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Employee Surveys: A Strategic Organizational Tool

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Employee research is a strategic tool organizations have at their disposal to improve organizational effectiveness, expand the commitment of their workforce, manage change and optimize organizational processes. This paper provides an overview of some of the reasons that make employee surveys such a critical instrument for organizational decision-makers. Three areas are examined: the impact of HR practices, managing organizational change, and team processes.

Perceptions of HR Practices. Substantial research indicates that human resources practices can positively affect an organization's performance (e.g., Chang, 2005; Becker & Huselid, 1998; Delaney & Huselid, 1996; Huselid, 1995; MacDuffie, 1995; Arthur, 1994). For example, training and investing in employee skills, sharing performance-related information with employees, and ensuring employee well-being have been found to improve employee attitudes and organizational effectiveness (Arthur, 1994).

Importantly, empirical studies suggest that employee attitudes are affected not only by HR practices but also by how employees perceive such practices (Chang, 1999; Gartner & Nollen, 1989). For example, recent research indicates that employees' perceptions of HR practices affect their feelings of procedural justice within the organization as well as their level of organizational commitment (Chang 2005). As indicated by these findings, organizations need to cultivate positive attitudes among their employees, as such attitudes are prerequisite to the acquisition of a truly committed, engaged, and dedicated workforce.

Given the criticality of monitoring and gauging employee perceptions, employee opinion surveys cannot be neglected. By conducting thorough and credible surveys, organizations can achieve a positive level of dialogue with their employees, identify areas of dissatisfaction, and gather important feedback to design corrective interventions.

Managing Change. Employee surveys play even more critical a role in times of change. Recent research (Eilam & Shamir, 2005) suggests that employees resist organizational change when change threatens their work-related self-concept, and specifically their sense of self-determination, self-distinctiveness, self-enhancement and self-continuity. According to these findings, organizational change that is perceived by employees as disabling their ability to express their values and identities, and preventing them from maintaining and enhancing their sense of self-esteem and self-worthiness, generates resistance and job dissatisfaction.

In a related fashion, research also suggests that organizational changes such as mergers and acquisitions may be a significant source of anxiety (e.g., Rentsch & Schneider, 1991; Buono & Bowditch, 1989), as employees cope with the uncertainty that accompanies them by envisioning worst-case scenarios for their job and career. Similarly, resistance to change may derive from cultural clashes and/or a strong desire to maintain one's own cultural identity (e.g., Elsass and Veiga, 1994).

Finally, changes may lead to role conflict (Katz and Kahn, 1978) by creating ambiguous and conflicting demands within the organization (e.g., duplication of reports, incompatible priorities, etc.). Any combination of these psychological processes is prone to generating unwanted outcomes such as low productivity, self-centered behaviors, sense of loss, denial and refusal of change, acculturative stress and resistance, and low job satisfaction (Seo & Hill, 2005).

Because organizational change can exert a powerful and subtle impact on the workforce, organizations should be particularly proactive when managing it. To this purpose, employee surveys represent a strategic tool that enables organizational decision-makers to understand, for example, how employees perceive the changes being implemented, and whether such changes are viewed as a source of self-empowerment or as a pending threat to employees' work-related

identity. Being a tool that creates virtual dialogue, when properly developed and targeted, employee surveys yield a very important by-product, that is a more positive and self-relevant framework for the change process from the perspective of the workforce. In this regard, employee surveys can be a medium to investigate employee perceptions, but also an outlet for employees' anger, resistance, and dissatisfaction.

Increasing the Effectiveness of Teamwork. Because today's organizations rely more and more on synergies and teamwork, employee surveys can also be a strategic tool in pursuing the goal of increased intra-organizational synergies and cooperation. Applebaum and Blatt (1994) estimated that in 1990 47% of large U.S. companies had implemented teamwork interventions. This is not surprising as empirical evidence suggests that work teams can significantly contribute to the success of an organization. For example, Macy and Izumi (1993) found that the creation of work teams is among those organizational interventions that can have the greatest positive impact on indicators of financial performance.

If we view teams as semi-autonomous social systems capable of varying levels of effectiveness (Hackman, 2002, 1990, 1987), then we can also identify essential components to their success. In this regard, task design, team composition and core norms of conducts as well as the degree of support that the organizational structure provides (e.g., reward systems, information systems, communications processes, etc.) have been proposed as key features of team effectiveness (Wageman, Hackman, & Lehman, 2005).

Research suggests (Wageman et al., 2005) that teamwork effectiveness can be accurately diagnosed by capturing critical dimensions such as team boundaries, team goals, team skills, team task design, etc. A strategic and well thought-out survey intervention can provide meaningful insights as to what works/doesn't work in a team dynamic, paving the road, among other things, to informed coaching interventions, should these latter be needed. Because teams are social systems embedded in larger social systems, they present a level of complexity that may escape any superficial level of analysis. The scientific use of surveys, which is today supported by empirical research, advanced technology and sophisticated applications, enables organizational decision-makers in a unique way, providing them with an in-depth perspective of how teams operate and interact with the rest of the organization.

Conclusions. Employee surveys have both wide scope and high relevance in the achievement of organizational success. As the current paper points out, an effective employee survey, that is, a research intervention specifically tailored to provide insights into certain strategic and operational areas, represents an invaluable and multipurpose tool in the process of gathering information, providing voice and establishing scientific measurement and analyses of organizational processes that need monitoring, support and improvement over time.

While the scope of employee surveys is vast in latitude, the actual development of any employee survey should conform to four specific criteria: accuracy, reliability, relevance and validity. Accuracy refers to the survey's ability to capture the areas of investigation that need to be addressed. In this regard, a survey is an accurate investigative tool to the extent to which it is able to target key areas and variables. Survey accuracy is not only a function of content, but also of how content is covered, including the latitude of open-end responses survey takers are allowed.

Reliability refers to whether the survey provides dependable measurement; for example, measurement that is consistent over time, or measurement that is free from error (e.g., social desirability, etc.). Relevance refers to the survey's ability to produce action-oriented results. In this respect, the relevance of a survey greatly depends on the degree to which the survey is driven by clear goals and it is used as a strategic organizational tool. Finally, validity refers to whether the survey can inform organizational interventions so as to exert a meaningful impact on the problem areas and/or dimensions being measured.

Any employee survey can be evaluated along the four dimensions discussed above. Although the assembling of surveys seems to be fairly obvious and straightforward, compliance with all four criteria is quite challenging, suggesting that effective employee surveys are indeed the outcome of scientific knowledge and insightful creativity.

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