Avoiding the Survey Slump

The Real Value in the Survey Process Happens When You Take Action

tns | Employee Insights

Avoiding the Survey Slump

In many survey processes, a phenomena called the "survey slump" seems to set in somewhere between the delivery of survey results and the launch of the next survey. Organizations that conduct employee surveys on a regular basis know this time well. Excitement builds around the delivery of the results as managers look to see if their scores have improved (or declined). Everyone wants to know if the actions taken had any effect.

During this phase in the process – between results delivery and the next survey administration – the primary focus should be on action – gaining employee involvement in clarifying results, determining root causes, identifying action steps and implementing action plans. But, the dreaded "survey slump" seems to settle in for many work groups and organizations. It is difficult to keep the excitement and momentum going when work gets in the way. You know you need to take action and track your progress. In fact, you've developed several great action plans, but finding the time and energy to implement the plans is often difficult. How can you avoid the "survey slump"?

A critical component of any successful survey program is strong commitment throughout the organization for the survey itself and for taking action on the survey results. Just as poor execution during administration can damage a survey's credibility, poor action planning can as well. Support for the entire survey process must start at the top with senior leadership visibility. Managers throughout the organization must see the importance of acting on results (Kraut, 2006).

Taking Action

Research shows that sharing results and taking action makes a difference. For many years, a global, diversified services organization included in their employee survey two additional questions related to sharing results and taking action. Respondents were asked the following key questions:

1. **Results from our last survey were reviewed with my work group.**

2. **Based on these results, my work group has taken action on our opportunity areas.**

yes	no	don't know

These two questions afforded the ability to classify the respondents into one of four groups:

Q1uartile **Results were shared, and action was taken**

Q2uartile **Results were not shared, but action was taken**

Q3uartile **Results were shared, but action was not taken**

Q4uartile **Results were not shared, and no action was taken**

Q1 Work groups that shared results and took action (Q1) had the highest average percent favorable scores overall.

Q2 Work groups where employees said actions were taken but results were not shared (Q2) had engagement scores that were approximately 7% lower than the first group. This assumes some actions were taken even though most employees did not see the data but understood that something was done as a result of their feedback.

Q3 Surprisingly, the group that said results were shared but no action was taken (Q3) reported equally low overall engagement scores at 27% lower than the first group. These results highlight the importance and significance of taking action from the survey data (Kraut, 2006).

Q4 Employees who said that results were not shared with them and that nothing happened from the survey, no actions taken (Q4) had much lower engagement scores, approximately 27% lower than the first group.

Based on similar in research conducted by BlessingWhite Research, nearly half **(47%)** of all employees who said their organization conducted a survey and demonstrated visible actions at the organization or department level are fully engaged. Meanwhile, of those employees who experienced a survey and saw no follow-up, less than a quarter **(24%)** are engaged. This is three percentage points worse than for employees who report no action at all, suggesting that surveying and doing nothing can actually decrease engagement levels. In other words, **"Managers who talk about the importance of engaged employees or promise to act on engagement issues can severely damage their team's contribution and satisfaction if they focus only on results and fail to walk their talk."** (BlessingWhite Research, 2010)

The Management Behavior Inventory

Determining whether managers take action is sometimes a difficult task. One way to determine if results sharing and action-planning efforts have had the desired effect is to assess the percent of increase (or decrease) during the annual survey process. This tracking mechanism provides the means to measure improvement in key results areas. Unfortunately, the process of having to wait 12 months or more to find out if anything has changed is counterproductive because if results aren't what you expected, then it is too late to change your course of action or implement additional actions.

Spot or interim surveys are often used to determine if action planning efforts are paying off. These surveys are typically shorter surveys that focus on specific action items, key driver questions or management behaviors that drive action planning.

In 2010, two hospitals within a large healthcare system, implemented a spot survey focusing on the key management behaviors that drive action planning. Both hospitals included questions from the annual survey to track interim progress on specific actions as well as five key questions designed to assess specific follow-up activities regarding the survey process. These five key questions focused on assessing management behaviors around results sharing and action planning. Research supported the use of these questions in driving engagement and overall improvement in survey results.

1. My department leader presented the employee survey results in a complete and open manner. | yes | no |

2. I was given an opportunity to provide feedback and voice my opinion. | yes | no |

3. I feel actions have been taken as a result of the last employee survey. | yes | no |

4. I feel action will be taken by my department leader. | yes | no |

5. I feel action will be taken by hospital Senior Leadership. | yes | no |

It was important to know whether employees did or did not have an opportunity to provide feedback or if they felt their department leader had or had not taken action. Since an answer of "I don't know" provided less valuable information this response option was not included. All respondents had the opportunity to skip a question by not selecting a response option on the website.

These interim scores were not included in the annual survey reporting process or used to measure improvement (or decline) over time. The interim scores served only as a directional measure.

The MBI was administered online in English and Spanish. The organizational coding and reporting structure was identical to the structure presented in the previous full survey so that direct comparisons to the employee survey scores could be made. Since this was an interim survey designed to track improvement from the previous employee survey, only groups or departments who participated in the full survey participated, in the interim survey. No departments or work groups were excluded.

The reporting process for the interim survey was simplified so that managers could quickly compare their interim results to the full survey results to track progress. An Engagement Scorecard report provided managers with item comparison and trending data. In addition, a report was designed for the Management Behavior Index highlighting the responses to the results sharing and taking action questions. Following the process outlined in the research, a matrix chart was created that focused on the extent to which results sharing and taking action occurred among the employee groups. The Matrix provided managers additional information about the action planning process, especially highlighting areas in the hospital where results sharing and action planning activities had not yet begun. This helped to jump start activity in inactive departments.

Management Behavior Inventory Matrix

1. My department leader presented the employee survey results in a complete and open manner.

	yes	no
2. I feel action will be taken as a result of the last employee survey. **yes**	35%	20%
no	30%	15%

Results of the Management Behavior Inventory

Results of the Management Behavior Inventory interim survey indicated:

- The majority of employees participated in feedback sessions **(85% in Hospital #1 and 88% in Hospital #2)** where their department leader presented the employee survey results in a complete and open manner.

- The majority of employees **(88% in Hospital #1 and 87% in Hospital #2)** had been given an opportunity to provide feedback and voice their opinion.

- More than three quarters of employees **(73% in Hospital #1 and 80% in Hospital #2)** felt actions had been taken as a result of the last employee survey.

- Overall directional results from the spot survey indicated an upward trend from the previous full survey.

The Real Value

Although results from the Management Behavior Inventory interim survey are helpful in identifying current activities and indicating directional change, the real value is in the action planning process that follows. The purpose of the employee survey and action planning efforts is to create organizational improvement over time.

Results of the interim survey were positive and provided the hospitals with directional indication that their results sharing and action planning efforts were moving in the right direction. In addition, the interim survey results highlighted areas within the hospitals where feedback and action planning efforts were not effective, thus giving hospital leadership time to make mid-course corrections prior to the launch of the next annual survey.

The final indication if action plans have any impact comes with the administration of the next annual survey. In 2011, exactly one year later, the employee survey was administered again to the entire organization including the two hospitals that participated in the MBI interim survey. The results for both hospitals showed greater than average improvement with significant results in several key areas including satisfaction with senior leadership and satisfaction with employee voice. Employees felt that they had a voice in the process and felt more confident that management was going to listen and take action. Both hospitals who participated in the MBI interim survey showed meaningful improvement in all categories in the survey. One hospital was identified as one of the Most Improved Hospitals for 2011 based on the percent of change from the previous survey.

The real value in the survey process happens when you take action! To build excitement and keep momentum going, look for ways to avoid the "survey slump". Mid way through the survey cycle, take a quick pulse of how people are doing. Asking a few simple questions such as, "My department leader presented the employee survey results in a complete and open manner" and "I feel action will be taken as a result of the last annual employee survey" can get the action planning process on the right track.

The real value in the survey process happens when you take action!

References

Kraut, Allen I. (Ed), 2006, Getting Action from Organizational Surveys: New Concepts, Technologies, and Applications. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.

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