

# Training 101

## ANOTHER LOOK AT EMPLOYEE SURVEYS

**W**hat's new with the old concept of surveying employees for their ideas? Plenty! Recent innovations may make the employee survey the centerpiece for modern concepts of empowerment, feedback, and participative management. Let's take another look at employee surveys and discover how they meet the new needs of the 1990s.

The purpose behind employee surveys is to solicit worker perspectives about how a company is doing. Employees often have viewpoints that can move the organization to new heights and counterbalance the all-too-frequent "business-as-usual" comfort of many managers.

Why don't employees tell management what they think in the course of day-to-day operations? Some do. But they may not be taken seriously, partly because managers have no way of knowing if a few assertive voices actually represent most employees. Many employees are afraid to speak out, because they assume their comments are unwanted or will come back to haunt them.

For example, in recent surveys of employees at several organizations, only 29 percent to 41 percent of workers agreed with the statement, "We say what's on our minds without fear of attack or reprisal."

Employee surveys were devised to help management discover what employees really think. Typically, they are written questionnaires with mostly multiple-choice items. Most surveys are completed anonymously by all employees or a "representative sample" of employees, and then are tabulated by demographic groups.

Surveys have provided important information to management for some time, but several factors account for their recent popularity in organizations. More sophisticated strategic



planning, customer satisfaction, and quality-improvement techniques now stress internal as well as external data-gathering. Also, the growing mobility of workers and the tight labor market (while lessened during the recession) have sparked managers' interest in employee satisfaction. Widespread downsizing has raised issues of employee morale and loyalty.

Several major problems have emerged with the administration and analysis of employee surveys:

- ▶ When a survey is anonymous, it's difficult to get a high return rate. When it is not anonymous, the reliability of answers is questionable because employees may be afraid to tell the truth.
- ▶ "Check-mark" answers sometimes raise more questions, rather than providing useful data. But narrative answers may be too cumbersome to categorize and tabulate.
- ▶ Too often, management does nothing with the results of a survey; at least, employees perceive no change.

*Are you looking for new ways to collect confidential employee opinions and make use of them? Take another look at a traditional method. That old employee survey has some new twists.*

▶ Long time lapses between the completion of surveys by employees and the implementation of changes by management weaken the tool and any reactions taken in response to its findings.

▶ Traditional questionnaires are one-time measurements of employee feelings about specific factors such as their jobs, supervisors, and pay—rather than perceptions about the broader business developments that are important to companies.

Several recent innovations have reduced the problems associated with traditional questionnaires, and have increased the benefits of employee surveys to organizations.

**An ongoing process.** The days of the “once-and-done” survey are over. Why solicit employee ideas only once? What about employees who join the company after a survey? How do we know if progress has been made since the last survey? Periodic, regular communication with employees makes more sense.

Surveys are increasingly part of

management’s overall planning and development strategy, providing regular information for decision making—like financial and customer reports. The new major players in the survey game—line supervisors and managers—want to know how the business is doing from the employees’ perspective.

**Involvement of line management.**

Employee surveys once were the province of industrial psychologists and management consultants. More and more, internal human resource or organization development specialists are spearheading the activity. And increasingly, they are involving frontline supervisors and managers throughout the process, from initial design of the instrument to action planning based on the results.

External consultants may also play a part, as advisors throughout the survey process.

Greater supervisory and management participation helps develop line ownership of the process. After all, line supervisors and managers are

likely to be held accountable for implementation of any changes made as a result of the survey. Their most critical role may be in the leadership of employee feedback sessions, described below.

**Broader business issues.** Traditionally, employee surveys were used to gauge satisfaction with narrow issues such as pay and immediate supervisors.

The trend now is to ask employees to rate the organization’s progress more broadly. For example, an article in the September 1987 issue of *Training* magazine said that IBM, which has used surveys for more than three decades, now asks employees how it is doing with innovation, efficiency, and the use of information systems. Xerox asks employees to rate its progress in becoming a “total-quality” organization. Johnson and Johnson employees evaluate the company’s success in meeting commitments to customers, employees, stockholders, and the community.

This refocusing of the process

**Asking the Right Kinds of Questions**

Questionnaires can use one or more of the following types of question formats.

**Multiple choice.** Multiple-choice questions contain two or more mutually exclusive answers. The respondent must pick one of them.

Use multiple-choice questions when all the possible responses to a question can be included, when those responses can be worded so that they are mutually exclusive, and when the forced selection does not result in bias. Advantages of the multiple-choice format include easy tabulation and interpretation, and short response time.

**Multiple answer.** This format is similar to the multiple-choice format, except that the respondent is allowed to choose more than one statement. Also, multiple-choice responses are exclusive; multiple-answer responses are not. Multiple-answer questions are used to help respondents remember and to ensure that they consider all viable options. Researchers may choose to list only those answers that are of

special interest to them, and can provide space for respondents to write in other answers.

**Ranked questions.** These questions ask respondents to indicate, in order, their personal preferences or perceptions of the relative importance of the answers. A respondent may be asked to choose a first choice, or to rank some or all of the possible responses by numbering them in order of preference.

**Open-ended questions.** These allow respondents to answer with no prompting. Use open-ended questions when individual responses are important, when the range of responses can’t be predicted, or when free expression is needed to clarify a multiple-choice answer.

**Scaled questions.** These questions are used to determine opinions or attitudes. A scaled question measures direction (positive to negative) and intensity (strongly positive to strongly negative). Survey developers commonly use three types of scales:

▶ Semantic-differential scales allow

respondents to indicate how they feel about a specific item by selecting a position on a bipolar scale (such as agree/disagree or good/bad).

▶ Diagrammatic scales are grids or diagrams on which respondents indicate their position with respect to a statement. Words or numbers are usually not included on the grid, with the scale expressed instead by an abstract category or continuum—for instance, with symbols or pictures.

▶ Likert scales provide standard sets of words and ask respondents to indicate agreement or disagreement with a statement. Possible answers are assigned weights, which are used to compute individual and group ratings. For example, on a 5-point scale, 1 could indicate “strongly agree,” 2 could indicate “agree,” and so forth, with 5 representing “strongly disagree.”

— adapted from Info-Line 9008, “How To Collect Data” (available from ASTD Press, 703/683-8129)

heightens the interest of managers and supervisors, especially those who are evaluated on performance in those areas. And it helps employees achieve alignment with broader organizational goals and objectives. In today's fiercely competitive business environment, that alignment is a strong side benefit of an employee survey—if not a direct objective.

**Customization.** Companies once purchased standard survey instruments from national sources. That practice saved in-house staff from laborious development, tabulation, and analysis of data. It allowed for comparison of responses with related industry groups. In general, it was considered to be an economical way to run an employee survey.

Those same advantages still apply, but HR people should keep in mind that standard surveys may not capture what many organizations really need—data on key issues that are critical to current operations. When deciding whether to develop a survey in-house or purchase an off-the-shelf instrument, also take into consideration the specific products or services a firm provides, the firm's geographic locale, and the company culture. Such factors can make it difficult to draw meaningful comparisons with the results of other organizations.

Also, in-house analysis of the results may be easier than it used to be. Computerized data analysis now allows firms to speed up the process of tabulating data in-house.

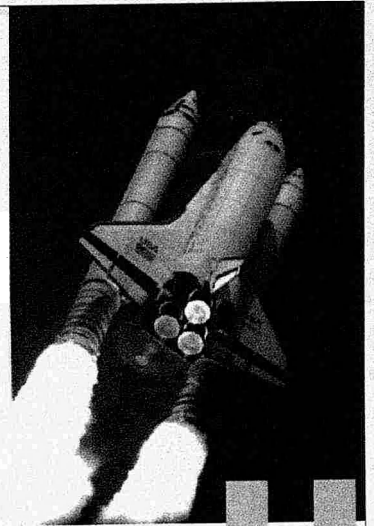
Outside assistance from an expert in employee surveys can be helpful in many steps of the process:

- ▶ designing surveys
- ▶ offering advice at critical points
- ▶ assuring anonymity or confidentiality
- ▶ providing complex tabulations

But external consultants should be prepared to tailor instruments to client needs, rather than relying on off-the-shelf questionnaires and procedures.

**Expanded feedback sessions.** After the results are in, feedback sessions are essential. In these sessions, managers meet with employees to share survey results and plans for improvements. A firm that does not hold such sessions can reduce employee satisfaction and willingness to share ideas with management.

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### Tabulating and Analyzing the Results

After you collect the responses to an in-house employee survey, you'll need to tabulate and analyze them. Here are some general guidelines:

- ◆ Be prepared for incomplete surveys and incomplete responses. Decide whether you're going to disregard all of a respondent's answers if he or she didn't complete the survey.
- ◆ If you are using a computer to tabulate results, check for data-entry errors, especially when the operator is entering the first responses. This will prevent the recurring errors that can be created when an operator does not understand a task.
- ◆ If staff members are tabulating results by hand, make sure everybody is using the same tabulation system.
- ◆ Be sure that anyone tabulating results understands the criteria for making decisions about questionable responses.
- ◆ Paraphrase carefully the answers

to open-ended questions; don't change the meaning of a response.

- ◆ Use charts and graphs to make the results of each question evident at a glance.
- ◆ Use a cross-tab table for a pictorial comparison of the results of two or more questions. Computers can be very useful for doing this. Crosstab tables can help you analyze cause-and-effect and complementary relationships. For example, the cross-tab between a question about age and one about professional development might reveal that 20 percent of employees over age 50 want development opportunities.

Several books offer more detailed instructions for tabulating results. They include *Handbook in Research and Evaluation* by S. Isaac and W.B. Michael, and *Survey Research Methods* by E.I. Babbie.

*adapted from Info-Line 8612,  
"Surveys From Start to Finish"  
(available from ASTD Press,  
703/683-8129)*

Feedback sessions have evolved into much more than reporting results and planned actions. Many companies now use them as a second phase of the process. In these firms, groups of employees discuss with managers the meaning of the survey results. For example, they may talk about why they feel less content with the company than they did three years ago. Or they may offer ideas on what could be done to improve corporate innovation.

Typically, managers or supervisors lead these meetings with each division or department. They may hold several sessions with the same team of employees. Once the sessions have clarified the issues, the group or the feedback session leader develops an action plan, which may be considered the third phase of the employee-feedback process.

Of course, the feedback sessions and group problem solving fit in nicely with the current business trends toward empowering employees and pushing responsibility downward.

**High-tech embellishments.** As with everything, computers have given em-

ployee surveys a big boost. Obviously, they can speed the tabulation of data, but there's more—much more!

Imagine this scene: Forty-seven employees of a manufacturing firm are seated in front of keypads, responding to questions about their company—the standard questions normally asked on mail-in surveys. Once they've all answered the question of the moment, their group results are flashed on a big screen in front of the room. Smiles, gasps, and looks of surprise flash across faces as they discover the meaning of the latest tally.

They follow the voting with discussion—sometimes in small groups and sometimes with the whole group. They talk about what the results mean.

"Why do you think 20 percent voted 'very satisfied' while another 20 percent voted 'very dissatisfied' on that question?" the facilitator queries.

"Well, each group is treated differently here," answers a young man in the back row.

Even quieter employees are likely to join the discussion, buoyed perhaps by the strength-in-numbers concept, after they see that others

voted the same way they did.

"Decision technology" is growing in America. The process allows employees in groups of 10 to 150 to react to organizational issues with less likelihood of being swayed by the biases of the loudest or most aggressive group members.

The voting is anonymous, as with the feedback given on most written surveys. But unlike other methods of surveying, decision technology allows both managers and employees to receive instant results. The software's instant tallying makes it possible for the group to clarify questions about what the responses mean, on the spot. Finally, the computer and the group do the analysis work at the session, rather than tying up support staff for days or weeks.

The process offers anonymity, objectivity, speed, and clarification—a combination of advantages that are not available through other means. Growing numbers of corporations are setting up conference rooms specially equipped for decision technology. And some management-consulting firms can transport such systems to company locations for facilitated workshops.

**Changes in attitudes.** The new trends affecting employee surveys reflect changes in the way we do business. They support organization cultures that are increasingly geared toward business issues, that are intent on funneling responsibility downward, and that mix the latest technology with more traditional methods.

The employee survey is becoming less of a stand-alone project. Instead, it is an integral component of an ongoing planning and decision-making process for collecting information. Managers who want to update their surveys should consider recent innovations. And those who once berated employee surveys for their traditional deficiencies may want to take another look.

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