

Surveys...

the good, the bad and the ugly

Jill Flint-Taylor looks at some of the more useful aspects of workplace surveys and suggests that sometimes the results can raise more questions than they answer



Bear in mind the difficulty of comparing responses from survey results that may seem similar, but are subtly different in meaning



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Have you been surveyed recently? Did you welcome the opportunity to express your views and find out how people are feeling in your organisation? Or did you groan at the thought of another questionnaire to complete and another set of results to respond to?

It's now standard for most large public sector organisations to conduct an annual survey of employees' opinions. In some cases, this process is managed in a way that makes a significant contribution to organisational performance as well as to employee engagement and wellbeing. In others, the exercise is seen as a waste of time by many and brings little or no benefit in terms of organisational performance.

What makes the difference? One of the first points may seem obvious, but definitely needs emphasising – don't over-survey your team or organisation, or you'll almost certainly end up with survey fatigue. At the organisational level, this means taking a strategic perspective and ensuring a coordinated approach. So, for example, organisations may run a full employee survey once a year, supplemented by a shorter "pulse" survey going out to a smaller sample of employees with a few key questions.

As always, it's important to find the right balance for your context and in some organisations tension arises when the team often referred to as the "survey police" blocks even the most potentially beneficial attempts to run additional surveys on specific issues such as stress or diversity. Yet there may be a very strong case for additional, organisation-wide surveys.

For example, the recent Foresight review of mental capital and wellbeing recommended that all organisations run regular wellbeing audits. Anyone who has been responsible for considering risks to wellbeing and engagement will know that these more detailed and focused audits are an essential complement to the broad-brush approach of the annual survey, which has to cover so many other issues.

But is it possible to run a wellbeing audit that delivers value to the organisation every year? Probably not. Experience suggests that the best results are obtained by running this type of survey every two to three years. This allows time for results to be analysed and interventions to be designed and implemented. After all, these surveys are supposed to drive actions that improve working life.

This brings me to another obvious principle that can be very difficult to follow in practice – survey results must be properly understood and used to guide real change and improvement. The key here is to link the results to long-term, strategic objectives and organisational performance by identify-

ing baseline measures and tracking them to evaluate progress. At the end of the day what counts is real, observable improvement.

If your organisation is taking a coordinated, strategic approach this puts you in a better position to explore and make use of survey results. However, think carefully about how to do this. There are some powerful online survey tools these days and this can be both good and bad. Tools can be valuable in gathering further insights in a safe and confidential way after a full survey, but consider if this is the right approach for you.

For example a survey result may raise more questions than it answers and your own informal survey may seem a good way to open up this issue. But consider whether you could get a better result by engaging your team in helping you to understand the result and explore possible solutions and actions. The risk of setting up another survey is that it will delay the move from diagnosis to action.

And bear in mind the difficulty of comparing responses from survey results that may seem similar, but are subtly different in meaning and rely on normative comparisons for accurate interpretation.

Another key aspect is giving due consideration to what is being measured. Not surprisingly, a core set of issues is addressed by almost all employee surveys, with changes to reflect current challenges and objectives.

So, for example, over the past couple of years we have seen an emphasis on employee engagement, achieved both through the branding of the survey and the addition of items to form an "engagement lens".

From a manager's perspective it can be difficult to cut through these changing patterns to recognise core themes that need to be addressed and evaluated over the longer term. Responding to specific, problem items in a particular survey is one thing, but if you want to use annual survey results to influence your leadership style and approach it can be helpful to identify a set of core themes that you recognise and consider to be important for your area. This is informed by your own values as a leader and those of your organisation, both of which can provide a consistent context.

Many organisations facilitate this by ensuring that certain items are retained over a number of years. I would encourage you, however, to spend some time working on it yourself. Probably the most important way you can maximise the benefit from the survey approach is to engage actively to make it work for you – and, of course, for your staff.

● Download Robertson Cooper's Wellbeing Report 2009/10 at www.robertsoncooper.com