

# It's Not About Employee Satisfaction

## Dos and Don'ts for Conducting an Employee Engagement Survey

By Bob Kelleher

I usually hear a few gasps in audiences when I announce, “I don’t care about satisfying employees, nor should you!” I don’t believe it is the responsibility of companies to satisfy their employees. You can always throw money or offer the best perks to your employees as a means to boost satisfaction levels. However, the last thing any employer wants or needs are satisfied but underperforming employees, or satisfied employees working in a business that is underperforming.

I believe that employee satisfaction will be an outcome of a great culture, but I don’t believe it should ever be your goal. Engagement should be! I define engagement as “the unlocking of employee potential to drive high performance.” Companies with highly engaged employees have 3.9 times the earnings per share (EPS) growth rate compared to organizations with low engagement scores.<sup>1</sup> It is this linkage between company performance and employee potential that will drive high performance. Companies need to focus efforts on building a mutual commitment between employee and employer—a commitment that is the foundation of employee engagement. Only when this foundation is in place will firms experience the secret sauce of a high performing business—the discretionary effort of employees.

Are your employees currently engaged? Are you capturing their discretionary effort? The latest research by the Corporate Leadership Council is staggering: only 5.9 percent of surveyed employees are giving their employers high levels of discretionary effort.<sup>2</sup> Wow! Are your employees highly engaged? How would you know? As we slowly recover from this deep recession, some enlightened companies are beginning to ask their employees “what do you think?” as they conduct employee engagement surveys.

Employee engagement surveys measure engagement—not satisfaction. I suggest that organizations conduct an employee engagement survey sooner rather than later to gauge your organizational pulse. Studies show that 49 percent of employees are in the process of looking or plan to look for new employment over the next 12 months.<sup>3</sup> At the risk of sounding like an alarmist, the same study reports that 63 percent of your Generation X employees expect to change jobs over the next 12 months.<sup>4</sup> This restlessness will create huge organizational challenges for companies. With many employees, the recession has resulted in smaller pay raises and bonuses, layoffs, reductions in training and development, and fear. This has spawned the era of the “disengaged but staying put” within our ranks. For this reason, it makes sense to determine the engagement levels of your employees sooner than later.

After conducting many surveys over the years for companies large and small, I’d like to share some lessons learned, including successes and non-successes:

**LESSON 1: Do not conduct a survey unless you are convinced your leadership team is committed to listening and acting on feedback.** If you ask your employees what they think and then do nothing with the results, you will foster cynicism and skepticism with your employees. In fact, you’ll be worse off than if you didn’t conduct a survey in the first place.

**LESSON 2: Partner with a consulting firm.** You want the ability to benchmark your results with other companies in your industry, and most survey providers have valuable benchmark data. If you attempt to design and implement an employee engagement survey in-house, you might lose some level of confidentiality (or at least, that is what your employees will fear). A consultant will create a survey that is specific to your organization and also assist with the delivery and roll out of results. There was a point in my career when I was responsible for the HR, OD, and IT functions, and thought I had

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all the in-house technical resources to design and administer our own survey. We did save some external costs—however, these “savings” were more than offset by a huge internal administrative effort internally, diminished trust with our employees, and a lack of credible external benchmark data. Can you say, “penny wise, dollar foolish”? Partnering with a third party is money well spent.

**LESSON 3: Set the stage.** For those companies conducting a follow up survey, I strongly suggest you promote specific actions, successes and progress since the last survey. Of course, if you have a vibrant and effective communications plan since your last survey, you most likely would have been doing this throughout the months since your survey! This communication, summarizing your successes, should be a key part of your overall survey communication plan and be led by your best internal communicators. View this exercise as a terrific branding opportunity—key if you want to capture high employee participation levels.

**LESSON 4: Have a communication plan.** When the results of your survey are summarized, invite your survey consultant be the “deliverer” of the first overview to your top leadership team. He/she will be able to provide the proper context to minimize leadership anxiety—common with senior leadership teams who often take potential “less than positive” results personal. After this meeting, you should be working with your communication team to outline your “next steps” to your employee base. Your consultant can also help you decide your organizational readiness in when to share results with employees. At some point, you will want to communicate both your overall company results and your “next steps,” as you begin to build transparency throughout the communication process with frequent, open, and consistent messages. Your employees need to know their feedback was heard, analyzed, and action is being taken. This will help to build trust and credibility.

**LESSON 5: Establish a cross sectional committee to review overall company results and to make recommendations to management.** This should

be done shortly after your leadership team receives the survey results. The task team should be between 10 to 20 employees (depending on company size) and include an equal mix of leaders (representing leadership) and respected nonmembers of your leadership team (representing your employee base). This diverse team will reinforce the mutual commitment aspect of an engaged culture. The committee will evaluate the company wide survey results and make priority recommendations to the CEO and leadership team. Consider keeping this task team together for a 12 month window to help guide and monitor progress of key initiatives.

**LESSON 6: At a micro level, establish a local cross sectional sub-committee to review local results (departmental, business unit, functional, etc.) and appoint local senior champions.** You will quickly learn that you have some business units, departments, etc. who score significantly better or worse than the average company, and will require an analysis at

the local level, and the establishment of local action plans.

**LESSON 7: Have your local committees adopt a common action plan template and consider posting all plans on your intranet to encourage the sharing of best practices, collaboration, and consistency.** I do not encourage sharing department rankings with all employees—you never want to embarrass a particular department or manager.

**LESSON 8: Keep it simple and execute flawlessly.** The tendency after a survey is to overpromise and under-deliver. If you succumb to this temptation, born of great intentions, you run the risk of creating a skeptical work culture (“they told us they would do *blank* but we’ve seen nothing!”). Also make sure you implement a rigorous priority review process which should include specific budget to adequately fund what the company is committing to. Remember, engagement is not free, and a well thought out engagement action plan will require organizational investments. My experience following a survey is quite

fascinating. Often, the same leaders who were reluctant to endorse a survey at the beginning stages, eventually get caught up in the organizational energy that follows a survey and eagerly want to change the culture overnight. Remember, organizational change is a dimmer switch, not a light switch. Your agreed on recommendations will take time to implement and will be competing with other organizational priorities. A few months after you analyze and implement your action plan, your leaders will be onto something else. An action plan which is too ambitious will create organizational fatigue (e.g. running a great 90 yards in a 100 yard race!). Organizational follow up and follow through will be key in successful implementation—and key in how your employees will judge the success of your survey efforts.

**LESSON 9: Plan for follow up feedback mechanism.** How do you plan to solicit ongoing input from your employees? Your employee engagement survey task team, working in partnership with your HR/OD staff will prove to be an invaluable team to monitor feedback

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while ensuring effective action plan follow up and follow through. I suggest managers include a “survey action plan” agenda item during their regular department meetings for a minimum of six months.

**LESSON 10: Do not commit to another survey for 18 to 24 months.** This can be a controversial suggestion but it is my belief that you need this amount of time to effectively act on the feedback from your last survey, and effectively execute your action plan. It will take time to see results, and if you conduct a follow up survey too soon, it is likely your organization did not have enough time to digest and understand the changes from the previous survey. If you have the need to do a survey at the 12 month window, consider a pulse survey to quickly and inexpensively gauge trends.

**LESSON 11: Invest less in your technology vendor and more in post-survey results.** When I reflect on my lessons learned throughout my career, it is more important to concentrate on the interpretation, action planning, follow up/follow through and communication and branding. It is the execution that should receive more of the budget rather than a survey vendor with expensive bells and whistles. If your employee engagement survey fails, it will not be because of failing to collect the right data. It will be because of your failure to properly interpret the results, poor prioritization, and a lack of action planning and follow up.

During your analysis of your results, most likely you will discover that there are many areas requiring investments

of time and money. Some of these areas will relate to engaging your different generations. Your engagement scores and needs will vary significantly across your different generations and will require careful action planning in order to address these variances. Your engagement scores will also vary by organizational tenure as personal experience and industry trends show that engagement levels differ significantly depending on one’s tenure with the firm. For instance, engagement usually drops after an employee’s first year (employees join organizations with hope and enthusiasm) but after year one, often an employee’s engagement levels drop until year seven. As you analyze your engagement results, and reflect where you want to concentrate your efforts, there is a tremendous opportunity for firms to focus some attention to employees in this valley of despair (tenure between years 1 and 7).

Engagement trends are another important facet to an engagement survey. You should not underestimate the importance of social media and engagement. As you analyze your engagement scores and prioritize your action plans, decide how you are going to build alignment by maximizing the different communication avenues now available to companies. Social media tools such as Twitter, Linked In, Facebook, and YouTube should be leveraged in building your communication and alignment follow up. Social media is not going away, in particular with Gen Y, and the sooner firms embrace these engagement and communication vehicles, the better.

Another topic that should be given consideration in both designing your survey and analyzing your results is the growing importance of CSR (corporate social responsibility) as an engagement driver. Employees want to work for a company that has a purpose and is committed to sustainability. Look for ways to leverage this engagement driver as you build your action plan. Workforce demographic studies and related research increasingly are telling us that CSR can be leveraged in your engagement efforts.

In conclusion, it is vital to link employee engagement to high performance. Remember, this should not be thought about as an initiative to make your employees happy (although that is often a byproduct of engagement), but rather as an initiative to engage your employees in your business—to help drive business success! ■

#### NOTES

1. Gallup, “A Leading Indicator of Financial Performance,” 2010.
2. Corporate Leadership Council, Employee Engagement Trends, July 2010.
3. Deloitte, Managing Talent in a Turbulent Economy, Feb. 2009.
4. Deloitte, Managing Talent in a Turbulent Economy, Feb. 2009.

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