

EMPLOYEE SURVEYS: FORUM FOR COMMUNICATION

Companies depend on feedback from their employees to correct problems. What employees don't say is often more important than what they say. In most cases, employees want to tell management about problem areas but feel they lack a communication vehicle for doing so.

A well-designed employee opinion survey provides a forum for two-way communication before what employees are thinking, but not saying, starts to harm the company. A survey provides a means for a company to hear and understand what employees think on a variety of issues, drawing out their perceptions of the organization's strengths and weaknesses. In addition, a survey can act as a catalyst for expanded communication and corrective action.

An effective survey gives feedback to management on how policies, procedures and programs are working and whether changes are needed. It also sends a clear signal to employees that their opinions and ideas are important to the company.



Making Surveys Work

PSP's employee opinion and retention surveys can systematically discover and accurately document employee attitudes on almost any subject. They are designed to gain the trust of employees, protecting individuals while gaining confidence and eliciting information. PSP has the experience to design surveys that pose questions in language familiar to employees and address specific topics of concern to the organization. PSP has found that a properly used survey provides an accurate gauge of employees' attitudes toward their jobs, the company, their supervisors and management, as well as toward proposed changes or particular work situations.

How a survey is conducted determines the credibility of its results. Employees will watch the process closely, observing whether questions reflect issues that are important to them and whether feedback on the results is open and straightforward. Their willingness to communicate openly and honestly about problems also depends on the effectiveness of management's follow-up.

Many companies put off doing surveys because they claim "the timing is not right." In most cases, this attitude signals management resistance to communication. If a company surveys its employees regularly (typically every two to three years), sufficient

comparison data will exist to eliminate any concerns about timeliness.

Results and Feedback

Once problem areas are identified, it is important to find the underlying causes before jumping into action. Management should not be afraid to ask employees for more information if it will increase understanding. A survey is a vehicle for effective communication, not the end result. Objectivity is of primary importance when seeking additional information; otherwise, employees will get the message that negative feedback is not acceptable.

When providing feedback, management should not hide data with which it is uncomfortable. The purpose of the survey is to evaluate strengths and weaknesses and to encourage open communication.

PSP's employee retention surveys also help management to discover both major and subtle influences that may determine whether employees will stay or leave the organization. They let management know the concerns of their employees before they begin to threaten the well-being of the organization.

Follow-up

It may be necessary to gather more information on areas of concern identified in the survey before any action plan can be implemented. This information is gathered most effectively by groups of representative employees as well as through in-depth interviews by a neutral outside party.

Survey follow-up can occur on at least five different levels: company-wide, within a particular department, at a given location, by particular functional areas, and at different employee levels. In all cases, management must be committed to resolving issues and encouraging employee participation so that everyone involved has a part to play in creating positive change. Effective group interaction techniques give employees an opportunity to participate and an effective forum for expressing ideas. Management's willingness to listen and respond to employees' concerns is the key to identifying and resolving problems early—before they get out of hand.

Surveys can be useful tools for showing employees the importance management places on their ideas. When handled poorly, surveys can reinforce the perception that management does not value what the employees think. When handled well, surveys can enhance openness in communication in all parts of the company and facilitate the resolution of what otherwise may remain unidentified problems.

A version of this article has been previously printed in HRMagazine.