the information will be in positively impacting the individual and the IC as a whole.



## Invitation

Find and modify the appropriate template from the [Templates](#) section of this guide. The template and language can, and should be, personalized to the employee being contacted and serves as a baseline for setting up the invitation.

## Schedule

- Make sure that Stay Interviews are scheduled independently from formal performance reviews and discussions.
- Conversations should be brief (20-30 minutes) and informal.
- Consider an initial Stay Interview within three months after onboarding a new employee.
- Repeat annually/as needed: Keep Stay Interviews as a recurring process to re-enforce the supervisor/employee relationship, demonstrate a culture of feedback, and proactively institute lessons learned.

## Interview

- Start with positive questions.
- Stay focused on the conversation; refrain from taking copious notes during the discussion; jot down specific actionable requests and general feedback afterwards.
  - Notes should capture key points, emotional words, and important quotes. This is especially true if the notes will be used to take action and gain buy-in from upper management.
- Stay Interviews should be conversational and contain a limited number (five to eight) of structured questions.
- Be a great listener and show genuine interest in the employee's views and goals.
- Remember to probe but read the level of comfort expressed by the employee during the interview.
  - Probing not only develops more information, but when done respectfully, it can show a supervisor's intention to use the feedback in a positive way and show consideration of the employee's perspectives.
- Maintain a casual, collaborative tone during the interview. Be careful not to trivialize how employees feel even if you disagree with their views.

## Take action and develop a Stay Plan

Employee feedback provides insight into the ways IC leaders and supervisors can enhance the work environment and impact change where they are able. Ultimately, the success of a Stay Interview depends on how the feedback is used to improve retention, engagement, and trust from employees and within the organization. **A supervisor's actions after a Stay Interview are just as important as the interview itself.** Following up on items discussed during the conversation is crucial to improving retention and engaging employees. The goal is to see if employees are reacting positively to the changes, and to understand why not if they still have concerns. If the feedback is not acted upon, it will likely lead to frustration and dissatisfaction among employees who provided their perspectives.

Supervisors should develop a Stay Interview Action Plan following the Stay Interview. This action plan should include ways to capitalize on items that keep employees engaged and satisfied in their role and reflect on aspects that are less satisfying to determine if changes may be appropriate. A [Stay Interview Action Plan template](#) is included in the Templates section of this document.

### Tips for taking action after a Stay Interview:

- Pinpoint the top priorities identified through the Stay Interview process. Review factors that encourage an employee to stay and how they can be maintained.
- Create a Stay Interview Action Plan following the initial Stay Interview and determine:
  - What the manager/supervisor will do.
  - What the employee will do.
  - When the action items should be accomplished.
  - The next meeting date to follow up.
- Make sure at least one identified employee priority is addressed or followed up on within a few weeks after the Stay Interview.
- Identify solutions or alternatives to requests that cannot be fulfilled.
- Check-in with the status of the Stay Interview Action Plan as needed and update it as appropriate.
- When making changes, inform employees that the changes are the result of their suggestions and responses.
- Report general themes that are of concern to your supervisor for possible action (remember to remove any PII).
- Repeat the Stay Interview with new or updated questions. Stay Interviews are not a “one and done” action and should be done at least annually.

## Best Practices for Stay Interviews

As you initiate the process of implementing Stay Interviews and begin conducting them, please consider the following best practices.

**Conduct Stay Interviews Individually:** These conversations should not occur in a group setting. Your employee must feel that they are the focal point and not one of many. This will help you to create individualized strategies to keep each employee, as well as strategies to stop or offset turnover triggers.

**Review the purpose of the interview:** Employees may not be familiar with the concept of Stay Interviews and may have a negative view at first. It is best to begin by explaining why you are conducting the interview and what type of information you will be discussing. Your goal is to gain insight into what motivates or frustrates your employees and what they value, and to support, develop, and retain their services.

**Avoid “Yes/No” (closed-ended) questions:** Specific information is your goal. The feedback you receive will be much richer by asking questions that require an explanation, such as: What attracted you to this job? What about your job makes you proud? What aspects of your job do you find challenging?

**Listen, don’t guide:** Pay attention to what gets your employee excited and engaged. Take notes and stay focused on the answers you receive. Probe deeper into responses that are not clear or may have more behind them. Keep the conversation constructive and positive, even if comments or concerns are made that you don’t agree with.

**Be creative:** Try to be creative in finding solutions that can be a win/win for your employee, you, and the team/department. If there are areas where you as a supervisor can’t make accommodations, be honest and clear with your employee so realistic expectations can be set.

**Do not negotiate:** The Stay Interview is not intended to be a negotiation with the employee. It is designed to proactively gain useful information, show appreciation, and remind employees that they are important to the team/department.

**Show follow through:** Demonstrate that you have genuine intentions to make changes, if possible, as a result of the interview. Supervisors should let their employees know what they plan to do to make improvements, including the anticipated timelines and plans.

**Timing:** Don’t wait until there is a noticeable morale problem to launch Stay Interviews within your team. Making Stay Interviews part of your team and department culture will show employees that you are sincerely interested in boosting job satisfaction.

*San Bernardino County. (2018). Stay Interview Guide. Employee Retention Tool for Supervisors. Retrieved from <https://www.sbcounty.gov/uploads/dph/DPH-Stay-Interview-Guide-2018.pdf>.*

## Templates

### Sample Emails to Your Staff – Please Personalize

Reach out to your employees and let them know you want to schedule a short, informational conversation with them. Being transparent about your intentions with the conversation can alleviate unnecessary anxiety. Below are several sample emails for your preference.

#### Sample A

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

I'd like to meet with you to learn more about your work experience and how different aspects motivate and de-motivate you. Specifically, I'd like to better understand what about your work is important to you, how we are utilizing your talents, what keeps you motivated and dedicated to \_\_\_\_\_, and how I can better assist you as a supervisor.

Please schedule a 30-minute block of time with me in the next few weeks so we can chat.

Thanks!

#### Sample B

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

You make a difference and I value your contributions, so I would like to discuss some things that are important to you and me:

- What keeps you here?
- What might entice you away?
- What is most energizing about your work?
- Are we fully utilizing your talents?
- What is inhibiting your success?
- What can I do differently to best assist you?

Please schedule a 30-minute block of time with me in the next few weeks so we can chat.

Thank you!

### Sample C

Hi \_\_\_\_\_,

We have experienced a lot of change in the last few years to both the way we do work and the way we work with each other. I wanted to let you know that I value your flexibility and adaptability during this time and would like to schedule a Stay Interview (discussion) with you. I will schedule it for about 30 minutes, and during this time I would like to discuss \*insert several questions you would like to cover with them\*.

Please let me know what times on \*insert dates\* would work best for you to meet with me. I'm looking forward to our discussion!

Thank you.

### Stay Interview Opening and Closing Remarks

Below is a guide for your Stay Interview conversation opening and closing remarks. The tone at the beginning of the Stay Interview is crucial to creating a welcoming and psychologically safe environment for all employees. Please note that this example can be adjusted to your needs and employee needs.

#### Opening Remarks Sample Outline

1. Welcome, thank you for being open and willing to engage in the Stay Interview.
2. The purpose of the Stay Interview is to capture feedback from employees about what their experience has been like to improve our organization.
3. This is not a performance review.
4. It is my responsibility to report if there is any mention of allegations as it pertains to harassment or violence in the workplace. You can determine how much or little you feel comfortable sharing during this conversation. With that in mind, I do hope and encourage you to be as open and honest with me as possible.
5. I will communicate directly and openly if there is something I need to report.
6. Please remember that this is your space, and you share as much as you feel comfortable with in this stay interview. All I ask if that you keep an open mindset.
7. I will ask you about (X number) of questions to better understand your feedback.
8. Do you have any questions?
9. Let's begin!

## Supervisor's Stay Interview Scripts

### Opening Remarks Sample Script for Stay Interview

"Welcome \_\_\_\_\_.

Thank you for meeting with me today. I want to start by saying that this conversation is meant for me to primarily listen and learn more about your experience thus far at [IC Name]. I will be asking you (insert number) questions today and will be taking notes as we speak so I can remember what we discussed.

Employees should know that while I will be discreet with any information shared, I cannot guarantee confidentiality in the discussion. It is my responsibility to report if there is any mention of allegations as it pertains to harassment or violence in the workplace. You can determine how much or little you feel comfortable sharing during this conversation. With that in mind, I do hope and encourage you to be as open and honest with me as possible.

The purpose of the Stay Interview is to try to address common barriers or challenges among employees, as well as better understand organizational strengths and things staff appreciate about their position.

Before we begin, do you have any questions for me?"

- If yes, answer any questions as needed.
- If no, begin Stay Interview.

### Closing Remarks Sample Script for Stay Interviews

"Thank you for your time and feedback. I hope this conversation was meaningful for you and hope you continue to provide feedback on your experience working in [IC Name]. My plan is to conduct annual Stay Interviews with all staff. If you have suggestions on how we can continue to improve this process, please do not hesitate to reach out."

## Stay Interview Sample Questions

Below is a list of possible questions for supervisors to ask their employees. Feel free to modify the language and remember you do not need to ask every question to every person. Select the questions that are most appropriate for your/their situation:

### Opening

- What do you think about on your way to work?
- What about your job makes you excited to come to work?
- What makes for a great day at work?
- What is one the thing that would make your job more satisfying and rewarding?
- What about your job keeps you up at night?
- What bothers you most about your job?
- Is there anything you'd like to change about your job?
- Do you feel that you are part of a bigger vision and mission? Why or why not?
- Do you believe that your work has meaning? How can we work together to make your work more meaningful?

### Skills/Talent Utilization

- Do you think your current position fully utilizes your talents?
- What talents, interests or skills do you have that are not being used at your current role?
- What part of your role is most challenging? What is least challenging?
- Do you feel that you are being recognized for your work?
- How do you like to be recognized?

### Professional/Career Development

- What is your dream job? Can the Division/Office/Center support your progress toward it? If so, how?
- Do you feel supported in your career goals?
- Are you satisfied with the training and development you have received? Do you have an IDP? A mentor?
- Do you know what career opportunities you'd like to pursue with our organization? Can you see yourself accomplishing them here?
- Do you have anything new you would like to learn this year?
- Is there anything that would help progress your career development that you are reluctant to ask about?
- What kind of development opportunities would you like to see more of?

## Environment

- Are you treated respectfully by your coworkers?
- What type of feedback would you like to receive about your performance that you are not receiving now? From me? From coworkers?
- Do you feel that you have the necessary control over your job to perform most successfully and productively?

## Leadership

- Do you respect the amount and kind of leadership and guidance that you receive from the senior managers?
- Do you trust the senior leaders?
- What can I do as a manager to best support you?
- What can I do more of or less of as your manager?
- Is there anything you wish I would do differently?

## Work/Life Balance

- Is the organization providing you with opportunities to grow and develop as a person and as a professional? What would improve your opportunities?
- What kinds of flexibility would be helpful to you in balancing your work and home life?
- What could be done to improve your experience at work?
- What workplace flexibilities would you like to explore?

## Recognition/Appreciation

- Do you receive enough recognition from your manager and other leaders?
- What type of recognition and reward for a job well done motivates you as an employee?
- What type of recognition and rewards do you want most?
- Does the recognition you receive for going above and beyond feel proportionate to the effort made?
- How can your talents and skills be better utilized within your current position?

## Resources and Accessibility

- Do you have sufficient resources you need to perform your job well?
- Do you feel you have adequate back up support when you are out of the office?
- Are your accessibility needs being met? If not, how can we help?
- Do you know the correct points of contact to reach out to for assistance when you encounter issues or challenges outside of our team or branch?



## Closing

- Have you ever considered leaving? If so, what are the specific reasons that would cause you to leave? What would make you stay?
- What can I do (as a manager) to help you stay?
- Do you have suggestions about how we can improve as an organization?
- Is there anything else that is important to you that we did not cover during this meeting?

## Stay Interview Action Plan Template

Following a Stay Interview, it is recommended that the employee and supervisor co-create a plan that documents the actions needed by both parties to achieve the initiatives identified in the Stay Interview to facilitate the employee's engagement and retention.

|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| Organization    |  |
| Employee Name   |  |
| Supervisor Name |  |
| Interview Date  |  |
| Follow-Up Date  |  |

### Directions:

1. Develop an action plan for the top priorities identified through the Stay Interview process.
2. **No more than three priorities** should be identified upon completion of a Stay Interview.
3. Action plan ideas should be agreed upon between the employee and supervisor.
4. Modify the form as needed to fit your unique context.
5. Keep copies handy to utilize during regular one-on-one meetings to review and update regularly.

| Key Priorities Identified | Supervisor Action | Employee Action | Resources                                                   | Progress Update |
|---------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|
|                           |                   |                 | A. Resources <i>Available</i><br>B. Resources <i>Needed</i> |                 |
| 1:                        |                   |                 | A.<br><br>B.                                                |                 |
| 2:                        |                   |                 | A.<br><br>B.                                                |                 |
| 3:                        |                   |                 | A.<br><br>B.                                                |                 |

### Tips for Stay Interview Action Plans

- Stay Plans should reside in a location that both the supervisor and employee have easy access to view throughout the year.
- It is the co-responsibility of the supervisor and employee to engage with the Stay Plan
- You may consider storing the Stay Plan as a shared online document (OneDrive, MS Teams) for both the employee and supervisor to access and edit.
- While OHR is here to support the creation of Stay Plans, the co-created plan is **not** something that needs to be approved by or submitted to HR.

## Handling Difficult Conversations

Due to the nature of stay interviews, sensitive topics might arise during the conversation with employees, such as receiving negative feedback or hearing allegations of bullying or harassment. Resources and best practices to support you with engaging and managing difficult conversations are found below.

### Difficult Conversations Best Practices

- Mentally prepare for a Stay Interview.
- Disclose your responsibility as a supervisor to report allegations of harassment early in the conversation and discuss confidentiality.
- Let the interviewee know how you will report their feedback.
- Discuss what feedback will look like when it is reported (aggregate, no quotes, high level summary themes).
- Discuss who will see the feedback.
- Try to establish trust with the employee from the start of the conversation.
- Be clear about your role and the expectation/objective of a stay interview conversation.
- Listen; show the other person you understand their perspective; try to reframe or summarize what you heard the employee say.
- Demonstrate empathy.
- Thank the person for opening up to you.
- Take a deep breath and try to stay calm and grounded.
- Use clear and concise communication.
- Lean into any discomfort you might be experiencing.
- Remember to collaborate and not confront the employee.
- In most cases, the feedback may represent a potential issue to be solved. Focus on the potential issue, not the person.

## Tips on Handling Difficult Conversations

While most of the Stay Interview is focused on identifying and reinforcing the positive factors, some negative factors might also be identified. For example, some employees might make a difficult or unreasonable request or share negative feedback. The excerpt below was written to address how to handle negative feedback, but the principles can also be applied to address difficult questions and requests.

**Step 1:** Make yourself listen without speaking or defending yourself as you receive the feedback. Remember, even if you completely disagree with the feedback, chances are there is some basis to it, or you would not be hearing it.

**Step 2:** Paraphrase what you perceive you heard. By rephrasing the feedback you received, you can clarify what you think you heard and make sure you understand the comments. Ask the person if you just paraphrased correctly. This may open a dialogue in which you can have a constructive discussion about the situation.

**Step 3:** Restrain yourself from reacting to the negative feedback. If you react, you will not be in a position of learning and improving.

**Step 4:** Thank the person for sharing his or her thoughts and opinions with you. Tell the person you want to use the feedback to improve, and you plan to spend time thinking about how you can make adjustments. Tell the person you will reply to the feedback after you think about it.

**Step 5:** Think about the feedback as objectively as you can. Analyze the person's motivation for the feedback and determine what his or her concerns may be. Consider the feedback a glimpse into your weak areas, affording you a perspective you can use to improve. Instead of immediately discarding the feedback, use it as a tool to sharpen and correct weak spots.

**Step 6:** Ask for input from other people you trust. Whether an advisor, mentor, supervisor, or colleague, share the negative feedback you received and ask for objective opinions. Ask the person if he or she thinks the feedback has legitimacy. Listen carefully to the comments and thoughts you receive.

**Step 7:** Reply to the feedback after taking the time to think and analyze. Share your thoughts about the feedback, specifically noting the points in which you agree or disagree. Give reasons for your agreement or disagreement but keep the conversation constructive. Direct the conversation toward a positive plan for the future, if possible.

*Hatter, K., How to Deal with Negative Feedback at Work. Retrieved from <http://smallbusiness.chron.com/deal-negative-feedback-work-21726.html>*

## Contacts, Resources, and Training at NIH

Stay Interviews may reveal information that requires assistance from outside resources. Concerns that may require further discussion outside of the Stay Interview could include Ethics, Work/Life Balance, Work Schedule (Teleworking, Alternative Work Schedules etc.), Reassignment, Training and Development (Leadership Programs, Coaching, etc.).

There are a variety of resources established at the NIH that address allegations of inappropriate conduct or harassment.

- Call the **Anti-Harassment Hotline** on **833-224-3829**
- [Report your concern through the Civil Office's web-form](#)
- File an EEO complaint through the [Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#) by visiting the [EDI Resolutions page](#).
  - **PLEASE NOTE:** If a federal employee wishes to pursue an EEO complaint, they must contact EDI within 45 days of the discriminatory incident to file a Pre-Complaint of Discrimination.
- Contact the [Office of Intramural Training and Education](#) if you are a trainee or fellow.

If you are not sure and would like to discuss your concerns with an office that operates under principles of confidentiality and is not required to take action, please call the Office of the Ombudsman or the Employee Assistance Program.

### Employee & Labor Relations Branch

Workforce Relations Division  
31 Center Drive  
Bldg. 31, Room B3C08; Mail Stop 2211  
Bethesda, MD 20814  
Phone: 301-402-9203

### NIH Employee Assistance Program

Building 31, Room B2B57  
9000 Rockville Pike  
Bethesda, MD 20892  
Phone: 301-496-3164  
Fax: 301-496-3845

### NIH Civil | Office of Human Resources

[How Can I Report Harassment or Inappropriate Conduct Within the NIH Community? | Office of Human Resources](#)

Phone: 301-40C-IVIL (301-402-4845)  
Email: [CivilProgram@od.nih.gov](mailto:CivilProgram@od.nih.gov)

### NIH Office of the Ombudsman Center for Cooperative Resolution

31 Center Drive, MSC 2087  
Bethesda, MD 20892-2087  
Phone: 301-594-7231  
Fax: 301-594-7948

**If someone has shared an allegation of harassment during their Stay Interview, you can use the following language:**

“Because you raised an allegation of *[harassment, sexual harassment, violent behaviors]* I am obligated to report this to *(or, if it’s inappropriate conduct.... I am referring you to)* NIH Civil. Please visit their website at [civilworkplace.nih.gov](https://civilworkplace.nih.gov) for more information.”

[Reference the "What to Report and Where: Guidance for NIH Managers and Supervisors" for more details.](#)

## Training

If supervisors are uncomfortable with topics that may arise in the course of these conversations, there are training resources available in addition to the scripted responses and resources already provided:

[Supervision and Leadership Development | Office of Human Resources \(nih.gov\)](#)

[Building an Inclusive Workplace for Supervisors](#)

[EEO Compliance Training for Managers and Supervisors](#)

[Anti-Bullying](#)

[SafeZone Training](#)

[Reasonable Accommodation Training for Supervisors](#)

[Anti-Retaliation for Supervisors](#)

[Managing Conflict and Challenging Conversations](#)