

should you be honest in an exit interview? — Ask a Manager

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by Alison Green on June 28, 2008

A reader writes:

I am leaving my job in a few days, on excellent terms. Our HR manager just set up the exit interview and (somewhat to my surprise) asked me to fill out an exit survey. Is this normal? This is my first “real” job, so I don’t know. The survey asks, among other things, my reasons for leaving. Fair enough. However, I’m concerned that the unvarnished truth could damage the terms of my departure. Am I supposed to tell it? My stated and primary reason for leaving is to go back to school, but I’ve been very unhappy with certain changes in company culture in recent months, such as increasingly long hours (55 is the minimum, 60+ is very common) and the expectation that we all work the weekends. The company has grown faster than we can hire, but these were not the expectations I signed up for. I have a great boss with whom I have spoken in private about these items (my boss agreed but is not in a position to make changes), but I’m not so comfortable talking with HR. At the same time, my coworkers have expressed fear over my imminent departure, and turnover is through the roof. Morale is terrible. Should I voice the concerns of the junior people, or should I just make sure the terms of my departure stay excellent?

Yes, exit interviews and exit surveys are very common. People frequently recommend not being candid on them, out of fear of burning your bridges ... but I totally disagree. As a manager, I know there are things going on that I don’t know about, and I rely on people being candid with me so that I can fix things that need to be fixed — whether it’s unreasonable expectations, a tyrannical manager, or whatever. So I cringe every time I see people advised not to be forthright in exit interviews.

That said, you do want to factor in what you know about how your company, and this HR manager in particular, handles honest feedback. Do they have a history of shooting the messenger? If so, they have only themselves to blame if no one is candid with them. But assuming they’ve seemed reasonably open to feedback in the past, my advice is to be honest about the things that bothered you. And assuming you can do so without resorting to lying, balance it out with comments about things you did like, so that you don’t leave them with an impression of overwhelming disgruntlement.

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