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It’s Not About Employee Satisfaction!

The Do’s and Don’ts of Conducting an Employee Engagement Survey

By Bob Kelleher

I usually hear a few gasps in audience when I announce, “I do not care about satisfying employees, and neither should you!” I do not believe it is the responsibility of companies to satisfy their employees. You can always throw money or offer great perks to your employees as a means to boost satisfaction levels. However, the last thing any employer wants are satisfied but underperforming employees, or satisfied employees working for an underperforming business. I do believe that employee satisfaction will be an outcome of a great culture, but I do not believe it should ever be your goal. Your goal should be engagement!

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.[1] Engagement is the link between company performance and employee potential. 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 collateral benefit of a high performing business – the discretionary effort of employees.

Are your employees fully engaged? Are you capturing their discretionary effort? The latest research by the Corporate Leadership Council is staggering; only 5.9% of surveyed employees are giving their employers high levels of discretionary effort.[2]

How would you know? As we slowly recover from this recession, 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 employee engagement surveys now, to gauge their organizational pulse. Studies show that 49% of employees are in the process of looking for, or planning to look for, new employment over the next 12 months.[3]

The same study reports that 63% of your Generation X employees expect to change jobs over the next 12 months.[4] This restlessness will create significant organizational challenges for companies. For many employees, the recession has resulted in smaller pay raises, the suspension of bonuses, layoffs, reductions in training, and job anxiety. This has spawned the era of the “disengaged but staying put,” within the employee ranks. It makes sense to determine the current engagement levels of your employees.

1 Gallup - “A Leading Indicator of Financial Performance”, 2010
2 Corporate Leadership Council-Quarterly Employee Engagement Trends, July 2010
3 Deloitte – *Managing Talent in a Turbulent Economy*, February, 2009
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Over the years, I have conducted employment surveys for many companies, large and small. I have learned a few lessons.

- **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. In fact, you will be worse off than if you did not 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 may 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.

At one point in my career, I was responsible for the HR, OD, and IT functions, and I believed I had all the in house technical resources to design and administer our own survey. While we did save some external costs, these "savings" were more than offset by a vast internal administrative effort, 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**: Setting the stage. For those companies conducting a follow up survey, I strongly suggest you promote specific actions, successes and progress since the last survey. If you have implemented an effective communications plan since your last survey, you are probably already doing this. This communication, summarizing your successes, should be a key part of your overall survey communication plan, and your best internal communicators should lead it. 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 to present 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 less than positive results personally. After this meeting, work with your communication team to outline the next steps to your employee base. Your consultant can also help you decide the best time 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 with frequent, open, and consistent messages. Assuring your employees their feedback was heard, analyzed, and acted upon, builds a culture of trust and credibility.

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- **Lesson #5**: Establish a cross sectional committee to review overall company results and make recommendations to management. Do this shortly after your leadership team receives the survey results. The task team should be between 10-20 employees (depending on company size) and include an equal mix of leaders and respected non-members 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 12 months, to 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 discover that you have some business units, departments, etc. that score significantly better or worse than the average company, and they may 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 over promise and under deliver. If you succumb to this temptation, you run the risk of creating a skeptical work culture (“they told us they would do __ but we have seen nothing!”) In addition, make sure to implement a rigorous priority review process, including funds to support the survey goals. Remember, engagement is not free, and a well-conceived engagement action plan will require organizational investments.

My experience following a survey is fascinating. Often, the same leaders who were reluctant to endorse a survey at the beginning stages, are caught up in the organizational energy that follows a survey, and want to change company culture overnight. Remember, organizational change is a dimmer switch, not a light switch. Your agreed on recommendations will take time to implement, and they will be competing with other organizational priorities. A few months after you analyze and implement your action plan, your leaders may be on to the “next big thing.” If an action plan is too ambitious, it can create organizational fatigue (e.g. running a great 90 yards in a 100-yard race!) Organizational follow up and follow through are critical to successful implementation, and ultimately how your employees will judge the success of your survey efforts.

- **Lesson #9:** Plan for a 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 a valuable asset monitoring feedback, follow up, and follow through. I suggest managers include a “survey action plan” agenda item during their regular department meetings for a minimum of 6 months.

- **Lesson #10**: Do not commit to another survey for 18-24 months. It is my belief that you need this amount of time to effectively act on the feedback from your last survey, and execute your action plan. It takes time to see results, and if you conduct a follow up survey too soon, your organization may not have had enough time to digest and understand the changes from the previous one. If you need to do a survey at the 12-month window, consider a pulse survey to gauge trends quickly.

- **Lesson 11**: Invest less in your technology vendor and more in post survey results. Concentrate on the interpretation, action planning, follow up/follow through, communication and branding. The execution should receive more of the budget than the vendor. If your employee engagement survey is not successful, the failure will not lie with the collection of data. More likely, the interpretation and prioritization were poor, the action planning was ineffective, or the follow up fell short.

During the analysis of your results, you will likely discover there are many areas requiring investments of time and money. Some of these areas will relate to engaging different generations. Your engagement scores and needs will vary significantly across generations, and careful action planning will be necessary to address these differences.

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 a firm. For instance, engagement usually drops after an employee’s first year (employees join organizations with hope and enthusiasm) but after year one, employee’s engagement levels drop until year seven. As you analyze your engagement results, and decide 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 1-7).

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, Face Book,* and *You Tube,* should be leveraged in building your communication and alignment follow up.

Social media is here to stay, particularly with Gen Y, and you must embrace these communication vehicles to stay relevant.

Another area to consider while designing your survey and analyzing your results, is the growing importance of corporate social responsibility (CSR) as an engagement driver. Employees want to work for a company that is purposeful, 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 tell us that CSR should be leveraged in your engagement efforts.

Final Thoughts* or *In 50 Words or Less
Employee engagement is linked to high performance. Engagement is not an initiative to make your employees happy, although that is often a byproduct, but rather an initiative to engage your employees to drive business results.

About the Author: Bob Kelleher
Bob is the Founder and CEO of The Employee Engagement Group (www.EmployeeEngagment.com), author of the critically acclaimed book, ***Louder Than Words – 10 Practical Steps To Engage Your Employees....and Drive Profitability****, and the soon to be* released, ***Creativeship, A Novel for Evolving Leaders****. Bob is a leading consultant, thought leader and speaker on Employee Engagement, Workforce Trends, and Leadership. He works with leadership teams across the globe and has consulted with or presented to leadership teams across the globe. Having been an internal practitioner for many years, Bob's practical approach and willingness to share his best practices, tools, and processes have helped leaders and organizations in many diverse industries. Before opening his own consulting business, Bob was the Chief Human Capital Officer for AECOM, a Fortune 500 global professional services firm, with 45,000 employees located in 450 offices throughout the world.*