



Key Reasons Why Employee Attitude Surveys Fail

Too many organizations, both big and small, waste far too much time and money on employee surveys. Erroneously, some senior executives think that conducting a survey will signal to employees that they are actually interested in what they might have to say. The reality is this, it is not about the survey or the methodology that is important – what is, is the dialogue and actions that managers take as a result of gathering feedback. Let's look at some of the key reasons:

1- Senior leadership lack of support.

The primary and most prevalent reason why employee surveys fail is the lack of commitment by senior leaders, and others, to taking action. A survey that simply “gets lost” in an executive's desk is disrespectful to employees including the organization's customers and owners. The result is a cynical group of employees that when asked again to provide comment simply ignore the request.

2- Understanding the purpose of the survey

Having clarity about the primary purpose of the survey is key. Is the survey about employee satisfaction? Or organizational culture? Working environment? Work process improvement? All too often senior Human Resources professionals, and others, design a multi- purpose or multi-dimensional survey that only confuses respondents.

3- Looking for problems

There is an old saying, if you are looking for problems you will find them. If you are looking for opportunities you will find them. Questions in surveys should be written in a way that encourages the

respondent to look forward rather than dwell on a history that cannot be changed.

4- Looking for scapegoats

If management uses the survey to punish or fire managers any subsequent survey will not be positively embraced by respondents. Using the results to punish or fire someone is rarely a morale booster; except in extreme cases of poor performing managers – and quite frankly the organization didn't need a survey to know that person wasn't performing well.

5- Treating the survey as an “HR responsibility”

It is true that HR typically have the requisite skills and experience to ensure that the survey is designed and conducted well. However it is the line operation that has the requisite skills and responsibility for ensuring that their employees are performing well. Operations leadership has to take an active role in the design, conducting, and debriefing of the survey.

6- Not maintaining confidentiality

If you give employees an opportunity to respond they will do so—particularly with open-ended questions. As such, sometimes it is possible to determine “who said what” when you read the comments or analyze the demographic information. If absolute confidentiality is not maintained then you can be assured that the next time feedback is solicited it will be guarded—from everyone in the organization.

7- Internal communications

Failing to have a solid employee communications plan results in lower participation rates and in raising skepticism about how the data will be used.

8- Surveying “everything”

Trying to make a survey cover every area of interest tends to water down

the questions in the survey. The result is feedback that may simply be “good information” but not insightful enough to be actionable. In addition too many subject areas often create fatigue in the respondent resulting in feedback that may not be of the highest quality.

9- Not using open-ended questions

Far too often open-ended questions are left out of a survey, mostly because analyzing them can be time consuming and expensive.

After all, it is much easier to score a scaled question. However, it is the comments in the open-ended questions that more often than not provide managers with real insight.

10- Being afraid to ask about expectations

Managers who may be comfortable about asking questions about the “way things are” can be reluctant or down-right afraid to ask questions about “how things should be”. The concern often stems from the belief that if they can’t meet those expectations then employees will be very disappointed. The truth is, employees are smart and they do recognize that an “ideal” is a target. What they are expecting is an honest effort in moving towards the “way things should be”.

11- Poor timing

Conducting an employee satisfaction survey after announcing a major downsizing is just not going to get you objective feedback. However conducting the survey at the same time every year or every other year does make sense.

12- Taking too long to do the survey and report-back

Running and analyzing data should be done in four weeks or less; the remaining feedback and action planning steps should not take any more than a maximum of an additional six weeks.

13- Consultants' do not own the results

It is not the “consultant’s report” it is a “report by the consultant”. A play on words, maybe. But the truth is, over reliance on a consultant for designing, conducting and most importantly interpreting the results; makes it too easy for senior leadership to ignore the feedback and the consultant’s recommendations.

14- Data summarized at too high a level

Data summarized at the “whole organization” or “division” levels rarely help managers uncover problems. Our experience suggests that about 50% of the problems that employees face in the workplace are actually under the control of their immediate boss.

15- Thinking that “average” scores are just fine

Question scales can produce deceiving results. For example, if the question was “I understand the key goals of the company”, would you be satisfied with an average rating of 2.5 out of 5.0? You shouldn’t be.

16- Thinking that “above benchmark” scores are great

Benchmarking, particularly industry benchmarking, is often heralded as excellent comparative data. While there is some truth in it, the reality is any benchmark data that is collected is historical. So, having scores above a benchmark simply means that your organization is better than what other organizations have achieved in the past. Yesterday’s benchmark may not serve the organization well in the future.

17- Not providing managers with training and support

The survey may be straight-forward and easy to read or interpret for some – but for many it can be a nightmare. Supervisors and managers at all levels need some training on how to interpret the data and how to conduct report-back meetings and/or feedback meetings.

18- Refusing to accept other interpretations

Data is interpreted in many ways and each can be valid. A major error that managers often make when presenting data back to employees is to presume that only their interpretation is correct.

19- Action planning is just a paper exercise

Manager's need to state their action plans that they are under-taking, including those of senior management. Generating a thick report with excellent thump value, is just a waste of time.

20- Not linking actions to feedback received

Many employees have a cynical view about surveys and will state that "nothing ever happens". Yet most organizations do take action, most managers and senior leaders do a very poor job in making the linkages back to the survey and its feedback.

There are many reasons why employee surveys fail; all of which can be dealt with in a professional manner. Employee surveys can yield exceptional information, information that is needed to create a better place to work, or to do business with (or both) – especially when employee ideas and recommendations are taken seriously.

An employee survey is not a "to-do" on some manager's list – it has to be treated as a project for gathering opinions about the work, the organization, employee and customer relationships. It is about involving everyone in the organization in identifying issues and opportunities and then acting upon them.

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