

What Employee Surveys Can Do For Managers

The great thing about employee attitude surveys is that they actually tell you not only what the real problems are, but where they are. As a result, you find your management attention is not spread thinly hopefully over a wide area, but focussed where you know it will make a real and positive difference. It is an invaluable tool if you want to manage people well.

For example, look at this chart of scores from a real company. The questions all seem very relevant, but look at the variance in views between departments, and between management and the rest of the staff. It's very revealing.

Finding Out The Facts

(Scores are in percentages)

| | Prod. | Market | Admin | Cust. Servs. | Info. Sysys. | Quality | Mgt. |
|--|-------|--------|-------|--------------|--------------|---------|------|
| 1. I understand the goals the company wants me to achieve | 50 | 50 | 25 | 44 | 29 | 53 | 86 |
| 2. There is commitment to good quality through the company | 42 | 50 | 50 | 56 | 43 | 13 | 71 |
| 3. The company is committed to good customer service | 53 | 50 | 50 | 56 | 57 | 73 | 100 |
| 4. How satisfied are you with the info. you get about the co.? | 12 | 0 | 25 | 22 | 14 | 7 | 57 |
| 5. My manager sees contributing ideas as important | 36 | 100 | 75 | 78 | 14 | 53 | 71 |
| 6. My manager encourages us to co-operate with other depts. | 42 | 75 | 75 | 78 | 14 | 53 | 71 |
| 7. I think things are improving in the company | 16 | 25 | 100 | 33 | 14 | 53 | 100 |
| 8. I have all the materials and equip. I need to do a good job | 33 | 25 | 25 | 33 | 14 | 20 | 71 |

According to Question 7, 100% of managers think things are improving in the company, but only 25% of people in Marketing think so, and even fewer in Production and Information Systems. In Question 3, 100% of managers say the company is committed to giving good customer service, but Customer Services department are only half convinced about that.

100% of marketing staff think their boss encourages them to contribute new ideas (Question 5), but only one third of Production people think their ideas are welcome, and even fewer in Information Systems. Whatever managers' *opinions* might have been before the survey, the survey scores reveal the true situation.

There's two obvious points that emerge from a chart like this. It's next to impossible to manage people effectively in any business if you don't know the facts. Managers are forced to 'manage blind', and opinions vary widely about how best to manage people in different departments. Naturally, managers do the best they can, but they can often then be frustrated and disappointed with the response they get.

But when you do know the facts, managers don't have to guess any more. They can home right in on the things that their people say most need attention. For example, significantly less than half of the people in every department here feel they do not 'have all the materials and equipment they need to do a good job'. That's a terrible score, but now that they know, managers can get down to solving that problem straight away. Not only will staff appreciate the change, productivity will start to improve too.

The vast majority of people much prefer to do a good job, it's their natural instinct. But when people find they don't have what they need to do that good job, their work becomes an irritating and frustrating experience every day. On the other hand, we know from experience that when managers put everything in place to make it easy to do a good job, employee morale and motivation starts to soar across the company.

Employees don't expect everything to be put right overnight, as they generally realise it takes time to bring about major changes. There is no need to launch immediately into some great campaign. Employees will start giving positive scores to a question like 'I think things are improving in the company' (unlike the chart above), as long as they can see visible evidence around the place that management are moving in the right direction. And with the survey data to hand, managers will know just what to work on.

Focussing Managers' Attention

It's an old adage but very true - what gets measured, gets done. If a company judges their managers' performance by measures of output, productivity, meeting monthly schedules, budgets, etc., it's no surprise that that's what they concentrate on. But the corollary is that what does not get measured will inevitably fall in the manager's list of priorities. As you might expect, they allocate their time to what they are most likely to be challenged on.

When you start to measure how well people are being managed, managers suddenly start devoting more time and attention to the issue. Federal Express, the international parcels company are strong believers in that. This is how founder and CEO Fred Smith puts it: "We discovered a long time ago that customer satisfaction really begins with employee satisfaction. The respect and care with which we treat employees carries over to how our employees treat and care for our customers. That belief is incorporated in our corporate philosophy statement: People, Service, Profit."

To support that belief, Federal conduct an employee survey every Spring. The first ten questions of the survey focus on how employees feel they are being managed by their immediate boss. The company bunches these ten questions into what they call a 'leadership index', and each year they decide on a goal they want to achieve on that. If the company doesn't reach that goal, the top 300 managers don't get any bonus. Since that bonus can amount to some 40% of their salary, do you think they pay attention to how their people being managed? You bet they do.

Now you do not have to go that far exactly, but not measuring at all leaves any company open to unseen mismanagement, which can significantly undermine its performance. While some managers are naturally good people managers, most find people management one of their most challenging tasks. And it is just these types of manager that real data from an employee survey can help most, by showing them precisely where to devote their attention to make real progress with their people.

Perception Versus Reality

When managers have been making efforts to manage well, they can often be disappointed with the low scores employees give to certain questions. But that is because employees often see things a lot differently from their angle.

To illustrate the point, try this little exercise. Have a look at the box below, and count up the number of letter 'f's that you see. It's quite easy.

Finished files are the re-
 sult of years of scientif-
 ic study combined with the
 experience of many years

So, how many are there? Three? Good, you're not alone, that's what most people say. But it's wrong. Four, you say? Very good. Still wrong! There are actually six 'f' s in the sentence. Really. Go back and look again.

[Just for the record : there are two 'f' s in the first line (finished and files), and one more 'f' in line two (in the word scientific). But there are also three examples of the word 'of', two in line two and another in line four. So that makes six 'f' s altogether.]

Don't worry if you only saw three or four 'f's - more than 80% of people do the same. Many find it unbelievable that they couldn't see every one. After all, it's only four short lines of simple English. But we use this item just to make one very important point when it comes to managing people.

The truth is not what the facts are, it is what people perceive them to be.

You may be working very hard to improve things, but employees don't give you any credit for that if they can't see it. That's why you have to work on managing employee perceptions as well as the truth, if you want to move employees' views.

Take a look back at the survey score table we showed at the beginning, in particular at the question "How satisfied are you with the info. you get about the company?" Apart from managers, the satisfaction score is poor in every department, down to zero in one case. Now that's easily cured, and it costs virtually nothing to keep people up-to-date on a regular basis with the positive things that are happening in the company. You don't have to go boasting, or pretending that there aren't any problems. Employees are actually more realistic than that, and they will feel better about a company which treats them like adults, and shares information with them about how the company is doing.

Starting Out

When companies do their first survey, they are generally hoping for the best, but are often disappointed with their first set of results. Don't worry about that, that's normal. The first survey is simply the platform from which you start to make real improvements in the company. In addition, the employees will have given you invaluable information about what to work on. You won't have to guess any more, you can focus your management efforts on the right things and in the right places.

When you do your second survey, you will be able to see the results of the actions you took, and measure the progress you have made. Don't expect a great revolution, of course, but our experience is that scores always start moving in positive directions. Indeed, when managers know just what to focus on, we have seen scores improve by as much as five-fold within just a year. That's something they could never have achieved otherwise.

It may seem obvious, but managing people well cannot just be left to Personnel Department. The fact is, the immediate manager has a more powerful influence on employee attitudes than any other factor. That's because he is the face of the company employees see every day. To them he is the company. What he does and says will have more influence on their attitudes than anything the company might otherwise say or do. That interface is critical when it comes to employee attitudes. That is where 'the rubber hits the road'.

That's why giving every manager the survey scores from their immediate team is specially important. That places prime responsibility where it really belongs, with the manager who works with his people every day. They are the people who can really change things, and with the right data in hand, they will. The purpose behind it all is to get managers treating good people management as one of their most important functions. When they do, you can expect to see employee attitudes – and performance – take leaps forward all across the business.

The Difference It Makes

Many Directors and managers we meet believe they know what their people are thinking without having to ask them. But when we ask managers to predict what scores they will actually get on key questions, we find that 90% of the time they are just plain wrong. The reality is often quite different. And if you don't know what that reality is, there is no way you can manage it effectively. If you are serious about managing your people well, you have to know the facts. When managers get the true facts into their hands, they start to manage differently, and better. It literally changes the business.

You can have some of most sophisticated machinery and technology available, but in the end it's people who make it all work. It's people who face the customers, it's people who solve the problems, who come up with the new ideas, who show the flexibility to deal with all the variables, who can co-operate with others to get things done. And it's only when you start measuring how well you are managing that 'most valuable asset' of your business, that you are going to unlock its full performance-changing potential.

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