

# Employee Attitude Surveys: What Managers Should Know

By NED ROSEN

**M**anagers who use employee attitude surveys with unrealistic expectations end up getting burned. Such managers walk away from the experience blaming their misfortune on the survey concept rather than the inadequacies of the particular survey used. The end result, unfortunately, can be serious damage to the organization.

I have found over the years that executives contemplating attitude surveys raise a set of questions that human resource professionals can anticipate when their superiors come to them for help. But remember: Conducting a survey is not a simple project you can assign safely to intelligent amateurs. Your qualified professional guidance can ensure that the survey reaps full value. Consider the following 15 questions and their answers as a strategically useful primer.

**Q. Why do employers conduct attitude surveys? What are the organizational objectives?**

**A.** Surveys are conducted

- to assess the organization's internal employee relations climate and monitor the trends.
- to identify emerging or existing attitudinal issues before they become explosive.
- to provide feedback to managers on how well they are balancing their various managerial and supervisory responsibilities.
- to build a data base that can inform the

organization of the content and processes of selecting, developing, and training managers.

■ to assist in the design and modification of personnel policies, management systems, and decision-making processes, thereby improving overall organizational effectiveness.

■ to provide a way to assess progress during periods of change.

■ to identify the parts of the organization that are experiencing pain and need help.

■ to provide a safety valve for excess "steam."

**Q. Is it possible to achieve these objectives with a single survey?**

**A.** While some can be achieved with a single survey—such as the second, fifth, and eighth items above—a repeated measurement program on a regularly scheduled basis offers far more potential. You can build several objectives into one survey program if you administer surveys periodically over a significant period of time.

You should consider an attitude survey program as part of an overall and continuing process both to clarify issues and stimulate innovative strategies for working together. It is *not* a popularity contest, a happiness exercise, or a route to instant cures. It *is* a useful organizational tool.

**Q. Won't we just stir up a hornet's nest or artificially create attitudes that aren't real?**

**A.** The first question any management considering using a survey must answer is, "Are we prepared to do an effective job of feedback and followthrough when the

findings are in?" Whether the results are good or bad, management must share them with the employees and must address the problems with confidence.

The effective use of attitude surveys requires top management participation in framing the program's objectives and commitment to following through on results.

And as far as being afraid of arousing sleeping dogs, remember: they usually only appear to be sleeping. Employees have attitudes all the time. Systematically measuring them and then visibly trying to deal with problems is the healthy way to manage.

**Q. Aren't attitude measures soft? Shouldn't we be more concerned with productivity measures and getting the work done?**

**A.** Employee attitudes are a direct reflection of frustration levels. When frustration is sufficiently serious, a variety of disruptive behavioral consequences occur. Some people become hostile, thereby disturbing the peace or even sabotaging work processes. Others become discouraged, leading to reduced motivation and teamwork, lower standards of performance, absenteeism, and general lack of enthusiasm. Still others develop stress-related health problems—such as alcoholism—that bear on the cost of doing business.

A well-administered attitude survey program, while not as hard as an accountant's cost-control system, offers a practical strategy for controlling important elements of the human costs in running an organization. There is no question that

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those human costs are closely tied to organizational effectiveness.

**Q. Should we use another firm's questionnaire or develop our own?**

**A.** The advantages of building your own survey instrument far outweigh the advantages of using a questionnaire borrowed or bought from outside. A tailored questionnaire has a much better chance of capturing local issues, incorporating local lingo, and developing management and employee ownership of the process.

Building a tailor-made questionnaire includes steps that ensure communication about the program, enhances the response rate, and helps prepare everyone for what is coming later. Assuming you use a participative process, building your own questionnaire improves the organization climate.

**Q. Should we make comparisons with other organizations?**

**A.** The advantages of such comparisons are overrated and don't match the advantages of building your own questionnaire. Moreover, attitudinal data are highly susceptible to environmental differences, subtle language differences, the state of the economy, political considerations, union activity, organization structure and size factors, and wage and salary influences. Unless you're quite confident that these and other factors are equivalent across the organizations you're comparing and that the comparison data are quite recent, the results are likely to be misleading.

Specialists in psychological measurement almost always recommend establishing *local norms*. Organizations are far better off establishing their own baseline data for comparison purposes rather than relying on chancy external norms. Just as in golf, "par" varies from course to course and hole to hole.

**Q. Should we hire an outside consultant?**

**A.** Most medium to large organizations have people inside with enough background and interest in this type of program to take a major role in its administration. Normally all they need is a task force and an experienced external consultant to provide guidance on the process and technical input at crucial junctures. But it may be best, depending on local circumstances, to have the data, once collected, statistically processed externally. You need to consider the degree of trust between employees and management, availability of computers and software, and time constraints.

**Q. Isn't it easy to develop a questionnaire?**

**A.** Questionnaire construction requires professional input. It also requires pretesting on a representative sample to get the bugs out. Assembling a questionnaire from collections of items—or by lifting items out of other questionnaires used elsewhere—probably will waste some of the survey's potential value.

Qualified professionals in this field have item-writing skills and extensive training in psychological measurement and statistical methods necessary for good results. They also bring valuable concepts and knowledge of the literature to the task.

**Q. Should we use a single-item measurement strategy?**

**A.** Single items are inherently unreliable measurement devices when applied to complex issues such as employee morale, motivation, stress, and managerial effectiveness. Psychological measurement specialists advise using some scaling techniques to combine several items into reliable indexes. This has the dual advantage of better quality data and reduced interpretation complexity.

Measurement reliability is important if you are planning to use the data for decision-making purposes and for testing trends. Single items, *if properly worded* and preceded by others that influence summary judgments, can be useful.

**Q. How long must a questionnaire be to provide reliable data?**

**A.** That depends on how many fundamental dimensions you plan to measure and how many special, local issues you plan to cover. Rather than worry about number of questions, it is more important to be concerned with how much time the average employee needs to complete the questionnaire. A good target is 45 minutes. Most high-school graduates can handle 100 to 150 items in that time frame, depending on question complexity and format.

**Q. Should we have separate questionnaires for different employee categories?**

**A.** A well-constructed questionnaire will have a substantial section relevant to all employees and subsections for special interest categories.

**Q. What is the best approach for sampling our organization?**

**A.** This question involves complex issues and raises other questions you have to answer first.

You must know the purposes of the survey, the degree of accuracy required,

the size and composition of the population, the likely strategy—mail versus group meetings, for example—for collecting data, and time and cost factors. If you want a good feedback process, you should sample intact organizational units rather than individuals. If sampling is necessary, see a competent consultant for advice before making sampling decisions. But keep in mind that it often is more effective to include entire populations, or large intact segments, than to use samples.

**Q. What response rate can we expect?**

**A.** Employee attitude surveys *can* produce anywhere from 25 to 90 percent or even higher response rates. Obviously, the bigger the percentage of returns, the more confidence one has in the data. Response rate is influenced by factors such as the following:

- the existing-employee relations climate;
- the questionnaire's length and interest value;
- whether employees believe the questionnaire allows them to express themselves on what *they* consider to be important issues;
- the amount of confidence employees have that management will do something about the results;
- fear of reprisals from managers;
- a belief that some "secret way" exists for managers to find out what specific individuals said about them;
- how the questionnaire is administered, such as group meetings versus through the mail;
- the amount of support and encouragement managers and supervisors provide;
- the effectiveness of publicity both before and during the survey data collection period;
- the posture of relevant trade unions.

You can minimize nonresponse by using appropriate, participative practices in designing and administering the program.

**Q. Just how much diagnostic value is there in attitudinal data? Are the interpretations self-evident?**

**A.** Attitudinal data are social data and, as such, are susceptible to a variety of human foibles: halo effect, general negativism, temporary mind-sets, and group-think.

Employee surveys, then, typically reveal more at a group level of analysis than along other lines. In other words, because of the strong social and group influences on work-related attitudes, analyses based on individual differences such as age, sex, pay level, and other demographics will explain

only a limited amount of variation in data patterns.

Survey designers can squeeze out modest diagnostic value if they anticipate the comparisons they need to make in such areas as job categories and occupational definitions.

The major diagnostic value of survey data lies in comparisons of organizational units such as departments and divisions. And given the strong influence of group attitudes, the analysis needs to get down to the primary work-group level to produce maximally valuable information.

While properly constructed attitude survey indices are capable of showing which units or groups in an organization are different from others, the data in and of themselves are not capable of explaining the reasons for the differences. The possible explanations are numerous. You'll need some form of follow-up to understand the data patterns.

Generally speaking, employee attitude survey data take on maximal meaning only when the various work groups involved discuss the data. A large percentage of the

survey's potential value to an organization is lost without a planned feedback and discussion process. You can't fully interpret the data if you take it out of context and if local factors known only to the participants play a major role. In some cases you'll need a trained neutral as a group facilitator in order to unlock the process.

**Q.** *How do we develop useful linkages between the survey process, the survey data, and the design and conduct of training courses for supervisors and managers?*

**A.** There are several answers to this question, all of which indicate that both the survey's content and the process involved should be linked with training and development.

■ You must carefully select and design the questionnaire items—especially those dealing with perceived managerial behavior and work-group task procedures—with due regard for the organization's culture and staffing patterns.

■ Managers and supervisors need to take ownership of the process so they will perceive face validity in the data.

■ You need to conduct useful comparisons and sophisticated analyses on the data to identify relationships and potential linkages to training.

■ The nature of the data received by individual managers on their own operations normally arouses their interest and leads many of them to seek help with their problems. This sets the stage for follow-up workshops and links to existing training courses or for the design of new ones to meet the better-defined needs that emerge from this process.

■ Staff responsible for training and developing managers and supervisors should receive periodic updates on what the survey data imply about managerial behavior and its consequences. You should encourage and teach them how to use this information in their work.



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