

BIG IDEA, IN BRIEF

Addressing the Talent Uprising Head-On: The Right Time for a “Tour of Duty” Conversation Is Today

The pandemic has impacted all of us, to one degree or another, and in multiple ways. We have been forced to think more intentionally about risks associated with activities that were once routine—like shaking hands, getting on a bus, entering a store or simply showing up for work. Many have reconsidered life’s priorities, evaluating what in life and work gives them genuine pleasure. Employees have experienced unprecedented levels of autonomy and flexibility that they are loath to surrender, and for many, relationships with bosses and colleagues have become more personal.



This intensified self-reflection has stimulated what we call the “[Talent Uprising](#),” leading many employees to search for new roles, new work environments, new career options, new types of organizational relationships and more. This search reflects their own emerging realization that they are not exactly the same person today that they were back in January 2020. Employees are leaving their organizations in record numbers, often without providing their former employers with a clear rationale—too often because their leaders never asked.

Leaders must act right now to address the Talent Uprising, acknowledging the reality that each associate has somehow changed, in ways small or large. And therefore, every leader must, at this critical point in time,

check in with each of their employees if they haven’t already, and hold a “Tour of Duty” conversation. The notion of Tours of Duty was popularized a few years ago by Reid Hoffman, the co-founder of LinkedIn, recasting the notion of career management into a series of tours of duty, of limited duration (typically 18–36 months) and with specific personal and organizational goals.

To be sure, in the face of the Talent Uprising, the leader’s intent in having this conversation should be to help the employee decide to remain with the organization. But this will only happen if—through an open, honest, caring dialogue—the leader and employee are able to identify and agree on a mutually satisfactory Tour of Duty.

An attractive Tour of Duty will have several key features, best established in a document:

- **A defined mission.** For example, launch a new product, restructure a department, expand a territory, implement a new technology, etc. The mission does not have to be grand or far-reaching, but it should be clearly defined with a suitable time frame attached.
- **Clear opportunities** during that Tour of Duty for the employee to exercise and hone specific, personally valued capabilities.
- **Connection points** that will enable the employee to forge new, satisfying relationships.
- **A vision of** how the experience will enhance the employee’s “brand” inside the organization, say by providing new visibility or the chance to be identified with a widely recognized contribution.



Note that the outcome of the Tour of Duty conversation may not, in fact, be an assignment any different from the individual's current role. But if effectively conducted, whatever the features of the next Tour of Duty, the conversation will capture with greater salience the personal value of their decision to stay in the organization, reinforced by an opt-in and time-bounded commitment mutually agreeable to both leader and employee.

There are two necessary conditions required to make a Tour of Duty conversation work:

#1 – Trust.

For many leaders, the pandemic period has provided an opportunity to deepen the emotional connection that is the basis for trust. During one-on-one meetings, the leader needs to build on that connection and act with complete transparency and honesty. Leaders must be comfortable sharing their personal vulnerabilities and frustrations. They should openly discuss any limitations in their power to create a next Tour of Duty that meets the employee's aspirations. They will on occasion have to tell some employees that the organization has no satisfying alternatives to offer and instead pivot the conversation to helping the employee think about options outside the organization. The key is ensuring a completely safe space where the employee understands that the leader is all-in on finding a win-win solution.

#2 – Insight.

Entering the conversation, leaders will have to let go of pre-pandemic impressions of the employee's aspirations, valued capabilities and preferences. They need to enter the conversation with an open mind, no matter how long they have been working with the employee, encouraging the employee to share

what might have changed over the past two years. Leaders can prompt a deeper conversation by being transparent about what changed for them. To be sure, most people have not been radically transformed, though some have. But nuances and subtleties count when it comes to working to identify a Tour of Duty that is more aligned with where the employee is today than some alternative—imagined or real—out in the market. That requires a conversation that digs deeply and respectfully to truly understand and appreciate the employee's mindset at this moment in time.

There is no doubt that many leaders will feel very uncomfortable with conversations that are this personal. They may not be happy risking a conversation that might well result in mutual agreement that the employee would be better off looking for a new organizational home. But avoiding these conversations is, in our view, abrogating a core leadership responsibility—retaining valued talent, providing roles that maximize contributions to the organization and at the same time grow capabilities for addressing future challenges, and strengthening the emotional connections that make for greater trust and influence.

The Talent Uprising is tangible proof that employees today are engaged in reflective inner dialogue on their options for a next Tour of Duty that best reflects the person they have become. Leaders should get in on that conversation by initiating open, supportive, safe and meaningful discussion—right now, with every member of their team—or suffer the unnecessary talent drain to which their discomfort has contributed.

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