EMPLOYEE SURVEYS THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

by Joe Folkman

Employee surveys can pinpoint where changes in a company are needed, help managers understand employee opinions and improve productivity, and provide the information and focus for fostering strategic alignment and developing competitive advantages. Well-designed surveys provide vehicles for employees to share their perspectives and opinions, and well-orchestrated efforts help to leverage the company's strengths and create a culture of success.

Nevertheless, as promising as this sounds, not all companies have positive experiences with surveys. Most survey processes take a lot of time, offer mixed and sometimes contradictory results, and lack specific detail about what to do next and how best to use the feedback.

In fact, most people in organizations express negative opinions of surveys, rather than positive ones. Managers ignore the results and file them on the shelf. Supervisors do not know how to interpret the data or use the results effectively and generally do not see the relevance of surveys to day-to-day operations. Employees, after giving their best feedback, often see no changes. They often resent the process, considering it a waste of time and occasionally believing the survey is a conspiracy by management to weed out negative employees.

Also, surveys generate expectations that are hard to meet. Each time an employee answers a question or provides a suggestion for change, he or she expects some change to occur. When companies conduct surveys and then do not respond to the results, employees feel frustrated and think management has taken advantage of them in some way.

As a result of these expectations, managers feel overwhelmed. It is not possible to make all the changes recommended by employees, and many suggestions seem unrelated to improving productivity or efficiency, relating more to employee "happiness." They appear far-removed from the business at hand and certainly unrelated to solving critical performance issues.

HOW CAN SURVEYS ADD VALUE?

Despite these problems, when conducted properly employee surveys add significant value to companies in several ways:

They provide feedback from all employees on a given set of issues.

A few years ago I attended a performance of my daughter's sixth-grade chorus. As the conductor prepared to begin the program, I watched my daughter in admiration. But when the students stood up to sing, I suddenly noticed that she was about a foot taller than the other students. I had never noticed how tall she was compared to others her age. It was only when I saw the direct comparison that the difference became evident.

Leaders often have the same difficulties noticing differences between their own companies and other companies. Being around their own employees every day, they become familiar with them and often do not notice unique differences, attitudes, and opinions. Well-designed employee surveys can do much to solve this problem.

They present the opinions of the whole company at a specific point in time.

Although there are many ways to uncover employee opinions, none are as efficient as employee surveys. Interviews, for example, are an excellent way to gather firsthand information and to discuss concerns and recommendations in detail. But the interview process is extraordinarily time consuming. Without careful and consistent wording of interview questions, comparisons between interviews can be difficult. Trends and differences between groups are hard to measure, and compiling an accurate summary of the results may be impossible. Twenty interviews may yield 100 pages or more of comments, which often fall "outside the box" framed by the interview questions.

In contrast, employee surveys present the same issues to all employees. Comparisons between groups and particular survey items are easy to measure. Consistent data allow for charts and comparisons, leading to better interpretation. And open-ended questions may be used to allow for some of the helpful comments and suggestions available in interviews.

They reveal the company's strengths and opportunities for improvement.

Careful interpretation of survey data at the management level can reveal strategic, systemic, or structural changes necessary to make the company more productive. The same survey interpreted at the work-group level can provide supervisors with insights into how they can communicate better, make more informed decisions, more accurately assess employee performance, and involve employees in planning. Survey data may also be analyzed in many helpful ways. For example, comparison with industry norms can help identify trouble spots or competitive advantages. Breaking down the data into demographic groups can help determine where problems and potential solutions are surfacing and help managers prioritize their change efforts. And data gathered over time can help measure the progress being made toward goals or targets.

They can send a positive message to employees.

The concerns raised by employees in employee surveys often impact employee performance, morale, and customer and supplier interactions. If done properly, the act of conducting a survey indicates that management values employees and their ideas. Surveys permit managers to identify barriers to productivity and design a more rewarding work environment. Once the issues are identified, action plans may be created to address the issues in a cooperative and productive manner with employees.

KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL SURVEYS

Too many of today's surveys are less than adequate. Some actually do more harm than good. But conducting a survey properly can create significant value for a company. In my recent book, *Employee Surveys That Make a Difference* (Executive Excellence, 1999), I emphasize ten things you should do to have a good survey experience and get the most out of your results.

Make a Commitment. Employee surveys demand a lot of work, especially teamwork. To be effective, surveys require an investment of company time and money. If you plan to conduct a survey, make a commitment to doing it right. Then, make a commitment to using the feedback to foster meaningful changes. The primary reason surveys are successful is because managers and employees make them work. Surveys don't create change in and of themselves. They simply measure the issues that require change, and when these are clear, managers and employees become enthusiastic about making survey initiatives work. Conversely, when people believe the process is a waste of time or resources, it will be virtually impossible to make it work.

Form a Steering Committee. A steering committee with the proper authority, composed of the right people, is essential to accomplishing the change goals of a survey process. A well-rounded committee includes 8 to 12 people representing the various levels, demographics, and locations in the company. The committee takes responsibility for making changes necessary for a high performance company. It provides leadership, clarity, and perspective to the company throughout the survey process. Without such a committee, the process will have a slim chance of success.

Keep Your Survey Simple. Some surveys seem to collapse under their own weight. They are long and measure too many things. The reports are complex, the analysis is overwhelming, and the feedback is time-consuming. When people cannot see the links between the issues being measured in a survey and the critical issues of the company, the survey will lose its perceived value. Surveys that make a difference are simple, easy to understand, and quick to review. They measure the "right things." Each item on your survey should be linked to the critical measures of company performance. Design your survey to measure the key issues which everyone agrees that, if improved, would significantly improve company performance.

Measure Things You Are Willing to Change. Establish expectations up front that although your survey will measure many issues, you will only be focusing on a few critical issues. Too often, employees expect that everything measured will be changed. But if the company takes on too many issues, no change will occur. Eliminate questions for which the answers are not likely to change over time. For example, on some questions, such as those relating to pay or benefits, employees consistently indicate that they are not satisfied, yet many companies continue to include these questions on their surveys. Continuing to ask these questions only frustrates employees and places managers in a difficult situation.

Strive to Predict Business Outcomes. When surveys can measure and predict company performance, the results become compelling. It's exciting to discover, for example, that the groups which scored highest in a certain category also had the most profit, the highest customer satisfaction, the greatest productivity, and the lowest turnover. Surveys that measure the right things can predict these and other outcomes. To find such correlations is more difficult for some companies than for others, and finding these correlations may require some experimentation, but the value of your survey will greatly improve when you make these discoveries.

Create Leverage, Start with Small Wins. Sometimes the results of an employee survey can seem overwhelming. Many people don't know where to begin with the change process. Also, many employees have become cynical over the years about the "latest corporate initiatives" that didn't work. Rather than focusing on the most negative survey results, where emotions may influence judgment, begin by identifying two or three areas that will ultimately have the greatest impact on company performance. Since you will be measuring things that everyone agrees need to be changed for the company to move forward, you must begin the process, even if you begin slowly. By restoring employee confidence through small and incremental changes, you will begin to build the company's faith in a more substantial and satisfying change down the road.

Identify Root Causes Through Careful Analysis. The secret to fostering strategic alignment with employee surveys is found in careful analysis that identifies the root causes of surface issues. Problems initially identified by the data become clearer, and root causes are easier to identify after thorough analysis. For example, if your survey

feedback identifies "communications" as a core concern in your company, this does not necessarily mean you need more meetings, memos, newsletters, or other messages. Instead, it may mean that people don't trust the messages sent, or that managers say one thing and mean another, or that departments are not coordinating efforts effectively. To compound the problem, most of what we call analysis is generally presented as meaningless and complicated statistics, which add neither insight nor understanding. Good analysis not only uncovers root causes through systematic and objective approaches, it should also be presented in a simple form.

Involve Everyone, Share Results Widely. Surveys that provide feedback only to the top executive just have one chance to make an impact, but surveys that provide feedback to many people will have many chances. Changes can be carried out more effectively by involving more people at more levels. The changes people notice are those that impact their own work groups. The capacity to generate change is what people look for in a change initiative, and surveys have this capacity when everyone is involved.

Learn from Your Survey Every Year. Once you have established your survey and the company is comfortable with its contents, it helps to build a database of results to make comparisons from year to year. But you should also make sure your survey evolves over time to mirror the changes and changing demands of your company. When your employees are first asked to evaluate the company's effectiveness, they often respond with what they think others want to hear. But over time, they become more adept critics as they begin to care about what they are rating and as they come to understand the importance of the company's critical measures.

Make the Survey a Part of Your Business. Ultimately, for employee surveys to make a difference they must become a standard part of how your company does business rather than a deviation or distraction from regular work. Managers and employees at all levels must learn how to build the survey into their routines. Action planning, measurement, review, and analysis then become regular activities that contribute to company success. Without real change efforts and the resulting improvements, a survey and its analysis are merely paper-passing exercises.

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