Difference Between Climate and Culture Employee Surveys

There are significant differences between climate and organization culture surveys, and knowing the difference will help you and your management team select the right type of survey for helping your organization evolve. After-all one of the reasons for conducting a survey has to be to give senior leadership important information to help them get the most out of the organization and its people.

Climate surveys, sometimes known as attitude or satisfaction surveys, gather information on a range of topics: e.g., compensations, benefits, workplace relations, word processing, and so much more. At UtilityPULSE, we believe that climate type surveys are excellent for discovering what the current issues and opportunities might be. It is somewhat akin to going to your doctor, who conducts an examination and then prescribes a remedy for what ails you. For example, if you injured your arm in a workplace accident, the doctor would examine the arm and injury and then take appropriate action. A climate type survey might ask the question, "Please rate the responsiveness of the medical staff." If the results from the survey indicate that the medical staff was not responsive, then "help" would be given to assist the medical staff in becoming more responsive.

So a survey that asks about such things as "fair compensation,"; "competitive benefits,"; "good training,"; "effectiveness of the performance management system,"; "supervisory support," and many other topics is a climate or attitude survey. Polls such as these often find things that are wrong but do little to help you build a better organization.

Organization culture surveys identify the values and feelings shared by members of the enterprise, which, in turn, drives the organization's success. Over the past ten years or so, there has been heightened interest in defining and managing an organization's culture. After all, there is always an organization culture. Study after study shows a primary reason for staying with an organization is not money (though money is important) – other factors are. At UtilityPULSE, our culture survey examines 12 distinct cultural norms grouped into three general types of culture. A culture survey delves deeply into employee feelings towards such things as "achievement"; "peer helpfulness"; "friends on the job"; "making meaningful contributions,"; "understanding the goals of the enterprise,"; "teamwork," and so much more.

Going back to the earlier example of an injured arm. While climate surveys typically concentrate on "how well did we do in looking after the injury,"; a culture survey would be attempting to measure employees' feelings and orientation towards "workplace safety." In short, does the organization have a "safety first" culture?

Take a look at these differences:

	Organizational Culture	**Organizational Climate**
Definition	While specific definitions differ, they all tend to emphasize certain things: 1- Culture is something shared by members of an organization 2- values (what is important), and beliefs (how things work), are central components of culture; and 3- culture encompasses norms and expectations that influence the way employees of organizations to think and behave.	While specific definitions differ, organizational climate is individual descriptions of the social setting of which the individual is a part of. Climate reflects the way the organization feels toward the people in it. In a sense, climate, of individual perceptions of a setting — for example, communication, leadership style, organizational effectiveness, etc.
Difference in measures	Culture surveys tap the member's beliefs as it relates to how people ought to think and behave. (UtilityPULSE has 12 distinct measures.)	Climate surveys tap member's descriptive beliefs about what has or do occur within the organization (e.g., how bosses reward & recognize).
What is measured	Things that are valued (e.g., risk-taking, decision-making, problem-solving).	Feelings about what it is like to be a member of the organization.
Time horizon	Future-oriented, used to build or "move-towards" a successful future organization.	Identify past and current issues which when dealt with, "fixes" the organization.
Responsibility	Every member of an enterprise is responsible for creating the kind of organization they wish to spend their career in.	Management is primarily responsible for fixing or removing issues and barriers in the workplace.
Purpose of measures	To improve the development (hence performance) of the organization and its employees.	To improve relationships between the organization and its employees.

Which one is right for you, your leadership team, and its employees? It depends on what your senior leadership team is most comfortable with. One has to ensure that today's climate is not a barrier to the achievement of goals. Hence identifying and completing key "to-do's" coming out of a survey ensures that those who participated in the survey are rewarded for their time, effort and concern about the company. So, if your senior leaders are very comfortable in diagnosing and fixing things, then a climate survey may be the best choice.

Culture surveys might be a better choice if your senior leadership team is looking for longer-term connectivity of employees to the mission of the organization.

After all, higher levels of employee engagement are not created because "my manager conducts the performance review in a timely manner"; but is based on whether or not the employee feels they are being treated "fairly with dignity and respect." While climate surveys typically are better at identifying "barriers," culture surveys are better at uncovering "enablers." The primary purpose of a culture survey is to identify the values, norms and behaviours that exist or are important for the enterprise as a whole.

For further discussion about climate and culture surveys, speak to a UtilityPULSE professional for a free consultation. Just like you, we believe that polling employees is valuable to the organization, its people and its customers.

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