

Tip #5

DEVELOPING A SURVEY COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

A successful survey program requires the willing participation of key groups and individuals in the organization. People participate because they feel ownership in the process, understand the benefits of a survey effort, and trust that their input will be considered. Communication before, during, and after the survey administration is an integral part of maintaining employee commitment to the process and reinforcing management's credibility.

A comprehensive communication plan should ensure a broad base of understanding and support for the survey objectives and how they will impact the organization. It must also present accurate and timely communication about the survey process, the survey outcomes, and what management intends to do with the results to effect positive change in the organization.

There are three over-arching guidelines for a successful communications strategy:

- **Empower someone** within the organization and then hold him or her accountable for coordinating the dissemination of information. This person can be your primary survey coordinator, someone in HR or a member of your communication department. Having multiple people responsible for different communication pieces with no single person overseeing

the process almost guarantee that something will "fall through the cracks."

- **Involve senior management** in your survey communications. This is particularly important in the initial announcement of the survey and in the initial feedback to employees. Having the participation of top management communicates credibility and commitment to the process.
- **Work within established communication channels** in the organization (e.g., an intranet, newsletters, employee meetings) but be willing to develop others if necessary. You do not want to add to the bureaucracy; at the same time, you want to communicate that this is important to the organization.

Following is a description of the three general areas of survey communication – pre-survey communication, administrative communication, and post-survey communication – along with some guidelines and recommendations.

PRE-SURVEY COMMUNICATION

Once the decision to survey has been made, inform all management personnel of:

1. the objectives of the survey
2. the anticipated schedule
3. their role in the process
4. how confidentiality will be ensured

Telling managers first allows them time to plan and prepare for employee questions. It also reinforces the fact that they are important players in the process. Some organizations put together "FAQ" sheets or

The survey announcement should come from the top of the organization, to reinforce its importance.

“talking points” for managers to prepare them to communicate about the survey to their employees.

Two-to-three weeks before the survey, send at least one pre-survey notification to all employees. This should be done even if you are sampling; you need to let everyone know what is going on. The message should come from a recognizable top executive in the organization such as the President or CEO, in order to reinforce its importance. The content of this communication should explain why the organization is doing the survey, when it will be done, who will be asked to participate, what will be done with the results, why participation is important, and what the confidentiality procedures are.

The vehicle chosen for this communication is up to the organization. Popular options include individual emails (for internet surveys) or memos/letters (for paper surveys), or an announcement in an organizational publication such as a newsletter. Some companies choose to have an all-employee "kick-off" meeting or, if you have in-house facilities, you could use a video format or develop a site on your Intranet.

Organizations might also find it helpful to rally support for the survey by conducting an internal public relations campaign using posters, publications and/or videos. One company produced survey-themed coffee sleeves and had them available in the cafeteria; another put their survey slogan on pens and distributed them to all employees. Such creative efforts can help keep the survey in the forefront of employees' minds. While this is a good idea for everyone, it can be especially important if it is the first survey the organization has conducted, or if participation in previous surveys has been lower than desired. The company should also

encourage managers and supervisors to remind employees about the upcoming survey at weekly staff/department meetings.

In large organizations, a division or location manager sometimes issues a second communication one week before administration. This message reiterates the objectives of the survey, and contains a personal request for participation, reminding employees of the importance of hearing as many viewpoints as possible.

ADMINISTRATIVE COMMUNICATION

At the time of administration, the need for participation must be reinforced and new information needs to be communicated. The method used for this communication will depend upon your chosen methodology. Written memos can be used with paper surveys; e-mails can be used with Internet surveys. This communication should include:

- Reiteration of the survey objectives – why the organization is doing the survey.
- A reminder that participation is voluntary, while re-emphasizing the importance of participation.
- A reiteration of the procedures for ensuring confidentiality.
- Your return (for mail-ins) or cut-off (for electronic surveys) date.
- [for sample surveys] An explanation of how employees were selected.

Other information that may need to be covered in special circumstances:

For onsite administration, send memos to employees telling them when and where to report for the survey. It is also nice to send a copy of the survey schedule to pertinent

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managers, so they can plan for any potential disruptions in work.

For mail administration, enclose complete instructions about the process for returning the survey (e.g., sealing it in an enclosed Business Reply Envelope and mailing it, or dropping it into a central collection box). Also, if employees are mailing surveys back, be aware that they may think your return date is a "mail by" date unless you are very specific.

For electronic administration, be sure to emphasize the procedures for ensuring confidentiality; this is a major concern for on-line surveying. Also, inform employees whom to contact if they have difficulties accessing the electronic survey.

Reminder/Thank You: About midway through the administration period, send out a reminder via e-mail (for electronic administration) or postcard (for paper) to all employees who were given the opportunity to participate in the survey. It should thank those who have already submitted their surveys, and encourage those who have not to do so. Reminders can boost response rates by 20-50%. For a longer administration window, use two reminders, spaced at least a week apart. But stop at two; more than that has little effect and may irritate people.

POST-SURVEY COMMUNICATION

One of the most common complaints heard in organizations is that "Nothing ever happened after the last survey" – a sentiment that directly affects morale, trust, and participation in any follow-up efforts or subsequent surveys. In truth, often several things did occur as a result of a previous survey effort. However, employees either

were unaware of the change or never connected it to their input from the survey.

Typically, only 30-40% of employees say they heard about the results of the survey. Fewer than half believe that action is taken based on survey results, with 50-70% reporting that they don't know. Questar's research has found that employees who hear about the results of the survey, and who see change as a result of their survey input, report consistently higher levels of engagement. Post-survey communication is a critical element of the survey success, helping to strengthen employees' belief in the company and drive engagement levels.

The official function of post-survey communication is to convey the survey results and keep employees updated regularly on what is happening. Once management has been told the survey results, the organization should prepare a general announcement to all employees. Venue options include: all-employee meeting(s); an article in an organizational publication or company newsletter; an area of the company intranet devoted to the survey; a special "Results Are In" piece distributed or posted for all to see; or a memo/letter/email sent to all employees.

This communication should include:

- A thank-you for employees' participation in the survey and the response rate.
- A brief review of the process and the goals for the survey.
- Overall company strengths (high ratings) and opportunities for improvement (low ratings).
- Major changes over time (if trend data are available) – positive and negative.
- Specific actions which have already been taken, are underway, or are planned

(including your feedback/follow-up strategy)

Subsequent communications will depend upon the feedback and action-planning strategy you have chosen. If the survey was strictly "pulse-taking," post-survey activities will be minimal and less detail will be necessary. For surveys designed to identify and solve problems or to effect organizational change, the communication needs to be more detailed.

If employees will be hearing their department results from their managers, tell them. If they will have the opportunity to participate in follow-up focus groups, or be part of action planning teams, tell them. If all actions will be determined by senior leadership, tell them. If you don't have all of the details worked out, promise to get back to them with that information and then do so.

It is important to keep employees continually updated regarding what is being done to deal with issues raised in the survey. One common practice is to have regular updates reminding employees of the issue, the plan,

and current progress. Use the same types of venues that you used for earlier survey communication (e.g., newsletters, emails, memos). Updates can come from the organization (for company-wide initiatives) and managers (for localized issues). When these updates go out, make them inclusive in language, i.e., encourage managers to say "we" are working on this, not "I" am doing this. This reinforces the perception of teamwork and collaboration that is often a side benefit of employee surveys, as employees come to believe "we're all in this together and we can make a difference."

It is equally important that you tie actions back to the survey results (e.g., "The policy was changed because employees said on the survey that it needed to be changed."). These reminders that their input is being used build credibility in the process and encourage continued employee enthusiasm and participation.

