

Survey Says

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Running a business can often be a lonely enterprise. Decisions are often made in the vacuum of having no one else to explore the issues with, or are made in the absence of any discussion with trusted advisors, lieutenants, or key employees. Being the leader of a company often means that others are looking for clear direction and certainty on how to proceed in ambiguous times or when there are multiple options available to pursue. Of course, just by being the leader of the company the business owner is quite aware that there are no special powers to see into the future that others are do not have. So the owner of the company is often left to do his or her own research or rely upon gut intuition to decide on various strategic initiatives. Of course, that flies in the face of what many believe is the right way to make some business decisions. Business gurus, pundits, and experts are constantly extolling the virtues of getting closer to customers, really listening to what employees have to say, and leveraging the insights of suppliers to improve the business.

Benefits of Surveys

One of the ways to glean the insight sought to make more informed decisions is for the business owner to conduct or sponsor a survey or to poll others on their perceptions about various business opportunities, commitment to the company, or ideas for improving it. But there is an art and science to using surveys and a proper way to administer them. If not done correctly, it can actually do more harm than good. Dr. Stuart Sidle, Chair of the Psychology and Sociology Departments at University of New Haven, and owner of a small business himself, Sidle & Associates <http://stuartside.com> provides the following three reasons to consider sponsoring

employee surveys:

1. Prevent turnover - by understanding employee opinions and concerns, organizational leaders can be proactive and make changes to reduce or eliminate the negative influencers causing valued employees to consider leaving for other opportunities. Constantly having to replace tenured employees who have an innate understanding of the business, are familiar with the products, services, customers, and share common values is time consuming and expensive and a poor use of time and other resources. Furthermore, even in tough economies when employees aren't actually quitting-dissatisfied employees often become psychologically disengaged. In that case they may be showing up but they may not be engaged enough to bring their best work to the table.
2. Adjust or replace ineffective programs - companies devote time and money on employee training and development programs that may not be effective. Surveys can be a great tool to get feedback on how to improve these types of programs. Or, when resources are tight, to figure out what training and development programs are needed the most.
3. Motivate employees to commit to change efforts - companies that are effective at adapting to a changing environment rely heavily on feedback. Some managers mistakenly think that they are getting authentic input from their employees. In reality, they are only hearing from a few loud employees (the angry mob) or from sycophants who will tell them what they want to hear. Formalizing the feedback process through survey instruments will provide organizational leaders with essential feedback that will help them be more effective managers in a changing environment.

Dr. Sidle advises that there are different ways to go

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about collecting information through a survey methodology. At times he has used standard questionnaires that most people are familiar with having at one time or another completed a paper and pencil or online version of a series of questions. At other times he has employed techniques such as focus groups or structured interviews where there is more observation and/or interaction with those being surveyed. And still other times he will mix or create a hybrid approach that incorporates both the questionnaire and focus groups to distill even greater insights.

When to Avoid Using A Survey

When asked about some of the ways that he has seen surveys being misused, Dr. Sidle pointed to the following two caveats:

1. If a company cannot provide an appropriate environment for an employee to answer the survey then it may be a waste of time and resources to conduct a survey. This means ensuring that the employees have a place where they can respond to the questions without fear that someone is looking over their shoulder. And this also includes having the resources for the employee to complete the survey. For example, if it is an online survey-Do employees have access to a computer? If it is a paper and pencil survey-do employees have a place to write their answers and time to complete it?
2. Another concern to keep in mind is that too many surveys can add to information overload and frustration. For example, if in-boxes are being filled daily with evaluation forms from every program and department employees may start to ignore the requests to participate. And if there are too many surveys and management does not have the time to analyze and respond to the data employees may start to feel frustrated that they constantly complete

surveys and hear no response or notice any improvement.

Having some experiences with using surveys in my own consulting practice, I can echo that management does itself a great disservice when it solicits input or feedback and then does not at minimum provide some communication back to the respondents about the survey. By virtue of sending a survey out to be completed, anticipation is raised that management is prepared to react or do something. If management does not close the loop by communicating back to employees what their findings were, what actions they are prepared to take (and what they are unable or unwilling to do and why), and when various actions will begin; the employees are left to feel as if no one cares and their opinions or insights are not valued.

Doing It Right

Of course, designing a survey is not as simple as asking some questions and tallying the results of how many people answered one way and how many answered another. Dr. Sidle cautions that, "Surveys are significantly more difficult to construct than most people think. That is why it is useful to leverage survey experts to help. Good employee surveys have thoughtful, clear questions that are easy for the respondents to answer. To determine relevant questions organizational leaders need to be clear on what they want to know. And a survey is useless if it does not have a good response rate (you don't only want to hear from a few employees with an extreme opinion). To ensure a good response rate the survey should not frustrate the respondent by being too long or too difficult to answer. It can be very difficult to answer questions that are filled with hard to understand jargon or that require respondents to have access to information that is not readily available. Finally, not only is it

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hard to write clear questions it is also difficult to write questions that are free from bias. You don't want to ask questions that lead the respondent to answer in a certain way."

Again, in my own consulting practice I have often seen surveys that ask for two responses in one question. For example, a question that is phrased, "Does your boss provide you with good feedback and challenging opportunities?" raises problems in that what if only one applies (I am provided challenging opportunities but do not receive any feedback)? How is the respondent to answer? How is the reply to be scored? Being able to phrase survey questions is definitely something that requires some rigorous work in order to ensure the answers received are usable and meaningful.

Other Hints

Finally, Dr. Sidle provides some things the business owner should consider when deciding to use a survey to uncover insights:

1. The survey should be piloted or trial tested before administration. Many times mistakes, language issues or bias are not noticed when proofing the instrument.
2. It is essential that leaders of the organizational show support for the survey. Respondents are more likely to answer a survey when they hear from their leaders that this is an important process.
3. Prepaid monetary incentives work to improve response rates-providing a small treat with the survey- a dollar, a candy, and a free coffee coupon tends to increase response rates.
4. As previously mentioned, senior leaders should

communicate what they learned from the results and what they will do moving forward in light of the survey results. If employees never hear a response to a survey then it becomes harder to get a strong response rate in the future.

While we all recall the game show, Family Feud, where families had to guess at the answers in a survey; Dr. Sidle's experience with surveys indicate that removing the guesswork from surveys is a much better way to go about identifying critical information needed to move the business forward.

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David Zahn is a serial entrepreneur and consultant to Fortune 100 businesses (www.zahnconsulting.com) as well as entrepreneurial startups (www.startupbuilder.com). His books, "How To Succeed As An Independent Consultant, 4th Ed.," and "The Quintessential Guide To Using Consultants" are frequently cited by other authors and have been used as textbooks in college and MBA classes.

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