

Employee Opinion Surveys...Go Ask Your People

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On the premise that most organizations have at one time or another considered doing an employee opinion survey, and many who have done so have found the process less than fulfilling, we'd like to offer some 'do's and don't's about employee surveys, and in particular, for taking the pulse of your workforce.

Following are what might be termed the 'Critical Success Factors' for using such a tool:

1. Commitment to the Process - Organizations deploying an employee survey absent the genuine support and commitment of top management are wasting time, money, and valuable management credibility. In fact, they are running the risk of making things worse.

Conversely, given the demonstrated resolve of senior management to look under 'every corner of the rug', including their own, and to make genuine (often time consuming) efforts to understand the data, and to act on it, the effort is likely to be rewarding.

In most respects, this comes down to not one, but two 'C' words – Courage and Commitment. Do you have the courage to risk being told that "your baby is ugly", and the commitment to do something about it? If so, read on.

2. Understand What You're Getting Into - On the surface, conducting an employee survey (or any survey for that matter) is a relatively straightforward process...You compile some questions, go ask people what they think, and tabulate the results. Often overlooked is the realization that the very act of doing so creates expectations on the part of those being surveyed - particularly when that population is your workforce. Expectations that:

- A. The results will somehow be shared with them
- B. Something will actually happen as the result of the survey, and
- C. No harm will come to them for telling you what they really think

Though we have no scientific data to back this up, three decades of dealing with employee surveys have produced a few hard conclusions. One of them is that it is imperative to do a good job of managing these expectations. One possible consequence of failing to do so is that you quickly reach a point where the only people who bother to respond to your survey are more interested in venting their spleen than offering helpful feedback.

Employee and customer surveys are, by nature, perceived by line managers as a threat, in that they inevitably ask questions about the quality of supervision (both direct and indirect). This makes it imperative that you establish and communicate clearly, right up front, why you're doing the survey, what will happen to the results, and what you hope to gain from the whole process.

If the results are to become part of your business metrics (they should), improvement over time should be a significant factor.

3. The Survey Itself - Too often, organizations trip themselves up from the start by asking too many questions, questions that aren't relevant, or questions people don't understand or could interpret differently. When it comes to the actual number of questions being asked, more is definitely not better. Twenty to thirty well-phrased questions will, in all likelihood, produce as much data as you and your management team can effectively manage.

Should we develop our own survey or use one that is commercially available? Clearly, there are advantages and disadvantages either way. The major advantage of designing your own survey is that it affords you the ability to ask exactly the questions you want to ask. The disadvantages are that you may shy away from asking questions you should be asking, and by definition, preclude any opportunity to benchmark your results to others.

Surprisingly, cost is not much of a differentiating factor since whatever you might save by going the self-serve route will likely be spent in internal haggling over the questions, crunching your own numbers, or managing the database. Often, in the beginning stages (i.e. the first few years) of using a survey, it may be advantageous to use one of the commercially prepared (externally processed) variety, as it tends to ease the minds of those who worry about where the responses are going, who will see them, etc. Just make sure that if you take this course, you're working with a survey instrument and service provider you're prepared to stick with for a while, as it's important to be able to establish some consistency in the data that is generated. Otherwise, you'll never be able to measure the results of your efforts over time.

4. Survey Administration - Some important things to consider here have to do with how the survey is actually administered (i.e., face-to-face, by mail, electronically, etc.), and the instructions people are given about completing the survey. Generally, face-to-face administration yields a higher participation level and the ability to answer any questions people may have about the survey effort. Administration via the Internet is faster and cheaper. Regardless of mode, it is vital to ensure that everyone gets a consistent message about why the survey is being conducted, what will happen to the questionnaires/results, etc.

5. Data Presentation - In this area, there are two important considerations:

A. The survey effort will be successful only to the extent that people below the rank of vice president actually take ownership of the data. Take pains to ensure that the data presented to them is indeed relevant to them. Generally, each workgroup or team should get its own discreet report. (Hint – dumping a 50-page report on a manager's desk is not seen as helpful.) The data should be presented in a fashion that enables them to make sense out of the report and begin putting it to use without having to whip out their Statistics 101 text to look up what a standard deviation is, or become a 'survey expert'. In short, you should insist that they be provided usefully formatted data, accompanied by user-friendly tools.

B. Stale information is of little or no value, be it financial data or employee survey results. The time between the actual administration of the survey and the return of the results should be kept to a minimum...certainly no more than a month.

6. Survey Frequency - Given that one of the major benefits of a survey process is the opportunity to measure results over time, organizations should commit themselves to periodically resurveying their workforce. Much like an operational or financial audit, an annual cycle is generally an acceptable interval; except in cases where either the results themselves or the existence of some significant internal events might call for an earlier resurvey.