

Designing Employee Surveys for Maximum Impact

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Make employee surveys a more meaningful and engaging activity for employees and the company by focusing on these best practices.

Introduction

Every year, many companies spend hundreds of thousands of dollars conducting attitude surveys of their employees. Some do this to “take the temperature” of the organization, identifying areas of concern where direct action can be taken. Others are interested in tackling specific issues or current topics to get a reading on what is happening and to gather information to guide decisions. Others want to know if recent organizational initiatives, such as reorganizations, employee programs, and performance management processes, are working as intended. Still others want to benchmark themselves against other companies to see how they stack up.

Unfortunately, many companies report that the time and expense associated with surveys do not pay off. At some companies, employees resent filling out the same old surveys year after year and never learning if their answers had any impact. From the company’s perspective, survey results may indeed tell a story, but it is often not clear what actions the company should take as a result.

Building Better Surveys

It does not have to be that way. Surveys can be designed and presented in ways that engage employees, giving them an opportunity

to be heard and, more importantly, to directly influence company policies. They can also be designed to gather information that is useful and actionable, giving the company a road-map to creating a high-performing organization that is conducive to attracting and retaining good employees. Here is how companies can turn the employee survey into a powerful strategic tool.

1. Have a clear-cut objective

Companies that use surveys as a strategic tool typically start out with a clear-cut objective. They build the survey around a specific topic rather than trying to cover a whole smorgasbord of objectives. If they are contemplating changes in benefits and compensation policies, they zero in on what is important to employees, what is not important, and where employees would like to see changes. Making it clear what the survey is intended to achieve, and why it is important, is a good way to get high employee involvement and higher return rates from people whose input you want.

2. Take preliminary soundings

Companies that develop well-targeted surveys do not leave the questions to chance. They sound out their employees first, sometimes using focus groups to get a feel for what

employees are thinking. Some companies tell their employees that they are conducting such focus groups. They want everyone to know that management considers the survey very important and is doing everything it can to make it valuable and meaningful.

3. Communicate the survey's relevance

A successful survey makes sure that employees understand completely what the survey is about. It alerts employees that the survey is coming, explains what it is about and assures them that their responses will influence the company's subsequent actions. The survey form 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.

4. Ask about experiences, not feelings

The most effective questions ask employees about their direct experiences and observations – things about which they can knowledgeably comment. The least effective ask employees about their feelings. For example, if you ask employees if they are satisfied with their job, a positive answer can mean many different things. One employee may be satisfied because the job is challenging and offers opportunities for advancement; another may be satisfied because the job pays a lot of money for very little work. Instead, for example, ask whether employees believe that their job is challenging, whether it creates opportunities for new learning, and whether it contributes meaningfully to the business; in other words, ask about things that relate to satisfaction but are actionable.

5. Make the questions as observable as possible

One of the problems often encountered in surveys is that some of the questions ask

people to read others' minds or knowing how they experience particular situations. For example, asking whether people in general are recognized and rewarded for their performance is less direct and more subject to opinion than asking whether the respondent is recognized and rewarded. Similarly, asking whether people are treated differently because of their race, gender, ethnic origin, etc. gets opinion about others' experience; it is better to ask whether the individual answering the questions has been treated differently as a function of who they are rather than their performance.

6. Don't ask questions that you are 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 cannot offer across-the-board raises, and it is too late to tell the employees that compared with people in other companies, they are being well compensated. By approaching every question with the realization that it will have to address the answer, the company can spot such "bombs" and avoid them.

7. Organize questions in meaningful sequence

Many surveys ask a lot of random 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 is more effective to put the questions in a sequence that helps employees think about the issues in a meaningful way. Some survey designers prefer randomizing the questions, arguing that grouping questions by topic can influence the employees' answers. They are right, but their argument is irrelevant. Organizing the questions by topic does influence the answers – and that is the reason for organizing them. You want employees to see the questions in

context, to understand their ramifications, and to answer accordingly.

8. Keep the survey short and to the point

Effective surveys do not ask too many questions. Employees typically begin to chafe at about 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.

9. Include space for written comments

Even good questions can lead to inconclusive findings, 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 tex-

ture 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 may alert Human Resources that a sizable number of employees see day-care as an important benefit.

10. Commit to measuring progress

Repeat the survey at appropriate intervals to measure change on areas that affect the performance of the organization. This does not mean that the same survey should be given year after year. Instead, add new questions to reflect changing business conditions and challenges, but keep an eye toward areas where the results were not so good and re-evaluate where you stand. Also, track “hard” measures of business performance against survey results to see which areas deserve special attention as you plan your survey for the next time around. As interactive technology has improved over the last few years, the options available to companies that want to offer employees a scalable, on-demand solution for

Case in Point

ExxonMobil

Cambria Consulting has worked with both Mobil and ExxonMobil to conduct issue-focused organizational surveys since 1987. The first such survey, of North American salaried employees, was designed to understand how the company could create an environment conducive to the promotion of women and minorities and the willingness of key people to relocate. The survey results found a number of critical flaws in the career development process that directly informed policy changes affecting key employee retention and willingness to relocate.

A later survey conducted in 1995, distributed to over 30,000 employees worldwide, was used as a vehicle for the new chairman to get a “reading” from all employees that he could use to fashion HR strategy and support reorganization efforts. The survey found significant differences between high-performing and low-performing units across businesses, and thus supported the setting of benchmarks that were incorporated into Mobil executives’ “balanced scorecard” reviews. The results also supported a new organization aligned by geographic regions rather than by product lines exclusively.

More recently, ExxonMobil has used Cambria to examine employee retention in its information systems and human resources organizations and to evaluate its Performance Assessment and Development Planning process.

planning and managing their development have greatly expanded. By web-enabling many of the tools referred to above, companies have found a way to more effectively and efficiently facilitate and support a coaching and development culture throughout the organization.

Closing Advice

Even if you follow all of the above suggestions, your employee survey might not be as effective as it could be. Here are some final recommendations that companies who have made employee surveys a good investment have followed.

1. Don't make surveys a burden

In addition to creating surveys that are too long, many companies over-survey their employees. In some companies, surveys are generated on an ad hoc basis by different departments or divisions – with the result that employees sometimes receive a spate of surveys from a variety of different sources. Central coordination and oversight can prevent this from happening.

2. Strike while the topic is hot

For best results, companies should survey employees when the topic is hot. If the company is planning to make major changes in its sales department, then that is 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 extra questions onto it, the topic may be less relevant and the importance of the questions may be obscured by the mass of other questions.

3. Communicate the results

Companies that get consistently high response rates on their surveys make sure that their employees believe that the surveys are important. Therefore, as a final step, they report the findings back to the employees and tell them what actions resulted or are being contemplated. This lets everyone know that their time was not wasted and that their opinions were heard and resulted in actions. Getting back to the employees and letting them know that the survey findings had an impact creates a positive mood and sets the stage for the next survey. 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 times of change and uncertainty, the survey can be a powerful tool for reaching out to people, asking what they think and showing them that their opinions count and are appreciated. People like to know that they can make a difference. Therefore, the survey is not just a way to gather information; it is also an opportunity to connect and interact with each employee on areas of interest that can make organizational change happen for the better.



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