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ORGANISATIONAL SURVEYS AS A TOOL FOR CHANGE

the PROCESS

Organisations decide to conduct surveys for a variety of reasons, some better than others. Very often the initial motivation is little more than a human resource manager's or a senior management whim. Many organisations go for years on end without an interest in what their employees think about anything. Business strategies change, old markets contract, and new ones develop, directors come and go, working practices alter, new remuneration systems are introduced and the organisation never thinks to ask employees what they think about any of this.

WHY DO WE NEED TO SURVEY EMPLOYEES?

As human resource management becomes ever more critical, managers will need to know precisely:

- Why employees are not performing as effectively as they might;
- What is likely to motivate the workforce as reward strategies become increasingly individualised and performance based; and
- How change can most swiftly and painlessly be accomplished.

Some managers feel that by doing an employee survey, expectations and interest in subjects that managers have previously managed to ignore, might be raised. There is no doubt that employee consultation, however conducted, is often the thin opener to a huge can of worms. Even if no major problems emerge, the process itself will set up certain expectations that demand management action. The whole exercise of surveying employees will be highly demanding and will probably bring some managers a few headaches before it begins to bring results and becomes a rewarding process.

This is not an argument for not doing employee surveys, but merely an argument for ensuring that it is done effectively, with the minimum of pain and maximum of results.

WHAT IS AN EMPLOYEE OPINION SURVEY?

An employee attitude or opinion survey can be described as a survey of employees' views, opinions, attitudes, behaviour, feelings, beliefs and perceptions of various aspects of the organisation in which they work. The terms "attitude" and "opinion" are sometimes used interchangeably. Strictly speaking the two types of surveys can be distinguished. A survey of attitudes is concerned with exploring employees' negative and positive feelings about a given topic. The traditional employee survey is often geared to identifying employee morale concerns.

An opinion survey may collect much more precise data about, for example, employees' preferences or past experiences and priorities.

In today's world, viewing employee surveys as a traditional assessment of morale is a very limited interpretation. Therefore most employee surveys examine both attitudes and opinions, using employees' opinions to provide guidance on possible future actions in a given organisation.

TYPES OF SURVEYS AND FUTURE TRENDS

The evolution of the world of surveys within organisations parallels the development of the fields of industrial and organisational psychology and human resource management. Broad trends and issues within society that affect the world of work are also reflected in the changing topics and uses of organisational surveys.

The 1990s, for instance, were characterised by surveys to provide a linkage to key strategies such as quality, customer satisfaction, and HR strategic focus.

According to Kraut (1996), future trends seem to indicate an increased focus on business strategy (e.g. strategy imple-
mentation and communication, competitive market intelligence surveys, effects of mergers and downsizing), measurement of bottom-line impact of HR and readiness for change.

Although surveys can be used to provide information on virtually any aspect of the organisation, the following is a brief outline of the more common uses of surveys:

> Baseline surveys provide a relatively precise measure of the state of employee attitudes or perceptions at the beginning of a major change initiative. The aim is to provide a benchmark for future evaluation, and to inform the development of the change process itself. Typical baseline surveys are a climate, communication or an organisational values audit.

> Evaluation surveys evaluate the effectiveness of change programmes, either at the interim or at the end of the change process. It may form part of a wider ranging review process, which might include an external consultancy review, an assessment of relevant performance measures, senior management interviews, and focus groups.

> Culture surveys

Many organisations now use culture surveys to help assess and define their organisational culture. The assumption is that culture is a key determinant of organisational performance, which may enhance or inhibit progress towards organisational goals. The assessment should give a clear indication of the appropriateness of an organisation’s culture to their new commercial needs.

> Quality and customer surveys

These surveys focus on attitudes to quality and customer service (internally and/or externally). The intention is to identify the factors likely to enhance, or impede, quality improvement in the organisation. This in turn may address issues of employee motivation, perceived barriers to quality service and experiences of internal and external customer service.

**WHY DO SURVEYS FAIL?**

The reasons that audits fail include:

> The organisation does not support business research in general and does not understand the value of research in yielding fact-based business decisions.

> The organisation does not demonstrate that it values its employees and does not recognise that its strategy is implemented by the sum of individual employees’ acts.

> Leaders of the survey research program do not have a broad vision of how the research program fits into the organisation’s business strategy.

> Organisational development tools are not used in the implementation of the research. Successful research groups operate on a consulting model, modified for an internal market. They understand organisational change processes, how they work and also understand and use a range of influential techniques in the survey process.

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- explaining opportunities for increasing profitability

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Managers who don’t know what their employees think may not be able to manage effectively in the future.

- Inefficient project management, such as:
  - insufficient prior planning
  - lack of communication
  - no professional involvement in planning the survey and compiling the questionnaire
  - no preparation and involvement of stakeholders
  - no sensitivity to confidentiality
  - incomplete feedback
  - no clear action plan for implementing recommendations and follow-through; and
  - hidden agendas by management or HR.

- Making use of a measuring instrument (questionnaire) that is not based on a sound model. A model is like a roadmap that indicates what outcomes could be expected, helps to make the survey scientifically sound and enhances understanding of the results.

- Lack of explanation to staff why certain issues identified through the survey results cannot be addressed.

The above issues need to be very carefully addressed during the survey process to ensure a successful survey.

**The Value of Surveys During Change**

The need for organisational change or realignment to be more flexible or better satisfy customers’ needs is clearly evident in today’s global marketplace. Such realignment, however, cannot occur successfully without a precise and detailed diagnosis of organisational factors, processes and systems that through the years have created barriers to change. **Ellen Martens** is a Director of Organisational Diagnostics and Prof. Nico M/d. is Professor of Industrial Psychology at UNISA and Head of UNISA’s Centre of Industrial and Organisational Psychology. E-mail: nicol@liber.co.za

A follow-up article will feature the results of South African organisations that have utilised organisational surveys as a tool for change.

**References**


