Safe Space Leadership

ARTICLE

Why exit interviews rarely name the manager

The reason people give on the way out is often the safest one to give.

What employees say, and what employers hear

No. 1
reason Australian employees say they would leave: poor manager quality
GARTNER, 2026

17%
of employers cite leadership or management style as a reason people leave
AHRI, 2025

6%
of organisations name manager capability development as their primary retention initiative
AHRI, 2026

When a valued team member resigns, the exit interview usually points to something reasonable: a better salary, a bigger role, the chance to grow somewhere new. It may all be true, but it's often not the reason they started looking.

If the real reason sits with their manager, saying so can feel like a risk with nothing to gain. They still need a reference, they may cross paths again, and the decision is already made. So they give a reason no one will question.

When the data points the wrong way

If exit interviews name pay or career, the natural response is a salary review or a new development program. If the underlying reason was how people were led, those fixes won't reach it. The next resignation follows the same pattern, at an average replacement cost of about $28,500, by Australian employers' own estimate.

The three figures at the top of the page point in the same direction. Employees name the manager as the top reason they would leave. Fewer employers hear that, and fewer still invest in managers as a way to keep people. The surveys differ, so the figures can't be compared directly, but they suggest employers may not be hearing the full story.

Look earlier

By the time someone sits down for an exit interview, it's usually too late to change their mind. The signals were there months before, in everyday leadership: conversations put off, feedback saved for review time, growth rarely discussed, one team losing people faster than the rest. On their own, each is easy to explain away. Together, they tell the story the exit interview won't.

Hearing it while it can still help

Safe Space Leadership works with leaders to build the trust and regular, honest conversations that bring concerns forward, so the real reasons are raised while there's still time to act, rather than saved for an exit interview, or never shared at all.

Spot it earlier

Our free checklist, *Six signs leadership may be adding to retention risk*, has six signs to look for, with a question to ask for each.

safespaceleadership.com.au/resources

SSL builds leaders people choose to stay for.

General information about leadership practice. Sources: Gartner, Global Talent Monitor, Q2 2026 (820 Australian employees; reasons employees would leave); Australian HR Institute, Quarterly Australian Work Outlook, March Quarter 2025 (603 employers; employer-reported reasons employees leave); AHRI, Managing the 5Rs, 2026 (211 respondents; replacement cost is an employer estimate). Published November 2026. © Safe Space Leadership 2026