

How to Sell an Employee Opinion Survey to Your Boss



Many Human Resources professionals have tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to convince their boss or other members of Executive Management of the benefits of Employee Opinion Surveys. Perhaps the last time you tried, you heard one of these four objections:

- "Doing a survey will just raise employee expectations";
- "Why surface the issues if we don't plan on addressing them?";
- "It costs too much"; or,
- "Now is just not a good time to do a survey."

Here are some useful tips on how to overcome these objections:

First, before you propose a survey, thoroughly evaluate whether your management team could ever support it. Consider the personality, managerial style, and motives of those you are trying to convince.

- Are they secure people who can take constructive criticism?
- Do they really want to hear what employees think?
- Will they respond to the survey with action?

If the answer to any of these questions is "No," your organization would be far better off not doing a survey, as any survey that is not supported by Senior Management will be a failure. On the other hand, if your organization has been blessed with open-minded managers, you will have a much easier time selling the survey.

Now, let's look at the specific objections.

Raising employee expectations

The simple fact is that employees already have expectations which should be *managed*, regardless of whether you do a survey. Managing these expectations is a *proactive* process of listening, evaluating, and initiating change; if anything, these management skills are complimented by an Employee Opinion Survey.

Creating issues

Unfortunately, too many managers naively believe that an employee survey will *create* issues. The fact is that employee concerns always exist. Not identifying them merely allows organizations to preserve the *status quo*, which directly contradicts the principles of good management, as well as the philosophies of most Quality Improvement programs.

Try pointing out that doing a survey doesn't mean you are handing out blank checks to the employees; a proper management response to a survey does not mean giving employees whatever they request. Most employees expect only that their opinions will be heard and taken seriously. Part of an acceptable post-survey response may include saying "No" to employee requests and explaining why the answer is "No."

In fact, addressing employee expectations and perceptions is the best way to get to the heart of employee matters and assure that employee opinions are congruent with the organization's mission and strategic plan. The survey, therefore, should be linked to your organization's mission and strategy, as well as to other important programs, such as those that relate to quality improvement, customer service, or employee involvement.

If your organization either regularly conducts Customer Surveys or Exit Surveys/Interviews with employees who have chosen to terminate their employment, but not employee surveys, point out that it makes little sense to openly seek the views and opinions of these two groups, while overlooking the opinions of employees. In fact, HR Solutions has been quite astounded by the great number of organizations that are spending time and energy on Exit Surveys/Interviews (which are a lagging indicator), while not querying their *current* employees and being proactive and preemptive with what is learned.

What about cost?

It is wise to include your Chief Financial Officer in the survey from the beginning. First, suggest survey questions which specifically fit your CFO's agenda, such as those that target: cost saving opportunities, productivity losses, employee turnover, and shoddy customer service. Second, respond to objections based on cost by being flexible and prepared. Know how much the survey will cost before you begin promoting it; force your survey vendor to provide a precise budget, and determine which survey-related tasks could be carried out by your own personnel, in order to save money. Third, make an effort to quantify the survey's potential gains and savings.

Is there a "best" time to do a survey?

The honest answer is "No." However, if your organization continually waits for the "perfect" time to do a survey, you will never do one. Organizations in today's business environment have to be fluid and dynamic. What might be a good time to survey for the Operations area, may be the same time your IT department is swamped doing a major computer conversion.

So, when is the best time to suggest doing a survey? Without a doubt, the best time is soon after a change in management, either at the highest level or within the leadership of the Human Resources department. This holds particularly true for Management Teams or Human Resources departments that have not enjoyed a favorable reputation with employees in the past. A new manager can wisely use the survey to uncover employee issues long before their own reputation is sullied by ghosts of yesterday past.

Of course, it helps to bring in an outsider when selling the survey to the Executive Team. Most survey consultants are well-trained to educate others on survey benefits, as well as on how to avoid common mistakes. Consultants can also keenly identify survey supporters within the Executive Team and help you commit them to the project.

Alternatively, introduce your boss or CEO to his or her industry peers who have used a survey effectively at their organization; they may be more open to accepting the idea if they hear it from a colleague outside your organization.

And what happens after the survey?

The process of selling an Employee Opinion Survey does not end simply because you have completed a survey. You should now focus on selling a follow-up survey, by inculcating the survey's continuing value and meaning to the organization. Some tips:

- Teach all of your Managers and Supervisors that the most effective way of using Employee Surveys are not as one-time or haphazardly timed events, but rather, as an on-going system of measurement which *continually* initiate positive change at all levels of the organization.
- Establish clear action plans, both organization-wide and work group-specific, and make sure each manager is accountable for achieving their plans. Without this accountability, little or no change will occur.
- Communicate to managers, supervisors, and employees that follow-up survey results will be used to evaluate, recognize, and reward individuals and departments demonstrating marked improvements from the last survey. Tying survey results to a manager's performance evaluation, and eventually, their compensation, is a sure-fire way to ensure follow-up action after a survey.
- Institutionalize the linkage between what employees said in the survey and what was done in response by the organization and/or work group manager.

And if you should fail in your attempts to make an Employee Opinion Survey a reality for your organization? Don't despair. Remember that unless your Executive Management team is willing to support the survey when the results are in and it is time to act, your organization will be better off not conducting one.