

Tips on Making Employee Survey Initiatives Successful

Employee surveys can be a powerful way of improving organizational effectiveness and increasing commitment and retention. However, survey initiatives are often not as successful as they might be. This *Insight* white paper explores ways to make them more successful in terms of an overall feedback-action planning model, and suggestions for each of the steps in a survey project. See Censeo's two companion *Insight* white papers – "The Value of Employee Surveys... And How to Increase Their Value," and "Developing an Effective Employee Survey" – for related topics that aren't repeated here.

Feedback-Action Planning Model

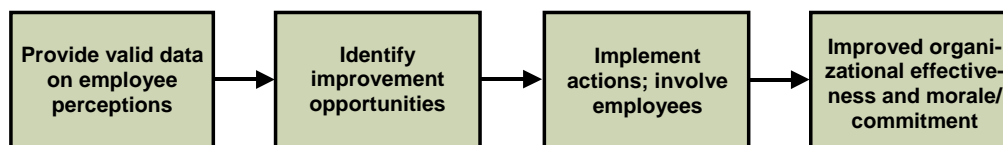
The model shown in Figure 1 below has been associated with employee survey research for more than 50 years. It is based on the concept that valid data collected on employee perceptions can be fed back to leaders in the business, and used to improve organizational effectiveness and morale/commitment. This embodies the most important tip we can offer on making surveys successful: focus the entire initiative around making change happen in the organization – systemic change for broader issues, and actions taken by line managers in their work units. This may seem too obvious a point to emphasize, but often surveys don't result in much real change because companies don't follow through on the action planning and implementation phases.

Here are a few other key points about the model:

- Data should be collected on areas related to the survey's objectives – usually a combination of organizational effectiveness issues and employee commitment issues – and be tied in with the business' strategies.
- Line managers at all levels in the organization play an active role in identifying and implementing improvement actions. They must be given the resources and support they need (including skills training), and be held accountable. It should be a management-driven, not an HR-driven, process. Most importantly, it should not be a consultant-driven process, although consultants can play a facilitation role, and efficiently collect and process the survey data.
- A high degree of employee involvement throughout the initiative will increase the likelihood of positive change occurring, and of the survey process itself having positive benefits. The mindset should be one of "we're all in this together and have a shared responsibility for success," versus the employees thinking, "we've told management our views, let's wait and see what they do about them."

FIGURE 1

Feedback-Action Planning Model



Steps in the Survey Process

Here are a few tips for each of the eight basic steps in the survey process:

1. **Project planning.** Survey projects often become bigger and more complex than is necessary, and they take longer than they should. We've seen few projects fail because they were too simple, but many fail because they became too complex. Keep things as simple and streamlined as possible. A sound project plan can help keep tasks within scope, and on schedule. Another thing that can help is to have one internal project manager, and not a committee. However, that project manager must still get input and buy-in from all the key stakeholder groups. The project plan should also specify which tasks will be performed by the consultant, if one is involved, versus internal resources.
2. **Survey development.** The companion *Insight* white paper titled "Developing an Effective Employee Survey" provides a more in-depth discussion on this topic. The main points we'll reiterate here are to make sure the content is linked to what's important to the business, write items and the response scale that meet sound psychometric criteria, and keep the survey relatively short and focused.
3. **Prior communications.** Communicate the survey objectives, and how the results will be used, well in advance of survey administration. Encourage the employees to participate, assure them that their responses will be anonymous, and state that the results will be shared with them (and, of course, you'll have to then do so!). It's more impactful if the communications come from a senior line executive than from HR; use multiple communications, not just a single memo or announcement. Good communications prior to the survey are the best way to increase the response rate.

If line managers will be expected to play a key role in using the survey results to make improvements (and that normally will be the case), then those expectations should be clearly communicated in advance. This will lay a good foundation for accountability later.

Focus the entire initiative around making change happen in the organization – systemic change for broader issues, and actions taken by line managers in their work units.

4. **Survey administration.** These days, most companies are using technology in some fashion (e.g., Internet-based survey platforms) for reasons of speed, cost and ease of implementation, and they usually use a vendor for survey administration and report generation. Our main tip for this step is to select a vendor whose platform can fully meet your needs. If paper-based administration will also be required for some employees, make sure the vendor can efficiently and quickly process the off-line surveys, and create an integrated database at the end of the campaign.
5. **Report generation.** Good survey reports are absolutely critical to a successful survey initiative. Because of the importance of this step, our tips are covered in a little more detail in the next section of this document. The only point we'll make here is that the reports should be generated within 1-3 days after the survey closeout date, not weeks or months. "Old data" don't have credibility, and the whole initiative loses momentum.
6. **Feedback and communications.** Feedback and communications often occur in two ways. First, a summary of the overall company results is shared with employees via the company newsletter or some other media. Second, and this is an enormously powerful method leading to change, line managers conduct feedback meetings with their employees. Tips for this step are also discussed in more detail in a later section.
7. **Action planning.** Improvements in some survey areas are best addressed systemically on a company-wide basis (e.g., the need to improve medical claims processing). However, most areas are best addressed by line managers at various levels in the organization, hopefully with a high degree of employee involvement. There are many tips one could give line managers regarding this step (which are covered in training), but probably the most important is to focus on the 2-4 improvement opportunities that are most important, and not try to take on too many actions at the same time.

It's helpful to document action plans because it increases the likelihood that the actions will be taken, it makes it easier to monitor progress, and the plans can be shared with others (e.g., line managers with their bosses). The format for the documentation isn't particularly important, as long as it includes goals (areas to be addressed), tasks, responsibilities and target dates.

8. **Implementation.** Action plans are of no benefit if they aren't implemented. Managers should be held accountable for making change happen based on the survey results, and be given the support and resources they need. A perennial problem in this phase of survey initiatives is that line managers don't have enough time for survey-related tasks because they're too busy meeting the demands of their "real jobs." The solution is to integrate the survey actions with their other responsibilities, and make them just as important as other areas where the managers are accountable.

We've already given you the most important tip, and here's the second most important, which is actually just another way of thinking about the first: strive to get every manager in your company to make at least two positive changes based on the survey results. Even if you're only 50% successful on this goal, the survey initiative will have profound and long lasting benefits to the organization. It really doesn't matter whether the actions are primarily aimed at organizational effectiveness issues or employee commitment/engagement issues – actions in either domain will have a significant bottom line impact.

Survey Feedback Reports

The survey reports are critical to successful survey initiatives because they summarize the survey results and provide the basis for identifying the best opportunities for implementing changes to improve organizational effectiveness and employee commitment/engagement. In a sense, they are the main "deliverables" from the vendor or internal personnel managing the project.

Here are a few tips related to the reports:

- Choose a survey vendor whose reports are easily interpreted by line managers. The primary statistic reported should be something they can easily understand and that has intuitive meaning (e.g., percent favorable or unfavorable). Reports should also clearly highlight the most significant results.
- Provide reports to line managers at all levels in the organization, down to first line managers, if possible. As noted earlier, empowering managers with data to improve conditions in their units is a powerful way to reap the most benefit from the survey initiative.
- Ensure the reports provide clear answers to the questions line managers will have, such as:
 - What are the major strengths on which I can build?
 - What are the key opportunities for improvement?
 - How does my group compare with other groups in the organization?
 - What are the strengths/improvement opportunities in the subordinate groups below me?

- What are the trends over time, and where are things getting better/worse?
- What specific actions can I take to improve employee satisfaction and organizational effectiveness?

In regard to three of the preceding questions, note the following:

- First, internal normative comparisons are very helpful to managers in identifying strengths and improvement opportunities (much more so, in fact, than external normative comparisons).
- Second, how subordinate groups performed is only relevant when the person getting the survey report isn't a first-level manager, and trend results are relevant only when it's a repeat survey.
- Third, and most importantly, the ideal survey reports will not only provide information on strengths and areas needing improvement, but also practical suggestions on specific actions the managers can take to improve those areas most in need of improvement.

Feedback-Action Planning Meetings

Earlier we described the feedback-action planning model as "valid data collected on employee perceptions being fed back to leaders in the business, and used to improve organizational effectiveness and morale/commitment." That's actually not the best description of the model when it's implemented in an optimal manner. Ideally, it's not just the "leaders" who receive and then act on the survey results, it's the whole team, with the leaders facilitating the process. This is an important distinction, and it represents another key tip on making survey initiatives successful: use the survey process itself, particularly feedback and action planning, as a way to get the employees engaged in improving things.

The most effective process works like this: (1) managers receive their reports, (2) they study the reports and identify key issues to share with the employees and get more detailed input, (3) they conduct feedback-action planning meetings with their employees, and (4) they involve the employees in making change happen in the unit. This approach is very powerful because it helps open communication channels and gets the whole work force involved in making the company better in terms of organizational effectiveness and quality of work life for employees.

In order for this approach to work well, however, the managers must have the skills necessary to perform the role described. The requisite skills development can be accomplished in several different ways, and it's not that difficult. Furthermore, the investment the company makes in training their managers to conduct constructive meetings, and to plan improvement actions based on quantitative data, will have significant payoffs as the managers apply these same skills in doing their "regular jobs."

Other Suggestions

We've already covered several tips on ways to make survey initiatives successful. Here are a few more suggestions that don't fit neatly into the previous topics:

- Get senior management endorsement. As mentioned earlier, senior management should drive the initiative, not HR and not a consultant. But "endorsement" means more than "Okay, let's do an employee survey." It means:
 - signing off on the survey content as providing data important to making the business strategies a reality,
 - actively encouraging employees to participate in completing the survey and helping plan improvement actions,
 - serving as role models for the important events that follow the delivery of the survey reports, and
 - providing support to subordinate line managers and holding them accountable.
- Don't let the process get bogged down. There are two ways this sometimes happens:
 - First, it takes many months to develop the survey instrument, and it consumes far too many internal resources in meetings, focus groups, etc. It shouldn't be that difficult. Determine the survey objectives, choose an item pool from a vendor that's on target, modify the items as appropriate, and get on with it.
 - Second, the feedback process becomes unduly delayed because a top-down, cascading process is used (i.e., each level in the organization has to wait until the higher levels have processed and "digested" the data). A better approach is to give each manager at every level in the organization his/her survey report within 1-3 days of the survey close-out date. The managers then go through the feedback-action planning process, and report their planned actions upward.

- Ensure a high response rate. A very low response rate leads to managers discounting the results (e.g., "Only half of my employees responded, and their views probably don't represent how the total group sees things."). An even worse problem with a low response rate is that it may not be possible to generate meaningful reports for subgroups at lower levels in the organizational hierarchy. In addition to good communications in advance of the survey, other actions to improve the response rate include keeping the survey as short as possible, ensuring employees that their responses will be confidential, telling them the results will be shared with them, and sending reminder emails to non-respondents at established intervals.

A Final Comment

This white paper provides only a brief overview of some of the main points in making employee survey initiatives successful. There are many other points that could be made, and a good consultant with expertise in all phases of survey projects can help guide you through the process to maximize the value and avoid the many pitfalls companies often get trapped by. In addition to survey expertise and a solid technology for collecting survey responses and generating reports, the consultant should also provide a variety of templates, processes, training programs, etc. to make the process easy, fast and value added.

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