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HOW TO DESIGN AND IMPLEMENT AN EFFECTIVE EMPLOYEE ATTITUDE SURVEY

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Attitude surveys are useful data collection tools that can lead to meaningful organizational change when developed, administered, analyzed, and used in the proper way. However, they can be detrimental to an organization if the data is misused or if the information is not used to make appropriate changes. There are fewer things worse than

asking your employees for their opinions and then ignoring them. When you conduct an employee survey, you set up an expectation that action will be taken as a result. If no action is taken after the survey, any dissatisfaction that existed before will be magnified. This guide will provide you with methodologies to use and questions to ask your client in order to ensure that the survey meets its objectives and helps to move the client's organizational change efforts forward.

INTRODUCTION

Several factors have an impact on the successful design and implementation of an employee survey including:

- Climate (trust, confidentiality, participation).
- Support from management at all levels.
- Clearly defined purpose (limit the scope).
- Choosing the right administration and analysis methodologies.
- Presenting the results in a meaningful, easy-to-understand, and actionable manner.
- Following through on action items and relating implementation to the survey results.

Whether you are an internal or external consultant, the remainder of this guide will help you think through your survey project and make wise decisions.

Why Conduct an Employee Attitude Survey?

Several organizational issues could prompt you to conduct an employee attitude survey. Based on our experience, some of the most common reasons are:

- high turnover
- low productivity
- to measure understanding or opinions on a new program or process
- difficulty recruiting new employees
- low morale
- safety concerns
- to monitor progress as part of a process improvement program
- to justify changes in a program or process

In the end, the reason for conducting an employee survey is to answer a question. By asking the question(s), you create expectations that changes will be made and create an implicit commitment to respond. Unless the client organization is willing to take action on (at

least some of) the results, you should not expend the time and effort to administer the survey. You can gather information on an informal basis to drive your decisions.

SURVEY DESIGN

It is important to have a clear understanding of the purpose of your survey before you design it. The choices you make regarding what is included in and what is left out of the survey will have a major impact on your ability to answer key questions down the line. It is critical that you discuss these issues with your client up front so there is no confusion at the end of the survey, when the data do not answer certain questions. For example, if the client were concerned about confidentiality or anonymity, minimal demographic information would be collected from each participant. As a result, you would be unable to determine whether there are significant differences between genders or age groups because you do not have that information.

Several elements go into survey design including the use of focus groups, item writing, negatively worded items, open- and closed-ended questions, demographic information for analysis, follow-up interviews, and number of items plus completion time. Each of these elements is discussed below.

Focus Groups. Focus groups are very effective for determining critical areas to include on a survey. By involving some employees in the survey design process, you can develop an increased level of support and “buy-in” for the survey. Employees are able to see that their issues (in their words, if possible) are on the survey. The goodwill this creates is extremely helpful when conducting surveys in environments where there is a lack or low level of trust between employees and management.

In practice, allowing participants to brainstorm the issues is more effective than reviewing an existing survey. When deciding which issues to include on the survey, you need to determine whether management is prepared to investigate or address them as a result of the survey findings. One issue that often appears is pay. In most cases, employees feel that they are underpaid. If management has no intention of researching pay disparity or making any attempt to rectify the issue (assuming there is disparity in the industry or within the company), you should consider eliminating that issue from the survey. On the other hand, you may decide to keep the issue(s) to determine the level of dissatisfaction and identify whether there are some departments or job positions that are harder hit by the pay issue. It’s a judgment call that is, as always, influenced by the climate and the level of management support.

Focus groups can also be useful for getting employees involved in the action-planning phase of the project. Once the results have been presented, focus groups can be used to prioritize action items or to begin brainstorming solutions. The continuing involvement of employees in the project will reinforce the organization's commitment to employee participation.

Item Writing. When developing survey items, it is important to limit each statement or question to one idea. That is, avoid items that ask about two or more concepts. An example of a poorly written (double-barreled) statement: "My supervisor is available and willing to help me solve problems." This item will be difficult to answer unless the participant feels the same way about both halves of the statement (availability and willingness). However, if one half is true and the other is false, the participant is likely to choose a middle rating, as if to average the two ideas together. It is better to ask the two halves as separate questions: a) "My supervisor is available to help me solve problems." b) "My supervisor is willing to help me solve problems."

It is helpful if you can pilot the items with a small sample of employees to ensure that there is consistent interpretation of the questions and to catch confusing or double-barreled questions before you begin administering the survey.

Negatively Worded Items. In order to prevent participants from getting into a response pattern (e.g., always marking the "strongly agree" option), item writers use negatively worded items such as: "My coworkers do not take pride in their work." These items cause the participant to pay closer attention to the question and to consider using other points on the rating scale. It is important to make these items easy to understand so that you do not create confusion about how employees should respond to convey their opinions. For example, "There is not poor communication between divisions" requires too much processing ("poor" is negative, and "not" negates the negative, which makes it positive). That statement will create confusion and inaccurate results. Keep your negatively worded items simple, and do not use many of them in your survey.

Closed-Ended Questions. In order to collect a large amount of data while minimizing the amount of time it takes to complete surveys, use closed-ended statements. Examples of closed-ended statements are: "I like my coworkers" and "I receive adequate training to perform my job."

When using closed-ended items, develop rating scales (most often to measure agreement or satisfaction) geared to the particular topic of the statement. It is important to clearly define each scale point so that everyone is rating items the same way. Participants need

a frame of reference so they are using the same “ruler” to measure their level of agreement or satisfaction. For example, rather than giving participants directions that say “1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree,” it is important to define what the points in the middle (2, 3, and 4) mean.

Open-Ended Questions. Open-ended questions allow participants to say what’s on their minds, using their own words. Examples of open-ended questions are: “What do you like best about working at MNO Industries? What three things could be done to improve working conditions at RS Corporation in the next 12 months? What are the top five reasons that would cause you to leave JJ Inc.?” Remember that you are directing the participants to focus on the positive or negative depending on the way you phrase the questions. Take that focus into account when you begin to blend the results from the open-ended questions with those from the closed-ended questions to draw conclusions or make recommendations.

When using open-ended questions, you need a plan for interpreting the data. We have found that coding comments is a useful approach. Some common themes that emerge in most surveys are communication, pay, advancement opportunities, quality of supervision, training, and fairness. By grouping comments into these areas and assigning codes, we can integrate the content with the rest of the item responses and present the results in an organized and easy-to-understand format for the client.

It is important to limit the number of responses you want for each open-ended question. In most cases, three to five answers are sufficient (consider the number of employees you have and the data entry and analysis that will be required to process the responses).

Demographics. Depending on the question(s) you are attempting to answer in your survey, here is a list of demographic information that you may want to collect from your participants:

- department or division
- supervisor or manager
- ethnicity
- age
- gender
- tenure with the company

Remember, the more demographic information you collect, the more likely participants are to feel that you can identify them as individuals. Consider including only the items that will enable you to perform the needed analyses without compromising the confidentiality of your survey.

We do not recommend “coding” surveys in a surreptitious manner (e.g., assigning different dates or footnotes to different departments). This tactic is most often used in environments where there is little trust or confidence in management. When the coding is discov-

ered (and it will be because your participants are already suspicious), you will have reinforced the distrust and undermined the project.

Follow-Up Interviews. Post-survey interviews can be useful in clearing up seemingly contradictory results and adding detail to general findings. While you may plan for these interviews in your overall project plan, you need not be wedded to completing the interviews if the preliminary survey results do not warrant the need for additional detail. Again, refer to your survey objective to determine whether the extra time, cost, and imposition on the participants is worth it. In some cases, you may decide that follow-up interviews are of little value in the overall scheme of the project.

There are two basic options for follow-up interviews: face-to-face or phone interviews. Like other decisions, this one will be affected by the organizational climate. If there is a high level of trust, then either format will be accepted and the final decision is likely to be based on scheduling and locations. If there is not a high level of trust, the interviewer may be more successful in getting candid responses by phone (particularly if the client organization is not privy to the list of interviewees and interviewees are promised that their names will not be revealed).

There appears to be a bimodal distribution of employees who agree to participate in follow-up interviews. They are either relatively dissatisfied with the way things are going and want to discuss their key issues or relatively satisfied and want to say something nice about the company or some specific employees. The employees in the middle seem to be less inclined to participate in follow-up interviews. Keep an eye out for this type of division in the interview responses, and take it into account as you begin to synthesize interview and survey data. Be careful not to let the opinions of these follow-up groups override those of the larger group.

Number of items plus completion time. Another consideration when designing a survey is the number of items, the depth and breadth of topics, and the expected completion time. In today's work environment, there is considerable pressure to collect as much data as you can in a short period of time. Focus on closed-ended questions whereby employees are asked to indicate their level of agreement with (and perhaps the importance of) a particular statement. Then ask for the participant's top three responses to three or four open-ended questions. This format allows you to cover a wide variety of topics, in some depth, in approximately 30 minutes of each participant's time.

SURVEY ADMINISTRATION

Depending on the objective of your survey, there are options regarding data collection. As with any methodology, there are advantages and disadvantages to each approach.

Survey Frequency. When determining how frequently to administer a survey, remember that the time lapse between data gathering and action should be short, and there needs to be enough time between surveys to measure changes. Also, it can be expensive to administer surveys to everyone in your company on a frequent basis. We recommend that if you are surveying frequently (e.g., once per quarter), you give the survey to only a sample of your workforce at a time, but ensure that everyone has the chance to complete it every few administrations. If the survey is going to be given less frequently (e.g., once per year), administer it to everyone. The decision regarding frequency and follow-up should be included in your initial project plan to the client.

Sampling. If you elect not to survey everyone, several sampling options are available.

- *Random Sampling.* This involves using a computer or other neutral process to choose a certain percentage of employees. The advantage of this process is that, more often than not, you will have a good cross section of employees take the survey at any given time. The downside is that random samples are not always representative of your population, which may lead some people to feel that they are unfairly picked on or that some groups are over- or underrepresented.
- *Stratified Sampling.* This type of sampling involves randomly sampling within certain parameters. For instance, you may want the sample to accurately reflect the proportion of males and females within each department. This process guarantees a more accurate representation, but it adds an administrative burden. Stratified sampling is most often used when you are interested in looking for differences between groups of participants.
- *Targeted or Non-Random Sampling.* You may choose to survey everyone in a certain group (e.g., the accounting department). This approach is good for getting at specific issues, but the results may not be generalizable to the rest of the organization (although it has been found that what is going on in one area is often going on in others).

Internal versus External Administration. External administration has the advantage of the appearance of neutrality, while internal consultants are often automatically seen as biased toward either management or the employees. Whether you are an internal or external consultant may determine which of the drawbacks and potential solutions apply to your situation. In either case, the client's organizational climate will have an impact on how you proceed.

DATA COLLECTION

Many of your decisions about the data collection process will be driven by the purpose of the survey and the client's organizational culture. While there are no hard-and-fast rules, there are options that you need to discuss with your client.

Mass administration. Group administration sessions (gathering groups in a central location for a scheduled period of time) provide several positive outcomes:

- Return rate is increased (80 to 100%, well above the rate for mail-out surveys).
- Participants see that the organization is serious about getting input since they are paying them to take time out of the regular workday.
- Administrators can answer questions about the survey.
- The data is collected over a short period of time, so processing can begin sooner.
- Postage costs are lowered.

<i>Potential Drawbacks</i>	<i>Potential Solutions</i>
A perception of less confidentiality since you could be sitting next to your supervisor.	Ask supervision to complete their surveys at their desks or in another location.
Someone at the company is charged with collecting the surveys which could compromise confidentiality.	Make a neutral party responsible for collecting and forwarding the surveys for data processing.
Resistance to shutting down the company to complete the survey.	Administer the survey in small groups so that someone is always on duty.
Concern that employees might be absent that day and not be able to participate.	Track participants and allow individuals who were absent on the day of administration to mail the completed survey directly to the data processing group.

Administered by mail (to homes or via internal company mail). The mail-in option is useful for clients who have few employees at a large number of geographically dispersed locations or do not have a work location to which employees report (e.g., salespeople and telecommuters). It is also used by companies that are not interested in the mass administration option. Advantages of this option include:

- It provides the highest perceived level of confidentiality, since no one in the client organization touches the survey (assuming it is mailed directly to an outside vendor for data processing and analysis).
- It requires less active participation from the client organization (no need to schedule meeting rooms, provide refreshments, etc.).

<i>Potential Drawbacks</i>	<i>Potential Solutions</i>
Poor response rate because participants get busy, forget, or don't see the survey as a priority. (Response rates can be as low as 35%).	Send reminder notes to encourage participation (from the CEO or COO) and stating the importance of participation. However, this follow-up is time-consuming and may result in only a small increase in the return rate.
Because the organization is completely "hands-off," there may be an impression that there is little support or interest from the top management echelons.	Hold meetings prior to the survey to explain the purpose of the survey and express its importance.

Administered via computer (e.g. intranet, Internet). In an effort to reduce paper handling and data processing, many clients prefer to administer their surveys via electronic media. Advantages of this method include:

- Data is automatically sent to a database, reducing the time and cost associated with data entry.
- The survey distribution process is simplified (e.g., survey can be attached in an e-mail, at a Web site link, or its file name and location referenced in a memo).
- Matches the nature of the organization (i.e., technologically savvy audience, reinforcing the need to be more computer literate).
- May create the impression that the survey is easier to complete than a hard copy version (i.e., complete it and hit the Send button).

<i>Potential Drawbacks</i>	<i>Potential Solutions</i>
Perceived lack of confidentiality if company officials have access to the files and individual responses.	Set up additional passwords or firewalls to minimize security breaches.
	Don't associate names or other identifying information with individual surveys.

<i>Potential Drawbacks</i>	<i>Potential Solutions</i>
Cost and time needed to set up the technology.	Work with Information Technology department or rely on outside vendors for support. Look at which process fits with your existing infrastructure.
Lack of comfort with a computerized process (intimidated by technology).	Offer the survey in hard copy format or provide some training on the process prior to administering the survey.
Poor response rate because participants get busy, forget, or don't see the survey as a priority, or the survey gets lost in the vast number of e-mails received each day.	Send reminder notes to encourage participation (from the CEO or COO), stating the importance of participation. However, this follow-up is time-consuming and may result in only a small increase in the rate of return.

Confidentiality. Individual surveys should be confidential (e.g., no one from the client organization will read an individual's survey and know that it is his or hers). However, the degree to which people are asked to identify themselves for the sake of group analysis should be considered carefully. It is common to ask people which department or area they work in and how long they have been with the organization. But more identifying questions may lead to more raised suspicions. In trusting cultures, this is not as much of a problem as it is in more toxic cultures. Be aware of the trade-off between doing more detailed analyses and receiving less candid responses from the participants. Experience shows that there are rarely as many group differences as management thinks there will be (i.e., the culture of the company cuts across most groups).

DATA ANALYSIS

It is important to reach an agreement with the client during the design phase as to what the final feedback will look like. While there may be some adjustments based on the findings, this up-front agreement will minimize a number of costly and time-consuming fishing expeditions when the client asks for more and more breakdowns that do not contribute to the original purpose of the survey.

Methodologies. The analysis methodologies will be driven by the objectives of the survey. You want to be able to answer the key questions posed in the survey without overwhelming the client with details and statistics (which are best saved for appendices). If you want to report on individual items, keep the statistics simple (e.g., average scores and frequencies). If you want to report on overall themes, more sophisticated statistical analyses (correlations and factor analy-

sis) may be required. You will also want to create an objective way of classifying responses to open-ended questions.

Data Interpretation. The numbers don't mean much by themselves. You have to be clear in explaining what the data means and how it relates to the question(s) you are trying to answer. Here are some common errors to help your clients avoid:

- Interpreting correlations as causation (e.g., “low satisfaction leads to a high intention to leave the company”).
- Overemphasizing small score differences (e.g., “My division got a 3.4 and yours got a 3.2, so I'm a better manager than you are”).
- Assuming that satisfaction or agreement equates with importance or criticality. Just because the participants feel strongly about an issue doesn't mean it is important to them. In fact, there is often a low correlation between the two, so if you want to know importance, add that rating scale to the survey.
- Overreacting to open-ended comments (e.g., “Anything you would like to add?”) that tend to bring out more negative than positive responses. If things are going well or at least okay, participants aren't as compelled to make additional comments.

PRESENTING RESULTS

Narrative. Tell a story that has a beginning (this is why we are doing the survey), a middle (what the data tells us), and an end (this is what we recommend). In order to keep this portion of the report manageable, try the following tips:

- Be concise and stay focused on one point at a time.
- End each section with a recommendation that will move the client forward (including “Keep up the good work,” since the tendency for consultants and clients is to focus on fixing whatever is broken).
- Be able to fully back up your conclusions and recommendations with data.
- Don't make excuses or try to explain away unexpected results. This is particularly true for surveys with high response rates, because the data speaks for itself. Simply present the data and proposed action items.
- Use numbers to illustrate and support your conclusions, but save the details for appendices.

Graphs and Charts. Present results in meaningful and manageable chunks. Presenting a sea of numbers in graphs, charts, and tables

usually makes people's eyes glaze over and creates more confusion than it alleviates. The object is to get people to understand the results and their implications. The audience will often dictate the mode or style of presentation (e.g., their interest in detail and level of sophistication or their preference for written or oral reports).

What to Present. By conducting a survey, you are committing to a certain amount of openness regarding the results. However, there are cultural and practical considerations regarding who gets the information and the amount of detail included. It is common practice to give the details of the survey to the project sponsor to be used in formulating recommendations and action plans, while presenting the overall results and action plans to the participants. Depending on the structure and climate of the organization, you may want to make more detail available to everyone (on hard copy or via intranet, with or without verbatim open-ended comments) to increase their level of buy-in and commitment to making the necessary changes. This information-sharing needs to be considered in light of concerns about anonymity and confidentiality. If participants feel singled out or exposed, they will not participate (candidly) in future survey efforts. You also run the risk of analysis paralysis when employees are busy reinterpreting the data, making excuses, or pointing fingers rather than taking action.

Preserving Anonymity. Open-ended comments are invaluable in understanding the ratings on a survey. If you ask people their opinions in a confidential setting, you will get them. It's a good idea to share verbatim comments with those involved in interpreting the survey. However, some comments compromise the anonymity of the survey: "My boss treats me unfairly because I'm the only Hispanic in the department." Even if the writer is unconcerned about his or her identity becoming known, you won't be able to guarantee anonymity in future surveys if anyone is identified in the current one. Our guideline is to read the comments first, then edit out information that may lead to a participant being identified. We would edit the previous comment to read, "My boss treats [some people] unfairly" before compiling the final report. This retains the content of the comment without compromising the identity of the participant or the supervisor.

MAKING RECOMMENDATIONS

The kinds of recommendations you make will depend on how much you know about the organization and what your role is on the project. If the survey is part of a larger organizational change effort, you may be directly involved in implementing the changes that are indicated in the survey results. In other cases, you may be making recommen-

dations that other consultants will carry out, or leaving the results of the survey in the hands of the client to implement. In any case, the following need to be included in your recommendations in order to increase the likelihood that action will be taken in response to the survey results:

- Tie the recommendation to a specific result in the survey. This strengthens the link between what the employees said and whatever action you are suggesting.
- Suggest tools or procedures that could be used to easily accomplish the task you have recommended.
- Link the recommendation to the survey objective.

For example, “Given that 68% of employees did not receive performance feedback last year [*result*], we suggest that you enforce the performance appraisal meeting guidelines that you already have in your management plan. Perhaps a checklist of meetings completed (and signed by each employee) that is submitted to Human Resources on a monthly basis would be a useful tool for ensuring compliance [*tool or procedure*]. This action item will directly affect the performance management system and improve productivity [*survey objective*].”

DEVELOPING ACTION PLANS

In addition to making recommendations, which are often presented in narrative form, you may want to consider developing a project plan with tentative timelines and resource needs to help your client get started. Despite the best intentions of most clients, there is often a let-down after the results of an employee survey come back. An action plan can help maintain the motivation level needed to respond to the results and create “immediate” improvements. The longer the time lapse between the administration, the presentation of results, and resulting action, the less confidence the employees will have that their input was taken seriously and valued. In order to have a positive impact on morale, timely action is required.

SUMMARY

Key points to remember when designing and implementing your employee attitude survey are:

- Keep your objective in mind during each phase.
- Maintain confidentiality.

- Consider the implications of your design and implementation decisions.
- Pay attention to the survey design.
- Monitor data collection.
- Consider the level of data analysis.
- Present results thoughtfully.
- Make careful recommendations.
- Take prompt action whenever possible to demonstrate the organization's commitment to improvement.
- Publish actions that are taken in response to the survey, so employees know that you have heard them and took their opinions seriously.
- Make the survey a positive experience (an open channel of communication, a step toward progress).

Each client and organization is unique. A survey process that works well for one client may be inappropriate for another. By examining the advantages and drawbacks at each decision point, you will be able to deliver a well-crafted and useful organizational diagnostic tool that will help the client answer important questions and will better meet the client's business objectives.