A GUIDE TO SUCCESSFUL EMPLOYEE SURVEY RESEARCH

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Employee Surveys: A Key Tool for Organizational Improvement

Employee surveys have evolved significantly over the past few years to become a critical component of effective HR management, regardless of what type of employee survey is used.

In the past, many organizations viewed employee surveys as simply a human-resource driven initiative that gave their employees the opportunity to "let off steam" but had little strategic value. As a result, the results were often not regarded highly enough outside of HR for any positive action to be taken. It's quite a different situation today, with employee surveys now being seen by many large and small organizations as a major business improvement tool.

These organizations understand that one of the main ways of gaining a major competitive edge is by increasing employees' capability and willingness to provide **world-class customer service**. But why is this the case?

These days, both consumers and business customers have a much greater range of choices than in the past and, due to the widespread use of online search and rating tools, they are becoming increasingly better informed and more discerning in their buying habits than ever before. Having access to many more sources of information than in the past translates into extremely high expectations for the products and services they use and, if they feel they are being "short changed" in any way, they'll easily take the initiative and switch their allegiance.

This reduction in consumer loyalty creates difficulties for organizations not only in retaining existing customers but also means that they must increase the time and effort spent on recruiting new customers and, not surprisingly, leads to a even greater importance on retaining both new and existing customers. Since customers and employees frequently interact with each other, this increased emphasis on customer retention also increases the need to fully understand how engaged employees are in their work and how enthusiastically they are going about their jobs. All in all, these recent market changes have boosted the need for effectively-designed employee surveys as primary tool for assessing employee attitudes and opinions.

While access to many more choices has brought greater competitiveness to the market, it has also become more difficult for organizations to differentiate themselves from their competition in terms of the range of products and services offered, the level of quality of those products and services and the prices that can be charged. As a result, the main differentiator for organizations is frequently the **quality of service** that the customer receives.

Think about the last time you went out to a nice restaurant for a special meal. Regardless of the quality of the food and the ambience of the restaurant, if the service was poor, you quickly forget how good the food was and will probably not visit that restaurant again. Following on this same principle, there is a significant amount of research demonstrating that **employees have the greatest single impact on quality of customer service provided**. In the eyes of **all customers**, the employees they deal with directly are "the face" of that organization and heavily influence how they feel about the organization.

It is essential for these interactions to be positive and mutually beneficial, not just for customers, but for employees as well. When customers are happy, they spend more money with those organizations and often become much more loyal and willing to recommend them to others. This increased spending and customer commitment naturally improves the organization's overall business performance. Likewise, as customer satisfaction and business performance increase, employee satisfaction can improve because of the additional pride and motivation that come from working for a successful organization.

Employee Engagement is Vital to Organizational Success

Both our own employee survey research and numerous external studies have shown that the most successful and valuable organizations have the highest proportions of engaged, satisfied, motivated, flexible, committed and well-trained employees. These employees truly believe that they can personally contribute to the success of the organization and are fully aligned with the organization's mission, strategy, products/services and corporate goals. These organizations achieve the most value from their employees because they consider them to be "their greatest asset" and are prepared to invest in them in the same way as they invest in technology, product/brand development and customer segmentation research.

A comprehensive examination of employee engagement conducted for the UK government was summarized in a report known formally as "Engaging for Success: Enhancing Performance Through Employee Engagement" and informally as "The MacLeod Report." This report concluded that it should be blindingly obvious - but is often overlooked - that how effectively employees perform determines to a large extent whether organizations succeed and that encouraging all employees to perform at their best should be at the heart of all business strategy. They also found, though, that commitment and action to maximize employee engagement is not nearly as high as they should be in the face of increased market competition. Their final conclusion is that the only effective approach for increasing employee engagement is through **deliberate and sustained culture change**.

Macleod Report on Employee Engagement

In essence, part of this culture change is to not only recognize the critical influence that employees have over the quality of customer service provided, but to also treat employees as a key stakeholder group that is just as important as customers, shareholders and other corporate "investments." This realization, in turn, leads to a critical need to fully understand the attitudes, feelings, thoughts and opinions of employees and to effectively manage the impact that any organizational change will have on them, since this is key to protecting the investment made in employees.

One approach protecting this critical investment is to proactively use **employee surveys** to understand what the key motivators and dis-satisfiers are for employees within an organization overall and among its major subgroups (such as divisions, business units or departments). An effectively-designed employee survey can help any organization - whether for profit or not-for-profit - learn what most excites their employees and what turns them off. Employee surveys can highlight where an organization performs well and where it falls short of employee expectations. Why is this information so important? Because of the direct impact that committed and loyal employees have on an organization's success, performance and profitability.

The Primary Benefits of Employee Surveys

A **systematic program of employee surveys** can give organizations a number of important benefits, including:

- Demonstrating to employees that you are taking a genuine interest in them, their views and ideas. This benefit assumes, though, the organization is committed to taking action on the results. In our experience, conducting an employee survey and "burying" the findings is actually worse than not surveying employees at all. If no action is taken, employees can become very cynical about the exercise and doubt whether senior management is truly sincere in their intentions.

- Identifying strengths and weaknesses in management performance and organizational policies, procedures and technology which will improve operational efficiency and reduce costs, as well as improving employee satisfaction. The anticipated outcomes from employee surveys should be clear improvement in many different aspects of organizational performance and not just be limited to HR alone.

- Improving employee retention, which will in turn reduce the costs of recruiting and retraining replacement staff and make your company a more attractive employment proposition,

- Improving the environment in which employees work, such as genuinely acknowledging their commitment to the organization, helping them achieve a better balance between their work and home lives or giving them a clear path to career advancement. These kinds of changes can provide important and real "paybacks" by reducing staff absenteeism and voluntary turnover.

- Determining key contributors and barriers to delivering excellent customer service and soliciting invaluable improvement ideas from employees who deal with customers on a daily basis. Many organizations fail to realize that their employees represent an invaluable - and inexpensive! - source of innovations that can be tapped by simply asking them how they would improve existing procedures.

- Assessing both the positive and negative repercussions that may arise from changes in current policies or programs so that they can be managed in a proactive rather than a reactive way. In some cases, employees may resist change - such as a recent reorganization - simply because it is a change but, in many cases, organizations are not as successful as describing the changes and explaining the reasons behind them as they may think they are.

- Helping HR Directors get key employee issues and concerns to the forefront of the organization's management agenda. Although HR typically leads the change process that results from an employee survey, senior leadership must be onboard and fully committed to these changes if they are to be successful.

Now that we've summarized a bit of the history of employee surveys and examined some of the major reasons for conducting an employee survey, let's now start putting some of these ideas into practice. In the next part of this Employee Survey Guide, we're review the importance of setting clear objectives and expectations from an employee survey program.

Establishing Meaningful Employee Survey Objectives

Before embarking on any employee survey program, it is vital to define a set of objectives for the research. Without these objectives and anticipated outcomes, the employee research program will lack focus and it might be difficult to generate enthusiasm for the employee survey among your key influencers and decision-makers.

We strongly believe that, in general, employee surveys need to be viewed as an **enterprise-wide initiative** that has implications for senior leaders, front-line managers and employees across the organization. To be successful, an employee survey should be directed by HR but HR should **not** be the only department involved in planning the project.

As a result, it's vital that the objectives established for an employee survey be business-related and reflect the organization as a whole, in addition to addressing human capital management issues. Taking this wider perspective means that the improvements resulting from the employee survey are more likely to translate into broader business goals, such as improving customer service and optimizing overall organizational performance.

Here are some of the objectives **defined by our clients** over the years:

- Provide assurance to CEO, Executive Directors and Board of Directors about the quality and consistency of people management, and the extent to which our core values are being applied and lived by.
- Measure the level of engagement and satisfaction of all employees.
- Determine employees' understanding of, and belief in, our organization's mission, vision and values and organizational objectives.
- Describe our organization's existing culture and how/where it may vary from our mission, vision, and values.
- Identify our areas of strengths and best practice, as well as potential risks and opportunities for improvement.
- Understand and rank the drivers of engagement, satisfaction and team effectiveness.
- Measure the success of current organizational policies and programs.
- Provide input to managers to help them execute their accountability for performance improvement.
- Determine the training and development/job enhancement/career advancement needs of our employees.
- Establish benchmarks to track progress in future.
- Understand variations between business units/departments/locations in order to build on internal "best practices" and address particular areas of weakness.

All of these objectives - and more! - can be achieved through a well-designed and well-executed employee survey. Next, let's take a look at our recommendation for how to establish realistic and meaningful objectives.

Effective Objective-Setting Questions

Research objectives are simply answers to some basic questions about the information you want to achieve. When thinking about collecting information from employees specifically, we suggest asking yourself each of the following questions:

- What information you are looking for or what problem you are trying to solve? In other words, what are you hoping to learn? Are there any other ways you might describe what you're trying to explore?
- Are all team members in agreement about what this research should explore and, if not, what are the differing perspectives?
- What have you/your team already done to explore these issues?
- What other initiatives/internal issues might affect this research? AND what other initiatives/internal issues might be affected by this research?
- What decisions will be impacted by the learning from this research? How might you act differently based on what you learn?
- Will all employees be affected by this research (which is usually the case for most employee engagement surveys) or will this research only apply to a certain sub-segment(s) of your workforce?
- How will you build awareness of the employee research program, results and improvements among employees?
- Once you have collected the results, will improvement action be required at different levels throughout the organization?
- How will front-line managers and employees be engaged in both the survey process and in action planning based on the findings?
- How will the progress of the action planning be reviewed, monitored and communicated over time?
- How would you define "success" within the context of this research?

Deciding on the Appropriate Research Methodology: Qualitative or Quantitative Research?

Defining objectives at the outset of the initiative also helps to determine the methodology for collecting this information. For any research exercise, there are two basic methodologies:

- **Qualitative research** is a more exploratory research technique that uses non-numeric data, such as open-ended interviews, focus groups and naturally occurring conversations, to identify and describe themes, patterns, norms, beliefs, decision processes and systems.

- **Quantitative research** uses structured data collection methods, such as closed-ended survey questions, measurements of frequency and intensity and counting events, to determine the demographic and psychographic distribution of opinions, beliefs and behaviors. This type of research can also be used to test hypotheses and to build predictive models.

Quantitative and qualitative research methodologies can both be highly effective in employee research. It is essential, though, to select the most appropriate methodology for the research objectives.

Qualitative Employee Research

Qualitative research is most appropriate when:

- The research objectives relate to relatively small groups of people rather than to the entire organization,
- You are looking to pursue a subject in more depth than is possible in an employee survey,
- You need the flexibility to move between subjects dependent on how participants respond,
- You are attempting to assess the range of feelings or attitudes about a certain subject,
- You are trying to understand the root causes of a feeling rather than just its symptoms,
- You are looking to identify the connections between issues, and/or
- You are researching particularly complex issues that would be difficult to quantify.

Face-to-face individual interviews and focus groups are the most common forms of qualitative techniques used in employee research. Qualitative research can both precede and follow quantitative employee research. For example, individual stakeholder interviews can be helpful when designing an employee survey, as a means of understanding the primary issues of concern within an organization. Qualitative research can also be used to pre-test a survey before administering to the larger population.

Alternatively, different types of qualitative research can be used **after** the survey data has been collected to better understand the meaning behind the quantitative results. For example, employee focus groups designed around specific topics can be helpful in turning survey findings into action.

Quantitative Employee Research

Quantitative employee survey research is most appropriate when:

- Large numbers of people need to be included in the research and, in many cases, this can refer to the entire workforce,
- There is a need to collect information on a large number of different subjects,
- It is important to have robust numerical data in order to confidently plan future action,
- You need to make measurable comparisons of survey findings between different groups,
- You want to be able to compare your organization's performance against other external organizations,
- You want to undertake some form of advanced statistical analysis on the results, such as regression or correlation analysis, and/or
- You need to link your survey findings with other research data (e.g., customer satisfaction data).

Comprehensive employee surveys are the most common form of quantitative employee research. These surveys go by all kinds of different names, including "employee opinion surveys," "employee satisfaction surveys," "employee climate surveys" and "employee engagement surveys." Although these different versions can vary quite a bit in terms of actual content, most are intended to meet the same overarching goal - to help an organization understand how well it is managing its people and what opportunities exist to improve working conditions so that, in turn, employees are encouraged and enthusiastic about doing their very best **every day**.

The Key Principles of Employee Surveys

Regardless of what your survey is called, it is useful to meet the following guidelines in order to ensure success:

- **Who should participate?** In our experience, it's best to invite **all employees** to participate, except perhaps the organization's newest employees or those with a less-direct working relationship with the organization.

- **What questions should you ask?** As you can imagine, there is a lot of variability in terms of survey length and content. These surveys generally measure thoughts, feelings and opinions about the work environment on a number of different dimensions, including attitudes toward the mission/vision/values, senior management, direct supervisors, corporate policies and even assessment of recent corporate decisions or changes.

- **Who should collect the data?** As a survey company, it should come as no surprise that we believe employee surveys - at least the data collection part - should be managed by an independent third party. We know that there are plenty of "free" or low cost survey tools available that you can use to collect employee data internally. However, **protecting employee anonymity** - both in reality and in the eyes of your employees - is absolutely essential if you want to achieve the highest possible participation and if you're determined to get **honest and reliable answers**. If you (i.e. Human Resources) are collecting the data yourself, especially if you're inviting people to participate via their corporate email addresses, how can you **guarantee** their anonymity? Also, many companies who manage their own data collection fail to recognize that there is a learning curve to writing and managing good surveys and **do not adequately account for the time** taken internally on the project when comparing against the cost of hiring an outside employee research company.

- **What should happen after the employee survey is completed?** In our experience, it is **extremely important** that any organization-wide employee feedback initiative be followed by action planning that addresses the top 3-4 opportunities for improvement. There is almost no value to an employee survey if the results aren't used to promote improvements within the organization - in fact, you're probably better off not doing a survey at all than to get your employees involved, have them take the time to share their opinions and then do nothing with the findings.

- **How often should you conduct an employee survey?** This is really a decision to be made by each organization individually. Many organizations conduct these studies on an annual basis, although some prefer to run them once every 18 months or every two years or so. Our advice is **not** to run a survey more often than you can effectively analyze and act on the findings. For example, if your survey suggests the need to overhaul your performance reviews, it would not make sense to launch another survey until all employees have had direct experience with the new review program.

Newer Types of Employee Survey Programs

Annual climate, engagement or employee satisfaction surveys are, by far, the most popular type of employee research project. However, the following types of research programs are also emerging:

- More frequent and shorter employee "pulse" surveys that can be used to "fill in the gaps" between the more comprehensive surveys,
- Conducting employee and customer satisfaction studies simultaneously with a goal of determining how closely the two are related,
- Evaluations of corporate procedures and/or policies, which can be used to both direct changes and to measure the impact of changes,
- Determining how strongly employees are aligned behind organizational rebranding, repositioning or new product development efforts,
- Understanding how well employees are managing through major organizational changes, such as mergers, acquisition/downsizing, etc..
- Internal inter-departmental customer service evaluations, which examine how well individual groups or departments are meeting the needs of the departments they work with most frequently,
- Internal communications evaluations, including helping to design corporate guidelines for effective communications, and
- Evaluation and employee input into design of different benefits schemes.

Now that we've discussed setting meaningful employee research objectives and reviewed the different types of methodologies available, it's time to delve deeper into the "best practices" for conducting employee surveys specifically.

Employee Survey Best Practices

Once you've completed your preliminary review and have decided that some form of employee survey is the way to go, let's take some time to review these surveys in more detail, especially since they are the most popular type of employee research undertaken in the U.S. Based on our own experience and having been exposed to the best and worst practices, we will guide you through the process and offer you some useful tips and advice in planning an employee survey.

The Employee Survey "Issues Discovery" Process

As a first step, we find it helpful for the primary stakeholders at an organization to conduct a straightforward "issues discovery" process as a way of clarifying the employee survey objectives, raising possible areas of exploration that might not otherwise be identified and reinforcing commitment from senior management.

As part of the process, we recommend getting answers to the following questions:

1. What are your organization's three biggest management challenges?
2. What are your organization's three biggest operational challenges?
3. From the employees' perspective, what are some of the positive aspects of working at this organization?
4. On the other hand, what might employees believe needs to be changed?
5. What would you say are the organization's primary leadership challenges? What about the challenges facing teams or departments?
6. How is change perceived within the organization?
7. Have there been any recent developments or policy changes at the organization that might be affecting employee morale?
8. Is there anything else your research company should know that would impact survey design or reporting?

These questions do not have to be answered exactly as shown and should be used more as thought- and conversation-starters. They can be tackled as a group or can be answered by each stakeholder individually. In total, the responses can help guide survey design and analysis by providing a more complete understanding of the organization's current situation.

Deciding on the Approach: Census or Sample?

Having defined your survey objectives, the next thing to consider is whether to include **all** employees in the survey - which would be a "census" - or just select a subset of employees - which would represent a "sample" approach. The evidence overwhelmingly suggests that a census survey is most appropriate for employee satisfaction or engagement surveys when the objective is to get feedback throughout the organization. This is particularly important if there is a need to drive through improvement action planning at local levels, since this means that frontline managers have to receive their own reports. By undertaking a sample survey, there may either be not enough responses to provide a report or the number of responses may represent too small a proportion of the whole employee population to be considered statistically robust.

Another advantage of a census approach is that it clearly demonstrates to all employees that the organization wants to hear from **everyone**. This reinforces the point that all opinions count and can prevent accusations that only "certain" employees were invited so that management would get the responses that paint them in the most positive light.

This is not to say that sample studies have no role in field of employee surveys but does emphasize the need for careful planning and communication to employees when a sample approach is used. Samples can be appropriate when conducting "pulse" or interim surveys or if there is need for feedback on a certain set of questions that don't require input from everyone.

Employee Survey Communication Best Practices

Employee buy-in is critical to the success of the survey. If they believe that improvements will result from the survey, they are more likely to participate and to become actively involved in the follow-up improvement action planning process. Communication is critical to getting this employee buy-in, particularly at the outset of the program and we recommend developing an **employee communications plan** that covers the following stages:

- Pre Survey
- During the Survey
- Post Survey
- Between Surveys

When developing this plan, you need to consider the different messages you want to give to your different audiences and the most appropriate communication channels for reaching those audiences. For example, it is important for frontline managers and immediate supervisors to act as positive role models for the survey so that when they interact with their staff and direct reports, they express active encouragement of the survey, a commitment to administer it properly and to act on the results. This is vital because employees are normally heavily influenced by their immediate supervisors or managers if they have any doubts about participating. If their manager/supervisor doesn't endorse survey, then neither will they.

Planning Guide for Employee Surveys

The following table outlines some of the key messages that should be communicated at each stage of the employee survey process:

Pre Survey	During the Survey	Post Survey	Between Surveys
Describe the objectives of the survey, the rationale for doing it now and how the results will be shared	Issue a reminder of the objectives and assurance that action will be taken	Thank employees for participating	Highlight and recognize successful examples of action planning
Stress that you are using an independent, third-party agency for data collection	Unequivocally promise that individual surveys cannot be reviewed or linked to names		
Inform employees when data collection will begin	Send regular reminders and state when data collection will end as part of the final reminder	Publish the final response rate	Recognize the contributions of teams and individuals to the action planning process
Stress that senior management is committed to taking action in response to the survey results	Reiterate both why and how the results will be acted upon	Offer detail on how employees should get involved in the action planning process	Demonstrate senior management's endorsement and support of the final action plan/survey outcomes
Emphasize the importance of a high response rate so that all employee opinions are heard	Provide updates on the current response rate	Share departmental results and encourage action planning at all levels	Give detailed plans for the next survey
Communicate the importance of participation	Reinforce the importance of participation	Provide top-level summary results	Identify any areas where action cannot be taken and the reasons for this
Inform employees of the methodology to be used for data collection(online vs. paper-based or some combination)	Let employees know how they can participate and what they should do if having problems accessing or completing the survey	Issue regular reminders of the action planning process and how it is progressing	Point to the impact of action planning on customer service and business performance
Assure all that the study will protect anonymity and preserve confidentiality	Reinforce the anonymity and confidentiality of the results		

Post Survey Action Planning Communications

It is the period right after completing an employee survey that is the most important for determining the appropriate action, letting employees know what action is being taken and then confirming what improvements have been made in direct response to their feedback. We strongly believe that **effective action planning** is the most important part of the survey process, especially since many employees believe that little or no improvements are generated from employee surveys (and this can often be based on real experience!)

However, the perception that little action has been taken often is not true. Lack of awareness of improvements among employees, or their inability to link the improvements back to the survey, lead them to believe that nothing positive is happening. Many organizations make little attempt to **link positive changes in policies and procedures** back to their original source - the employee survey findings. This is the stage that we call "closing the loop" by reminding your staff that the action being taken is because of the information they shared.

Branding the survey and subsequent action planning activity with a name and/or a logo is an excellent way of raising the profile of an employee survey program. In this way, employees can connect the results of improvement actions back to how they responded in the survey. A short-form name or acronym can help make your employee survey more memorable, especially if the name or acronym is used consistently throughout the survey process.

Choosing The Right Employee Survey For You

Now that we have reviewed the importance of establishing clear survey objectives, the most critical steps in the employee survey process and how best to communicate your survey plans to your employees, the next step is to start making some **practical** decisions about your survey. "Practical" in this case does not mean "unimportant." All of the decisions you make on the factors reviewed here will help determine how successful your employee survey will be.

Online vs. Paper-Based Employee Surveys

These days, online web-based surveys are the most frequent survey methodology and almost all survey programs include at least some electronic data collection. This type of survey offers many benefits over hardcopy surveys, including:

- Being cheaper and easier to administer than paper-based surveys,
- Offering the ability to monitor response rates in "real time,"
- Limiting each employee to one survey through the use of unique access codes,
- Allowing employees to be routed to certain questions (which is known as "skip logic programming") based on their demographics and/or their responses to certain questions without letting them know they are being routed or requiring them to pay attention to skip instructions,
- Ensuring that all participants answer every question they are asked.

However, before deciding that a web-based survey is the best option, it's vital to consider the following questions:

- Do all employees have, or have access to, a computer or tablet with has external Internet access?
- Are all of the employees sufficiently computer literate to complete a web-enabled survey?
- Do you have field-based employees and, if so, how would they complete a web-enabled survey?
- Can your IT Department provide the necessary assistance and support with the survey?
- Is the culture in place for it and would it adversely affect the response rate if the survey were web-enabled?

If some of these problems exist, then it may be more appropriate to initially administer a mostly paper-based survey with a small scale web-enabled pilot in the most appropriate parts of the organization. In future years, the web-enabled element can be increased until it completely replaces paper-based completion.

It may seem obvious that online will continue to dominate as the preferred methodology for data collection, but in some industries, such as manufacturing and hospitality, paper surveys continue to be the only realistic option for "non-wired" employees. In our opinion, the data collection method used for an employee survey should not, by definition, create a barrier to participation - if your employees are not "wired," then only offering an online survey is not the best way to go. Sometimes, the more traditional approaches - like paper surveys - are the best choice. For help in making this decision for your own organization, look to how you manage other types of employee activities, such as benefit enrollment.

Mobile surveys are also getting a lot of attention these days but they present some challenges for employee surveys. Most online surveys can be accessed by any mobile device with an internet connection. The problem comes, though, with trying to complete a survey on phones with very small screens (less than about 7 inches diagonal). This may be fine if the survey is extremely short and does not include any open-ended questions but it can be challenging for more detailed surveys. Over time, as phone screens get larger, this issue will become less of a problem and mobile surveys will become more common. As well, most people have little difficulty completing surveys using iPads or tablets because those screens are large enough to ensure a good survey-taking experience.

Employee Survey Questionnaire Design

The design of the employee survey questionnaire can have as much influence over the response rate as the method of completion. Employees can abandon surveys that they feel are biased or unfairly written. The elements of a good employee survey are as follows:

- Each question must directly relate to, and be measured against, the survey objectives,
- The survey must be easy to complete and not attempt to "trick" employees,
- It should take no longer than 20-30 minutes to complete,
- The survey should only contain questions that employees can reasonably answer,
- Similar questions/topics/themes should be grouped together, since this creates a more favorable survey "flow,"
- The employee survey should only include questions that will give relevant and actionable information to the organization,
- It must strike the right balance between addressing the needs of employees and the needs of the organization,
- At least some of the questions should allow comparison of results with other external organizations, and
- To emphasize the survey's role as a means of creating a better work environment, some of the questions should allow employees to provide improvement ideas and suggestions in the form of "verbatim" or "write-in" comments.

Following up on a suggestion we made earlier, as part of the questionnaire design process, it can be worthwhile to conduct qualitative focus groups and/or face-to-face interviews with employees and key survey stakeholders (i.e., senior leaders, board members or managers with a real interest in using the survey results) in order to solicit their feedback on the most valuable subjects and content to include in the employee survey.

There is both **an art and a science** to writing good questionnaires and this requires a solid understanding of research techniques and best practices. In addition to protecting employee anonymity, this is another reason why we strongly recommend against using a DIY approach with employee surveys. If the survey itself is poorly designed and badly written, with ambiguous, confusing or contradictory questions, then the survey results themselves may be useless for providing the correct direction in action planning. Additionally, DIY employee surveys come **without comparative benchmark data**. This lack of valid normative data makes it impossible to accurately determine which of your scores are low relative to similar organizations and, as result, this will leave you in the dark as to which issues you need to focus on first.

Employee Survey Validity and Reliability

The validity of your employee survey results is dependent on two key factors – the quality of the survey design and your success in getting the highest possible level of employee participation. A well-designed survey asks the right questions (what is known as "face validity" in the scientific literature), which ensures you are getting feedback that addresses real workplace issues and can serve as the foundation for effective action planning. When reviewing your survey content, look at each question carefully in the light of this need for face validity.

Your employee survey should also be constructed with an eye to minimizing sources of bias, providing statistically valid results and, most importantly, providing a full and complete picture of the state of employee engagement in your workplace. These elements include aspects of the survey design, survey administration and the analysis and reporting of the survey findings.

We strongly believe in taking a **comprehensive approach** to employee surveys, measuring employee experiences ("When was your last performance review?"), feelings ("How committed do you feel to this organization?"), observations (Agreement that "There is a good sense of morale among the people you work with"), priorities ("How important is it to you that policies are administered fairly?"), and judgments ("How much do you agree or disagree that this organization administers policies fairly?"). By asking questions that capture all these different aspects of the employee experience, we are able to avoid traditional sources of response bias.

Many HR professionals have concerns about employee surveys being too long because they do not want to overwhelm their employees. We feel that this concern is best addressed by achieving the **most effective balance between survey content and length**. This translates into a survey that is 15 to 20 minutes long. We believe this is a worthwhile investment of time by your employees, especially if your full study is conducted only once a year or every two years. Provided that your employees believe that senior management is serious about both asking for their opinions and taking action on the results, you should be able to achieve optimal participation with a survey of about this length.

We know that there is a trend these days in favor of very short employee surveys, although this seems to be driven solely by concerns about length and not about survey content.

Following the old adage that "you don't know what you don't know," you will **not** be able to identify systematic problems within your organization **if you do not ask about them.** Collecting results using a short survey that does not encompass the issues your employees are facing will do little or nothing to help you improve your work environment. This is not to say that "pulse" studies do not have a role to play in employee surveys - since there can be great value "checking in" with your employees between your full surveys - but content should not be sacrificed simply for the purpose of reducing survey length.

Finally, good data is nothing without statistically-appropriate analysis, thoughtful interpretation and actionable insights. We'll review our guidelines for meeting these goals later in this Guide.

Multiple Languages in Employee Surveys

Many organizations, especially those operating in multiple countries, need to decide whether to offer their employee survey in more than one language. Although this decision needs to be made internally, our advice is to avoid letting the language of the survey become a barrier to participation. Just as with your survey methodology, your guiding principle should to emulate the language policy followed for other similar employee communications, such as corporate news or benefit enrollment. Some multinational organizations have established English as their sole language of communication, which suggests that the employee survey should only be offered in English. Others, though, accommodate a wide range of languages across the globe and their employee survey should be provided in a similar number of languages.

Keep in mind that when you offer multiple languages, the verbatim or write-in comments by your employees will be captured in their original language. For data analysis purposes, online "machine" translation services can generally give you the "gist" of the comment. However, if you need a more accurate representation of their comments, thoughts and feelings, you'll need to use a translation service. Now that we've established the basics of selecting the most appropriate employee survey methodology and designing meaningful survey content, let's now turn our attention to getting the highest level of employee participation.

Maximizing Employee Participation

"Roger will be roaming the halls spreading the word about the employee survey"

We believe that achieving the highest possible level of employee survey participation requires a multi-faceted communications plan that is designed to generate interest and enthusiasm for the survey. Organizations should use all forms of internal communications available to make employees aware of the survey - it would be risky to rely on only one method alone.

The "ideal" communications plan should include some combination of advance notice of the survey initiative in multiple forums, encouragement from senior leaders as well as local management, email invitations and regular reminders for employees with email addresses, printed invitation letters and/or hardcopy surveys for those without emails and, where appropriate, print notices describing the survey on bulletin boards and in break rooms.

These different types of communication vehicles can include:

- Having senior management **announce the survey** in an all-hands meeting or a town hall gathering,

- Sending a voice mail or an email "blast" from the CEO directed to all employees **at least 2 weeks** before the survey launches,

- Featuring a **brief article** about the survey in the corporate newsletter and/or blog, which should not only include not only the timeline for data collection but also for sharing results and action planning outcomes, and

- Linking to a **description of the survey** on your corporate Intranet.

To assist with this communications process, it can also be useful to create customized tools to encourage participation – as examples, we developed a survey process "FAQ" for one of our clients whose workforce consists of in-home nursing staff and, for another client, their CEO recorded a welcome message highlighting the organization's commitment to carefully reviewing the findings and making changes based on employee feedback, as well as stressing the survey's role as an opportunity to let employees' voices be heard in a systematic way. This video message was shown throughout the organization, as well as appearing at the start of their online survey and the effective use of this message helped lead to a participation rate of close to 100% among manufacturing workforce of more than 1,500 employees.

It cannot be stressed enough how important it is for senior management to **genuinely express visible support** for the employee survey process and how valuable that generating **"buzz"** for the survey are as means of encouraging employee participation. Our specific recommendations for employee survey communications are as follows:

Communications to Employees

1. If you are using an external survey company, let your employees know the name of the company and a brief description of them - this helps to reassure them that survey invitation they receive is legitimate and should be acted on.
2. Stress that employees will be allowed to take the time necessary to complete the survey during their work day, while also informing them that they can complete the online survey on their own time if they wish. Employees must not be expected to complete the employee survey on their own time (unless they specifically want and choose to, of course) as this would undermine the value of the survey and suggests that senior management is not treating the process seriously.
3. Reiterate that senior management has endorsed the study and is committed to taking action on the results. Repeat this message more than once, both prior to launch and during the open survey period.
4. Make it very clear that all survey results will be kept completely anonymous and confidential - ideally, you should include a link to your confidentiality policy since some employees will want to know the specific details.
5. Let them know when they should expect the survey invitation. Based on our experience, Tuesday or Wednesday afternoons are the best time for launching employee surveys.
6. If you intend to release all or part of the results to employees - and we strongly believe that you should make this commitment - let your employees know this before the study starts. Employees are more likely to participate in the study if the results will be shared and they believe that positive action will occur as a result of their participation.
7. For any employees without email addresses or online access, it is especially important that frontline managers provide regular encouragement to these groups in order to maximize participation. (See Communication to Managers/ Supervisors below)

Communications to Managers/Supervisors

1. In addition to informing all employees of the study, it's worthwhile making a special effort to reach out to your organization's managers and supervisors to ensure that they are involved in the survey process.
2. Managers/supervisors need to encourage participation by all of their direct reports, including making whatever arrangements are necessary to let their employees give their undivided attention to the survey.
3. If your survey uses unique access codes to gain access, let your managers/supervisors know that they should not distribute their own code to their employees and to contact the survey company for re-sending lost codes or assigning extra codes as needed.

The Use of Incentives in Employee Surveys

The subject of offering incentives for employee survey completion is an interesting one. In our experience, there is little need to formally "incentivize" employee participation and we've not found that individual incentives, such as entry into a prize draw, do anything to boost response rates in a meaningful way. Your goal should be to get your employees interested and excited about participating because they anticipate that **positive changes will result** based on their attitudes, opinions and feedback instead of participating simply because they will receive some form of incentive in return.

This is not to say that, in some circumstances, incentives cannot be worthwhile. For example, organizing some form of team event - **such as a pizza party** - for each department that reaches a benchmark level of participation can create some extra enthusiasm and friendly rivalry. Making a donation to a company-sponsored charity, with the amount of the donation entirely dependent on the response rate (i.e. the greater the response rate, the greater the amount of the donation) can also be effective for some organizations.

In contrast to the weak influence of incentives, employees are more likely to participate in an employee survey if they believe that the results will make their work lives better. The golden rule of this type of research is that, if you do not intend to act on the results, then do not conduct the survey in the first place.

"Typical" Employee Survey Participation Rates

Employee survey participation rates usually depend on two key factors:

- To what degree employees **believe** that participation will lead to improvements in their work environment AND
- How **easy or difficult** it is for them to complete the survey.

In organizations with a high proportion of "wired" employees, it should be not be too difficult to reach participation levels of **70%-80%** as long as they believe their answers will translate into action. In manufacturing settings where survey data is being collected using either paper surveys or on-site computer terminals, a more structured approach - such as holding pre-scheduled proctored survey sessions - will result in much higher levels of participation than simply distributing the surveys and waiting for responses. For employee groups who are highly mobile, encourage the use of mobile devices (but keeping the restrictions we noted earlier in mind). If you have employees who prefer using their private email addresses rather than their corporate accounts, make sure you are using both addresses when sending their invitations and reminders.

Keep in mind that, for better or worse, employees can have very long memories. If you've run surveys in the past and not shared the results or conducted any action planning, they may actually "punish" you by not participating. You can only overcome this distrust and cynicism by doing your best to maximize participation but, even more importantly, being extremely vigilant about taking action and communicating that action to your employees.

Recommended Employee Survey Timelines

It should not be a surprise that, to some degree, the amount of time you set for survey participation will impact your participation rate. Online employee surveys can generally be completed in a 1-2 week timeframe, although participation should be monitored in real time so as to decide when to send reminders and thereby maximize employee participation.

If you are using any hardcopy surveys, then you need to carefully choose the most appropriate distribution method in order to maximum your response rate is achieved. As we noted above, "proctored" can lead to very high levels of participation while mailing hardcopy surveys to employees' homes is usually not very successful.

Regardless of how you distribute your paper surveys, you should leave a two to three week period for completion, with an additional week set aside (but not advertised internally) for the inevitable late returns. This will allow time for employees who are on holiday or away from the office for another reason to participate in the survey.

Consideration should also be given to whether employees on maternity leave, sick absence and contract/agency staff should be invited to participate in the survey. There is no right or wrong answer or blanket method that must be used and the most suitable method will depend on the organization, its structure and culture.

The following table summarizes the possible survey distribution methods and the potential pros and cons of each:

Method	Pros	Cons
Internal Mailing Directly to Office Address	• Stops managers from having the opportunity to unfairly try and influence or coerce their people • Discourages employees from responding in groups rather than giving their own individual feedback	• Poor internal systems can mean that the office addresses are not always correct, which can make it difficult to get surveys to employees and can lead to lots of additional surveys floating around the system • Harder to control and monitor survey distribution and completion • More labor intensive for HR • Prevents managers from being able to brief their employees, encourage their participation and answer questions they may have
Hand Distribution by Immediate Managers	• Easier to control and monitor distribution • Less labor intensive for HR • Ensures questionnaires actually get to people • Gives managers the opportunity to brief their people, encourage commitment to the survey and respond to questions	• Timing of survey needs to tie in with managers' schedules • Gives managers the opportunity to unfairly try to influence or coerce their direct reports • Permits employees to form groups to answer their survey together rather than on their own

Method	Pros	Cons
Organized Completion Sessions at Set Venues	• Easier to control and monitor survey distribution • Ensures questionnaires actually get to employees • Prevents managers from exercising unfair influence or coercion • Ensures all employees complete their surveys in the same environment	• Logistically both difficult and resource-intensive to organize • May make employees feel that their anonymity/confidentiality is being compromised (which can be addressed by using unmarked surveys and envelopes for submission) • Prevents managers from briefing their direct reports, calling for their help and answering their questions
External Mailing to Employee Home Addresses	• Ensures questionnaires actually get to people • Emphasizes the anonymity of the study • Prevents managers from having undue influence over the survey answers • Encourages employees to give their own individual feedback	• Can be seen as an intrusion into the home lives of employees • Might undermine the importance of the survey by suggesting it is not important enough to be distributed at the workplace • Makes it harder to control and monitor survey distribution and completion, especially if employees fail to open the envelope • More labor intensive for HR in terms of managing home addresses, etc. • More costly because of external postage, both outgoing and return • Discourages managers from briefing their employees, requesting their participation and addressing any concerns they may have

The focus on this section of our Guide has been on getting the largest proportion of employees to participate during the data collection stage. You will no doubt have noticed the number of times we have reiterated the need to take action as a prerequisite to participation. The next section will take a "deep dive" on the key principles for reporting, analyzing and action on employee survey findings.

Employee Survey Analysis, Reporting and Action Planning

A fundamental component of any successful employee survey program is the **action planning** that should take place after your data is collected. Before you can start planning, though, you need to get a good sense of what your results are telling you. Obviously, a good starting place is to review the reports produced by your employee survey company or, if you have used a DIY survey tool, make use of the reporting tools available to create an overall summary of your survey findings.

Interpreting Your Results

There are many different ways of analyzing, cutting and reporting employee survey results and each organization has to decide individually on the **best method for their needs.**

To help with making those decisions, here are some key factors to consider:

- Strike a balance between reviewing the "big picture" findings ("How are we doing overall?") and concentrating on the details ("What is happening in each potential action area?"). As a quick tip, take a quick look at **all your data** before you (over)react to any part of it.

- You will likely have a lot of numbers to look at, with each conveying specific types of information - this can include your overall survey findings, each individual group's survey findings, cross-group comparisons and both industry norms and U.S. norms. Remember that the key point of numbers and statistics is to make comparisons. Numbers and percentages let you see how you are doing in relation to your organization, your benchmark norms, your own goals and aspirations and where you were in the past.

- In addition to the numbers, you will also likely have another type of data in your survey results - your employees' write-in comments in response to specific questions and their suggestions for how to improve the organization. These written comments will give you context for the numerical results, help in understanding cause/effect relationships and emotional power. Use caution in both sharing and interpreting these comments. In particular, take a measured approach to strongly worded comments – don't overreact but, at the same time, don't ignore or dismiss them. Even if they seem unfair or hurtful, they still represent someone's point of view.

- As you review your employee survey data, make notes on your positive results, your negative results, unanswered questions and open issues and potential action areas.

- Deciding what to target for change means that you need to summarize your primary weaknesses and opportunities, understand the logic of change for each potential action area and determine where the points of leverage are for each area. Here are some guidelines for achieving each step:

    1. Listing weaknesses and opportunities is relatively easy – go through your data and list every item where the scores are lower than you'd like them to be and/or have lots of room for improvement and/or are critical to your operations, mission, role and/or are a priority for your organization overall. Don’t forget to also note key strengths, since these can be “wins” that you can and should share and celebrate (You weren’t going to just share what needs to be changed, were you?), potential starting points for improving weaknesses (Can you leverage your current strengths?) and possible sources of “internal best practices” that can be shared throughout the organization.

    2. Once you have your list of possible weaknesses and opportunities, think about how those things are related – to each other, to root causes and to possible actions you might take to improve. Are some of the items you identified related in terms of having the same cause? For example, a recent round of layoffs/downsizing could produce low scores in both how committed employees feel and whether they think their jobs are secure. Sometimes things on the list may be related to each other because one is a “cause” measure and one is an “effect” measure - as one example, a low score for overall satisfaction with communications is a potential effect of low satisfaction with communications to/from direct supervisors. Typically, in action planning, you should design interventions that will alter the specific “cause” measures, knowing that improvement in these leads to improvement in the broader “effect” measures. It would be impossible to simply mandate that employees should be more satisfied with their jobs without acting on the factors that are limiting their job satisfaction.

3. It can be useful to sort your list into two categories – “We can fix these” and “We need to live with it (at least for now). Using the “we can fix these” criteria, your list should now include only things that you can control/influence and you should also have a better understanding of the relevant cause/effect relationships for those action items.

4. So now it’s time to prioritize. Give high priority to potential changes that can have far-reaching effects (e.g., if there are big issues with immediate supervisors, improving the skills/behaviors of these employees may have broad positive effects on many of your survey measurements), areas that are critical to your organizational operations (e.g., if you are a manufacturing organization and you get a lousy score for “attention to safety,” that action item really needs to be on your "to-do" list) and low-hanging fruit. If you can see potential changes to improve a low survey score that are obvious, low-cost and/or low effort, there is really no excuse for not getting those done.

5. Now you should have a short list of priorities for action. For each of these, stop and think about what the change might look like. To get to the desired improvements, will there need to be changes in attitudes, beliefs, patterns of thought? Changes in practices, policies, processes? Changes in behavior, in how things get done and how people approach doing them? Differences in tools, equipment, physical surroundings, other resources? Differences in training, hiring? And so on.

6. Once you have visualized the changes, now identify the leverage points, meaning the actual initiatives you will carry out. Develop these using this simple definition – “Someone (a person or an organization) will do something to someone/something else (a person/group/organization or object) to achieve a clearly-defined goal.” Here is an example to get you started: “All supervisors will conduct individual discussions with each of their employees regarding the employee's career goals no less than once per quarter." It is essential that you create one or more of these “intervention sentences” for each of the action priorities you have identified. Once these are done, you'll be well on your way to creating an effective and meaningful Action Plan.

- As additional support to your analysis, consider using proven statistical techniques to identify the key drivers of employee satisfaction. Tools like correlation analysis and factor or regression analysis will highlight the most important areas to focus on from your survey results because these areas will bring the greatest overall benefits in improvement action planning.

- And lastly, avoid the temptation to spend lots of time overanalyzing the employee survey results and re-cutting the data in lots of different ways. We call this "Analysis Paralysis" because it gets in the way of focusing attention on taking improvement action. While the data from the employee survey will not provide you with all of the answers you need, neither will "slicing and dicing" it numerous additional ways. Your employee survey results are intended to provide a catalyst for real action and, to put it bluntly, constant analysis will never lead to organizational change.

“Let’s identify our weaknesses ... and don’t look at me when you list them.”

Communicating Your Results

In conjunction with interpreting and analyzing your employee survey results, you also need to have a plan for communicating the results to your employees. Sharing survey data – along with sharing action plans and progress – is a critical element in making positive workplace changes. Almost by definition, you want the results of an employee survey to lead people to change either themselves and/or aspects of their workplace. To do so, you need your employees' input, cooperation, effort, buy-in and support – and you can't get these things if they don't know (and to some degree, agree with) what's going on. On the other hand, though, we find that employees usually care much more about the action that will come as a result of the survey than they do about the survey findings themselves. When you think about sharing your employee survey results, you need to consider several issues:

- Your audience or, more likely, your various audiences (such as senior leadership, the board, middle management, frontline supervisors, individual task forces responsible for action planning and employees as a whole). Consider some of the differences you might face in sharing results, action plans and progress with these various audiences.

- What you want each audience to know, feel or do as a result of having the information shared with them. Do you want them to learn facts, such as numbers, opinions and trends, that they didn't know before? Do you want to change how they feel? Are you looking for them to feel proud, concerned, inspired, etc. Do you want them to actually **do** something? Make decisions, take action, participate in making changes, alter policies/processes/their own behavior? Or do you want all three of these to occur?

- The content, form and format of what you will are presenting to each audience. Are you sharing information, analysis/interpretation, opinions, plans, progress reports? Are you providing each of your audiences with **all** of the information or a **synthesis** of it? What mix of formats will you be using – words, pictures, charts or some other format? And how will you share this information? Will it be in in writing, via meetings or a combination of both?

- The frequency and timing for this data sharing. Think about how often each audience needs to be kept in the loop? Is it at designated regular intervals? Whenever there's "news"? Or when a specific phase of the process or action item is complete?

We find that the most effective communications plan includes several stages, which should start shortly after you first receive your results. Later stages, though, will be dependent on having completed your analysis so you should view interpretation and communication as being "interlinked" rather than sequential. Here are some guidelines on the various stages for sharing your employee survey results with your organization:

- Provide a **"topline" summary** of the key findings to share with employees as quickly as possible after your survey has closed. This will ensure that the momentum and interest that has already been generated will be maintained. This summary, which can be in the form of a short memo, email blast or newsletter article, should thank employees for participating in the survey, announce the overall level of participation (especially if it is high) and briefly identify the leading organizational strengths and primary opportunities for improvement. It is also extremely important to lay out a timeline for action planning so that employees will know when they will hear about the specific plans and start to see improvements being implemented.

- For your more formal reporting, adopt a **phased roll-out** of survey results, starting with a high-level overview followed by more detail at the business unit or departmental level. This approach helps all stakeholders easily absorb the results and not become overwhelmed by them. Although department leaders and frontline managers are usually most interested in the results for their own teams, stress the need for them to review their findings in the context of the results for the organization as a whole.

- **Face-to-face feedback** of results to employees is the preferred communication method and, although this may not be logistically possible within extremely large organizations, it is essential for the feedback of local team results. Proving summaries of the employee survey data in person gives employees a chance to ask questions, lets them suggest the root causes behind the results and reinforces their integral role within the process as a whole.

- **Do not dress bad news up as good news** and likewise **do not hide bad results**. Honesty is critical if you want to involve employees in improvement action planning since they will quickly suspect or identify anything that is being hidden. At the same time, it is equally important to highlight and celebrate **positive results** and recognize what organizational factors are driving them. No employee survey presentation should focus on "doom and gloom" entirely.

- Add **interpretation** to the results so that your various audiences can put the findings into a realistic context. We find that, used judiciously, the open-ended comments can really help to highlight findings by showing how they are expressed in an employee's own words.

- Before distributing your sub-group or departmental reports, ensure that managers are familiar with **what report they will get** and **what they need to do with that report**. The test of whether this has been successful is whether managers are able to interpret and identify the key strengths and weaknesses for their team within an hour of receiving their report.

Keep in mind that there are lots of different media available for sharing this type of information:

- Emails, blogs, Intranet articles and memos are great for thanking employees for joining in the survey process, sharing your initial results and introducing or updating action planning and task force activities to the whole group.

- Survey feedback sessions are really appropriate for presenting a summary or highlights of the larger results in a large group setting with some opportunity for Q & A – it is also helpful to include either some direction on action planning or the actual initiatives to be implemented. In our experience, simply sharing the survey findings without addressing the action to be taken may be frustrating and unfulfilling for your employees.

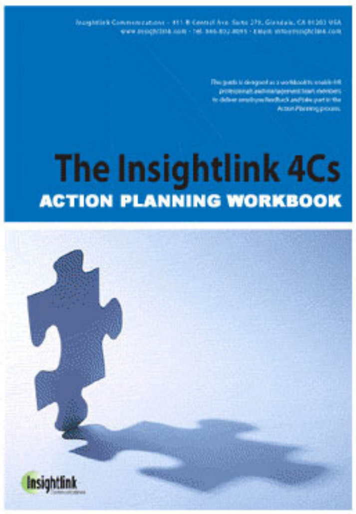
- Focus groups, which are small sessions consisting of 8-10 employees, can help in getting additional employee input on particular aspects of the survey findings or for generating possible solutions to more challenging issues (such as "What would a genuine program of reward and recognition actually look like at this organization?")

- Multi-disciplinary task forces can be created to work on specific action items, so they would need to get the full detail on the findings relating to that issue rather than needing to review **all** of your findings.

One final tip that will help ensure you "get the word out" in an effective and efficient manner is that it’s much better to communicate too early/too often than too late/too little!

Employee Survey Action Planning

As noted earlier, the guiding principle of employee research is that, **if you are not prepared to act on the survey results, then do not conduct the employee survey in the first place.** You have spent time and effort getting employees enthusiastic about giving their feedback and they now have high expectations that there will be improvement activity that will impact their working lives directly.



Although moving from survey results to action is the most important part of the process, it's also the activity that many organizations fail to successfully achieve. One of the main reasons for this failure is the lack of a clear and coherent process for action planning throughout the organization.

The ideal situation is that each organizational "leader" (ranging all the way from senior management down to the localized frontline manager/ supervisor) who receives an employee survey report should work **directly** with their team to identify and prioritize the three to four areas that most require improvement and then develop and implement an improvement action plan that is regularly reviewed and updated.

In this section, we reviewed the key principles and offered some useful guidelines for employee survey analysis, reporting and follow-up survey planning. In our last section, we'll share our experience and tips for getting the most value from action planning specifically.

Action Planning Best Practices

Successful action planning in response to employee survey findings requires a thoughtful, structured and well-documented approach to ensure not only that formal plans are created but they are put into place and lead to the type of workplace improvements intended. This type of planning must start at the top of the organization, where the priorities for the organization are identified, communicated and acted upon at the senior management level. If those in charge are not held accountable for taking action in response to employee feedback, how can any other member of the workforce be responsible instead?

After starting at the top, the responsibility for action planning can then flow down to divisional, departmental and unit levels of the organization, with local teams given the information and support they need to identify and tackle the factors that they have direct control over while escalating everything else back upward to senior management.

Before proceeding with action planning, it is vital to ensure that:

- All of those responsible for creating plans - whether in teams or on task forces - have had time to see and digest the results and to ask questions and get clarification when necessary,

- The results have been discussed fully by each planning team or task force, with their priorities identified together with the most likely root causes,

- Those priorities have been classified, even if somewhat "loosely" at first, into short-term "quick wins," medium-term factors and longer-term issues, so their respective timelines are clearly recognized,
- There is clarity about what is being tackled at the higher levels and among other teams or task forces to avoid any duplication of effort among the more tactical teams, and
- All members of each planning team or task force understand their mandate and responsibilities, are committed to moving forward and know that they will be held accountable for the outcomes of their planning efforts.

For planning purposes, the best approach is to limit each wave of action planning to 3 or 4 top priorities, since it's better to focus on a smaller number of issues and handle them well than to tackle a wide range of problems and handle them poorly. Further actions should not be pursued until at least one of the existing priorities has been fully completed. This is not to say, though, that different teams/task forces can't manage different priorities.

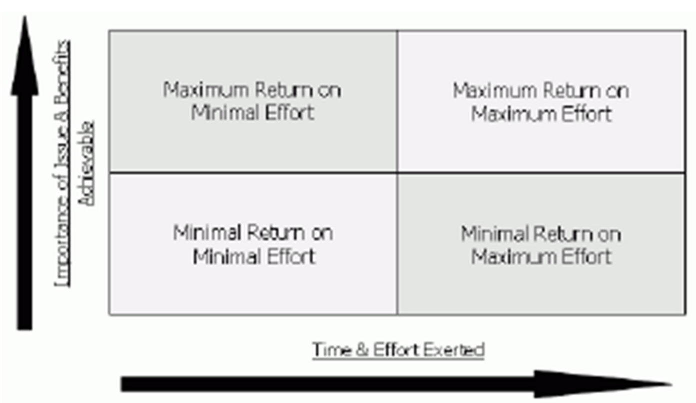
The topics to be addressed need to be compatible with the decision-making authority of each respective planning team. For example, only senior management can effect change relating to the mission, vision or values of the organization, implement strategies to revise or renew the "culture" of the organization, establish or update organization-wide policies/procedures and manage issues relating to compensation.

More tactical cross-functional teams, on the other hand, can easily handle such topics as setting guidelines for improving day-to-day communications, reviewing and updating job descriptions, identifying training and cross-training opportunities, planning team-building activities and finding ways for the organization to be more responsive to employee ideas and suggestions.

Prioritizing Improvement Actions

Prioritization of improvement actions based on your employee survey is another vital component of effective action planning. Some organizations struggle with making improvements because they try to tackle far too many initiatives at once and start spreading the valuable resources they have too thinly over too many actions.

There is a simple model that can be used to prioritize opportunities for improvement:



Improvement actions could be plotted on this quadrant map plot and, ideally, you should start with the issues and actions that are important to address but are the least resource intensive (i.e. those in the top left hand quadrant). An example of this type of action could be improving communication by reviewing and changing the structure and content of monthly team meetings. These types of actions should be combined with some of the "**Quick Win**" actions. These would fall under the "**Minimal Returns on Minimal Effort**" category.

The four key questions to answer when trying to set your priorities are:

1. How important is this issue to your employees?
2. Is it something you have direct control over?
3. Are the benefits of improving the situation worth the effort?
4. Will achievement in this lead to a marked improvement in business performance and/or customer satisfaction?

This model that can be used in conjunction with the action planning process by simply reviewing proposed actions against each of the above questions. The fourth question, relating to customer satisfaction and business performance, is especially important because it correlates exactly with what your employee survey effort should achieve. In other words, using this goal as a key determinant of action reinforces the commercial and business imperatives of your employee survey.

Formalizing the Employee Survey Action Plan

Once you have identified the key improvement areas and then prioritized each of them, the next step is to decide how to deliver on each of them. To achieve this goal, it is vitally important that your Action Plan be fully documented and summarized so that all stakeholders are aware of the content and timeframe of the plan. The formal and documented plan can then be used to review progress as actions are undertaken. In other words, you should look on employee survey action planning as a "circular" process of setting targets, reviewing each target in terms of both time and progress and making adjustments and refinements as needed until an action item has been fully implemented.

The specific components of the plan should be as follows:

Area for improvement: What is the problem? What impact is it having on employees and customers? What is causing this problem?

What Needs to Happen: Specify the specific improvement action that is required to address the problem.

How It Will Happen: Specify the process and activities required as part of the improvement action.

Timelines: Set a target date for completing this element of the plan. Ensure that target delivery date are realistic and achievable - but not overly generous - recognize that it may be stretched if circumstances prevent it being met. Each action planning goal may have a different timeline in terms of how quickly progress may be visible or the goal is fully accomplished. Choose a timeline that allows the action planning teams to see if the changes are “on course,” enables them to report and celebrate progress (even if they have a long way left to go) and does not over-tax the team’s ability to collect and utilize data (or even the tolerance of those providing the data).

Action Owner: In our experience, although action planning works well with a team approach, it is just as important for each action items to have a designated "owner." These "owners" do not have to be solely accountable for the delivery of the action, but they are responsible for ensuring that fulfilment of the action item actually happens. Ownership for actions should be spread around the team or task force so that no one person is overburdened.

Resources: Specify and determine what individual resources are required for each action item such as personnel, money, materials or support from other parts of the organization. Ensure that those resources are made available as needed.

Improvement Targets: Another action planning imperative is to set realistic improvement targets to assess whether the improvement actions are having the desired effect. Your employee survey can be used as one source for this evaluation by establishing targets for improvement on specific questions in your next survey. Also, keep in mind that survey data is not likely to be your only data source for target setting, so look to using other organizational data metrics, such as employee turnover rates and customer satisfaction data. Different goals may require the input of different groups of employees or even others outside the organization, including customers/clients and vendors.

Method of Measurement: Setting targets for improvement will have little impact if they are not documented. Create a detailed list that clearly lays out the current measure, the minimum anticipated improvement and the data sources for this measure.

Progress Review Dates: Creating a timeline for each action step also means that you need to monitor when these actions are actually occurring. Specify all of the dates when at least some part of the action plan will be reviewed to see which action items are "on track" and which have not met their targets. The frequency of this type of review is largely determined by the target dates specified for improvements, although we recommend that they take place at least quarterly (maybe as part of a regular team or task force meeting). These progress reviews are intended to be a learning experience rather than a forum for repeating mistakes. In this context, "progress" means recording whether some action has been taken or if the item has not been started at all. Similarly, in addition to sharing and celebrating successes, it's vital to review the parts of the plan that are not working and determine what needs to be changed. The final portion of each progress review should be used to re-confirm targets and timelines and check that all members of the team are happy with the progress that is being made.

Making Plan Adjustments: Regular review of your action plan is critical because it helps to maintain the momentum that has been created, lets the planning team track their achievements and opens an opportunity to identify any barriers to implementing the plan. If any actions have not progressed as intended or as fast as they should, take the time to understand the reason for this. Rather than unnecessarily attributing blame to individuals, identify the corrective action required to bring things back on track. If an improvement action is not producing the desired results and an alternative action route cannot be identified, sometimes it's best move on and tackle something else after documenting the reasons for doing so. If some actions are experiencing delays, adjust the timeline but be careful not to extend key priorities out beyond a reasonable timeframe. If many action items appear to be "in limbo," you're at risk of derailing the entire action planning process, in which case the planning team should diagnose and fix the barriers that are preventing progress.

Completing Action Items: Once an action item has been fulfilled, it's safe to mark this action as complete. Note that success on this item, though, won't be known until you've assessed its impact (which is the final step). Once an improvement action has been completed, the planning team or task force may be given the opportunity to choose a new action area to focus on.

Measuring Impact: The final step in the plan is to measure each action item's success against the improvement targets set earlier in the process. It's really important to define the impact and difference that the improvement action has made to employees, customers and the business overall, since this is really the only way to see if positive change is occurring at your organization. If an action item falls short of its targets, don't get discouraged but, rather, look for insight as to why - such as setting targets that are too ambitious or looking for improvement too early - so that you can build this learning into future action planning.

Communicating Outcomes and Achievements

As changes begin to be implemented, don't keep your employees in the dark and expect that they will automatically be receptive to all changes and will attribute them to the employee survey findings. As action plans are rolled out and changes are introduced, your employees need to know:

1. Exactly what they are being asked to do, or do differently,
2. The rationale for the changes,
3. (If appropriate) what new policies, procedures, equipment they are being asked to follow, understand or use,
4. What training or resources will be provided to help them make the change,
5. What sort of timeline is expected for each change, and
6. How the effectiveness of each change will be measured.

For any type of organizational change, but especially for big/long term initiatives, reviewing progress on action planning should never be limited to the planning teams or task forces alone. Since you want employees to both **recognize** and **be open** to the changes being made, share the planning outcomes along the way to help keep the changes on course, enthusiasm high, and key audiences informed. It's equally important to celebrate all achievements - successful change that leads to a happier workplace is a cause for celebration of the achievement and recognition of those who made it happen!

Summing Up

Our objective in preparing this Guide to Successful Employee Survey Research is to give HR professionals a thorough introduction to employee surveys, including examining the main reasons for conducting these surveys, the primary considerations for choosing what type of survey to run, how to tell employees about the survey in order to maximize employee participation and then what steps to take once you have your survey findings.

Throughout the Guide, we've shared our own experiences conducting employee surveys for more than 10 years and for more than 200 different organizations. This background has shaped the way we approach employee surveys, including the 4Cs (Commitment, Culture, Communications, Compensation) model around which most of our surveyed are designed and which we use as the basis for collecting rigorous normative data in the U.S. and Canada every year.

Our many clients - large and small, domestic and international and from almost every industry - have also given us insight into a number of issues specific to particular employee-employer relationships and situations. While these cases are too numerous and varied to include in this Guide, we here at Insightlink always stand ready to discuss your unique information needs and to bring our experience to bear on meeting your information objectives. Whether you need an “all hands” survey of employee satisfaction and engagement, a “pulse” survey about a narrow, time-bound topic or an online system to administer onboarding surveys or exit interviews, we are always happy to speak to you and to help you find the **right tools** to get you the **right information** to make the **right decisions**.

If you are interested in learning more about our services, please don't hesitate to call us at 866-802-8095 ext. 705 or email us at info@insightlink.com. We'll be glad to discuss your specific survey needs and design a project to meet those needs.