

Do you know the . . .

The 20 Signs of Leaving Behavior?

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It's one of the challenges driving employers nuts – THE GREAT RESIGNATION! Lots has been written about the reasons and the impact. But WHAT DO YOU DO ABOUT IT? That's what this guide is all about. Very few people tell their boss they're searching. They just up and disappear. But if you're watching for the signs of leaving behavior, you have a much better chance to intervene and re-recruit them. It won't always work. But every time you convince a person to remain on board, you will be saving *tens of thousands of dollars in turnover costs*.

So, what do searching employees look like? What do they say? How do they behave? Here are 20 signs of "leaving behavior" and some simple suggestions for successful intervention. (Yes, there are 20.) The first five will be more obvious. The others are more subtle. The last five pertain specifically to those who are working remotely or in some hybrid fashion. At the end, I'll discuss the principles for successful retention. But read about these signs first, so you know what you're looking for. Circle the ones you have seen in your workplace.

#1. More formal attire – Many places have relaxed their dress codes, some to the extent of jeans and flip-flops. But even if they come to work in pajamas and bunny slippers, most people know that dressing up for interviews is still a smart thing to do. Seeing this change in behavior could be an indication that a person is interviewing before or after work. *Simple strategy for intervention?* Compliment the person on their attire. You might ask light-heartedly, "Going someplace special?" They might have a simple reason. If they fumble for an answer, this could be a sign they're on the hunt for a new job.

#2. Increased absences – This will be especially noticeable among those who haven't missed a day since they arrived. If this is due to an illness or family emergency, they'll probably share it. If they don't, they could be looking for new employment. *Simple strategy for intervention?* Mention the absence(s) in an off-hand and friendly way. Chances are, they'll have a logical explanation. But if they don't, it's a good idea to make note of it.

#3. Tardiness or surprise requests for a couple of hours off – Sure, there are doctor appointments, teacher conferences, and other personal business issues that require an hour or two. But as a general rule, these are scheduled in advance. Employees who mention that they'll be a couple of hours late "tomorrow morning" or have to take "a long lunch" may be visiting with a prospective employer. *Simple strategies for intervention?* #1 – Ask about the nature of the time off. After all, they have a responsibility to you and the organization. #2 – If you challenge the unexpected absence, be prepared for an uncomfortable encounter. This may exacerbate their leaving, but that could be the best thing for both of you. At least you'll have some warning.

#4. An “I don’t care” attitude – The reality is that some employees just don’t care. You generally know who they are. The people to be concerned about are those who display a disappointing change in attitude. This can mean sloppy work, inattentiveness in meetings, missed deadlines, and comments that seem to indicate that this job is no longer a priority. *Simple strategy for intervention?* It’s probably time for a visit about performance anyway. But this will also give you the chance to probe a little and see if they are looking to change circumstances. You have to be proactive. Don’t just hope that the problem will go away.

#5. Transitional comments – These can include phrases such as “This place isn’t what it used to be,” or “When it comes time for me to leave . . .” or “I guess it’s time to move on.” You might think that no one would say such things unless they have another job. You’d be wrong. Some people use comments like this to begin the process of cutting emotional ties. After all, work relationships can be a bigger part of a person’s life than the job itself. Sure, they’re unhappy on the job, but the emotional separation can be worse than job search for some.

Simple strategy for intervention? Ask them about it. You might pull them aside discreetly and say something like, “You’ve made some comments recently about leaving. Tell me about that.” Then see how they respond. If they’re really not looking, they’ll probably just blame it on frustration with the job, the workload, or someone in particular. If it stops after that, chances are it was nothing. On the other hand, they might come clean about their desire to leave. Then you can decide how you want to intervene.

#6. Begging out of organizational activities – In every organization, there are those who are the life of the party. They organize, clean up and are the inspiration for social events. When one of those people begins to demur from taking on this role, you might have someone who is thinking of leaving. *Simple strategy for intervention?* Discreetly mention to them how much you and others have appreciated their contributions with social occasions. While it would not be a good idea to ask why they have begun to withdraw, you may find that they will disclose their reasons for doing so. One of these reasons might be a desire for an exit.

#7. Complaints about the facility, resources and environment – If you have a staff member who has made it his or her life’s work to comment on the surroundings, I would not worry about this. But when someone who’s always been very accommodating says those same things, this might be a sign of pending departure. *Simple strategy for intervention?* Check this behavior out. If the understanding people are beginning to complain, there are probably one or more issues that need to be addressed anyway. On the other hand, you may find that this new complainer may be trying to break the emotional ties to the organization by joining in with the complainers.

#8. Shifting to a decreased or more rigid schedule – While some people have a tendency to punch the clock, others put in the extra time or accept offers of overtime more readily. When an individual like this starts turning down these opportunities, it could be a sign that he or she is looking for a transition. *Simple strategy for intervention?* Informally ask about this change in behavior. Nothing accusatory, just curiosity. There may be personal or family reasons. At the same time, those hours could be going into a job search.

#9. Going to really boring places on vacation – Sure, sometimes we all take trips to mundane places to see the relatives. But if someone seems to be traveling to a place you would not normally associate with him, this might be something to note. Orlando? Probably a vacation. East Patterson, NJ? Hmmm . . . *Simple strategy for intervention?* Chat it up and see how the person responds.

#10. Going out to lunch without the gang – Sure, this could simply be a simple change of pace. On the other hand, it could be an indication that someone's taking time to meet with employers or recruiters. *Simple strategy for intervention?* Again, chat it up a little or perhaps make light of it as in "Don't you like us anymore?" There's probably a reasonable explanation, but . . .

#11. Calls for references – Some people have concluded that checking references is no longer a reliable metric. But many companies still include them in their hiring process. Someone checking a reference generally means that your employee is under serious consideration for another opportunity. *Simple strategy for intervention?* While this is obviously a red flag, it leaves you with the option to approach your employee or let him/her depart. If the search has gone this far, chances are you know the person has been looking. At the same time, you may find that their planned departure is due to something easily resolved. It never hurts to ask.

#12. Rants on social media – Posts on Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram and other platforms have become today's water cooler conversations. In most cases, you will not be able to monitor this on private accounts and smartphones. But you should be monitoring the use of your company's name on all public posts. It goes without saying that e-mail or any other company communication platform should be reviewed for comments about leaving, job search, etc. Most employees are aware that these applications can be monitored. So, if they're posting here, chances are they don't care. *Simple strategy for intervention?* Rather than accusing them of disloyalty, approach them with concern and see if you can resolve the issue.

#13. Loss of eye contact – There are those who always seem to make good eye contact. When they begin avoiding your glance or presence, chances are they're unhappy. Are they thinking of leaving? Are they simply frustrated over a current issue? Are they embarrassed about something personal or professional? You will have no way of knowing unless you ask. *Simple strategy for intervention?* Find an appropriate time to approach them or bring it up in another conversation. You might say something like, "I'm concerned that you don't seem to be your cheery self," and see how the person responds. It could be nothing. You might find they've been waiting for you to open the door. Refrain, however, from asking others what they think is wrong. This should remain discreetly between the two of you.

#14. Asking for a raise – Seeking more money is not a sign of leaving behavior in itself. In concert with other signs, however, it might mean that the person figures s/he has nothing to lose. If a raise is forthcoming, that's a win for the employee. If it's not, s/he was beginning to look elsewhere anyway. Over the past couple of years, the negotiating balance has been shifting toward employees and will stay this way for the foreseeable future. *Simple strategy for*

intervention? Take time now to prepare for these conversations, rather than being caught off guard when someone approaches you.

#15. Recruiting calls from people who have left – Remember Jack, who left a couple months ago for greener pastures? Does he seem to “checking in” with all his former co-workers? Does he come up in conversations? Has he lured someone else away? *Simple strategy for intervention?* Perhaps it’s time to connect with Jack and let him know that this is inappropriate. At the same time, you’ll need to gently approach those who seem to be thinking about it and determine their concerns. Loyalty is not what it once was.

#16. Constant ghosting – It has become commonplace for half of those in a virtual meeting to have their cameras turned off. Most people will comply, however, if you ask that the cameras be turned on. But sometimes the motivation for “camera off” is more of a concern. Some individuals, for example, are choosing to take on a second full-time job without telling their original employer. This has been labeled “overemployment.” As a result, it is important you pay more attention to remote working behaviors. Some ghosters don’t want to eat on camera, be seen checking email, reveal the condition of their home or risk having a spouse in a towel walk behind them. But if a person never turns on their camera, this can be a challenge to be resolved.

Simple strategy for intervention? You might ask everyone to turn on their cameras at the beginning of every meeting just for a brief meet and greet. If someone refuses or always offers some excuse not to, it is reasonable to approach them individually and ask why. After all, it is tough enough to build a remote team without this kind of behavior. If they reveal their unhappiness or desire to leave, you have an opening to pursue a conversation about it.

#17. Increased activity on Linked-In – It is good practice to be connected with all your team members on Linked-In. Without an intent to spy, it is also good practice to periodically review what they are posting and commenting on. Sudden increased activity may be a sign that they are beginning a job search or at least exploring other opportunities. *Simple strategy for intervention?* This increased activity or the nature of what they’re posting may not be a cause for concern by itself. But taken in concert with other signs, it’s a good idea to approach the person and mention the changes you’ve seen. If they are contemplating a change or already searching, they’ll likely come clean. Then you have an opportunity converse with them about staying.

#18. Casual mentions of what they’re finding on Indeed.com, Glassdoor.com, ZipRecruiter.com and similar platforms – When someone says, “Hey I saw this cool job on _____, you would think they’d be more discreet. But that doesn’t occur to some and doesn’t matter to others. Once or twice is probably nothing. If it becomes frequent, you should be concerned. *Simple strategy for intervention?* When someone mentions this kind of thing in a meeting or gathering, or even sends a link around to colleagues, you need to respond. Be careful not to make a direct accusation. But you might say something like, “I am troubled that you seem to be searching for another job and passing these postings around to others. Tell me about that. Then get quiet and see how they respond. Hopefully, they will reveal their motivation. Then you can open a dialogue about their concerns.

#19. Telling stories about people switching jobs for big raises or bonuses. We've all read about these anomalies. But when someone starts relating them in meetings and other team gatherings, it should be a cause for concern. Even if they are not looking, they are still displaying a restlessness and may be stirring up dissatisfaction within the workplace. *Simple strategy for intervention?* You might begin by asking if it has occurred to them what impact these stories might be having on team morale. Most will probably express surprise and promise to be more mindful. If you detect a restlessness or unhappiness when they respond, be proactive about pursuing these concerns. Telling these stories might be their way of sending you a message that they're looking to move on.

#20. Increasing inflexibility about schedules and workplace parameters. Flexibility has become one of the emerging trends in today's workplace. That said, parameters still need to be established and enforced. When someone begins to object to reasonable expectations and cannot be mollified, this could mean they are looking for a way to rationalize their departure. As mentioned before, this could be their way of trying to cut emotional ties to the organization. *Simple strategy for intervention?* You might approach them by saying, "I'm concerned that you appear to be unhappy about _____. Can you tell me what's going on?" Then get quiet and listen. Be prepared to respond to their concerns. Along the way they may reveal that they are looking for another opportunity. If their concerns are reasonable, ask you can have time to address them. If they appear to be using these concerns as a reason to justify their leaving, there may not be much to do except smooth the transition so it does not disrupt everyone else.

Now that we've discussed the twenty signs of leaving behavior, it's time to discuss a few principles for retention:

1) Look for collaboration. Sure, your employees might do something that can be interpreted as a sign they are looking. But before approaching anyone, look for a pattern that would verify your concern. Are there other signs besides the behavior you observed? Is the obvious behavior repeated more than once? Do those around the person in question seem to be treating him or her with more detachment. They may know something you don't. Remember that in today's workplace, everyone is instantly watching and sharing what you say and do. Reflect before taking action.

2) Prepare what you're going to say and where to say it. Obviously, you're not going to look across the table during a meeting and ask, "Are you looking for another job?" Just the same, you need careful about blurting out something like this in a setting where they might feel embarrassed or placed in a corner. Put yourself in their shoes and imagine what they might be thinking if they were conducting a discreet job search. Then compose your thoughts and rehearse what to say. You want it to come out right the first time. Then pick a time and place where you will not be putting them on the spot.

3) Be prepared to respond to their concerns. It's one thing to establish a conversation about whether a person is leaving or thinking of doing so. It's quite another if the person confirms that they want to move on. Then what do you do? These contingencies need to be considered in advance. Would there be the opportunity for more training if they remained? A more appealing job? A more convenient location? A better title? Opportunity for development? A promotion? An increase in wages? The solution may be something simple, such as a change in hours? It may be a lot more complex. Take a few minutes to consider the contingencies so you, as a supervisor, are not caught unprepared?

While some employee churn in any organization can be healthy, it is critical to monitor the reasons for departure and look for patterns. Keeping these 20 signs in mind will help you do so. Employee turnover can have a devastating impact on morale and the bottom line. Don't ignore the signs that people may be preparing to depart.

About the Author

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