

WHAT DO YOUR EMPLOYEES REALLY THINK?

Is your workplace full of pent-up anxieties and stressed individuals? Or perhaps it consists solely of happy workers? Why are people leaving in droves? How can you really tell? Culture surveys may provide some insights into the minds of your employees

To assess what the term ‘employee survey’ means to most workers, step into their shoes for a moment, or think back to when such a survey came across your desk or landed in your inbox or on your intranet. Here is a golden opportunity for employees to vent their feelings, highlight what’s being done well and draw attention to the areas that need to be improved, and hopefully offer some feedback on how to right any wrongs – a powerful tool. Most mildly engaged employees will welcome the opportunity; even the more cynical may begrudgingly take part.

Yet what happens when, six months afterwards, nothing about the survey has been revealed, nothing has changed, and employees are more disgruntled than ever before?

The decision to undertake an employee survey should not be taken lightly – for one thing, they are costly to set up. Clear objectives need to be set: what is the hoped for outcome of the survey? More importantly, there needs to be action taken on the results.

Why a survey?

The primary reason for conducting an employee survey (also known as organisational, culture or culture mapping surveys) is to gain a snapshot into the minds of employees. “You want to measure how well you know your organisation, and an organisation’s performance is

“A culture survey is worthless and is, in fact, detrimental if management fails to take any action”
– Hamish Sinclair

only as good as the people in it. If senior management think they know about their employees, why not determine once and for all if those suppositions are correct?” says Hamish Sinclair, director of operations at LINK Recruitment.

“In most instances, the use of an employee survey is to determine how

engaged the staff are to your business. It’s identifying the factors that enhance or inhibit performance and it’s also about aligning staff values and practices to the business objectives – are they actually aligned?” he adds.

A culture survey does not need to be across the whole of a company – specific departments or groups can be targeted. However, it should be a tailored approach to what the organisation’s requirements are at that point in time. “It’s often good to start at an organisational level if it’s not been done before,” says Sinclair. “Most organisations have different parts that make up the business, therefore the needs, wants, requirements and expectations of departments can differ greatly.”

Cards on the table

A culture survey also needs to be voluntary – forcing people at gunpoint to complete it will certainly not garner good results. However, if you later discover that there has been a low uptake, this can also reveal some underlying issues – perhaps that people are mistrusting and uncertain



Hamish Sinclair



about what will happen to them if the information is provided.

Transparency is therefore vital. Despite the best of intentions, the privacy of employees when they are making

potentially negative or even damning information needs to be addressed. It should be clearly stated what the information will be used for, how it's going to be used and who will be managing the information. Anonymity also ensures results will be honest and hopefully results in constructive feedback. Most large organisations use an external third party to handle the information and reporting of information, "that way there's no identification, no recourse from it, and there's a sense it's being handled by an expert as opposed to internally saying, 'let's do a culture survey and see what happens,'" says Sinclair.

There also needs to be a clear delineation made: a survey is not about individual performance reviews or even about 360-degree feedback. Primarily, a survey is attempting to assess culture

and organisational engagement, and determining whether or not your business is engaging the people who work for you. However, that's not to say some clues to how closely an employee and a manager are aligned to organisational objectives cannot be revealed.

"You can certainly pick up if staff are feeling supported and engaged by their manager – but it's broad-based and not directive. Ideally, you would use both a survey and something like 360-degree feedback in conjunction with each other," Sinclair notes.

"A culture survey might ask management-related questions such as, is your manager providing you with the right kind of support: yes or no? You can automatically see if there's any kind of disconnect between management and the staff. The next step would be to take that

top tips

- Market the survey** – create awareness. Employees need to be given plenty of notice about having to participate in an upcoming survey. Use any medium(s) available, such as e-mail, notice boards, company meetings, etc. You will need to emphasise the importance of employees responding, and how valuable their opinion is to the organisation in order to make necessary improvements. You also need to advise upfront what process you have in place to review and then action results.
- Clearly state survey objectives in the invite** – communicate what the purpose of the survey is, why the organisation is conducting it, where and when employees will be able to access it, and how the results will be used.
- Preserve anonymity** – employees are more likely to provide honest feedback if the surveys are conducted anonymously. Reassure employees that their responses will be strictly confidential and will not be linked to them as individuals, but rather viewed in a cumulative format. Often involvement in the process by a third party to manage the process can help reinforce the integrity of the survey.
- Consider incentives for completed responses within the given timeframe** – research shows that incentives can help increase response rates by 10–15%. They are

especially useful in a longer survey, and can be anything that will appeal to the employee demographic, from department store vouchers to wine, electronic goods or movie passes, depending on budget. For example: "The first 100 completed responses received will go into the draw to win ..."

Send reminders – usually sent to people that have not yet started the survey (make sure your survey tool can tell you this), survey reminders can increase your responses by another 10–15% by providing an additional prompt to employees to complete the survey seven to 10 days after the initial invite was sent.

- Share results** – communicate a summary of the key findings to your employees in a timely manner after the survey close date. This will provide assurance that time and effort spent on completing the survey was worthwhile and acted on, and will help ensure high response rates continue for any future staff surveys you conduct.
- Take action on findings** – it is imperative that the organisation is committed to making appropriate changes for improvement based on the findings of the survey. If no action is taken (or seen to be taken), the survey could potentially have an adverse effect within the organisation, promoting distrust in employees and often reinforcing some of the concerns raised in their feedback. The appointment of a 'Survey response working party', assigned the task of interpreting and actioning survey results, can be an effective way to reinforce your organisation's commitment to the survey process.

Source: www.peoplepulse.com.au

to the next level, which is where a 360-degree feedback session might come into play," he adds.

There is also no reason why HR needs to be the principal driver of setting up a culture survey – although clearly HR's involvement in determining problem areas, the questions to be asked and the strategies for improvement can be valuable. For HR to be a truly strategic business partner (and for the survey process to be a success), it needs to engage with the CEO and senior executives to take ownership of the survey.

Don't bury it

Once the results are back, the 'cards on the table' policy needs to continue. Indeed, the success of the management team will be demonstrated by their ability to effect positive action.

"A culture survey is worthless and is, in fact, detrimental if management fails to take any action," says Sinclair. "There are often a lot of things that can be done immediately, which gets employees saying, 'these things are worthwhile, they've listened to us, and I feel great that my input has created an outcome for the business'. However, if six months pass and nothing has changed that's worse than not having done the culture survey in the first place," he continues.

This honesty may mean facing some harsh truths – especially if the results come back largely negative. Sinclair notes it can actually be an important turning point for an organisation. "If it comes back negative it means you have to be very proactive and visible in accepting the feedback, recognising that it's important, and working towards making some improvements. It's time to draw a line in the sand and say we won't fall back any further, we're about to move forward. Then it's about engaging the people who can affect positive change," he says.

Roadmap to success

Often a culture survey is a great way to set a roadmap for where an organisation currently stands and where it could potentially head in the future. Instead of managers having to second guess what they think the problems are, a survey clearly outlines them and enables priorities to be set up.

"Employee surveys can be an extremely powerful tool if they're implemented and managed in the right manner. They can demonstrate that an organisation wants to respond to the people who make a business what it is. But don't do it as a once-off; do it on an annual basis and once you've done a couple you can measure the improvements," Sinclair concludes. **HC**

The death of paper-based surveys?

Many organisations have discarded traditional paper-based surveys in favour of web-based ones. "This is mainly because of the workload; it's very labour-intensive to distribute the surveys, get the data back, analyse it and then report on it," says Robert James, product manager, EmployeeConnect.

Greater flexibility has also played a role in this shift online. EmployeeConnect, for example, has a range of integrated HR technology platforms. Their web-based survey provides a framework for the client to fill in according to their needs. "Web-based surveys are much easier to deploy – it comes up as a web-based form, with the questions and details decided by the client. As much information as required can be captured. Because it's web-based they can be personalised with images, hyperlinks to other documents and other websites," says James.

In terms of reporting, clients can choose to use either the default graphs and charts provided with the software, or an extract function that dumps the raw information into Excel, from which countless reporting methods can be used.

As for the in-house or external provider debate, EmployeeConnect offers a mix of both. "Some clients go in across the web, use the surveys, click on the Excel icon to take the data locally, and perhaps report on it locally as well. Others have the application completely in-house. We're using the same technology as internet banking so data is very secure and only authorised persons are allowed access," says James.

Anonymity is also assured. "People talk about cookies, and say you know my IP address and you can trace who I am – but we simply don't capture any of that information," James says.

