

Employee surveys: guidance to facilitate effective action

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Joan Fraser, a mature student at the University of Sheffield, gained extensive experience with employee surveys as an occupational psychologist in a large government organization. Regular contact with other managers of surveys raised awareness that taking effective action was a widespread practical problem and stimulated her research interest in finding a solution. Joan's previous experience in educational and health psychology made her consider individual as well as organizational change approaches as a means to improve survey action.

Abstract

Modern employee surveys have the potential to add value to an organization by assisting planning and change. However, the survey literature shows that using the findings is a challenge (William Steinberg Consultants Inc., 2004). The aim of this article is to provide guidance on how to take action on an employee survey.

The article defines employee surveys and explains the reason for their increasing use. Then, by combining information from the literature with the views of managers who frequently use employee surveys, we identify the main facilitators for action. These are: a clear action purpose for both the overall survey and individual topics; endorsement by senior management; and assignment of both a survey co-ordinator and topic specialists to plan and implement action. These personnel need expertise in the topics targeted for action plus knowledge of how to implement change.

Providing perspective to employee survey action

The aim of this article is to provide guidance on survey use to improve practice. To begin, we consider the definition of employee surveys and then examine their prevalence. We continue by describing their potential value and the challenges organizations face in taking effective action. Then, using information from both the literature and qualitative research with managers of employee surveys, we focus on processes that should be included in guidance to promote action.

Introduction

Although many books, consultants and websites describe how to undertake employee surveys, there is a dearth of information on how to use surveys to take action or initiate change. The inadequate use of survey data is an acknowledged issue by both practitioners and researchers. Hartley comments in relation to proposed survey actions:

"In general, implementation and the sustaining of ... actions was found to be harder than initially anticipated and several [organizations] did not succeed in this area."

(Hartley, 2001 p.201)

There are consequences to lack of action. The potential cost is considerable: a large company survey could cost in the region of £45,000 (Incomes Data Services Limited, 2004 p.44). In addition, there is damage to people's trust. When employees make the effort to complete a survey, it raises expectations that action will be taken (Hogg, Cole, Walker, & Walker, 1989). Breaking this implicit agreement is likely to reduce motivation to complete future surveys (Rogelberg, Luong, Sederburg, & Cristol, 2000). Survey action is vital to organizations, as remarked by Myers and McCutcheon:

"A technically sound questionnaire accompanied by sophisticated statistical analysis and professionally produced reports will have minimal effect on the organisation unless there is explicit recognition throughout that follow-up action is the most important aspect of the survey."

(Myers & McCutcheon, 1995 p.34)

Even organizations that produce survey action plans can find implementation difficult. An investigation of 600 companies cited action planning as their main survey concern: the proportion reporting their action plans as "fairly successful" was 46 percent with only five percent seeing action plans as "extremely successful" (The Industrial Society, 2000).

Definition and Prevalence

Descriptions of employee surveys often concentrate on data collection, albeit that many practitioners see the purpose of employee surveys as wider than information gathering (Munro-Faure, 2000). One definition that acknowledges their use for planning and change is that of the Chartered Management Institute (2007) which on their website describes an employee surveys as:

"A planned procedure which enables an organisation to obtain the opinions of its employees on a particular issue or on the organisation itself, so as to take account of them in the planning process or make changes beneficial to the organisation and individuals alike".

On investigating the history of employee surveys, we noted that prior to the nineteen eighties most surveys developed around a single topic, often communication. Over time survey content expanded to include topics linked with company productivity, such as leadership, training and satisfaction. Leadership was introduced to identify any relationship between different leaders and performance, and remains a popular topic of enquiry. Training questions are often added when companies surmised that training might increase production (Martin & Nicholls, 1987). Interest in satisfaction came to prominence in the nineties when businesses whose employees reported greater aggregate levels of job satisfaction improved their financial performance (West & Patterson, 1998).

The use of surveys has increased dramatically over the last two decades. For instance, the 1998 Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS) found that survey use had risen from 28 percent in 1992 to 45 percent in 1998 in workplaces employing over 25 people (Feature Article, 2000). A more recent survey (WERS, 2004) found 42 percent of workplaces with over ten employees had held an employee survey within the previous two years (Kersley et al., 2005). These findings show that there is extensive use of employee surveys even in small workplaces. However survey use tends to be greater in large companies (56 percent) and in public organizations (66 percent) (Forth, Bewley, & Bryson, 2006). The 1994 European Council Directive may have had some influence on survey uptake, as it requires Member States to consult employees. The related 2002 National Information and Consultative Directive made this consultation compulsory for employers with over 50 employees (Official Journal of the European Communities, 2002). This legislation applies in the UK from April 2008.

In addition to external pressure from legislation, there are internal drivers promoting survey use. These relate to their potential value to the organization. The first is to monitor company initiatives. This is well established and often a survey's prime focus (Heneman, Fox, & Eskew, 1998). Here employee surveys act as an audit rather than an action tool, such as undertaking a performance-monitoring role to assess quality management initiatives (Taylor & Wright, 2006). The second driver is to give employees an opportunity to express their feelings on work issues

(Hogg et al., 1989). If handled well a survey can facilitate two-way communication and develop employee participation. The final and potentially most important internal driver is to make the organization more effective by using survey findings to inform business strategy and assist change. As previously mentioned the use of survey findings in relation to business strategy remains limited due to difficulties with developing action (Hartley, 2001). Our inspection of the survey literature highlights a variety of stumbling blocks to action, such as lack of time and expertise. More importantly traditional advice on how to conduct a survey provides minimal reference to action. This highlights the key barrier that we are trying to address, which is the limited guidance available on how to promote survey action.

Developing Guidance for Action

The starting point to developing guidance was to review the wider literature on individual (e.g., Lewis, Passmore, & Cantore, 2008), group (e.g., Storey & Salaman, 2005), and institutional change (e.g., Quinn, 2004). Although this literature provided useful information, it lacked detailed recommendations on the use of survey data. To gather more specific information, managers from public and private companies were interviewed as part of a study on employee surveys that began in 2000.

Method

To obtain data useful to large organizations, eighteen managers were invited to participate from large (over 5,000 employees) multi-site companies that had conducted surveys for at least three years. The managers interviewed were identified as having major responsibility for managing their company's survey. The organizations all had headquarters in the UK and were from both the public and private sectors. Some were contacted through existing connections; others through snowball sampling following recommendation from early interviewees; others by criteria sampling using desk research to identify appropriate companies.

Semi-structured interviews lasting on average one-hour covered survey objectives; responsibilities and administration; questionnaire design; employee involvement; and results dissemination. These interviews concentrated on obtaining managers' views of good survey practice, particularly on factors that improved survey action, and acquiring examples of successful actions taken.

Interviews were transcribed and thematic analyses used to classify the data by key themes and then make sense of emerging patterns (Ritchie, Spencer, & O'Connor, 2003). Text from interview transcripts was reduced and classified in a matrix. The matrix headings were based on the research questions and information from the literature (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

Findings

This section describes the major themes emerging from our investigation of the literature, enhanced by information from the interviews. Relevant themes on the change process were obtained from reviews of historical theories (e.g., Lewin, 1946), behaviour change approaches (e.g., Sniehotta, Schwarzer, Scholz, & Schuz, 2005), and stages of change models (e.g., Prochaska, 2004). Prevalent themes were Leadership, Experience, Communication and Change Capability. The last theme encapsulates knowledge of how to initiate, manage and maintain the change process. The interviews with experienced managers provide a valuable pragmatic focus to these literature themes as innovative twists result from the interviewees' perspective of what occurs in real life around company surveys.

Leadership

The literature identifies the need for a senior leader to act as a catalyst for change through their ability to focus activity towards a desired outcome (Quinn, 2004). The interviewees were in agreement on the value of senior management to trigger survey action. Many also indicate the need for two additional leaders to be associated with the survey process: a coordinator and a

topic specialist. The former requires expertise in survey administration, plus the ability to influence others to agree and implement action plans. The purpose of the latter is to promote action around particular topics in the survey.

There were a variety of comments highlighting the benefits of a survey coordinator. For example, Interviewee 6 describes an overall coordinator facilitating action planning with divisional coordinators supporting action locally. Other interviewees suggest that a central team for the coordinating role. Coordinators appear particularly valuable in large organizations to liaise with remote locations.

In contrast topic specialists need to be responsible and skilled on specific survey issues. For example, Interviewee 12 describes a specialist from their personnel department concentrating on improving training and development. Therefore while senior management are needed to endorse survey action, the planning and implementation of action requires survey coordination and topic specialists.

Experience

Both the literature and the interviewees confirm that all leaders (senior management, coordinator and topic specialist) require experience for credibility and quicker more effective decision-making. Management studies find experienced executives generate more positive organizational outcomes, as they can perform more varied or complex activities (Quinn, 2004). The marketing literature highlights that credible sources appear expert and trustworthy, and therefore are more persuasive (Kotler, 1988).

The interviewees confirm that the senior manager's experience provides benefits. For example, when skilled senior people are involved in the survey process through steering groups, surveys have greater action orientation. Furthermore the interviewees recognise that experience and credibility are vital for the coordinator, expressing this as:

"People with no experience were running surveys so the results were ambiguous and the objectives unclear."

Interviewee 1

Managing a company survey is complex, as Das points out:

"Designing a valid survey questionnaire requires considerable training and experience."

(Das, 2004 p.23).

One company, where the interviewee reported "very little" evidence of action, regularly reallocated responsibility for their survey to someone without experience, not realising the benefits of having an established and knowledgeable manager. Here the literature is very specific, advising on the use of consultants to provide expertise when a survey is complex (Heller & Golzen, 1996). In addition, to facilitate action, expert credibility is shown to have greater influence than power, such as dictates from senior management (Kotler, 1988 p.645). Therefore the coordinator plays a vital lead role based on their skill in survey management.

Topic specialists require skills in setting goals and promoting change. The literature bears out the need for specific knowledge during change implementation, when knowledge barriers are greater than motivational barriers (Stiles, 2000). With some survey questions this specialist knowledge may need to be acquired from external consultants. For example, Interviewee 15 describes the need to "buy in a lot of safety training" because improving safe working practice was a major concern for their Board. The important factor with topic specialists is that they should be able to set goals and influence work objectives in their area.

Communication

In the literature, a communication strategy is described as a critical success factor for employee surveys (Harwood, 1998). The interviewees highlight that the important aspect of communication is that all leaders communicate "commitment to action". This can be expressed in various ways: senior leaders often show this focus from the start of the survey, while

coordinators may demonstrate commitment through distribution of timetables and results, and topic specialist can reflect this through their action plans.

Senior management, according to the survey literature, should communicate their commitment to the survey AND to making changes at the start of a survey (William Steinberg Consultants Inc., 2004). Interviewees back up the benefits of an early senior management focus on action. They describe a variety of methods being employed to assist action including senior management making funds available, relating action to Directors' bonuses, employing consultants to assist action planning, with the most popular being to integrate action with business plans.

"Every initiative within the business links back to the survey and actions for each initiative decided by process group and outcomes measured through survey."

Interviewee 6

There were a variety of ways by which the interviewees describe coordinators communicating their commitment, such as advertising aspects of the survey, identifying areas of concern, setting targets, proposing plans, or monitoring action. These activities can be encapsulated as the organising, communicating, and monitoring of action plans. This method of displaying commitment is exemplified in a comment from one interviewee:

"Action plans communicated. ... Evaluate actions to ensure linked to purpose of survey - communicate progress or deterioration (through measurement of future survey results) ..."

Interviewee 15

Based on their experience, several interviewees highlight an important coordinating task as the production of timetabled activities. An important milestone within this timetable is speedy communication of survey results to all employees. It appears that many companies do not plan areas for action until they receive these results. As a consequence, the interviewees express difficulties in using their survey findings to develop and communicate action plans.

"When it comes to interpreting the results and action plans the company is weak, and the [company] believes they need new ways of communicating."

Interviewee 4

To address this, one interviewee uses a form to coordinate plans.

"The action plans ... have basic headings of actions, timescales and who responsible (on a proforma supplied by HO)."

Interviewee 7

Prior planning emerges as important, yet some survey literature advises that surveys should not be change orientated but overly inclusive, concentrating on general rather than actionable questions (William Steinberg Consultants Inc., 2004).

Topic specialists normally communicate their commitment in a similar way to coordinators by developing and communicating their particular plans for action. The use of a form permits topic specialists to describe their plans with the resources / responsibilities required for implementation. The literature suggests that it is rare for more than three or four major changes to follow a survey (Walters, 1996). Therefore coordinators should be able to liaise with these topic specialists to design actionable questions and to publicise plans and progress.

Change capability

An important facilitator is change capability through knowledge of how to manage change. The literature recognises a weakness throughout organizations regarding knowledge of change techniques (Buchanan, Claydon, & Doyle, 1999). The interviewees describe addressing their lack of knowledge by gaining information from consultants, books, conferences and professional bodies. Even so they report that taking action on survey findings is hard work and takes time. Similarly the literature shows that achieving change requires persistence. This means that

survey action may need to continue over more than one year, and communicating progress depend on the next year's survey results.

Although leaders require a thorough knowledge of the change process, change capability is particularly pertinent for the topic specialist for two reasons. First, a knowledgeable topic specialist can ensure that the style of question in the survey provides the information they require to take action. Second, by planning potential action, specialists can propose a goal and describe tasks required to reach the goal.

One aspect that affects change capability is the length and content of the questionnaire. Interviewees recognise that a long questionnaire can cause confusion over where to target change.

"Initially set the survey up to identify people's issues so that they could be addressed. Since then the survey has picked up all sorts of other things, monitoring initiatives. Possibly measuring things that should not be being measured by the employee survey, ..."

Interviewee 12

A very small number of the interviewees accept that their survey is used for monitoring only, but the majority comment that survey content should be limited to actionable questions on specific topics.

"The survey needs to be an action tool rather than a monitoring tool. ... Focused, shorter questionnaires may be more actionable."

Interviewee 16

The main point that emerges for topic specialists is that action to bring about change requires formal planning with responsibilities and reporting detailed. Indeed the literature endorses the planning of tasks and resources to improve business results (Smith, 2003). Benchmarking topic results assists goal setting; but in relation to capability, does not tell topic managers how to make improvements. Prior planning is often needed to understand the effect of proposed changes (Mason, Chang, & Griffin, 2005).

Pre-planning of potential action areas requires the company to consider how to undertake change and its capacity to take action. When change is not planned people do not know if it is possible. As part of the planning process topic managers may need to seek expert advice, consider methods of communication, or gradually build tasks into existing work to avoid overload. These findings broaden a survey from having one overall survey purpose to recognising that for action to take place each topic question should have a clear reason for inclusion in the questionnaire.

Top Tips

It is argued that a well-organised survey, where the final result provides reliable actionable information, gives a company data, which would be difficult if not impossible to obtain even at a higher cost by other methods (Schuman & Presser, 1981). Yet one in five organizations report problems with post survey action (The Industrial Society, 1994). This research examined how organizations conduct employee surveys and, more specifically, how organizations action their results. Although each company survey is different, on the basis of our work we have drawn together the following tips to assist managers wanting to undertake surveys:

- Clarify the action purpose of the survey:
 - At the initial design of the survey make it clear that the purpose is to gather data to make improvements for employees and the business.
 - Make the purpose of each topic to be investigated clear and design questions in such a way that improvements emerge.
 - Ensure corresponding actions link with business needs.
- Communicate the names of leaders and resources available:
 - Senior management should commit to assist action implementation.
 - The coordinator promotes resources available for action.

- Topic specialists plan and undertake the implementation of action.
- Added expertise may be required, for example to understand the effect of proposed actions or to undertake training in change management techniques.
- Persist to complete planned actions:
 - Use benchmarking, of results and methods, to set realistic goals.
 - Integrate work towards goals into employees' job objectives.
 - Track, report, and celebrate action implementation.

Conclusion

This article is not recommending an increase in the number of employee surveys, it is arguing for better use of the information gained from surveys. At present, in spite of the fact that the majority of organizations use employee surveys, practitioners and researchers note that effective action taken is limited. This article provides some guidance on how to address this problem through communicating a clear action purpose, committing to specific actions and providing expert knowledge on how to achieve these actions. These principles need to be applied by senior management, the survey coordinator, and the topic specialist.

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