

Employee Engagement Surveys: The Newspaper Is Never The Whole Story

By David Irvine, Best-Selling Author and Leader's Navigator

I'm not against employee engagements surveys. I'm just not in favor of our over-reliance on them for an accurate picture of what's really going in a culture. Reading your employee engagement surveys is like reading a newspaper or watching the news. It's interesting, there's an element of truth in them, but it's not the whole picture. It's a small spectrum of what's happening. You get a sense of what's going on, but you always have to go further if you want an accurate picture. There are very reputable organizations, like Hewitt Associates for example, that help provide a rigorous outside perspective of your culture. Here are some suggestions for using surveys more effectively and appropriately:

1. While thorough surveys (like Hewitt) provide excellent data and get you started with a snap shot of your culture, don't rely on surveys alone to do the job. You also have to get out of your office, wander around, and be in touch with people. Ask people how they're doing. Ask people what they need. Then listen to what they're saying. If you use the excuse that "people aren't honest with you when you do that," that's a good indication you haven't been out of your office enough to build trust. To be committed to culture, leaders need to be out of their office about half of the time or they just aren't leading.

2. Shorten your surveys. People are getting surveyed out. I've seen employees answer low because they are angry about having to do so many surveys! Dr. Theresa M. Welbourne (www.eepulse.com) is designing employee engagement and 360 Feedback surveys that take three minutes to complete. I believe that you can get pretty much all the information you need in about three minutes to give you a picture. Dr. Welborne might just be on to something.

3. You don't have to survey everyone to get an accurate picture. Television ratings are not determined by calling every single person watching TV. Pick a good cross section of people to survey and give people a break. Switch it up so you aren't surveying the same people every time you hand out a survey.

4. Don't mistake *climate* for *culture*. Climate is how people feel about the organization and their work (what you get from an employee engagement survey). Culture is what *causes* them to feel that way. Employee engagement surveys may tell you what the climate is, but they don't necessarily get the culture. Every culture has both the "visible" culture and the "real" culture. The real culture is what people talk about when the boss isn't there. What if we could build a level of trust that people would

have the same conversation – whether you're there or not. You can only get the real culture by getting into the cafeteria and the hallways and listen to what's going on, and more importantly, *why* it's going on.

5. Never ask a question about something you don't know how to fix and you aren't prepared to fix. Every survey question implies a promise that you are going to take action based on the answers you get. And if you break that promise, things will get ugly. I like Mark Murphy's (Leadership IQ) experiment as an example of how this works. Tonight at home, make some popcorn. Then ask your spouse if they want some and when they say "yes" just ignore them. Now multiply that by a few thousand and you'll see what we're talking about. Don't use surveys to abdicate leadership accountabilities. You must live your values, and have a way to ensure that this happens at every level of your organization. Your actions as leaders define your culture more than your value statements do. Actions really do speak louder than words. The goal is to get your actions and your value statements aligned. The more you connect with people and really listen to what they say in a variety of ways, the greater your chances of bringing your claim and your reality into alignment.

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