

Untangling Positive and Negative Employee Feedback

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To be sure employee attitude surveys meet their goal of fine-tuning the overall workplace—and individual employees—companies must take the surveys seriously and follow up on what survey-takers convey.

“I had an employee complaining that their manager has no strategic direction, throws everyone under the bus [and] sends out inappropriate e-mails,” said Nicole Hall, vice president and associate director of HR for Draftfcb, a 400-worker advertising firm in New York City.

Separately, she cited a highly productive ad salesperson who recently opted to accept a buyout rather than remain under a misguided supervisor. “We told that supervisor, point-blank, ‘we have people who do not want to work for you,’ ” Hall said. “We try to take all this employee feedback, all these little nuggets that come from attitude surveys and, in a constructive guided manner, tell managers, ‘You need to be a little more of this, more of that,’ ” she told *SHRM Online*.

When necessary, managers are given coaching using mock scenarios which highlight their style of supervision, Hall added.

Encouraging Feedback

Although some companies don't bother with such surveys, Draftfcb, like many firms angling to measure the attitudinal pulse of their workforce, does so yearly. Workers are granted anonymity so that the surveys might yield the most candid answers possible.

Getting an honest assessment, however, hinges on the tone already established by the higher-ups, according to Audrey LeGrand, president and CEO of Innovators & Motivators, an Atlanta-based HR consultancy that, among other services, conducts attitude surveys for its clients. “It starts with a company's environment,” she said. “Is it a place where information already is being easily shared ... where information flows from top to bottom and bottom to top? How open and candid employees are willing to be in attitude surveys often begins with the answers to those questions.”

FedEx Express used to outsource its annual attitude surveys but opted several years ago to bring that process in-house, tailoring its own, more pointed and succinct survey, said Ranae Daniel,

FedEx Express' manager of organization effectiveness solutions. "We went from 250 questions to 32 ... We realized survey vendors couldn't customize the surveys in a way that we really needed," she said.

"Our feedback and action process occurs at every level, from the work group to the highest levels of management," Daniel explained. "We're able to take the positive data and build on that. In the areas that need improvement, we do the same thing. A lot of times we follow up with focus groups to look at the trends in either direction and develop detailed action plans."

The profitability of FedEx Express—which, as one arm of the FedEx conglomerate, has 140,000 on its payroll—rests on being sensitive to the fact that their couriers spend the bulk of their time delivering packages as quickly and efficiently as possible. Too lengthy an employee survey would do more to dampen than boost their confidence in the company, Daniel said.

"Still, we believe a survey is 100 percent essential," she added, "... to how we monitor trends, to how we do all kinds of follow-up studies and gauge how the company is doing overall."

Among other concisely worded questions, Daniel said, are these:

- How do you feel about customer service?
- How do you measure the strengths and weaknesses of your immediate leaders?
- What are the rewards of the job?
- What are the job conditions?
- How much pride do you experience as a member of this organization?

"That concerns us a lot," said Daniel. "If someone says they don't have pride in working here that means they're not giving their best to the company. We need to help those employees and managers be better because the level and type of engagement impacts our employees and the bottom line."

Coping with Mixed Reviews

Workers sometimes give mixed reviews, rating the company high in some areas and low in others, according to HR managers and consultants.

"The love/hate thing employees sometimes have is a reality that's to be expected," said Veronica Rock, HR director for the Washington, D.C., government's real estate division. "If we all had a choice, we would do something that we love as opposed to something that helps us pay the bills. People sometimes do end up going into jobs they don't really like."

Consultant Pat Lynch of Business Alignment Strategies in Long Beach, Calif., said, "Divergent responses ... indicate that while respondents feel positively about the organization, they are experiencing problems with their leaders. Since dissatisfaction with immediate supervisors is the No. 1 reason employees leave organizations—and/or join unions—the results signify that unless management addresses the issues immediately, the organization is likely to lose good performers who have other options." Her firm conducts employee retention and satisfaction surveys, and

helps develop strategies for addressing issues uncovered by those surveys.

Design Matters

“It’s important that every organization conduct a survey on a regular basis and actually care about how an employee is perceiving their work environment,” said David Witt, program director for the Ken Blanchard Companies, a workplace researcher and strategist based in Escondido, Calif. “The second thing is that employers should make sure the design of the survey is such that they can take action.”

General questions such as “How satisfied are you at work” will not suffice. “With questions like that you’re merely [straw] polling,” Witt said. “Employees begin to ask how serious is senior leadership about making any changes?”

He prefers formal surveys to informal ones that rely on random queries to randomly chosen supervisors. That latter approach is hardly comprehensive or fail-proof, Witt said.

Among factors employers should be assessing, he said, are:

- Whether pay increases and other benefits are being fairly determined and distributed.
- How interested workers are in their daily duties.
- Whether what’s expected of workers is clear to them and whether they have some influence in defining their assigned tasks.
- If the workload is reasonable, allowing the worker sufficient breaks and deadlines for delivery on projects.

Determining the degree of satisfaction in each of those and other areas is impossible to quantify without a formal survey, Witt said.

“I hear of places that don’t do surveys at all because they just don’t care,” LeGrand said, “They see their employees as disposable human capital.”

Healthy organizations, on the other hand, accept the positive and negative feedback they receive and ask the question, ‘Are these legitimate concerns?’ she said.

“They use the information to make their organization a better organization. They take it so seriously that they build it into their managers’ job descriptions and review the fact that results from attitude surveys will tangibly impact the manager’s job,” LeGrand added. “That way, the manager becomes truly interested in these survey results.”

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