

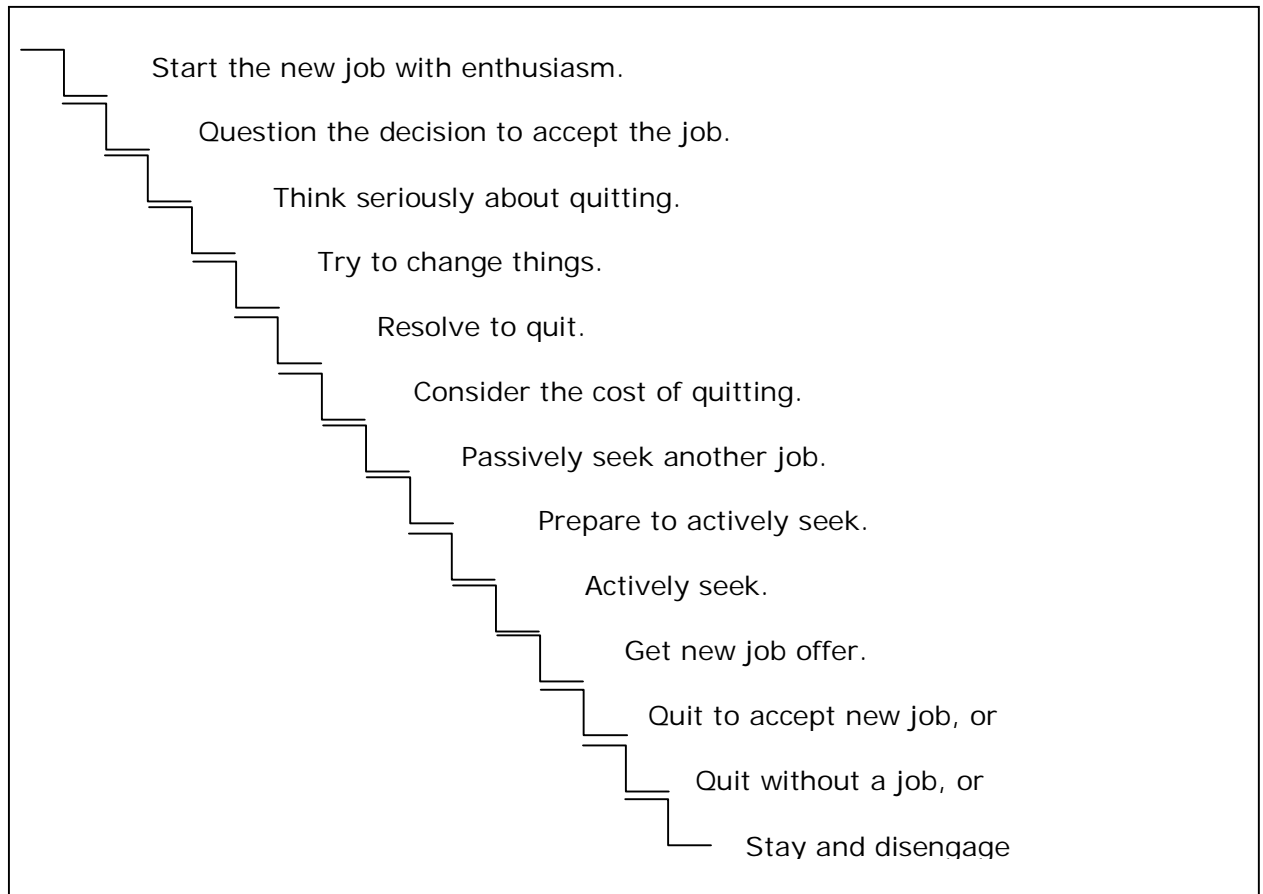
Disengagement and Quit of Employees

Before we identify the main reasons employees disengage, it is important to understand the dynamics of how they go through the disengagement process. Understanding the unfolding nature of employee disengagement helps us see how we can interrupt the process and salvage key talent at many points along the decision path.

The first thing to realize is that employee turnover is not an event—it is really a process of disengagement that can take days, weeks, months, or even years until the actual decision to leave occurs (if it ever does).

As the stair-step graphic in Figure shows, there are actually several sequential and predictable steps that can unfold in the employee's journey from disengagement to departure.

Leigh Branham mentioned thirteen steps in the engagement-to-departure process.



Of course, many managers are so busy or preoccupied that they wouldn't even notice. But not that it's only the manager's responsibility to take the initiative in this process—employees also need to understand they have a singular responsibility to find ways of addressing their concerns and re-engaging themselves in the workplace. But many

managers are just too slow to observe the telltale sign of employee disengagement until it is too late to do anything about it.

The obvious early warning signs of disengagement are absenteeism, tardiness, or behavior that indicates withdrawal or increased negativity. It is also useful to know that these early signs of disengagement typically start showing up after a shocking or jarring event takes place that causes the employee to question his or her commitment. Here are some of the stimulus events that can trigger disengagement:

- Being passed over for promotion
- Realizing the job is not as promised
- Learning they may be transferred
- Hiring boss being replaced by new boss they don't like
- Being assigned to new territory
- Being asked to do something unethical
- Learning the company is doing something unethical
- Sudden wealth or sufficient savings to buy independence
- Earning enough money (grubstake)
- An incident of sexual harassment
- An incident of racial discrimination
- Learning the company is up for sale
- Learning the company has been sold
- Realizing they are underpaid compared to others doing the same job
- Realizing they are not in line for promotion for which they thought they were in line
- Realizing that their own behavior has become unacceptable
- An unexpected outside job offer
- Being pressured to make an unreasonable family or personal sacrifice
- Being asked to perform a menial duty (e.g., run a personal errand for the boss)
- Petty and unreasonable enforcement of authority
- Being denied a request for family leave
- Being denied a request for transfer
- A close colleague quitting or being fired
- A disagreement with the boss
- A conflict with a coworker
- An unexpectedly low performance rating
- A surprisingly low pay increase or no pay increase

Sometimes, departed employees use the term "last straw" in referring to these events.

Dr. Thomas Lee, a business professor at the University of Washington, who has extensively researched what he calls "the unfolding model of turnover," reports several interesting findings about how and why people disengage and leave:

- The majority of voluntary turnovers—63 percent—are precipitated by some kind of shocking event.
- Very few employees start thinking of leaving because of shocking events related to pay.
- About 20 percent of departing employees leave without having another job in hand.
- Some leave when the job offer is "likely," not waiting until it is in hand.
- Temporary, part-time, and marginal workers are more likely to quit suddenly or impulsively after a shock rather than enter into a drawn-out period evaluating the situation.

- Many talented employees keep an eye out for other jobs while working, and decide to interview for outside opportunities just for practice, to create a “plan B,” or to test their marketability.
- Many employees leave because of “personal shocks” unrelated to their workplace, such as marriage, pregnancy, inheritance, last child leaving home, decision to relocate, becoming a caregiver for a family member in health crisis, or paying off the mortgage.
- Exit surveying or interviewing that doesn’t uncover the shock (turning point) and get the employee to discuss the deliberation process, if there was one, will not reveal the root cause.

Since most disengagements begin with some kind of shocking event like those listed above, managers need to keep their antenna up for signals that a valued employee may have recently received a disappointing shock. Or better yet, because it is often hard to read the feelings of employees from the looks on their faces, managers should simply sit down with their direct reports on a regular basis and ask, “how are things with you?” Such simple, caring questions can help avoid turnovers like the one mentioned above, opening up discussions that can lead to a resolution of the precipitating issue.

Or, perhaps the employees could have done more on their own initiative to resolve the situations. Or, maybe they had done all they could. It may even have been impossible for the managers to accommodate the employees’ wishes. We will never know. The point is, if the manager does not regularly initiate such discussions, and they never happen, it is the manager and the organization that risk suffering the loss of talent and the high costs of turnover. When we consider the gradual, unfolding nature of employee disengagement and that, as research reveals, 75 percent of employees are disengaged, there can be but one conclusion: The need for managers to initiate action to engage and re-engage employees is urgent, and the daily opportunity to do so is ever-present.