



Eight Keys to a Successful Employee Survey

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Introduction

If you gathered 100 retail human resource executives in a room, and you wanted to pick a contentious discussion topic that would divide the room equally between those opposed to and those in favor of a fairly common organizational practice, you could not come up with a better topic than employee opinion surveys. For every person in the room who saw the employee survey as an indispensable management tool, you would find another who saw it as a waste of time and money. We at The Retail Survey Group can empathize with both positions. An effective employee survey process can be an indispensable, high-ROI tool for improving store morale, improving customer service, reducing turnover and opening the lines of communication throughout the organization. But a poorly conceived, poorly executed employee survey can be a complete waste of money and effort. Unfortunately, it is very easy to have your employee survey fall into the latter category.

The Retail Survey Group has spent years helping companies get the most out of their employee survey programs. What follows are eight of the most important keys to survey success.

1. In most cases, an employee survey should be perceived as an operations-driven initiative rather than an HR department program.

In companies with the best survey processes, the entire management chain, from President/CEO through store department managers, views the survey as a top priority. This is difficult to accomplish, given the number of other company-wide programs or initiatives with which it must compete. The bottom line is that when it comes to corporate initiatives, the competition for time and attention is a zero-sum game. In most corporate cultures, there is not enough time in the day to work toward the completion of every initiative or program underway. Therefore, when the status of one program is elevated, the status of others is lowered.

Programs that are sponsored by a support function, such as Human Resources, typically do not carry the same status as those programs that

have their genesis in operational management. True, some companies have very solid HR functions that have the full tacit support of operational management. However, in our experience, when the survey is viewed as a pet project of the Senior Vice President of Retail Operations, or of the President, it is treated by the entire management chain as having top priority.

2. Your goal for response rate should be 100%.

The problem with a low response rate is not that the results present an inaccurate picture of the company as a whole. For most companies with 1000 or more employees, even a 30% response rate will yield fairly accurate company-wide results. However, this does not hold true for a smaller unit of analysis, such as a store or a department, where that same 30% response rate will yield results of questionable validity.

The greatest benefit of a high response rate is that it assures that the results for the smallest units of analysis, in most cases the individual store-department level reports, are accepted as having face validity by the employees who make up those units. Once employees buy into the “truthfulness” or accuracy of a set of results, they are ready to put their energy towards resolving the issues. Conversely, if the employees do not buy into the data, the odds of them working toward the fulfillment of an action plan are decreased.

Surveys are deemed successful when one or both of the following occur:

- One or two large-scale organization-wide improvements are made as a result of having conducted the survey.
- A “critical mass” of smaller-scale improvements happen throughout the organization, based upon department- and store-level improvement efforts.

While a single year’s survey effort may have been made worthwhile by virtue of the first reason, a survey becomes a valuable ongoing management tool usually by virtue of the second.

As far as a goal for participation goes, why should anything other than 100% be acceptable? In fact, the language you use should speak of participation as expected, rather than desirable. Are there any other critical processes that strive toward anything other than 100% compliance? We don't say to cashiers that when you cash out at the end of the day, your tally should be correct 85% of the time, or that we are going for a 90% accident-free workplace this month.

The best way to get an acceptable response rate, i.e., one that is certain to yield accurate reports down to the department level, is to make survey participation an expected occurrence, and to set up an administration procedure that makes this a reality.

3. A survey for retail employees should take less than 10 minutes to complete.

Both the questionnaire length and the method of survey administration will impact the overall response rate. Keep in mind that the goal of the questionnaire development and administration phases is to get to the action planning stage with a high response rate and useful, reliable data. While it is of paramount importance to have a valid, reliable survey questionnaire, it is also important to remember that long questionnaires take a long time for respondents to complete. And long surveys are associated with lower response rates and less accurate data.

In the past decade, we have written hundreds of employee survey questionnaires. The survey development process always begins with the question "What is it that we want the survey to tell us, and how can it reliably do so using the fewest items." In most cases, we are confident that we can get a good handle on store culture/employee morale using 20 to 25 closed-ended items and one or two open-ended items. A survey of this length takes the average respondent 5 - 10 minutes to complete.

The benefit of a questionnaire that takes less than 10 minutes is that it can be easily administered at the store during naturally occurring times like breaks or pre-shift meetings. This means that no special arrangements are necessary to get employees to complete the survey during the time when they are already scheduled to be at

work. We have seen companies spend more money on the overtime pay required to have employees complete a 45-minute questionnaire than on the rest of the survey combined.

The other benefit of a brief survey is that respondents with short attention spans do not feel overly taxed by the survey process. A brief survey greatly increases the likelihood that the respondent will give as much thought and attention to the last survey items as he/she does to the first few.

4. (Good) Norms are important.

After the survey results have been tabulated, the task facing the organization is to address the issues and problems illuminated by the survey data. Obviously, this is a critical point in the survey process. A company must target the right improvement areas in order to get the maximum return on its survey investment. Because they help to put the results into perspective, normative data are crucial in considering what areas should be addressed.

A norm is simply a quantitative point of comparison. A set of norms for survey data typically allow for the comparison of your own company results to those of a larger group of companies (the norm base). The utility of a norm base is determined by how beneficial it is to compare your results to those of other companies.

For example, consider the case of a supermarket chain that has conducted its first-ever company-wide employee survey. Senior management is reviewing the results, trying to figure out how they will allocate their resources toward making improvements. Let's assume that they get what appears to be a fairly high score on *workplace safety* and a fairly low score on *developing employees for future promotions*. Without the benefit of normative data to tell them how other supermarkets fared on those items, they might decide not to do any work to improve the safety item, and instead focus on the development item.

Had they had access to a good retail norm base, they would have seen that the safety item typically receives a very high score, and that their score was significantly lower than the norm, indicating a potentially serious problem. Conversely, the item regarding development for

future promotions is typically among the lowest scoring items on the survey. In fact, their score on that item places them in the upper quartile of the norm base.

Of course, the money they put toward further work on development might well pay dividends, because it is such an important item. And improving the promotional process might cement their image as a great company for which to work. However, relative to the safety item, it might not be as critical to target for immediate improvement.

5. Each store should get a report detailing its overall results and the results of its major departments.

Many companies make the mistake of not disseminating the results to the store level. In our view, this greatly reduces the chance that the survey will be successful.

First, as has already been stated, surveys are most useful when they are the impetus behind change efforts undertaken at the store and department levels. Only by having access to the survey results can the employees begin to participate in the action planning process.

Second, keeping the results within the confines of senior management can easily be perceived as a violation of the social contract inherent in most employee-based feedback systems.

For reasons beyond the scope of this paper, employee surveys are assumed to be *closed-loop feedback systems*. The loop begins with the employees filling out a survey form. Next, the survey forms are tabulated, and their collective opinions are shared with management. To close the loop, management must in turn share the collective results with the employees. If this loop is not closed, employees are left with a sense of unmet expectations. It is similar to the feeling one gets when applying for a position and then never hearing back about it one way or the other.

On occasion, we have been brought in by senior management to help them do a better job of surveying their employees. It never fails to surprise us how little employees know about the results of the prior surveys. When employees are pressed for a guess as to why they had not heard

about the results, the damaging effects become clear. The most commonly held hypotheses are:

- “The results must have been so bad they were embarrassed to publicize them.”
- “They can’t tell us what they found because then they’d have to change things.”
- “They just did the survey to make us feel like our input was important...they could care less how it turned out.”

With the exception of special circumstances, we advocate that you share with all employees an item-by-item comparison between the results for their store and the results for the overall company. For most employees, this constitutes a full and deserved disclosure of the results, and it is a great way for employees to begin to get a handle on what the results mean. Once you have done this, you have set the stage for store-level action planning.

6. Anyone who completes a survey should be able to understand a survey report.

If you are going to share the results of the survey with store employees, you need to present them in a report format that is easy to grasp. Some people are more numerically inclined and others more graphically inclined. We recommend that results be presented in a combination of these ways, but most of all in a fashion that is simple and intuitive.

Remember that the goal is to enlist the help of your employees in analyzing the survey results. You want employees to be excited about the potential insight they have into the results of the survey. They were the ones who gave the feedback; they have ideas about how to make things better. A huge binder of results, laden with statistical jargon and complex, poorly labeled graphs is a sure way to turn off most employees and handicap the action planning process.

7. Give those responsible for creating action plans some basic ideas to use as starting points for their plans.

Imagine that we are at the most critical point in the survey process...the point at which store and department managers are sitting down with their employees, report in hand, with a good understanding of the results and having selected a few problem areas to target for improvement. The group is ready to create action plans. The store manager is at the flip chart...her marker is poised...and then it strikes the group that no one has the faintest idea about what a good action plan looks like, let alone how to go about creating one.

This is where many surveys lose their momentum, and it is entirely understandable. Most retail store managers have had little or no training in how to work with a group to come up with an improvement plan.

To make matters worse, consider the following Survey Research 101 axiom: Managers at stores with the lowest employee survey scores are the very managers least likely to be able to facilitate a productive action planning session. In other words, those stores most in need of good post-survey action plans are the ones least likely to succeed in creating them.

Fortunately, it is not that difficult to provide managers with the tools they need to write effective action plans. The easiest way to do so is to provide them with a template for the format and content of their plans. For example, our firm provides clients with an Action Planning guide, which not only offers store managers a step-by-step guide to action planning, but also suggests several actions for each topic covered by the survey. It is easy to use these ideas as the starting points for the group discussion, and to transform them into high quality action plans.

Finally, if there is a critical role for the Human Resources department during the survey process, it is to identify store managers most in need of assistance with action planning, and to offer them the assistance they need to do the job right. This can mean going so far as to co-facilitate the results sharing and action planning discussions.

8. The organization should commit to a follow-up survey even before the first one is administered.

Companies that get the most out of their surveys treat them as part of a cycle as opposed to one-time affairs. Each survey is seen as a benchmark for the subsequent survey. The trends in the survey results over time are indicators of the relative health of a company's human capital, predictive of such things as turnover, shrink, and customer service. Managers come to rely on the survey as a cornerstone of their communications with their employees. Employees begin to look forward to the survey as a time when they are guaranteed the ability to have their upward feedback heard. To get to this enviable position, however, a company must have that first full successful survey cycle. Which means that there must be a follow-up survey to the initial survey.

From the very start, your organization should think in terms of an *employee survey program*, or an *employee survey process*, rather than a stand-alone employee survey. A survey program is comprised of an initial survey, the creation of action plans focusing on the results of that initial survey, and then a follow-up survey to measure the improvement made by those actions.

When you announce the survey and communicate about it to managers and employees, you should send the message that your company is embarking on a survey process, and should outline the basic steps: survey → make improvements → resurvey to measure improvements.

Summary

The best survey processes have teeth. They are sponsored by senior operational management, and they are seen as a benchmarking exercise by which to measure substantive organizational improvement. The improvement is expected based on the assumption that each store, and the organizational units supporting the stores, will follow through on well-crafted action plans. Participation in the survey is prioritized in order to ensure that store and department level reports are accurate. Managers are given the assistance they need to come up with effective action plans, including normative data, easily understood reports and suggested ideas for their plans. Finally, the survey is conducted on a regular basis, to ensure that the organization is continuously improving.