

Reducing Conflict 42 Fewer Surveys

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



In most organizations, when managers want to know how people are feeling, they do a survey to find out. There are more direct ways to identify what people are thinking. By simply discussing the need for a survey, the most insightful data is already revealed.

Issues with surveys

Not all surveys are bad, but many organizations make mistakes when trying to obtain information through employee surveys. Here are some classic mistakes:

1. Too many surveys. They become an annoyance.
2. Not anonymous. If people sense managers can tell who made the input, then it will not be valid.
3. Poorly designed. Generally, surveys are more burdensome than they need to be.
4. No feedback on the results or no visible changes were made in response to surveys.
5. The survey asks leading questions that are not validated.
6. Asking for the same information multiple times.

High trust eliminates the need for surveys in most cases

I believe that in an environment of high trust there is less need to obtain information through surveys. Taking an employee engagement survey usually does not reveal trust weaknesses or their causes. In low trust environments, people will either not be totally honest or be angered by yet another survey.

Most people believe the data will sit in a desk drawer anyway, and it will not provide real change. How many times have you heard employees say this? "They keep doing these satisfaction surveys, but nothing ever changes around here."

Taking a survey feels like progress to a management team with their hearts in the right place. They believe they can dig in and really understand the problems in depth. I believe there is a far easier and more accurate way to get the real data.

In an environment of high trust, the information is present every day. What is working well and what needs to change is as ubiquitous as the air we breathe. People do not need to fill out boxes on a computerized screen to identify the most pressing needs. Improvement opportunities will surface continuously and naturally. Action can occur

immediately, not after 11 meetings to discuss the 27-page summary of the employee satisfaction survey.

Identify changes to management behaviors

There is a better way to make progress. Identify which management behaviors are causing people to hold back the truth out of fear. Rather than contemplating an employee satisfaction survey, Management should be asking themselves questions such as:

1. How can we change the culture to eliminate the need to take surveys in the future?
2. How can we modify the way we interact with people? We want them to tell us when problems are small and easily resolved.
3. How can we get more time in the workplace to chat with people?
4. How can we continually test our understanding of people by listening and watching their body language?
5. Why do we have an insular management team? When we look around the room, why do we not see more workers in our meetings?
6. Why do people think our values are not practiced consistently?
7. Why are our goals not fully understood or supported by the people doing the work?
8. How can we build a culture of higher trust?

Focus management energy on creating a real environment where people are not playing games with each other. In that culture, improvement ideas will flow like water down a mountain stream and fewer surveys will be required.

Ask questions like the ones above and seek to gain information from your analysis. The progress will be far easier to achieve and more robust as well.

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