

## Tip #1

### 10 WAYS TO DE-RAIL YOUR EMPLOYEE SURVEY

An employee survey should be a process, not an event. An event has a beginning and an end. A process implies something that is ongoing and integrated into an organization. Integration comes about as a result of the critical **survey follow-up** stage. The follow-up phase – what happens in an organization after the data are in – is where most programs fall apart.

When you ask people for their opinions, they assume – they *expect* – their input will be used. Not following up on the survey results will damage the organization's (and management's) credibility.

Why do so many survey follow-up efforts fail? Here are ten sure-fire ways to de-rail your employee survey process:

#### DERAILER #1

**Not defining your follow-up strategy at the beginning.**

It's important to begin with the end in mind. As the Cheshire Cat said to Alice, "If you don't know where you want to go, any road will take you there." Know where you want to go with your survey results, and then design a follow-up strategy that will help you accomplish your goals.

Many things will affect the design of your follow-up strategy, e.g., your objectives, your culture, available resources. Lots of questions will come up: Who is responsible

for taking action? How centralized will the process be? Will it be mandatory? How will survey results impact performance goals?

If you wait until results are in hand before you start discussing these things, one of two things will happen:

- You will make decisions in haste and miss some important considerations.
- You will delay the process way too long, and employees and managers will lose interest.

Plan your follow-up before you start; then communicate your plan well in advance so people aren't caught by surprise.

#### DERAILER #2

**Ignoring unpleasant findings.**

You must be willing to address all issues – positive and negative – that come out of the survey. If you do not want to deal with an issue, it shouldn't be in your survey in the first place.

The key word here is address – not solve. You should not promise to fix everything. However, you must at least report negative findings and explain what you can and cannot do. Not every issue can be worked out to everyone's satisfaction. But ignoring an issue because you don't want to deal with it is very damaging to the credibility of both the organization and the survey process.

#### DERAILER #3

**Keeping top management invisible.**

Just as top management plays a critical role in the decision to survey, they are equally important in the follow-up process. Of course, they are primarily responsible for

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communicating the survey findings for the overall company, and for explaining the company's follow-up strategy.

Ideally, however, top management should model the behavior expected of other levels of leadership. As an example, one company had decided that all managers were to conduct feedback sessions with their direct reports. The CEO of the company convened a feedback meeting with his executive staff to discuss their results and identify areas for taking action. When word trickled down that this had occurred, the message heard throughout the company was that *follow-up was important*. Imagine the message if the CEO had decided to "opt out" of this part of the process.

#### DERAILER #4

**Using the survey as a managerial "report card."**

One of the reasons managers are often reluctant to support employee surveys is because they believe their ability to effectively manage their areas is being critiqued. In truth, employee surveys are not good management performance evaluations. The scope of an employee survey is typically too broad. Employee surveys are not like 360° feedback assessments, focusing on an individual manager's behavior. Surveys deal with many issues – company policies, organizational decisions – over which individual managers have little, if any, control. But these things still affect employees' perceptions of management performance.

Be careful of using employee survey results to rate individuals. If your strategy is to hold managers accountable, great! But hold them accountable for taking action on the results, and be sure to reward *improvement*, not just the achievement of specific scores.

#### DERAILER #5

**Underestimating the resources needed.**

A successful follow-up strategy is not inexpensive. At the very least, it may involve multiple meetings to formulate action plans. These meetings often occur in all areas, involving time away from the job, which may impact productivity. Then there are the very real costs of taking action, e.g., investing in training or purchasing new equipment.

Once the process is underway, the organization must have the discipline to see it through, or credibility and employee relations will suffer. Adequate understanding of, planning for, and commitment to the time and resource requirements are vital.

#### DERAILER #6

**Not supporting your managers.**

Managers often see survey follow-up as just one more thing to add to an already overcrowded plate. If they do not actively embrace the process, your survey will not get you the result you wanted. To help address this:

- **Clearly define your expectations** early in the process. Tell managers if they will be required to hold follow-up meetings or file action plans. Tell them what the anticipated schedule will be. Give them as much notice as possible to prepare.
- **Provide logistical, administrative, and developmental support** as needed. Offer training to managers on how to communicate their results and conduct feedback sessions. Adapt schedules and quotas to allow time for meetings and actions. Make it as easy as possible for managers to follow through.
- **Help managers and groups prioritize** issues so they don't try to do too much at one time. That will lead to a lot of issues

not getting proper attention and things “falling through the cracks.”

Prioritization makes it easier to decide what one or two issues to address first.

- **Encourage responsible delegation.**  
Involving more people lessens the burden on individuals; allows more ideas to be generated; encourages active commitment to the process; and enhances communication and cooperation between employees, managers, and the organization.

## DERAILER #7

### **Not monitoring progress.**

It is a truism in business that what gets measured, gets done. It is important to monitor your progress in some way. Make use of status updates, track documentation or statistics, or simply ask employees if they think the situation has improved. And keep the accountability process simple. Build survey follow-up requirements into existing accountability systems (e.g., performance reviews, yearly planning), rather than adding new layers to the bureaucracy.

It is also important to evaluate your follow-up strategy. Maybe you are too centralized in your approach. Maybe your priorities are unclear or people need more training. If you wait too long to learn how things are going, you will damage not only your current process but your ability to successfully re-survey. Do a progress check that allows you to plot course corrections before you get too far astray.

## DERAILER #8

### **Overlooking the need for communication.**

Once the initial company results have been communicated, information from anyone other than the manager often ceases. But

continuous communication at an organizational level keeps the survey process alive and well. Use venues such as a company intranet or newsletter to keep people informed:

- Tell employees about changes that have been made at an organizational level – what was changed and why, the outcome, etc. Ask for their feedback on the change.
- Share effective group solutions across the organization, perhaps through an intranet blog or bulletin board. It’s likely that different groups are struggling with similar concerns and could benefit from learning what others are doing.
- Recognize and celebrate successes to keep people enthused and committed to improvement.

## DERAILER #9

### **Not tying your actions to the survey.**

One of the most common complaints heard from employees is that “nothing happened” after the last survey. Oddly, management usually says the exact opposite; they can provide a laundry list of changes as a result of a previous survey. Where is the disconnect? No one told employees that the change came about as a result of their survey input.

Employees see new policies and procedures coming out of management all the time. They won’t necessarily connect that policy to the survey unless told. So tell them: “We changed this because you said on the survey that it wasn’t working.” Now employees can see that their input was used – that they were listened to and that it made a difference. This increases their belief in the survey process and management’s credibility, which enhances the prospect of their future participation.

***Think marathon, not sprint! If you rush things, you may jump to conclusions and not solve the problem.***

## **DERAILER #10**

### **Rushing the process.**

One of the most important things organizational management can do is set realistic expectations for progress. People are impatient; they want to see immediate results. But it isn't realistic (or even logical) to think that a situation that may have developed over a period of years can be fixed in a matter of weeks.

Think marathon, not sprint! If you rush things, you may jump to conclusions and not solve the problem. You also run the risk of burning people out. And if you re-survey too soon, you may see your scores remain static or even drop. Then people get discouraged and the process of improvement grinds to a halt.

Enough time needs to pass for people to see visible, sustained change; otherwise they will view the employee survey process as just another "flavor of the month" program that has no staying power.

On the other hand, DO look for opportunities to make an immediate impact. If a minor but highly visible change can be implemented relatively quickly and easily, do it! In one organization, the CEO learned that a specific rule was causing trouble. At a meeting with his leadership team, he verified the concern and then simply said, "It's gone." That action substantially improved employees' perceptions of management's desire to listen to them and take action on their input. People became re-energized and credibility in the process soared.

