



MANAGER/LEADER TOOLKIT

for individual retention conversations

This Manager/Leader Toolkit provides structure for the setup, implementation, and follow-up of conducting Stay Interviews, which in this document will be referred to as Individual Retention Conversations (IRCs). You can re-phrase things as you need and craft your own terminology that best fits your team and work environment. These meetings are structured discussions facilitated by managers/leaders to better understand employees' feelings and motivations affecting their jobs.

This toolkit is not a “how-to”, but a tool to help you create a meeting that will be best for your department/team/needs. This tool can be tailored and used as a framework for implementing your own IRCs. Suggested questions are listed in Part III but can be modified and reworded based on your department/employee needs and situation.

The toolkit is separated into three parts:

- 1) Conducting Individual Retention Conversations
- 2) The Individual Retention Conversation: Before, During, and After
- 3) IRC Questions

Part I

■ Conducting Individual Retention Conversations

What is an Individual Retention Conversation?

An Individual Retention Conversations (IRC) is a periodic structured discussion between managers or team leads and employees (or team members) intended to identify specific actions that can strengthen an employee's engagement and retention. They are not assessments of employee performance, but instead one-on-one talks focused on employee satisfaction. Clinical Research Professional (CRP) shortages and high turnover rates directly impact the conduct of studies. IRCs should be conducted for ALL employees in a team/department.



Why are Individual Retention Conversations important?

Clinical research is continuously changing, and CRPs are expected to adapt to and incorporate these changes into their roles. In addition, teams can be in a constant state of flux due to employee turnover and problems with retention. IRCs can be used to identify and address issues affecting employee satisfaction and discontent.

They can also be used to strengthen teams and/or departments by providing feedback on how the organization can better engage employees and identify motivations for them to remain on the job. Leaders can make immediate actions: clearing obstacles, providing new resources, and increasing recognition. IRCs are repeated structured conversations – not formal interviews – that are entirely separate from performance evaluations.

Purpose:

- Build trust and strengthen relationships between managers and employees, fostering positive change by acknowledging issues, understanding motivations, and increasing engagement.
- Provide information to make changes, target issues, reinforce factors that motivate, and engage employees and address concerns to minimize turnover.

Individual Retention Conversations are:

- **Preventative** – designed to identify issues that employees have that may lead them to leave their role
- **Motivational** – recognizing the value that employees bring to the team and showing them that their managers appreciate them and are interested in their future at the institution
- **Engaging** – a bi-directional conversation where ideas can be shared, and managers/employees can have a candid conversation about factors affecting their job satisfaction and performance

IRCs do three things that exit interviews do not:

- ✓ They bring information that can be used immediately
- ✓ They give insights for engaging and retaining employees, including top performers
- ✓ They put the manager in the solution seat for developing stay plans



IRCs ARE

- A one-on-one conversation
- Designed to build trust
- About the employee
- Structured meetings
- Open, candid conversations
- Conducted by manager/leaders
- Used to make goals for next steps
- About asking questions and listening
- Brief and focused



IRCs ARE NOT

- Team or small group meetings
- Designed to get answers
- About the manager/leader
- Casual conversations
- About pay and performance
- Conducted by HR
- A personal development plan
- About training and coaching
- Long and random

Who should conduct the conversation?

Anyone in a position to make or advocate for positive change (e.g., managers, team leads/members, other leadership) should be the one conducting IRCs. This toolkit should help the person conducting the conversation to learn how to effectively lead the conversation by expanding on the following:

- The format and set-up of IRCs
- How to use the IRCs to build trust with associates
- How to ask probing questions and conduct efficient, effective IRCs
- How to assess outcomes and follow up after the conversation

As a manager/leader, you are responsible for setting the tone with your employees. Provide assurance that IRCs are about helping the employee grow and are not punitive. There are no right or wrong answers, and the meetings are not an evaluation of the employee's skills or performance.

IRCs enable employees to have one-on-one time with those in the position to make positive changes to their career environment. It also allows leaders to get a better understanding of opportunities that could benefit employees and grow their careers.

Part II

The Individual Retention Conversation: Before, During, After

Before the Interview



- 1. Set expectations.** Managers should tell team members that the goal is to help everyone feel more fully engaged at work and learn what you can do to help them stay longer.
- 2. Schedule for 1 hour.** These are structured conversations, but you want to have enough time to let the employee talk and listen. You do not have to use the full hour.
- 3. Schedule as needed, but at least once per year.** Depending on needs, you can schedule meetings annually at a set time for all employees (e.g., every December) or at a set time for each employee (e.g., on their work anniversary).
- 4. Schedule depending on your specific needs.** This is not a “check the box” exercise! It is meant to result in better retention of your team.

- Prioritize hearing from every team member. Each time IRCs are conducted, it should ideally be done with every person in the department.
 - If conducting the meetings at a set time each year, scheduling them close together (ideally over 3-4 days) can prevent employees from sharing their conversations or questions with others, which could lead to more honest responses.
 - Let employees know that responses will not be shared with other employees during the IRCs, and will only be shared back to the group as aggregate themes if overall outcomes are being shared.
 - Give new employees time to settle into the role before scheduling an interview - you don't want to give them anxiety if they don't have answers for every question.
- The manager should be familiar with the resources and opportunities that are available to employees before the interview begins, e.g., continuing education, travel for conferences, and any “roadblocks” that could affect follow-up, e.g., remote work availability, pay structure
- Have a plan on the priority questions (top 5 or 10 to ask).
 - Choose questions wisely; you may need to focus on their experience so far, e.g., what do you like about your job, where do you see yourself in 5 years
 - Ask the questions one at a time, listen, take notes, and probe when needed.
- Set a comfortable location.
 - In-person meetings are recommended but not required. Zoom can be used if needed but some nuance and the conversational tone may be lost. If Zoom is used, it is recommended for both parties to use their cameras to enhance the conversation and allow access to non-verbal cues.
 - The area should be private and without interruptions, but somewhere where the employee feels comfortable. Since this is more of a discussion than a formal interview, it is recommended to not have a desk so the meeting can feel more conversational.
- Consider if you want to send questions in advance.
 - Sending them ahead of time may put employees at ease and make them feel more prepared for the IRC
 - Not sending them in advance may encourage more honest, “off the cuff” responses
- If conducting the interviews annually, do it at a different time of year than performance reviews so there is no confusion.
- Remember – you won't get everything in one meeting!

During the Interview

- 1 Start the conversation.** This conversation should not be intimidating, but it may take a few minutes for the employee to get comfortable.
- 2 Focus on the employee.** The focus should be on identifying specific improvements that can raise employee's engagement, not morph into how they can perform better.
- 3 Close the Conversation.** Thank them for their time and honest feedback.



- Reiterate expectations for the conversation
- The interview should be one-on-one
- Assure staff that what is said during the conversation will remain confidential unless otherwise noted
 - If you need to follow up with someone outside of the conversation, make sure the employee understands this
- Have a laptop or notebook to take notes – or just listen and make notes immediately afterwards
 - A laptop can make you look less engaged and make it seem more formal
- Use the Individual Retention Conversation questions in Part III. Be consistent in using questions from the guide, however...
 - ...tailor the questions and phrasing based on the employee's level or need – e.g., don't ask a new coordinator about their interest in certifications since they aren't eligible right away!
- For experienced staff focus on their experience so far, likes, where they see themselves in 5 years, etc.
- Use the time to listen and let the employee speak without interrupting
- The conversation should be bi-directional, but do not guide employees on their responses to the questions.
- Let the conversation flow naturally – if you don't get through all the questions, that's okay! It's better to plan a follow-up meeting to finish the interview than cut an employee off.
- Some people will naturally talk more than others, but...
 - ...pay attention to staff that aren't sharing – an additional meeting may need to be scheduled
- Identify if the employee is becoming overwhelmed, and figure out ways to help
 - Even if you do not have an answer right away, let them know that you will follow back up with a plan
- Close the conversation and reiterate plans for follow-up
 - Remember, don't make any promises except that points from the conversation will be considered and followed-up on as appropriate – you don't want to overpromise on things that you may not be able to deliver



After the Interview

- 1 Set aside time after the interview** to collect your thoughts, make notes, and summarize key responses from interview.
- 2 Prioritize common themes** to help develop your follow-up plan after all the interviews are done.
- 3 Analyze outcomes** and develop action plans, SOPs, goals, extra training, team building, etc.
- 4 Work with employees** to set professional goals for themselves (outside of performance review)



TOP TIPS

- Conducting this without follow-up is useless – this is an ongoing process
- Needs will differ depending on employee and department needs
- Outcomes need to be achievable! You can't promise something that can't be done
- Be cautious about what you put in writing and/or promise
- Encourage continued conversations – the employee may remember something after they've had time to digest the meeting that they'd like to discuss
- Some people may not want to go beyond where they are – and that's okay
 - Setting goals for those employees can be hard
 - Respect their responses! Support what these employees want to do – even if you don't agree with them

■ Vignette

“During a stay interview, one employee responded that her favorite task was to process blood specimens and that she would be willing to do this more often. Many other employees reported that they did not prefer to process blood and it was their least favorite task. As manager this enabled me to balance the workload based on this preference that I would not have otherwise known about.”

Follow-Up Action Items

Analyze both individual and aggregate outcomes to develop plans for follow-up. Base next steps on individual and/or departmental needs. No matter what the next steps are, there must be follow-up from the interviews!

Examples of follow-up could include:

- **Revising or Creating SOPs** – add specific elements (e.g., training or orienting) that could be useful moving forward
- **Team Building** – organize activities or opportunities for employees to disengage from work and spend time getting to know each other as colleagues
- **Training** – provide opportunities for training and encourage employees to take courses to support their career development
- **Professional Development** – invest in the staff member through supporting professional development activities (e.g., paying for professional membership organization, conference attendance)

■ Vignette

“My unit was brought in to assist with restructuring a research site and bringing stability to a clinical research team that was experiencing very high turnover. By using Individual Retention Conversations, we were able to open lines of communication and build trust with the employees by recognizing major areas of concern from their points of view. Stay interviews helped us to identify needs for education and skillsets that employees possessed but were not using to their full potential. This enabled us to match talents and staff assignments to support a healthy, happy, and more productive work environment.”

References

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Individual Retention Conversation Guide

Likes/Dislikes | Motivations | Workplace Influence on Personal/Professional Blend | Professional Development Barriers & Opportunities



..... LIKES/DISLIKES

1. What do you like most about your current position?
2. What do you find the least satisfying about your current position?

Probing Question:

What specific challenges do you encounter in your current role?

3. If you could implement one change in your role, what would you choose and why?
4. How would you describe your team dynamics?

Probing Questions:

How do you perceive your current work culture?

What would you recommend to improve your work culture?

..... MOTIVATIONS

5. What motivates you to perform at your best?
6. If you have ever been tempted to leave, what caused you to feel that way?

Probing Questions:

Has that issue been resolved?

What single most meaningful action could I take to address this issue?

..... WORKPLACE INFLUENCE ON PERSONAL/PROFESSIONAL BLEND

7. What are the top three qualities you value in a team?

Probing Questions:

How does your current team demonstrate these qualities?

How are these qualities expressed or not by your leadership?

Do you have a sense of belonging within your team? Organization? If not, what contributes to that feeling?

..... WORKPLACE INFLUENCE ON PERSONAL/PROFESSIONAL BLEND (CONT.)

8. How do you like to be recognized?

Probing Questions:

Are you recognized in this way?

Tell me about a time you have been recognized (e.g., what happened, how did it feel)?

9. Do you feel valued for your contributions and achievements? (from the organization or from your direct unit)

Probing Questions:

In what ways do you feel valued?

How can we enhance the recognition of your contributions and achievements?

10. What actions can we take to provide the best support for your personal and professional blend?

Probing Questions:

Describe any barriers or missed opportunities that would promote a more meaningful personal / professional blend for you?

Acknowledge what's within actionable reach as conversation moves forward.

..... PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES

11. What is your understanding of your job responsibilities / role?

Probing Question:

What additional resources and tools do you need to be successful in your position?

12. How would you describe your average daily workload?

Probing Questions:

How does your average daily workload impact your confidence in producing quality work?

How can leadership support you to ensure your workload is manageable (e.g., time / project management training, workload prioritization)?

13. What talents or strengths are not being used in your current role?

Probing Questions:

How might we better utilize these talents / strengths?

What talents and skills are you consistently utilizing in your current role?

14. Are there any professional growth opportunities that interest you?

Probing Questions:

Is professional certification important to you?

Have you identified any barriers hindering your pursuit of professional growth?

How can we support you in achieving your professional development goals?