Not Getting Traction on Your Engagement Surveys?

Stop Looking to Technology for Answers

Organizations continue to look for ways to create insights and drive change from their employee surveys. The survey technology is often blamed (directly or indirectly) for not meeting these needs. In reality, the problem isn't that employee survey technology isn't good enough or doesn't have all the latest features. The problem is that many organizations are not focused on those things that will really make a difference.

The evolution (and proliferation) of survey technology over the last 20 years has done wonders to help capture and report employee feedback more quickly, accurately and globally. This in turn has provided organizations with the information they need to make more timely decisions, drive more focused actions and share results more broadly. Because of advancement in survey technologies, they can be conducted more frequently, using a range of structured and unstructured items to include a broader number of topics and leverage self-service functionality, rather than remain dependent on the survey vendor to run the technology.

Yet despite all these technological advances, many organizations continue to struggle with their survey results year after year. Leaders and managers remain unsure of what to do with results, HR feels put upon to drive (read: nag) people to take survey actions, and many of the actions defined are either check-the-box exercises or heavy, convoluted initiatives that don't get off the ground. So how can organizations ensure their employee surveys are providing the insight and ROI needed?

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Start having the right conversations with the right people

Up until about five years ago, most conversations with clients and survey teams centered on how to use the survey process to understand the employee experience, gain insight and drive change. Technology was a useful tool to help support this process, but the focus was on what we wanted to learn and what we could do with that new information.

Today, the conversation often starts with a heavy focus on the technology itself. More time is spent talking about technical bells and whistles and flashy survey dashboards, while any discussion on the process to create useful insights and activate sustainable change feels more like an afterthought, if it is discussed at all – as if the tech can simply solve for everything. The people at the table have shifted as well. More often these discussions around the employee experience or measuring employee engagement are being led by IT and procurement teams, while the HR team and leadership have seemingly left the building.

Technology has become a poor substitute for the real topic we should be discussing -- which is how to best gather information, uncover insights and create a process that helps leaders drive the right priorities in the employee experience that will lead to better business outcomes such as improvements in retention, customer satisfaction, financial performance and the like.

Employee listening efforts should be human-centered rather than technology-focused

Real change comes from aligning to strategy, defining roles, discussing results, evaluating options, following through on a course of action, reviewing the effectiveness of those actions and adjusting them as needed, as well as evaluating impact to determine the next best move forward. These are all human activities, not technological processes. Although they can be supported by technology, no technology can effectively do this on behalf of leaders, managers and team members.

To implement a successful employee listening program, organizations should use a human-centered approach, starting with a strategic conversation to identify the goal of the survey program, who the "end users" of the results are, what process or journey you want to take people on and finally, where you want to be once the cycle is completed.

It is also important to think about how your survey results will be integrated not only across various surveys and employee listening moments you may have, but also with other critical metrics of interest (e.g., turnover, customer satisfaction). This can help to determine what analytics and insights (read: stories) you want to glean from all this data.

Defining this strategy can provide a better sense of the change process needed and chart a clear path for people to follow. This in turn informs what questions the survey(s) should ask, what analyses you need to run, how this information needs to be shared (and at what level), how often you need to do surveys

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(annual versus pulse) and what actions will be needed from there. Once these questions have been answered, you can determine what technologies (or technology features) are needed to support the process.

Without this conversation, organizations may think they are getting the best technology, but miss what they really need. For example, there are organizations that make a significant spend to have access to real-time dashboards and reports that can be pushed out to leaders and managers, only to insist on using simple pre-generated off-line reports "because that is what our leaders really want." They are buying technology that is slick and fast, but then dumbing it down (or side-stepping it entirely) to get what they actually need.

Getting back on the right track

The promising news is that some organizations are starting to have deeper strategy sessions around their employee listening efforts. These conversations are helping break away from the mechanics of how data is collected and reported and moving more into why you are doing this, what should happen and when.

These working sessions have a greater focus on determining what the process should be (versus survey mechanics per usual), opening doors to new measures and analyses that generate the insight and change that the business needs in the current moment and towards its longer-term goals.

To be fair, survey technology will always be, at some level, "table stakes" – but you must keep in mind (and this is true not only of surveys but beyond) that they must be of service to the people involved in the process, not the other way around. When those lines become blurred and organizations start looking at technology as the solution ("This will fix what ails us!"), it will become a losing battle in driving change.

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