THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

What If the First Hour of Every Job Was the Exit Interview?

TOPIC: WORK AND EXPECTATIONS

The exit interview is one of the strangest rituals in working life. It happens at the end, when nothing can be changed, and it is conducted with great seriousness. Notes are taken. Findings are filed. Someone promises the feedback will be valuable. Then the person leaves, a new person is hired, and the whole arrangement begins again with no memory of what the last ending said.

So here is the experiment. Move the exit interview to the first hour of the job. Before the desk is chosen, before the laptop is handed over, the new employee sits down with the manager and answers, in the future tense, the questions that are usually asked at the end. Why will you leave? What will have disappointed you? What will you have hoped for that never arrived?

It sounds like a strange way to begin. That strangeness is worth examining, because it tells us something about how we handle endings everywhere.

Everyone arrives with a private prediction

Nobody joins a company expecting it to end badly, but almost everyone arrives carrying a quiet sense of how it might. The role will turn out to be smaller than described. The manager who was charming in the interviews will be absent in practice. The growth that was promised will keep being promised. These predictions are rarely spoken, because the first day is supposed to be hopeful, and hope does not invite its doubts to the table.

So the prediction sits there, unasked and untested. Months or years later, at the exit interview, it finally gets spoken - at the exact moment when speaking it helps no one. The company receives the information at the moment it stops mattering. The employee carried the disappointment the whole time it mattered. This is a strange way to run an exchange: the truth is available from the first hour, and the ritual is designed to collect it in the last.

Expectations are cheapest at the beginning

A hope named on the first day is a conversation. The same hope discovered at the exit is a grievance with a date on it. This is the simple arithmetic the experiment exposes. Every working relationship runs on expectations, and expectations can only be negotiated while they are still cheap - before they have hardened into interpretations, before each side has built a private record of the other's failures.

Ask the questions early and something odd happens. The company learns what it actually sold in the interview, which is often different from what it thinks it sold. The employee learns what they actually bought, which is often different from the job description. Both of those discoveries are valuable precisely because they are early, when adjusting is still easy and nobody has to be at fault.

The door swings both ways

Run the experiment honestly and it has to run in both directions. The company answers the same questions. Why will we let you go? What will have disappointed us? No organization would enjoy this, which is exactly the information. A company that cannot say, on the first day, what would end the relationship has not described the job. It has described the good version of the job - the version that exists in the offer letter, before the budget meeting, before the reorganization, before the quarter that changes everything.

Two honest answers, exchanged in the first hour, would not guarantee anything. They would do something more useful. They would turn the relationship from an act of mutual hope into a mutual description.

A manager who has heard the ending manages differently

There is a practical consequence hiding inside the experiment. A prediction spoken on the first day becomes a to-do list. If the new hire says, I will leave when my work stops being visible, the manager now knows exactly which failure to prevent. If the manager says, we will disappoint you when budgets get tight and development budgets go first, the employee now knows which promise to watch. Neither answer prevents the ending. Both answers prevent the surprise, and surprise - not disappointment - is what turns departures bitter.

This is not a prenup

People will object that the first-hour interview is a prenuptial agreement for jobs. It is the opposite. A prenup plans the division of things after the ending. This conversation plans the prevention of the ending. One assumes failure and arranges the wreckage. The other names failure early so it can be outmaneuvered. The prenup is legal. The first-hour interview is architectural. It does not divide the house. It checks the foundation while checking is still cheap.

Saying the ending clarifies the beginning

There is a second effect, on the employee's side. Being asked why you will leave forces you to admit why you came. People join companies for reasons they do not always say out loud: to escape somewhere else, to borrow a brand, to buy time, to prove something. None of these are shameful. All of them shape how the job will go. An ending imagined clearly at the start is not pessimism. It is the first honest description of the arrangement.

And it changes the meaning of the commitment. A person who has said out loud what would end the relationship has, for the first time, actually chosen it - with its exit visible, not hidden.

Why it feels wrong

The resistance is real, and it is instructive. Beginnings are supposed to be hopeful. Naming the ending at the start feels like bad luck, the way writing a will feels like inviting the event. But notice: the prediction exists whether or not anyone speaks it. Speech did not create the ending. It only moved the ending from a private file into a shared one, where it can be worked with. Every commitment contains its ending. The exit interview proves we know this. We simply insist on learning it too late, and we pay for the delay in the currency of avoidable disappointment.

The pattern is not limited to jobs. Anything joined has this shape - a partnership, a city, a membership, a project. The first hour is the only hour when the terms can still be shaped without anyone losing face. After that, the terms shape us.

The question that stays

Much of my Ph.D. research looks at how the framing of a situation decides what becomes visible inside it. The exit interview is a framing problem wearing a scheduling problem's clothes. We placed the most honest conversation at the moment of lowest usefulness, and then we wondered why nothing changed.

So the question the experiment leaves behind is not really about interviews. It is this: in anything you are about to begin, are you willing to say at the start what you will one day say at the end?

If not, it is worth asking who that silence is protecting.