I recently read a series of brief, online articles by John Sullivan on stay interviews. Dr. Sullivan is a professor of management at San Francisco State University.

Dr. Sullivan defines a stay interview, "A periodic one-on-one structured retention interview between a manager and a highly valued 'at-risk-of-leaving employee' that identifies and then reinforces the factors that drive an employee to stay. It also identifies any 'triggers' that might cause them to leave."

**Stay Interview Benefits**
The basic premise behind the stay interview is to keep talent. Conducting an exit interview after someone leaves may provide some insight, but by that time the talented employee has already left. Thus the stay interview is geared to gaining the insight early and keeping the employee.

Dr. Sullivan describes a number of benefits in conducting stay interviews. One of his reasons is, "They stimulate the employee – Most employees are excited simply by the fact that the organization is concerned about their future and that their manager took the time to consult with them."

Another reason is, "A focus on the positive – Most of the interview is focused on identifying and then reinforcing the positive factors that the employee enjoys about their job. Although some negative factors may be covered, they are not the primary focus of the interview."

A third reason is, "They include actions – Unlike exit interviews, which only identify problems, stay interviews also encourage the parties to identify actions that can improve the employee experience and actions that can help eliminate any major frustrations or turnover triggers."

**Stay Interview Questions**
Dr. Sullivan provides twenty possible questions or topics for a stay interview. I have not gone to the formality of conducting actual stay interviews, but I have weaved a few of his recommended questions into individual conversations, staff meetings, and performance reviews.

One question is, "Reasons you give to others – If you have ever been asked by a close friend or have been contacted by an external recruiter, can you tell me what reasons you gave them for wanting to stay at our firm?" This is a great question which gets at both what motivates them and also at the positive workplace factors which we want to maintain.

In asking a similar question of an employee, I was particularly touched by the response about making our hometown a better place. I have been intrigued by answers about pride in working with the Mayor and other city leaders on important projects. I have been impressed by comments about liking the challenge and personal growth in a promotion. I

have been pleased to hear about appreciation of a supportive and collaborative work environment.

Another question is, "Better managed – If you 'managed yourself,' what would you do differently (in relation to managing 'you'), that I as your current manager, don't currently do?" Actually, I have not used this question, but I like it.

I do frequently ask employees whether there is anything that I or the City Council can do to help them succeed. Generally, I get a simple response along the lines that they feel supported and everything is pretty good. When I do get responses they tend to be rather simple problems. I learn about training or equipment needs. I hear about communication which falls short and needs to be better.

But I like the idea of rephrasing the question. Asking about better management focuses on improvement rather than maintaining the status quo or addressing a simple fix.

A third question is, "Recognition – Can you highlight any recent recognition and acknowledgement that you have received that increased your commitment and loyalty? Are there actions that we can take to further recognize you?" I realize that Dr. Sullivan is talking about a structured stay interview, so reference to "increased your commitment and loyalty" may make sense. But I think it sounds too formal, I prefer asking about "was particularly meaningful for you."

In Evansville, we encourage individual recognition in the way of praise or thanks, typically by peers or supervisors. Such appreciation may well be essential for a successful recognition program. But in our case it is largely happenstance, not a formalized program. The City Council budgeted funds for a formalized program this year, but we have not yet determined just what it will be. The answers to the recognition question will help in determining a program meaningful to our employees.

Done well, a recognition program communicates the right behaviors, rewards and reinforces those behaviors, and validates employee contributions. This is very much in line with the strategic discussions city leadership has had over the last few years about driving for excellence and providing top-notch service.

However a recognition program has to be balanced to recognize both the achievement and the person behind the achievement. And knowing about individual preferences will help strengthen appreciation and respect in our day-to-day social architecture, recognizing the person.

**Employer of Choice**

City Council members and department heads have discussed being an employer of choice, attracting and keeping the right people. The key to keeping good staff (and by and large we have very good staff) is empowerment so they can do their jobs correctly, feel part of a team rather than worker bees, and not just be taken for granted.

And a stay interview may well be one more piece in setting the foundation for Evansville as an employer of choice.