Insights for Executives

After the Dust Settles -- Reigniting the Passion to Excel!
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Quick Read:

Getting positioned to take advantage of a recovery is always difficult: you need to make changes in systems and processes but budgets are tight, staffing lean, and incremental funding unavailable. It makes sense to use the resources at hand and one of the most underutilized resources in companies today is the employee attitude survey process.   Most companies fail to gain much real benefit from all the money spent on the survey process because they don't exploit the information collected to engage employees in implementing real change. *It is not the quality of the survey that makes the difference; it's the quality and authenticity of the dialogue with the people who took the survey.*

Through a **Survey Discovery Process**, all levels of a function or department can be involved in an orderly progression from discussion to synthesis and negotiation, culminating in concrete individual and team commitments for action. The use of group rather than individual inputs forces discussion that leads to a synthesis of individual views into a group product understood and owned by everyone.   Negotiating mutually agreeable solutions produces practical, doable solutions to complex issues and dramatically boosts accountability for action. When employees and managers are willing move into action with courage, honest self-reflection, a willingness to think about old things in new ways, and persistent hard work at all levels, we absolutely guarantee results.

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As the global economy is beginning to show faint signs of life, many organizations are beginning to focus on the future. The dilemma in the early stages of an economic recovery is always the same: tremendous opportunities await those who are first to adapt but the resources to make significant changes in products and processes are in short supply.

A cost-effective solution is to extract maximum value from the tools at hand and maximum benefit from the intelligence, insight, and experience of your employees. One money pit for many companies is the annual or biannual employee attitude survey process. Lots of numbers, lots of PowerPoint slides, lots of pages on the intranet, lots of meetings, and lots of angst for managers expected to "do something" but precious little in the way of bottom line results. Invariably the survey process goes awry, not because of flaws in the survey methodology, but because the company fails to use the information as a catalyst for change.   That's a real waste because clients deploying our Survey Discovery Process have used just about any old survey to focus employees'

attention on creating tangible, innovative, game-changing improvements throughout the business, especially at this stage of an economic cycle.

What Could Possibly Go Wrong?

1. **Fixing the Wrong Problem**. Most surveys are structured around categories such as reward and recognition; training and development; supervisory practices and so on. If a specific category has received low scores, the natural tendency is to focus on making improvements in that category. What KLC Associates has discovered is that sometimes none of the items in the survey capture employees' core issues, so they express their dissatisfaction as best they can through the questions that are available to them.

Every organization has its own subterranean lava pool of root causes. The items are like fissures along which lava can reach the surface. Closing a fissure will not drain the lava pool underneath. Management teams often work very hard to implement solutions only to be frustrated when employees fail to appreciate their efforts or even see them as relevant to the survey results. It's very hard to get those managers very enthused when the next survey rolls around.

2. We Know What They Meant. Because surveys are blunt instruments they provide very little granularity around what people were feeling when they filled it out. A well crafted survey will tell you what employees were thinking, but not why they were thinking it. Management teams will often sit together to interpret and understand the data, relying on what comes to mind for them. One real world example: a particularly low scoring survey question was "How satisfied are you with reward and recognition." The management team concluded, "Well, this has to do with the fact that we can't give people promotions or merit raises because of the economy and we can't do anything about that." When we explored the issue with employees we found that employees wanted their managers to do the simple things: greet them in the morning, thank them for efforts that went beyond the call of duty, and value their skills.

In their May newsletter, McKinsey reports that respondents to a McKinsey survey think that three noncash motivators -- praise from immediate managers, attention from leaders, and a chance to direct projects -- are at least as effective as the three most highly rated monetary ones. These nonfinancial incentives make employees feel that their companies value them, want to foster their professional development, and take their well-being seriously.

3. Here's My Chance! All executives and managers have pet issues, and it does happen occasionally that someone will use the results of a survey to justify a pet project. In a discovery workshop I conducted with a vertical slice of managers and salaried employees of a particular function the consensus was that the key issues were: lack of control over their work, too much micromanagement, and repetitive non-value-added meetings. However, the executive insisted that having poor facilities (i.e., wonky chairs or desks) and poor training were the root causes – despite the fact that participants said explicitly that they could live with wonky chairs and no training if their key issues were addressed. (We later heard that the following year survey scores plummeted for this executive.)

4. Let's Do This Efficiently. When executives do decide they really want to hear more "from the source," they often – with the best of intentions – attempt to get the feedback in

the most efficient way possible. A popular strategy is to hold a Town Hall meeting and give everyone a feedback questionnaire to fill out individually. Even if many employees take a brave pill and give honest answers, there is no mechanism to synthesize views and identify the vital few core issues.

And even when open-ended questions are used, the wording of the questionnaire will tend to channel employee thinking and responses in particular directions. And once again, management is left in the position of interpreting what employees meant without the benefit of any interactive dialogue with them.

When employees are forced to answer as individuals, they often feel vulnerable: "they will identify me through my handwriting"; "what if no one else says this is an issue"; etc. Moreover, the artificiality of Town Hall meetings sends a message that management would like the issues to go away. The net effect is that most employees will provide feedback they believe management wants to hear, or they will identify issues, such as compensation, they know are beyond the control of, and probably shared by, their direct management. The end result is inauthentic feedback that will not lead to needed change.

5. We Think, We Don't Feel. Many surveys are couched in terms of how employees feel about particular aspects of their company. In very rational/technical organizations, employees and managers alike tend to be uncomfortable dealing with emotional factors. Hence, one reason very sincere management responses to survey outcomes in such organizations are frequently ineffective is that emotional issues are redefined in quantifiable, rational/technical terms. In one situation, it became clear that there was a trust issue between an executive and her direct reports. The direct reports expressed the feeling that their manager did not trust them, and failed to share sensitive information with them. This issue was redefined as the need to create a master control sheet showing which managers should receive which specific reports and data by which date -- with a column for checks to acknowledge the reports had been duly received.

6. We're Busy with Real Business. A survey process is in place but senior management is not really prepared to do the work necessary to follow through on survey results and create meaningful change. Perhaps the C-levels believe that giving employees the opportunity to express their views through a survey is enough to "engage" them. Perhaps they want only certain things to change and hope a survey will channel employees' energy in a particular direction. The inevitable result is a confusing set of mixed signals to their management team, whose plate may be full already. There will always be some managers who will embrace the opportunity, but the majority may hesitate to charge ahead. Without clear guidance or resources many may doubt their ability to actually fix the things that frustrate them and their employees. Best case, nothing much will happen.

How to Dramatically Boost Survey Scores and Reignite Commitment.

If an organization is not willing to empower managers to **listen, explore, understand and take action**, then they should not conduct an employee attitude survey. Period. Best case, the survey process will simply be a waste of money; worst case the survey will exacerbate whatever problems already exist and further weaken employee commitment.

Exploring and understanding the news (both good and bad). It is vital that executives and managers understand what people were actually thinking and feeling when they responded to the survey questions, rather than rely on their own assumptions and interpretations. We've found that the most efficient way to achieve this understanding is through our **Survey Discovery Process**. This entails convening everyone in a department or function to engage in finding the true meaning of the survey outcomes. Planning and conducting a successful Discovery Session requires an environment in which people feel that it is safe to be completely honest and open. Hence we strongly recommend the use of a trusted, high integrity, neutral insider or an outside consultant with a thorough understanding of group level dynamics. It is definitely not advisable for the executive herself, or an HR business partner, to attempt to conduct the session, since either may be perceived to have a preferred outcome or a personal or professional agenda in mind.

We begin by dividing Discovery Session participants into subgroups, usually grouping people of the same organizational level or function together in order to identify any sharp differences in perceptions and experiences across these groups. All participants are provided with a package containing the survey questions and the results for the unit or division conducting the Survey Discovery Process. No interpretation or analysis of the results is provided. Instead, each sub-group is asked to consider four basic questions:

o   What, if anything, in the results surprised you?
o   What, if anything, are you proud of and want to keep or strengthen?
o   Looking at the areas with the lowest scores, and thinking back to what *you* were thinking and feeling when you filled out the survey, what are the core issues that contributed to these scores?
o   Looking at the areas with the lowest scores, and thinking back to what *you* were thinking and feeling when you filled out the survey what ideas/solutions would you recommend to address them?

Following reports from the subgroups the large group identifies the common issues and proposed solutions across subgroups, as well as noting any major differences in perceptions or experiences among the groups. We lead the Discovery Session through an exploration of what contributed to any differences in perceptions or experience and what can be learned from them. The final step in the discovery Session is for each participant to vote for the ideas or solutions that, if implemented, would most enhance their performance, motivation, commitment and job satisfaction.

Moving Into action. During the Discovery Session, we engage the most senior executive in negotiating actions and next steps with the large the group:

o   Things he or she can and will do.
o   Things employees in the large group will take accountability for but need approval or support.
o   Things he or she can **not** do with the reasons that make it impossible. This is opened to the large group for a discussion of how the obstacles might be removed, or under what conditions, if any, action might become possible.
o   Things he or she may be willing to do in conjunction with enabling actions from the members of the large group, often with a time frame for experimentation with different behaviors.

A real world example: A product development team asked for fewer status review meetings. The executive's concern was that deadlines would be missed or people would fail to deliver assignments. The group committed to taking individual and collective accountability to ensure work was delivered on time and deadlines met. The executive asked for a further guaranty that if individuals or the team began having problems they couldn't solve they would bring this immediately to the executive and request help rather than trying to hide them. The group agreed. Timing for a trial period was established, the frequency of status review meetings was reduced and performance to schedule improved.

Using the Discovery Process to identify the underlying causes and negotiate mutually agreeable solutions offers the following significant benefits over traditional hierarchical approaches:

o   The many things that are going well and being done right are identified and affirmed.
o   A comprehensive and shared understanding of the real core issues adversely affecting employee performance and satisfaction is established.
o   Agreement on action plans (responsibilities, timing, deliverables, etc.) take place publicly – all commitments are known to all, meaning that every employee is personally accountable to every other employee.
o   All employees are involved in defining the underlying causes of problems, seeking solutions, and personally committing to specific individual actions – all of which stimulate interest, motivation, commitment, and a feeling of being listened to and valued.

Build momentum with action, not trinkets. Ok, this is the tough part. Often, executives and managers secretly hope that despite whatever emerged from the Discovery Session, some relatively superficial actions are going turn around survey scores. Examples we have observed include: employee of the month awards; baseball hats, motivational posters on the wall; employee suggestion boxes, indoor and outdoor games, gym facilities, chats with the CEO online; repainting and installing new carpet; fixing holes in the roof; removing the top half of cubicles to enhance work group communication; open door policies; turning off the lights and heat at 7.00 pm to discourage excessive work hours; and, my favorite, stress reduction training programs.

Responding in meaningful ways to Discovery outcomes will require things as seemingly trivial as saying good morning to your employees and thanking them for exceptional efforts or a job well done, to major changes in management assumptions and styles and the way work is carried out. As an example, one of our functional clients instituted the following:

o   Changed management style – elimination or reduction of micromanagement, and delegation of technical decisions to subject matter experts.
o   Put lower level subject matter experts in charge of technical project and cost reduction teams.
o   Allowed subject matter experts who did the work to make the presentations to senior management.
o   Used a new model for teams in which all members were aligned behind and committed to a common mission and collaboratively developed a work plan and agreed roles and operating processes.
o   Changed supervisory roles to provide more coaching instead of direction.

o   Implemented flexible working hours and telecommuting where appropriate.
o   Established technical 'teaching forums' prepared and led by subject matter experts to disseminate knowledge and learning.
o   Used employee teams for problem-solving, improving processes and innovation.

This function's employee satisfaction survey scores rose to and remained in the top 80% --90% percentile compared to the company average of mid-thirties (and which we believe may have dropped further).

If you look through the list, you will see there was very little in the way of money involved. Instead, these initiatives required: the ability to listen; honest self-reflection; caring about employees; the ability to stand with courage; a willingness to try scary experiments; a willingness to think about old things in new ways; and persistent hard work at all levels. In our own experience in conducting Discovery Sessions and on-going work with clients, we have found that if managers and employees bring these traits to bear, we can guarantee results.

How do I know it's working? This is the question we are asked most frequently, particularly by technical, metrics-driven organizations. In our experience there are 'informal' and 'formal' ways to observe or measure progress.

The informal ways include noticing what we call **weak signals**. Some examples include:

o   Employees smiling, talking enthusiastically about things, volunteering for assignments, contributing more in meetings and taking more initiative, suggesting projects that could benefit the customer or company, getting involved in teams, taking visible pride in their work, consistently delivering on time and at high quality standards.
o   Changes in language (that are not mandated by the PC police). For example referring to employees by name or as our employees, people, our subject matter experts, rather than arms and legs, heads, warm bodies, the troops, etc.

More formal assessment techniques can include:

o   Workshops and employee meetings to assess how they see progress
o   Follow-up, focused (and brief) mini-surveys conducted online.
o   Noticeable and measurable improvements in individual and group level performance, quality; process efficiency and reliability, reduction of waste and costs; reduced absenteeism and turnover.
o   And finally, the next edition of the annual employee attitude survey.