Managing Employee Surveys

Scope—This article provides an overview about the ways organizations use employee surveys to stay informed about changing employee attitudes. Specifically, this article discusses laying the groundwork for an employee survey, designing the survey, interpreting and communicating the results, and demonstrating to the organization that the feedback has been taken seriously.

Overview

Sound employment practices geared toward attracting, training, retaining and rewarding employees must reflect a clear understanding of the employees who make up the workforce. Employee surveys are an excellent vehicle for gaining that insight. Conducting one of these surveys correctly, however, takes months of planning as well as careful execution and follow-up. Misinterpreting the results or failing to act in response to the feedback can have a devastating effect on employee morale. References and samples are included at the end of the article.

Pros and Cons of Conducting Employee Surveys

A carefully designed and conducted employee survey can reveal a great deal of information about employee perceptions that management can use to improve the workplace. Organization responsiveness to employee feedback leads to higher retention rates, lower absenteeism, improved productivity, better customer service and higher employee morale. The simple fact that the organization is conducting a survey can send a positive message to employees that their opinions are valued. In addition, managers can gain insights into issues affecting their departments or business units that allow them to manage more effectively. Conversely, if the senior management team is not fully committed and ready to really listen to and, most important, act on what employees are saying, then conducting a survey can falsely raise expectations among employees, leading to an employee relations disaster.

Common Types of Surveys

The three most common types of employee surveys include employee opinion and satisfaction surveys, employee culture surveys, and employee engagement surveys.

- Employee opinion and satisfaction surveys measure employee views, attitudes and perceptions of their organization (also known as "climate surveys").

- An employee culture survey measures the point of view of employees and is designed to assess whether it aligns with that of the organization or its departments.

- Employee engagement surveys measure employees' commitment, motivation, sense of purpose and passion for their work and organization.

HR's Role

HR must have the full commitment of the organization’s senior management team before conducting any survey of employees. Once senior management is sold on the idea, HR professionals typically facilitate the survey's development, help managers overcome their natural hesitation about employee feedback, develop careful communication plans, and help determine how to interpret and use the data generated.

Some employers manage the survey process internally, whereas others use outside vendors. See SHRM Vendor Directory: Testing & Surveys (http://vendordirectory.shrm.org/category/testing-surveys)

Alternatives are available, including consulting firms and professional industry groups like SHRM. SHRM provides services to small to midsize employers wanting to conduct an engagement and job satisfaction survey of their employees. See SHRM Employee Engagement Service: An Employee Job Satisfaction & Engagement Survey Service (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/business-solutions/pages/employee-engagement-survey-service.aspx).
Regardless of the approach taken, HR is typically heavily involved in the design and development of the survey, the employee communication strategy, and the data analysis, as well as the action planning that takes place based on the survey results.

If the organization decides to use an external survey provider, HR may want to consider initiating a request for proposal (RFP) process to solicit bids for the project. Among the factors for seriously considering an RFP are the following: customer feedback, pricing and pricing options, technology, the availability of benchmarking data, turnover of vendor’s staff, reporting capabilities, and of course the questions included in the survey instrument.

**Timing and Frequency of Employee Surveys**

Organizations should conduct surveys of employees on a regular basis—most companies elect to ask their employees for feedback annually. Requesting regular feedback shows employees that the company actually cares about how they perceive their work environment. Choosing when to conduct the survey should take several things into consideration. Avoiding peak holiday seasons is usually best to ensure a maximum response from employees. Scheduling the survey during the organization’s historically slow periods is also advisable so that employees will have the necessary time to devote to the survey. Finally, it might be good to avoid conducting the survey during cycles that could skew the results either positively or negatively. Bonus season or high-stress periods can provide an unrealistic picture of normal employee satisfaction if year-over-year normal operating results are the objective.

Employers are often hesitant to measure employee attitudes during business slumps, reorganizations, downsizings or outsourcing efforts because they assume that employees will simply say how disgruntled they are; however, organizational experts suggest that such times can provide an ideal opportunity to check in. The simple act of asking for input during critical junctures can send a positive message to the workforce.

However, when an organization is in the midst of a major corporate change (e.g., massive layoffs or a significant merger or restructuring), conducting a survey might not be advised because employees tend to be somewhat reserved and fearful during such times. To generate honest feedback, an atmosphere of trust must be present. If not, the survey might actually end up doing more harm than good.

**Survey Design**

Prior to administering a new employee survey, HR should spend some time looking at previous surveys and their results (if any) and ask questions like: “What’s the driving force behind the survey? Is it simply because it is time for another survey or because the organization is trying to win an award? Is the survey tied to the organization’s business strategy?” Many companies find it useful to form a multilevel, cross-functional team to consider the organization’s key objectives for conducting a survey before designing it. The working group should consider design and strategy questions, such as:

- Why are we conducting a survey (i.e., what do we want to know, what do we hope to obtain)?
- What are we measuring, and why?
- Who will create the questions?
- Who will be asked to participate in the survey?
- When will we conduct the survey?
- Will all results be communicated, and how?
- Who will be held accountable for implementing changes driven by survey results?
- Are there questions from previous surveys that should be included again?
- Are there questions from previous surveys that need to be rewritten because they were vague or confusing?

In addition to conducting surveys at regular intervals, employers should make sure the design of the survey will yield information that isolates problems and helps management address them. Employers increasingly survey employees about business strategy and direction, goal alignment, customer focus and satisfaction, employee retention, and quality-of-life issues. Determining the degree of satisfaction in each of those and other areas is virtually impossible to
quantify without a formal survey. See When Surveying, Treat Employees Like Customers. (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/employee-relations/Pages/TreatEmployeesLikeCustomers.aspx)

When surveys ask trivial questions or ask questions in ways that are ineffective, the result can be low employee response rates, as well as the generation of useless information, making the exercise an expensive waste of time. Some best practices in survey design include seven key principles.

**Keep it short and simple**

The number and types of questions asked can significantly influence the survey's response rate. Most experts agree that including too many items, and including items that are confusing or repetitive, can wreck a survey. Instead, survey questions should be simple and short, using terminology familiar to all employees. A general employee survey should contain up to 75 questions and take no longer than 20 to 30 minutes to complete. If the survey is too long, the response rate will likely be very low.

**Avoid “double-barreled” items**

A survey question should not be “double-barreled”—two topics that are grouped into one question, even though they may be related. An example: "The pay and benefits are excellent at this company." Employees' responses may not yield useful information because they may think pay is great but not benefits, or vice versa, leaving HR managers with no clear follow-up plan. If the survey items are not solidly constructed, the data generated from the survey will not be actionable.

**Involv employees in design and analysis**

Organizations may pilot surveys with a subset of employees before rolling them out companywide. This process can help survey designers identify unclear items. Focus groups can also help once a survey is completed. If HR has sound processes for examining and using the data collected, it can still elicit useful information from a weak set of survey items, but that may require convening employee focus groups right after the survey to get to the heart of the issue. See How to Conduct an Employee Focus Group. (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/how-to-guides/Pages/conduct-employee-focus-group.aspx)

**Ask the right questions**

Survey design experts advocate the use of items that seek responses based on a numerical scale, such as 1 to 5, with 1 meaning "strongly disagree" and 5 meaning "strongly agree." Some experts recommend asking primarily closed questions—those with a finite number of answers—instead of a fill-in-the-blanks approach. The major problems with including open-ended questions are the volume of data generated and the difficulty grouping and analysing them. Organizations regularly conducting surveys will want to be able to do trending analysis, and open-ended questions make that difficult.

**Questions to limit or avoid**

Another crucial issue in getting employees to respond year after year is to ask questions that will yield answers on which management can act. Employers should be willing to do away with, or at least limit, "nice-to-know” questions and instead focus on questions essential in understanding what employees think about their workplace.

Demographic questions that ask about gender, race and age should be voluntary to limit fears employees may have about anonymity. These questions are beneficial to include because they give employers insights into emerging group concerns and trends—for example, how older workers prefer to work. However, employees could interpret questions about race or gender as an indication that the employer plans to initiate specific programs targeting those populations.

**Use neutral statements**

Surveys should be sprinkled with negative statements. If a survey is filled with positive statements such as "My boss is considerate" or "My team is helpful," the results may be unrealistically rosy. Also, leading questions, such as, "Is the staff size too small?" can skew results.

Experts also advocate the use of questions about observable behavior to avoid the "social desirability" syndrome—the tendency to give all positive responses to please the inquirer. See Tools of Engagement (www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/pages/0210rivenbark.aspx)

**Ensure anonymity and confidentiality of responses**
HR professionals should advise employees from the outset that survey responses will be reported in aggregates only and kept absolutely confidential to ensure that everyone feels comfortable providing honest answers to the questions. Some employees may question the confidentiality of online surveys, given the ability to track IP addresses, e-mail addresses and other information. Having a third-party vendor conduct the survey usually helps assuage employees’ fears of being identified on surveys. Open-ended questions should be summarized instead of providing actual comments, any references to actual people should be removed when providing overall reporting. Such targeted feedback should be given privately.

**Policy Issues**

Most organizations do not see a need to develop policies about the conduct of periodic surveys of employees, but the employer’s internal policies and practices (as well as any labor contracts) should be consistent with existing policies, rules or labor practices.

**Legal Issues**

For employers, the greatest potential legal concern is that their third-party survey provider might have infringed on the copyright of the original survey author—so-called “pirate” or counterfeit surveys. These types of surveys are often cobbled together and lack measurement integrity. In fact, they can actually generate harmful misinformation. Organizations should look for a registered copyright and the date of the registration in the survey materials under evaluation and ask for copyright registration numbers to ensure that they are not exposing themselves to unnecessary risk by working with an unreliable vendor.

In addition, if the organization has unionized employees, HR must provide appropriate notifications and advance discussions to ensure agreement to include union employees in the survey.

**Employee Communications**

HR must prepare supervisors and managers with advance information about the rationale for conducting the employee survey, expectations on timeliness of communicating the results, plans to follow up on results and questions employees may ask. A question-and-answer packet may be an effective way to brief managers in advance on this information. Without proper planning and disclosure of the rationale for the survey and plans for its future use, the employee relations impact may be quite significant. In fact, some organizations have experienced serious productivity drops or public relations problems as a result of a poorly planned and executed survey of employees.

For unionized environments, it is a good idea to also brief the union representatives and stewards on the process and timing of the survey.

Once supervisors and managers have been briefed, HR can kick off communication to all employees by explaining the reasons for the survey. Deciding how to communicate the survey or its results depends largely on the culture of the organization and on the various types of communication readily available, such as training, staff meetings, policy and procedure manuals, company intranet, e-mail, newsletters, flyers, new employee orientation training materials, and individual letters to employees.

Though designing a good survey is key to obtaining useful information, doing something with that information afterward is essential to employee morale. Setting realistic expectations of the timing and communication of survey results up front is important to the success of the process.

Data generated from employee feedback mechanisms like surveys are real gifts that deserve attention. When the survey results have been analyzed, HR and other senior leaders should communicate the findings—warts and all—with all employees as part of the numerical presentation of results. This will enhance the authenticity and transparency of communication. In addition, organizations can facilitate the communication process by providing results in a format that is simple and easy to follow.

**Technology**

Most organizations use electronic surveys because they are more efficient and faster and use fewer resources. Make sure that employees without computers at work have a paper version of the employee survey or are given access to computers to complete the survey online. The ability to complete the survey via mobile devices such as phones or tablets may also enhance the survey experience.

Employers are increasingly using sophisticated tools to analyze the data generated from their employee surveys, which makes having the results available electronically even more valuable. Using an electronic system for inputting employee feedback usually results in higher participation rates due to ease of access and in quicker analysis of the data.

**Interpretation of Results**

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Survey results should not be taken at face value—even those on the positive end of the spectrum. A positive score in a specific department or business unit, for example, could mean either that a particular manager is doing a good job or that he or she is not holding employees accountable. HR professionals should also benchmark their organization’s results against organizations similar to theirs or against national employee norms.

Regardless of whether organizations are working with a third-party vendor or tabulating the results in-house, they will need to assess the reliability of the data and throw out meaningless results due to a particularly low response rate or poorly worded question. Employers will also need to determine the format in which they wish to display the results and demographic cuts that will be useful. Once the results of the survey have been tabulated, HR professionals should not be surprised if senior managers attempt to discount the importance of the findings by saying that “the data were what I expected” or “there were no real surprises here.” HR can use data discussions to coach senior leaders to see the results as an opportunity for organizational insights and improvement.

**Survey Follow Up**

Organizations often establish cross-functional teams to respond to and act on survey findings. A majority of the team should consist of nonsenior employees; however, each team needs to be supported by a senior-level champion whose responsibility is to monitor and support—but not manage—the team. Such teams should be in place within a month after the organization releases the survey results to signal to employees that senior management is serious about responding to the findings. HR should monitor the follow-up ideas and recommendations from any cross-functional teams to ensure that change and progress occur. In addition to (and sometimes instead of) cross-functional teams, some organizations also set up department-specific teams. These groups are given the responsibility of responding to specific issues within their particular departments.

Ideally, the process of conducting an employee survey is “closed loop,” with the life cycle moving continuously from calibration and communication (the time organizations take to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) to coaching, collaboration and continuous improvement (the time to take corrective action and conduct pulse checks) to celebrating and recognizing progress. Then the process begins anew.

It is important to maintain the results of any survey undertaken to have comparative data. If annual results are not kept and reviewed each year, how can an organization know how it is trending over time? Many employers also like to benchmark their results against those of similar organizations, which can generally be completed more easily by outside providers that maintain this type of data. Benchmarking against general employee surveys is also useful.

**Beyond Surveys**

In addition to the information that can be generated as a result of an employee survey, some organizations also choose to initiate strategic conversations with some employees to explore key issues in more depth. The hidden power of these conversations lies in the fact that they are not about data but about dialogue, and they tend to make employees feel valued. All employees need to understand that their employers will treat their opinions with dignity and respect. To yield the most insightful responses, employers using this approach ask such questions as:

- What does it take to be successful here?
- If there is one roadblock between the organization’s ideal culture and the way it really is, what is it?
- Which of the corporate values speaks to you the most?
- Tell me about a time when you were especially proud to be associated with this organization.

If these small group discussions are a direct result of survey results, it is important that the questions asked target a few specific topics. Rehashing the entire survey will not produce useful results and may communicate a lack of confidence in the original survey.

Gathering feedback from employees through multiple channels (e.g., 360-degree feedback, focus groups, small group discussions) on a regular basis can be preferable to using the results of a survey exclusively. The channels and methods used to gather feedback from employees will typically vary based on type, size and demographic makeup of the organization.

**Templates and Tools**

**Samples**

Employee Satisfaction (www.shm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/hr-forms/Pages/cms_002078.aspx)