

12 Tips for Improving your Employee Survey Results

Lessons and tips from organisations that maximise the potential of employee surveys

Ensure Leadership buy-in;

To be effective an employee survey must be supported by all levels of management. Sometimes a survey can be seen as a threat as it circumvents the traditional relationship between an employee and their line manager. Leaders must be engaged as to the benefits of the survey and how it will help them lead and develop their teams. The more positive the leadership team are about the survey the more likely they are to encourage responsible participation and get the best response rates.

Link the Survey to your business goals;

Ensure that all participants in the survey understand how it fits in with the business goals of the organisation and how it will inform thinking. The survey should be positioned as an enabler to achieving company objectives through the better utilisation and management of organisational resources. Linking the survey to specific goals and objectives will ensure its credibility amongst many conflicting priorities.

Customise where possible;

Many surveys provide the opportunity to customise particular sections or questions. This might be considered to ensure that the language used resonates with the target audience. Watch out for questions and statements that are ambiguous and if customisation is not possible ensure you highlight and explain the meaning of these questions. If the survey provides the opportunity to add in specific questions use it to focus on particular areas of the business you have been working on to check the success of previous leadership activities.

Ensure all employees are briefed;

Leaders should take responsibility for ensuring that employees understand the reasons for the survey and how it will be used. Organisations that partake in briefing sessions beyond emails and notice boards get both a higher response rate and more considered responses to the questions. Briefings can be as part of the usual communication process as well as utilising activities such as appraisals and 1:1 meetings. This is especially important for employees that may work remotely.

Explain key questions;

Understanding of references and questions may be different when viewed from different parts of the organisation. When referencing the managers or leadership there is often confusion as to whether the reference is to higher strategic leadership or my line manager. This confusion is often used as a buffer for poor results as leaders are able to question "who were they talking about?" Be clear on whom you mean and the results will mean more and help the employees be more objective.

Some organisations provide examples of particular questions to obtain objective results, for example that regular communication includes meetings/coaching sessions and 1:1 sessions. Not all training is off the job and can include practical sessions on site.

Encourage informed responses.

Many surveys work on a five or seven point scale with a neutral section in the middle. Disengaged or disinterested employees may choose this response as a way of removing themselves from its purpose and not taking part. Whilst “no opinion” or “neither satisfied or dissatisfied” may at times be valid responses employees should be encouraged whenever possible to give a definite – either positive or negative response as this provides better information. Explaining the questions correctly will increase this. When analysing the data it may be worth including neutral responses in a negative context as employees feel they have not had a positive experience of this factor of the survey.

Maximise responses;

The more responses received the more valid the results. Create a project of communication from announcement to the last day the survey is running to remind people the survey is on going and encourage responses. Use different mediums such as emails/posters/briefings/and 1:1 sessions to constantly encourage employees to fill the survey in. If it is possible to log the number of responses companies may wish to publish the percentage of results received so far as a company or by company of by department

Ensure anonymity;

Though most surveys position themselves as anonymous employees may be distrustful of codes and references positioned on survey documents. Explain what these mean and how the data will be cut. The extent to which people believe in the anonymity of the survey will be a factor of the level of trust between the employees and leadership. Explaining what happens to the surveys / how they are analysed may help to build trust and get more relevant results.

Create the right environment

Filling in surveys in open plan offices or at a desk next to your manager might not be comfortable for all employees. Consider offering a range of mediums – paper / email to suite the employee. Some organisations provide a lap top for employees to use in private or a dedicated terminal in a quiet room to fill in the survey. Those people not based on site or with access to a PC may prefer a paper survey sent to their home.

Be transparent with the results

As soon as possible publicise the results from the survey. This will validate the importance you placed on filling it in and also show transparency of the same level you expected from the employees. This should be done quickly whilst it still in people mind and to block responses of “that was then – it would all be different now”. Leaders should be responsible for briefing the results to their own teams.

Create momentum

Ensure the results are seen to be actioned. A lack of action ensures that employees will not take the survey seriously and make it difficult to create a positive message for next time. A plan should be created with the senior leadership team to develop and build on the results with dates and objectives where possible. Issues arising from the survey may form part of the regular communication plan and inform decisions on leadership and organisational development. This will also create a positive message to reflect back on when launching subsequent surveys.

Turn the data into management information

Don't take the results on face value but find out what the data really means. Each set of positive or negative responses will point to an experience an employee has had and many of these may be shared across the company culture. Spend time with employees to investigate key results areas that have the most impact on the business. These are not necessarily the lowest scores. Getting real behavioural examples (anonymously reported) will provide leadership with credible examples of situations that have strengthened or detracted from the organisations culture.

For more information on how to turn your survey data into management information visit

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