



EMPLOYEE ATTITUDE SURVEYS: A POWERFUL TOOL FOR ENHANCING ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

Rashmi Nakra*

One of the cardinal rules of business is, "*Listen to your customers*". The notion that success also depends on listening to your employees is just as basic. All organizations that strive to improve performance and effectiveness are constantly faced by questions such as: "*Are our methods working?*" "*Are our products and services meeting the market's expectations?*" or "*Why weren't we the first to launch the latest version of the product?*" One of the most cost effective sources of advice is close at hand: *THE WORKFORCE*.

Apart from asking employees as to what is working and what isn't, managements are also acutely aware of the relationship between employee satisfaction levels and customer satisfaction. This link has been validated by research studies as well as experienced by each one of us in everyday life. Most of us can vividly recall our feelings of apprehension whenever we have to visit an organization, be it a bank, a retail outlet or a restaurant where the employees look miserable and unhappy in their jobs. Each time we enter such an organization, we get an uncomfortable feeling that its employees are annoyed at us for walking in and causing them to do work.

* Faculty, St Joseph's College of Business Administration, Bangalore

Think back to the last sour experience you had with a person who was servicing you. How did this make you feel? You would've found yourself making a mental note not to return to a place of business where you were mistreated. At the very least, you will not recommend an organization whose employees have been rude, sloppy or disinterested. On the other hand, positive memorable experiences not only make you return to a place of business, you also recommend them to friends. Perhaps the employees of the former organizations are unhappy with the management style, the working hours, the pay/benefits, their immediate supervisors, or their career growth opportunities. Research has shown that when organizations treat their employees well, the employees treat the customers well. In the words of Schneider, "When employees encounter Human Resource practices that facilitate a more positive experience for them, they will create a more positive experience for customers."

A valuable management tool for providing a systematic feedback on how employees view and react to various organizational policies, identifying areas of concern and seeking employees' inputs on the challenges confronted by the organization is to conduct employee attitude surveys. Tapping into the knowledge and expertise of employees can provide a wealth of information and ensure that the organization is tackling the fundamental issues that make the difference between success and failure.

Managements commonly use three methods to survey employee attitudes:

1. Questioning the employee's immediate supervisor
2. Interviewing employees
3. Administering professionally constructed attitude surveys

Of these, the third approach is the most economical, efficient, and an objective source of information. Questions can be quickly administered to large groups, readily scored and interpreted, and the responses provide an objective measure of attitudes concerning both general and particular work situations, as well as providing a basis for comparison with other similar companies as well as its own satisfaction indexes.

The roots of attitude surveys or employee satisfaction surveys can be traced to the Organization Development intervention of "Survey Feedback" which is essentially a process of collecting data from employees of an organization on a number of organizational dimensions like leadership, communication, decision-making, superior-subordinate relations, and job satisfaction as well as any other pertinent issues. This data is analyzed, summarized and then fed back to the system members

in an understandable format. Thereafter it is used to assess the current position of the organization, diagnose problems and to generate action plans for improving selected aspects of the system. This process is referred to by different terms like Attitude Surveys, Employee Satisfaction Surveys and Survey Feedback and Action.

Why use an Attitude Survey?

A closer look at some of the underlying dynamics of an "Employee Survey" reveals that it serves the following vital functions:

As an improvement and involvement tool:

A survey provides a useful health check for identifying the organization's strengths and weaknesses as perceived by the employees. Apart from this, it identifies opportunities for improvement and helps evaluate the effectiveness of the change programs initiated. Areas of critical concern within the organization are highlighted and the entire process acts as a catalyst for turning feedback into action.

It also helps involve the staff – right from the identification of the issues and problems facing the organization, to brainstorming for solutions, to creative planning and finally task completion. This involvement improves the likelihood of employees accepting the resultant changes, as they would feel a part of the change program.

As a communication tool:

It facilitates dialogue between the management and employees and in the process uncovers grievances and issues whose existence might have been unknown to higher management. Even if nothing can be done to alleviate all the problems, it may improve matters by giving employees an opportunity to voice their concerns and providing a communication channel to the management for explaining the reasons for things being the way they are.

As a motivational tool:

A survey demonstrates concern and respect for the employees and is a visible sign that management values their opinions.

As an early warning system:

Well-designed and administered surveys can uncover areas of discontent before they become major issues. Often, employees can warn management when equipments or processes are malfunctioning before they actually break down, about

customers reacting unfavorably to a product - ahead of the sales results reflecting this, about safety hazards before major accidents occur, or even when employees are becoming disenchanted with a company action, program, or condition before organized resistance or a strike results. Surveys thus provide an early warning to management while there is still time to act.

What are the costs?

Attitude surveys, if properly used, can be a powerful tool in organization improvement. However they have the following inherent costs:

- Raise employee expectations with the resultant negative effects on morale if they feel that they spent time and effort but no one listened or accepted their views.
- Take a lot of time.
- Provide discontented staff with an opportunity to have a "GO" at senior management.
- Become a "Millstone", if management commits to do it regularly but is unable to make necessary changes, this inaction becomes very noticeable and in the event of any issue reaching a flashpoint, the management can no longer use the excuse that it didn't know.
- Be seen by some managers as a threat.

The benefits of attitude surveys far outweigh their costs if certain ground rules are followed for ensuring their effectiveness.

The Ground Rules

1. Define the Purpose

The key to any successful survey is for management to clearly define the purpose and identify the priority areas facing the organization. Organizations should measure only that which they are prepared to address. If the management is not going to use the information generated by the survey or is not prepared to face the issues raised, it should not undertake a survey in the first place.

Further if the management holds the view that its commitment to surveying the employees is indicative of its concern for its people or if it believes that the survey

process by itself would result in well-motivated employees – the survey would be started on a wrong footing.

2. Communicate

Before starting a survey, the rationale for undertaking this exercise should be clearly communicated. It is important to ensure that realistic expectations are set and the message conveyed that improvements would not be made overnight in every area. The period after the survey is also critical - employees will want to know what has been learnt and what actions intend to be taken. Delays of months between data collection and communication will always generate suspicions that the results are being fixed or are too bad to be shared.

3: Provide Meaningful Feedback and Listen Actively

Feedback sessions are a crucial part of the process, for it is during these that a sharing of the findings takes place and suggestions and creative solutions to acknowledged problems are born. The feedback sessions could be led by managers of the department / organization or by an outside consultant.

During the Feedback meeting, the findings should be presented in an open and non-defensive manner and should be used as a means to get the group to open up and to fully understand the specific issues revealed by the survey results. For example, if the survey indicates that the group is unhappy with the state of disorganization that exists, the manager should try to find out exactly which of the processes are disorganized. He should also ask for all the possible solutions to the problems that have been revealed, listen and record them without commenting on the proposed solutions.

It is important that the manager is skilled in the art of listening and should be trained to draw out employee suggestions with sensitivity and maturity. Imagine what would happen if the manager asked an employee for a suggestion, and as soon as the employee started to speak - the manager jumped in and explained the "real" problem (as per his perception) and what needed to be done to fix it. When this happens, in one act, the management is simultaneously telling the employee that his or her suggestion is valueless, the management has all the answers, and that no one really cares what the employee thinks.

4. Timing and Frequency

As to the timing, organizations must consider what the optimal timing is for their own specific circumstances. However, care should be taken to avoid the perception

that the organization is deliberately manipulating the timing to avoid bad news or the effects of "difficult" budgets. Surveys should not be run during major labor negotiations, strikes, corporate restructuring and downsizing.

A one-time survey is of some immediate value, but a continuous program, with follow up surveys, serves better to monitor the effectiveness of a company's action plan, as well as employee reactions to management's activities. The initial survey provides a benchmark; succeeding ones indicate improvement or deterioration. In addition, when managers know that their groups will be surveyed every year, they have an incentive to improve the working environment of their team.

5. Act on It

Many a time, employees are left with the impression that nothing was ever done with the survey results. In some cases this is true; in other cases the wrong things were done; and in some situations, proper steps were taken but employees did not recognize the relation between the steps that were taken and the survey. It isn't the conducting of surveys that promotes morale or retention; it's what companies do in response to what they learn that counts.

An Employee Survey is a strong communication tool: it communicates the intention to listen and to change. Unless the results are communicated honestly and visibly acted upon - disillusionment is intensified and the very tool seeking to enhance employee engagement becomes a mechanism to undermine it. There are fewer things worse than asking the employees for their opinions and then ignoring them.

Generally, running and analyzing the survey should take a maximum of three weeks. The remaining feedback and action plan development steps should take a maximum of five more weeks. The longer the time lapse between the administration, the presentation of results and the resulting action, the less confidence the employees will have that their inputs were taken seriously and valued.

6. Guarantee Anonymity

In order to get a meaningful response, a guarantee of anonymity, confidentiality and non-attribution is essential. Without trust the management will not be able to uncover the perceptions and information that it needs to be aware of. This commitment to anonymity must never be violated. It is for this reason that many organizations use an outside expert to administer the survey and analyze the responses. This emphasizes the significance of the survey and gives credibility to its anonymous nature.

Conclusion

The attitude survey program is thus a self-critical process - measuring a company's strengths and weaknesses leading towards a constructive end - i.e. improvement in the company's effectiveness. The ultimate goal of an attitude survey program is positive - to increase awareness and understanding of employee feelings and to tap into the immense reservoir of their collective knowledge and hands on experience in order to initiate the changes necessary to improve the working conditions , employee satisfaction and organizational effectiveness. If due care is taken in the planning, execution and follow up of an employee attitude survey, it can provide fresh impetus in the improvement process for any organization at any stage of its life.

References

1. *Organizational Development & Change Management*: Thomas G Cummings & Christopher G. Worly: South Western College Publishing,
2. *Organizational Development*: Wendell L. French & Cecil H. Bell Jr.: Pearson Education Asia.
3. *Attitudes In and around Organizations*: Arthur P. Brief.