

How to Make Employee Surveys a Tool for Change

By showing employees that answering survey questions can have an impact on policies and practices, companies are gaining valuable insights -- plus response rates of 80 percent and higher.

By George Klemp and Michael Sokol

Many employees resent filling out surveys. They answer the same old questions year after year and never learn if the survey had any effect whatsoever. They assume, perhaps correctly, that nothing happened and that the entire exercise was a meaningless ritual.

It doesn't have to be that way. Some companies get return rates of 80 percent or higher on their employee surveys. Their employees regard these surveys as an opportunity to be heard and, more important, to directly influence company policies. Here's how these companies turn the employee survey into a powerful strategic tool.

Step 1: Have a Real Business Reason for the Survey

Companies that use surveys as a strategic tool typically start out with a clear-cut objective. If they are losing good people, they ask what they can do to improve retention. If they are contemplating changes in benefits and compensation policies, they zero in on what's important to employees, what's not important, and where employees would like to see changes. They build the survey around a specific topic rather than trying to cover a whole smorgasbord of objectives.

One giant corporation, believing that relocating top people was a way to enhance their careers, found that its relocation policy was hurting morale and causing good people to seek careers elsewhere. Stung by the realization that it was not on the same wavelength as its employees, the company surveyed them on what it took to get ahead. Because the survey raised questions the employees saw as important, the response rate was more than 80 percent.

Another company implemented a new marketing strategy and then surveyed the sales force for feedback. To its chagrin, management learned that the sales force thought the new marketing program was actually making it harder for them to make sales. The company quickly replaced that failed strategy with a more effective one.

Step 2: Test the Water

Companies that develop well-targeted surveys don't leave the questions to luck. They sound out their employees first, sometimes using focus groups to get a feel for what employees are thinking. Often such preliminary surveys identify sore points that can be corrected immediately. For example, one company found that smokers resented having to leave the building to smoke a cigarette. Rather than survey its employees about smoking, the company simply set up special rooms for smokers.

Some companies make sure employees know that they're conducting such focus groups. They want everyone to be aware that management considers the survey important and is doing everything it can to make it valuable and meaningful.

Step 3: Communicate the Survey's Relevance

Once the company knows what it wants to cover in the survey, it alerts employees that the survey is coming, tells them what it's about, and makes it clear that their responses will influence the company's subsequent actions. In short, it markets the survey.

A successful survey makes sure that employees understand completely what it is about. It states its intent right up front. If retention is a problem, it will say, "We want to retain our best people." If performance is a concern, it will say, "We want to motivate people to do their best." It also indicates the kinds of actions the company is considering.

The survey reinforces the sense of its relevance by asking employees questions that relate both to the survey's objective and to their own experience. All of this helps get everybody on board and improves the response rate.

Step 4: Ask the Right Questions

The best questions ask employees about their direct experiences and observations -- things they can knowledgeably comment on. The least useful questions ask employees about their feelings. For example, if you ask employees if they are satisfied with their jobs, a positive answer can mean many different things. One employee may be satisfied because the job is challenging and provides opportunities for advancement; another may be satisfied because the job pays a lot of money for very little work. Such answers don't give management information they can act on.

Perhaps the worst questions are those that provide information the company is not prepared to deal with. The classic example is: Are you satisfied with your salary? Chances are that the majority of employees will say that they are not satisfied. What then does management do? They're in a bind. They can't offer across-the-board raises, and it's too late to tell the employees that compared with people in other companies, they're being well compensated.

If management approaches every question with the realization that it will have to address the answer, it will spot such "bombs" and avoid them. In the case of salary satisfaction, many companies have found that a good approach is to simply provide employees with market studies that show them how their pay stacks up against that of comparable employees in other companies.

Even good questions can lead to inconclusive results, forcing management to re-survey or take other steps to get the specific information it needs. To avoid this, many surveys provide space for employees to write in narrative comments. The narrative comments add texture to the answers. They can also alert management to flaws in the survey.

For instance, if a benefits survey focuses exclusively on medical and dental care, narrative comments might alert HR that a sizable number of employees see day care as an important benefit. Besides providing useful data, narrative comments give a critique of the survey that can guide management in designing the next survey.

Step 5: Organize the Questions in a Meaningful Sequence

Many surveys either confront employees with a random barrage of questions or arrange questions into groups without a clear rationale for their order. This leaves employees confused about what the survey is actually intended to measure. It's more effective to put the questions in a sequence that helps employees think about the issues in a meaningful way.

One recommendation is to start the survey with "global" topics and work down to specifics. For instance, a sequence might start by asking such questions as "Does leadership set a tone that inspires?" and "Can they be trusted to do what they say?" and work its way down to such questions as "Would you recommend this company as a good place to work?" Sequencing questions and putting them in context gives the employee a clearer sense of what management is seeking and elicits more thoughtful responses.

Some people argue that grouping questions by topics and then sequencing them from the global to the specific can influence the employees' answers. They prefer random questions. Their argument is both true and irrelevant. Organizing the questions does influence the answers -- and that's the reason for organizing them.

You want the employees to see the questions in context, to understand their ramifications, and to answer accordingly. Employee surveys are not psychological tests in which randomization can be critical. Rather, they are attempts to gain useful information from employees that can later be used to make knowledgeable business decisions.

Step 6: Establish Useful Measures

Companies that want to measure their results test their metrics in advance to make sure they will yield meaningful findings. For example, if the survey asks people how much they enjoy coming to work each day, a 3.0 on a 5-point scale may mean that 25 percent love coming to work, 25 percent hate it, and the rest are neutral. Or it could mean that 100 percent are neutral. You don't really know what that 3.0 score represents. For decision-makers, it's much more useful to have both the score, 3.0 in this case, and the percentage of employees who answer that they are very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, neutral, dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied. If the goal is to move people up the satisfaction scale, it's critical to know where they are on that scale.

Here again, the narrative comments provide critical examples (job not challenging, bad management, can't question authority, micromanagement, etc.) that help pinpoint specific sources of dissatisfaction and identify the necessary steps to deal with them.

Step 7: Don't Over-rely on Benchmarking

Some companies benchmark their findings against those of other companies within their industry sector. However, this often produces apples-to-oranges comparisons. For instance, in the high-tech sector, benchmarking against the industry norm could result in a company like Cisco benchmarking its results against those of other manufacturers like Dell and Compaq, neither of which competes with Cisco.

Benchmarking can also ignore special situations. For instance, it will compare companies just starting to downsize, where employees are filled with anxiety, with companies that have finished downsizing and where employees feel more secure.

While industry benchmarking often produces misleading findings, internal benchmarking can be quite useful. Typically, companies that use internal benchmarking identify sections of the company with superior performance and then benchmark the other sections against them, with the goal of bringing those lagging sections up to that higher performance level.

Step 8: Don't Ask Too Much or Too Often

Effective surveys do not burden employees with too many questions. People typically begin to chafe around the 80-question mark. However, some survey designers have discovered that if you divide the survey into a small number of categories, each with a number of questions, employees will look at the number of categories rather than the number of questions -- and show less resistance. This approach, called "chunking," is especially effective if each category has a title or an introduction that persuades employees that answering the questions is important.

Another mistake is surveying employees too frequently. In some companies, surveys are generated by different departments or divisions with no central oversight, with the result that employees sometimes receive a spate of surveys from a variety of sources. Central oversight can prevent this.

Step 9: Make Surveys Timely

For best results, companies should survey employees when the topic is hot. If the company is planning to make major changes in its sales and marketing departments, then that's the time to take an employee survey. Short surveys focused on specific developments can be highly effective. Employees immediately see their relevance. If the company tries to save money by waiting for the annual or semi-annual survey and tacking on the questions, the topic may be less relevant and the questions may become submerged in the mass of other questions.

Step 10: Share the Results

Companies that get high response rates time after time on their surveys make sure that their employees feel that the surveys are important. So, as a final step, they report the findings back to the employees and tell them what actions resulted from those findings or are being contemplated. This assures everyone that their time wasn't wasted and that their opinions were heard and acted on.

Many employees feel that their survey responses simply fall into a black hole, never to emerge. Even if something happens as a result of the survey, they don't hear about it and don't make the connection. Their input might have made a difference, but who's to know?

Letting employees know, in a really visible way, that the survey findings had an impact creates a positive mood and sets the stage for the next survey. Knowing that management really cares about what they think, people start to see their feedback as a valuable part of the business process, as a way for those closest to the issues to make themselves heard.

In these days of uncertain organizational and employee loyalties, the survey is just one way to reach out to people, to ask what they think and to show them that their opinions count and are appreciated.

People like to know that they can make a difference in this sometimes very impersonal world. The survey is not just a way to gather information, it is also an opportunity to connect and interact with each employee. It is not the only way to make the connection (nor should it be!), but as a part of total company involvement in driving the business forward toward success, it is an integral element of an HR strategy.

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