Employee Surveys: A Tool for Change

A WHITE PAPER

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Many people feel that surveys are a waste of time and money, and they are often justified. Consider these common scenes:

- A consulting firm provides a good questionnaire, and beautiful reports, which are given to leaders with recommendations. The reports are placed on a shelf and life moves on.
- Actions based on the findings take more than three months to become clear, by which time most have forgotten about the survey.
- Leaders take action on a survey - but fail to tell employees that their actions are based on the survey findings, and the employees don't see what happened to their input.
- A survey is done internally, but many refuse to take it, or do not answer honestly, because they fear retaliation.
- After a survey, some managers take revenge on employees for saying "bad" things.
- The survey guides change at only one level or department, and the actions taken by people at this level are not clear to others.

It's no wonder that surveys have a bad name in some places! But these problems can be overcome. Even a history of failed surveys is not a major barrier to success.

One of the worst outcomes of a survey is having the results ignored, or discussed but never used, and not communicated back to employees. This frustrates employees and gives them the impression their input is not really wanted. Telling people what happened to that sheet of paper they filled out shows respect for their time, cooperation, and feelings; this respect will be repaid with carefully completed surveys the next time around.

Summarizing the results is better, but still not what people want. Most employees want to know what *real changes* have been made as a result of their time and effort. More than that, they want a chance to *use the findings* to improve the organization.

Learning from experience

Summarizing the data and providing recommendations is the standard method, but it often lead to little action. Recommendations are too easily forgotten in the day to day rush.

Because of this, a new method of presenting survey findings was developed: after presenting the data, the consultant asks the audience to draw conclusions and come up with action steps. Our role, after about twenty minutes of presenting information and a couple of models for using it, is to guide the team into a decision-making session, and to ensure that they set clear deadlines, lines of responsibility, and follow-through dates. This results in more action.

Working with small, cross-functional groups to help *them* present survey data at a staff retreat can be even more rewarding. After early qualms and doubts were addressed, they can have an astonishing amount of enthusiasm, and many make plans for using the information in their everday work. They also learn enough to make educated criticisms of the surveys themselves.

These teams leave with a better understanding of how they could use survey data to make their organization better. More important, they tend to use their authority and knowledge to address long-standing issues.

In many ways, the ideal is for a trained facilitator to sit with each team and go over the results with them, and then guide them through action planning and follow-through. Not every organization can do that, but the next best thing is to use a cascading process, where the senior team goes through the process, then helps the teams beneath them to do it, and so on throughout the organization until everyone has understood and acted on the survey information.

Feedback/action planning sessions

Feedback sessions are an opportunity for managers to show how they, personally, have used the information. Speaking of broad intentions may damage credibility; people usually want to hear about specific changes.

Feedback sessions also ensure that people understand the information and can use it to answer their own questions and make decisions.

The purpose of a survey is usually to spur action and guide decisions. It makes sense, then, to use the feedback session to create action plans. Doing this can not only kick off a project with a bang, but can make the feedback session the most valuable part of the entire probject.

Advice for feedback session leaders

When scheduling the session, tell everyone its purpose: to review survey findings, ask people for their views of the implications of the information (causes, problems, strengths, trends, etc.), and create some action plans to address issues raised by the survey.

It is best to set up feedback sessions with plenty of time; a morning or afternoon, or a day or two, depending on the scope and how much you want to change. Prevent interruption by phone or messenger; many experts suggest having the meetings off-site, where people can think "out of the box" and also avoid interruptions. Cell-phones should be off.

Set up some ground rules. The session should be genuinely open, and people should be able to participate without fear of retribution or attack. (Don't make any promises you can't keep! It helps to have an outsider present to warn when managers become defensive). The manager must create a feeling that people can freely ask questions, discuss issues, propose ideas, and take on new responsibilities.

Briefly review the goals of the survey project and how it was conducted, including how surveys were distributed and who analyzed the data. The goals may include increasing effectiveness, learning customer or staff needs, spotting minor problems before they became large headaches, initating or advancing continuous improvement, or other purposes. (As mentioned earlier, having small teams of other people get this information together and present it may help to increase participation and interest, especially if you refrain from presenting your point of view during or after their talks).

Questions about the validity of the numbers might be raised. A natural reaction is to quickly dismiss the questions; even experienced consultants do this. Addressing validity issues *is* important, and is worth the effort of seeing from the employee's perspective and having to review one's own rationale (or to defer to an expert, or even to admit to a flaw!). If one person openly questions the data, others might silently do the same. More importantly, if one person's concerns are brushed aside, it sets a negative tone for the entire session — and beyond.

One good way to start the action planning session is by asking for help in solving problems. Acknowledge that other people may be closer to the situation, or may have more experience with different parts of it. Asking for help may increase the others' respect for you, because it shows that you have some respect for them; and because people tend to like those who they have helped. (Benjamin Franklin once wrote of making an enemy into a friend by borrowing a book from him). People are also much more likely to accept and to actively support solutions which they had a part in creating.

If people at the meeting do not have the power to make decisions and implement plans, be honest about these limitations and tell them that you will be using their input to make these plans yourself, or to bring them up to a higher level. However, if you (or the people at the higher level) are not really serious about implementing the proposals unless they were what you were planning to do anyway, forget about the action planning session. It is better to have an open, honest feedback session without action planning than a session that raises expectations and then dashes them.

Action planning: key to success

Instead of having formal minutes, when the action planning session starts, notes can be taken on large sheets of paper so they can be visible to everyone, and can be transcribed later.

Usually, some people say they cannot change anything, that other areas must be changed first. This can be countered by asking, "Well, what *can* we do? ... What's stopping us from doing that *right now?*" This has a tremendous motivating effect. *If we cannot do everything we want, we can certainly do some of the things we want.*

If the people from the other area or department are in the room, you have a tremendous bonus. We have seen people pointing fingers across the room, and simply brought them together: "Who can do this, if you can't? Are they here today? ... John, how do you feel about doing this? Can you work together on it?" Long-standing communications problems have been resolved that easily, in a single meeting, with lasting (over a year and counting) effects.

It is essential for everyone to feel that their opinions and suggestions are valued, and that they are taken seriously. Watch yourself for condescending, authoritative, and defensive actions or words, while making positive comments about useful suggestions and contributions. Practice "active listening" — the art of intentionally concentrating on what people are saying, and considering how it can work and help rather than any problems it might cause or any difficulty in implementing it. Often, people can find a way around problems and barriers if they really believe in something and have a reason to invest their time and energy in it.

Seemingly trivial issues can be important, partly because of their symbolic value, partly because they are a daily nuisance: the drip in the faucet, the sign-off process for magazine subscriptions. If the survey spotlights small problems that can easily be fixed, *immediately* fix them, no matter how small. (Delegation helps.) When you visibly and immediately use a survey, you show respect for your employees, and increase energy and enthusiasm.

Responding to a suggestion by rewording and summarizing it shows you have heard and understood it, and gives other people a chance to clarify or add to it. It also helps to write suggestions on posters, which also comes in handy when writing down what was suggested and accomplished at the meeting.

If ideas are not usable, but the group believes they are, present your points not as absolutes, but as barriers. For example, "This is a good idea, and but..." Someone in the group might have thought of a way around it, or might be able to come up with a similar plan that is doable. I have often been surprised by how quickly seemingly insurmountable obstacles can be overcome; and I have often surprised other people by getting around them myself!

After a number of possible solutions have been created, they should be prioritized and discussed. If there are a large number of ideas, try asking for the group to help in sorting them out. I usually use a table with four cells, with importance on one side and ease (or speed) on the other: so items can be easy and very important, easy and less important, etc. Afterwards, have the group discuss the pros and cons of each idea, starting with the "easy-very important" group, then the "easy-less important" group, then the "not easy-very important" group. It is essential to tackle some of the "easy" issues, even if they are not as important as some others, to gain momentum and quickly, visibly use the work of the group.

People should be able to come up with workable actions to address problems and enhance strengths, some which can be put into effect immediately. To maintain momentum, it is *essential* to follow through and enact at least a few of them within the week. The ideal is to come out of a feedback session with several ad hoc committees working on specific tasks which are within their authority, and with several decisions ready to be put into effect.

The final part is deciding who will do what, and when. Many people find just coming up with recommendations to be sufficient; and that is fine, if the group does not have the power to make changes on its own. Frequently, the group includes people who do have power, if not over everything, then at least over their own areas. It is fine to mix recommendations to higher authorities with specific actions that group members can accomplish on their own.

Go through the list of action steps which people have agreed on, and ask the group who will volunteer to handle the first one. Ask that person when they think they can have it done, and mark their name and the date next to the item. Then ask when they will be able to report on preliminary progress, even if it's only considering exactly how they will do it, or discussing it with someone else. Mark that as a follow-through date. Repeat this for each of the actions, until everyone's plate is full. Do not force anyone to volunteer through intimidation or peer pressure, and do not let anyone take on too many tasks; the important thing is not to get people to agree to do things, it is for them to actually carry them out!

Before people leave, schedule a meeting for a later date, two weeks or a month afterwards, to follow through and check on progress. This reinforces commitments and ensures that stalled projects are re-examined.

At this point, a small celebration is in order. People are generally tired but enthusiastic if all has gone well, and need some time to wind down and also to discuss any "leftover" concerns or ideas with other people.

Following through

The next day, get all the action steps, volunteers, deadlines, and such distributed to everyone in the group. Ask for input, clarifications, etc. Give them a chance to revise it.

You may want to informally speak with people who seem to have unreasonably short (or long) deadlines, remembering that the final word is theirs.

If goals were set, make sure they can be measured. It is often good to start measuring key indicators *before* the survey or feedback session, so you can measure progress. Using performance indicators is also a way to measure the effectiveness of particular changes.

It helps to divide the report into:

- *Actions the team has already put into effect.*
- *Actions it will be putting into effect*
- *Actions for which it needs approval.*
- *Actions that need to be taken by other groups*

If the report includes actions that must be taken by other people (different areas, higher levels of management), put them last, and specify what actions are to be taken to encourage those actions. The most important changes, in terms of motivation, are the ones which have already taken place! These are often forgotten, but they are a key in empowering people to do more.

The report should include a summary of the survey results, such as key strengths and problem areas, most frequently given suggestions or comments, and common answers to open-ended questions.

Take advantage of surveys to gather people up, make decisions, and implement them. That's what surveys are for.

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