The Levin Group LLC

Top Nine Mistakes Implementing Employee Surveys

By Jim Moore and Patricia Wheeler

1) **Lack of clear goals for the survey or lack of integration with strategy**
   Many companies are unable to cite clear and specific reasons why they conduct employee surveys or show how the survey fits with their organization's strategy. Many companies do it because they have always done it. Some believe that quoting statistics will make them sound more impressive. Several companies have told us that they were not surprised by the responses. If that is the case, we wonder why they didn't address the issues before the survey.

   Suggested Action Step: Before starting an employee survey, ask yourself: what specific results do you want the survey to accomplish? How will this lead to better business results? The answer is not obvious and it will not be the same for every organization.

2) **Failure to properly position the survey with employees**
   To achieve the results you desire from any survey, an effective communication strategy is essential. We often see an initial level of suspicion and distrust, particularly the first time a survey is conducted. It's not unusual to hear questions such as, "Why do they want my answers?" How confidential are the results?" What will be done with the data?" "Will anybody be punished?" These suspicions can be minimized with effective communications which must be both written and verbal, from all levels of management.

   Suggested Action Step: Determine what questions will likely be asked by employees. Craft a series of communications which will address these, and plan to meet personally with employees to answer further questions. For organizations with employees who are represented by unions, it is critical to include the union in the planning and communications.

3) **Including questions that the company has no interest in improving**
   One of the problems in using "off-the-shelf" surveys is the likelihood that questions might be included that are irrelevant to the organization using the survey. Be aware: each question on the survey sends a message to employees that this is an area the organization cares about and will take action on .

   Suggested Action Step: If you don't plan to take action on a particular area or issue, don't measure it. These items should be removed from the survey to prevent a perceived loss of integrity.

4) **Over-dependence on comparative results**
   Comparative industry data can be important, particularly if the organization is losing employees or customers to the competition. However, for high performing organizations and industry leaders, comparative data can be a distraction. Additionally, it is important to know the make-up of organizations in the

comparative data base and to confirm that these are appropriate organizations to benchmark against.

For example, a client was recently considering deploying a famous brand name culture survey. After some research, we discovered that most of the data in the normative data base came from U.S. Government organizations. For this small, entrepreneurial company, a comparison to a large bureaucracy was meaningless.

Suggested Action Step: Make sure comparative data, when available, is truly relevant for your organization.

5) **Lack of clarity on reporting levels & accountability**
Some companies compile results only at the highest organizational levels to prevent the use of the data for performance management of managers. Other companies compile results at relatively low organization levels to make the results more meaningful and actionable by individual managers, using the data in promotion & performance management decisions.

There is no single right approach. But, it is essential that management and employees have a clear understanding of how the data will and will not be used and that the usage is appropriate fit with the organization's culture.

Suggested action step: Before you implement any survey process, decide how you will and will not use the data and communicate this at all levels. Never change your approach mid-stream.

6) **Lack of a customized action plan that senior management "owns"**
Improvement will not happen simply by showing the survey results to every manager. The survey data should be one small part of an overall change management approach that starts with ownership at the topmost executive level. In all successful organizations, senior management sets the expectations for change & improvement. There are many options for taking action on survey results. In some organizations, action oriented improvement teams are formed at various levels; in other organizations, key improvements and action plans are identified by executive level managers.

It is not unusual in companies that continue to do surveys without visible improvement plans to see the most negative response on the survey associated with the question, "I believe management will take action on the results of the survey." Without visible action, employee surveys can do more harm than good.

Suggested Action Step: Craft a clear, actionable plan for implementing survey results. Remember, the credibility of your survey and your management team depends upon the actions you take following the survey.

7) **Lack of focus**
As is true for individual leaders, organizations can't get better at 50 different things all at once. It's important that the organization focus on 1 – 3 things to improve and avoid trying to get better at everything.

Suggested Action Step: Use the survey results to choose. What are one or two things, which if your organization raises the bar, would make a significant difference to your organization and its employees? Focus on these critical initiatives and put the rest on the back burner.

8) **Failure to communicate changes & relate the changes to the survey**
It is not only important to make positive changes as a result of the survey, it is critical to communicate these changes and tie them to the survey results. Without an effective, ongoing communication plan, employees may not be aware that positive responses have been made and this may erode the credibility of senior management.

Positive examples include statements in communications from senior executives that look like this; "You told us that we need to get better at (X.) We agree and as a result are implementing (Y) in an effort to improve our performance in this area. Thank you for your feedback."

Suggested Action Step: Make sure that leaders in your organization visibly acknowledge steps taken in the desired direction, no matter how small.

9) **Failure to follow-through and follow-up**
As in individual leadership development, organizations that practice follow-through & follow up will get better. Organizations that do not, may get worse. Follow-through means tracking & accountability on improvement plans. Follow-up means another survey, perhaps a "mini-survey" to track results.

Suggested action step: Decide how you will track progress and follow-through, which will drive the results you receive from the employee survey. Make sure that your investment of time, energy and money yields the results you desire.

In summary, best practices for implementing employee surveys always include:

1) Clear goals for the survey which are owned at the highest level
2) An ongoing communication plan before, during & after the survey
3) A customized survey that includes only questions that the organization's leaders care about. (With standardized surveys, items should be specifically selected to meet the survey goals.)
4) An effective action plan for analysis and improvement that includes determination of the most import issues, a process for addressing them, and accountability for results.
5) A follow up process to measure and demonstrate progress.

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