



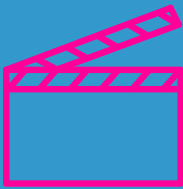
HOT TOPIC

THE RESULTS ARE IN, NOW WHAT?

Turning employee surveys into agents of change



Companies spend months planning, designing and administering employee surveys, and then compiling the data into detailed reports. But too often, these same organizations lose momentum in the action planning process and end up with either ineffective programs or no improvement plans at all – leaving employees wondering why the survey was conducted in the first place. In this paper, we’ll discuss how to turn surveys into agents of change by turning data into action.



INTRO

Many employees are apathetic towards surveys. Answering the same questions year after year, they rarely learn how the survey data was used to improve the business and assume, perhaps correctly, that the entire process was just a pointless ritual.

It doesn't – and shouldn't – have to be that way. Employee surveys should be viewed as an opportunity to be heard and directly influence company policy and direction, but only about half of employees believe senior management will act upon survey results. Why only half? Part of the answer lies in how companies view surveys themselves.

If a company positions a survey solely as a benchmarking event focused on numbers and scores, employees are less apt to participate while those sponsoring the survey can experience a “paralysis by analysis,” which prevents them from taking concrete actions based on the data. Organizations that place a high strategic value on employee surveys and view them as a way to engage employees in a dialogue, turn data into knowledge that is the basis of action planning: the steps, tasks and processes involved in implementing sustained change.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how to turn surveys into agents of change and to illustrate how HCA, the largest healthcare organization in the United States, used such an approach to create action plans that increased employee engagement and grew the bottom line.



Turning Data into Action

Employee engagement drives behaviors that elicit high productivity, creativity and a strong commitment to the success of the company. It directly enhances an organization's performance, which leads to increases in service quality, customer satisfaction and financial results.

Once companies have a complete assessment of engagement – identifying the drivers and comparing them to normative and historical data – it's time to turn the data into action. Yet, companies often times jump from data analysis right into action planning, leaving out two important steps that help to ensure the organization implements the right changes at the right time.

ACTION PLANNING STRATEGIC STEPS

Following a four-step process of converting data into action will help you build confidence in the survey process and focus resources on issues that will have the greatest impact on performance:



Data: Analyze the Results

Reviewing the detailed reports from the survey can be daunting without a disciplined approach that helps you focus on high level results first and then work into the details. Review summary information first, looking for themes and trends. Be sure to review comment information since it adds greater insight into the issues.

Next, go a bit deeper into the data by examining results by categories or dimensions. Ask yourself: What category or index scores are lowest/highest? How do engagement scores compare to target goals? How do workgroup results compare to other comparison groups or target goals?

Then dig into the details and look at individual item results. What questions are most favorable? Least favorable? What items have the highest neutral response? Neutral responses are valid responses that convey employee uncertainty or mixed opinions. Such responses tend to stem from either a lack of information or a “let’s wait and see” attitude. Individuals who respond with a neutral response are typically the easiest to be swayed through action planning to respond more favorably on the next survey.



Information: Communicate the Results

The goal of this step is to turn survey data into information by cascading information down to each level of the organization. The process originates with the survey champion (the individual or group who is responsible for the overall success of the survey) presenting the findings to senior leadership who then communicates top line results through multiple channels. This demonstrates that the C-suite values employee opinion, has listened to what they have to say, and will take action.

The survey champion should then educate management on how to read the reports and identify the top issues that should drive their individual action plans. Tools, templates and training are often times provided to help managers interpret results and create step-by-step plans for improvement. As results work their way down the organization, managers prepare to communicate results to their workgroups and begin to conduct feedback sessions.



Knowledge:
**Conduct Feedback Sessions
and Prioritize**

Using feedback sessions to clarify issues identified in the survey results is the main way to turn information into knowledge. They can uncover hidden agendas and problems, clarify misunderstandings or misinterpretations, create agreement and provide greater focus for large negative or neutral responses.

After the feedback sessions have taken place, opportunities for improvement must be prioritized, so the organization focuses its efforts and resources on those actions that will yield the greatest results. One way to prioritize actions is by examining the impact each would have on the business or workgroup in relation to how likely it would improve a given issue. In this approach, organizations would only pursue actions that would have the greatest likelihood of improvement and impact.

Another way to prioritize actions is by labeling them as ones that can be completed now, sooner or later. In this approach, actions that can quickly be implemented are balanced with those that may take longer, but offer greater benefits. The final way to rank improvement opportunities is by levels of engagement and what actions will drive employees to change their behaviors and become more engaged.



Action:
Develop Improvement Plans

The importance of action planning can be summed up by psychologist Morris Viteles: “A survey is like a hand grenade – once you pull the pin you have to do something with it. Otherwise it may hurt you rather than help you.”

Indeed, every group has some action that can be taken to improve survey results. Even the smallest actions implemented at the work group and department levels can have a significant impact on the business.

While action planning is important, implementation is critical to realizing improvement. Many organizations prepare great plans only to see incremental improvement in their survey results from year to year. What separates good organizations from great ones is their ability to implement their action plans and follow through to completion. The best organizations also communicate their progress and successes to all employees at each step of the process, so they know firsthand that actions taken directly link to survey results.

The HCA 2-4-6 Game Plan

HCA learned firsthand that employee engagement directly correlates to high performance. In its most recent employee survey, the results revealed that HCA's high performance facilities have 4 highly engaged employees for every actively disengaged employee with high performers obtaining an engagement ratio of 5.68 compared to 1.63 for other facilities. HCA also found that more than 50 percent of its high performing facilities were in the lowest risk quartile while over 50 percent of the low performing facilities were in the highest risk quartile.

HCA developed an action planning model known as the 2-4-6 Game Plan that guided managers through the action planning process and specified timelines for the completion of various steps. The plan was developed around three main principles:

- Communication flows downward ultimately resulting in local managers discussing survey results and action plans with their individual workgroups
- Action planning originates at the individual workgroup level and is presented upward to middle management and then to regional and/or senior leadership
- Specific timelines are applied to action planning with specific steps needing to be completed at the conclusion of 2-4-6 weeks and again at the end of 2-4-6 months

The 2-4-6 Game Plan made action planning more straightforward, giving managers a clearer understanding of their areas of accountability so they could effectively prioritize their efforts. The plan also helped to improve employee perception of the survey as a tool management uses to better the organization. Two years prior, only half of employees surveyed said they believed HCA would actually do something with the results. Following the implementation of the 2-4-6 Game Plan, that percentage increased by eight percent amounting to an additional 14,000 people gaining greater confidence in HCA's intent to take action. One group even saw a 20 percent increase in that question following the implementation of the action planning model.

The key behind the success of the action planning model was creating very specific, time-bound goals that can be measured. HCA also provided managers with a tool kit that offered training on conducting feedback sessions, developing goals and timelines, and assigning responsibility to team members for specific actions. The tool kit also offered guidance on identifying barriers and ways to break through them. Interestingly, HCA found that most action steps did not require a lot of money and were in the purview of a manager's area of responsibility.



In a recent poll, we asked participants what their greatest challenges were to implementing action plans following an employee survey. The top five answers were:

- 1. Availability of resources (time, people, money, etc.)**
- 2. Competing objectives and responsibilities**
- 3. Lack of communication an action plan or progress of employees**
- 4. Viewed as another activity/thing to do**
- 5. Manager accountability**

The Value of Action Planning

According to internal research, the average company spends about \$9 per employee per year on surveys. Smaller organizations can spend as much as \$30 per employee depending on the scope of the project. For most companies, employee surveys are a valuable investment in improving communication between employees and management and gaining insight into their opinions and behaviors.

Conducting a survey is instrumental to better understanding an organization's most valuable resource – its employees. Simply asking the right questions is not enough. To achieve better customer service, higher retention rates, improved productivity and increased profits, a company must follow through with actions and make sure employees know the implemented improvements directly link to the results of the survey.

Action planning is certainly the most challenging aspect of the survey process, but it's also the part that can add the most value to the organization. Small actions, even at the work-group level, can open the door to new opportunities.



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