



# The Hypocrisy of Employee Surveys: A Closer Look at the True Impact

Organizations of all sizes use employee attitude surveys to gauge employee satisfaction, engagement, or work-life happiness in some way. Administering employee attitude surveys requires a significant investment of time and money, but organizations hope that the return on this investment will be a clearer understanding of how employees feel about the organization and what changes are required to make meaningful improvements.

However, is this hoped-for return a myth or reality? Working with organizations over the years, we have noticed a predictable and routine disconnect between (1) senior-level managers and human resource personnel and (2) the rank and file manager/supervisor/employee base regarding the worthiness and utility of employee attitude surveys. On one hand, most everyone agrees that the data in general is *good to know*. Beyond that, a significant disparity exists in regards to the accuracy and utility of the results. Considering such a heavy investment of money and time, we need to take a closer look at the reality of employee attitude surveys.

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## Perceptions of Value: Out of Touch?

In the recent survey conducted with our partner, HRmarketer, 45% of respondents felt the survey their organization was using had *little or no value* for managers or employees while only 24.5% felt there was value in the surveys. Even more significant was the perception of the executive and vice president-level respondents. Of the senior management group, 48% reported the surveys they used were *highly valuable* while only 19% of all other responders felt the same. This disparity can have negative implications as the rank and file may come to perceive that the senior people are out of touch with reality. This may result in disillusionment with senior management and hinder commitment and engagement in the workplace.

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## Honest and Accurate Data: Not Really

In regards to our questions about whether employee attitude surveys provide an honest and accurate employee assessment of the organization, about 48% of all respondents felt the surveys did *not* provide an honest and accurate employee assessment, compared to only

31% who did. When research uncovers a 48% belief that an instrument is not honest or accurate, some critical attention is required.

Again we find a similar disparity between the perceptions of the senior-level respondents and all others. We noted that 52% percent of senior-level respondents felt the surveys provided a *very accurate* employee assessment, yet 52% of all other respondeents said the survey data they received was *absolutely not or only somewhat accurate*. We can certainly predict that it is highly unlikely managers will take the survey results seriously, or take action for improvement, when the rank and file believes the data is dishonest or inaccurate. This issue further leads to conflict between senior levels and the rank and file—senior levels push for improvement in the scores while managers and supervisors covertly resist acting on data they believe is inaccurate or even untrue.

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## Who Responds?

We find these surveys are typically administrated either to everyone in the organization collectively, or to a random sampling of employees with no specific target in mind. There is sufficient data regarding attitude surveys to predict that most employees who take the time to respond fall into two categories—very displeased or very satisfied—with the very displeased group far more likely to respond than any other. This has the effect of distorting reality for those receiving the data and, unfortunately, does not uncover important information that could make an improved difference in management practices. It would seem prudent to be more tactical when administering attitude surveys by considering questions like:

1. Who do we really want to hear from regarding what it takes to create a satisfied workplace? Everyone? If so, why everyone?
2. Shouldn't employees have some degree of care and concern for the organization and other co-workers to provide meaningful and realistic assessments?
3. To whom are we targeting our management practices? Poor performers? Good performers? The “average” performer, whoever that is?

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## Using the Data

Perhaps the most alarming feedback from our survey was that most managers and supervisors did not have any idea how to use the data to improve future performance. The results confirmed what we have heard and known anecdotally for years—58% of all respondents stated that the

employee attitude survey data *does not or only slightly helps* managers know what behaviors or practices to change in order to positively influence future survey results. Once again, the senior level respondents see this same issue in a more favorable light than other respondents—30% of them reporting the survey data *consistently* helped managers, while only 17% of all other respondents felt the same.

When receivers of the data are required to improve their scores and yet, at the same time, can't determine the specific behaviors and management practices that influence the score, we can predict that they will feel frustrated and cynical. This, in turn, leads to a further disconnect between the reality of the manager/supervisor world and the perceived reality at the senior level.

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## Moving the Needle

Let's go back to the beginning. The overarching purpose of employee attitude surveys is to uncover important issues that, if addressed effectively, will improve the culture of the organization, the quality of work-life for employees, and overall business results. With that goal in mind, our survey results report that approximately 47% of all respondents agree that survey metrics remain flat over time and another 30% report that the results only *somewhat* change. This begs the question of why an organization would continue to use an engagement, satisfaction, or attitude survey with no clear-cut strategy for effecting positive change.

We clearly see a connection between the perceived lack of survey effectiveness and the lack of score improvement over time. We also see a correlation between the perception of the value and accuracy of the survey data and future scores remaining flat. When people (1) don't value the process, (2) don't believe in the honesty and accuracy of the data provided, and (3) can't identify the critical influencers that are driving the scores, little if any action—except what is mandated from above—will take place. And even that action will be carried out with compliance—not commitment—guaranteeing a less-than-desirable result.

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## Metric Scales

Our report revealed that the five-point scale was the most predominately used scale for employee attitude surveys. The seven- and three-point scales were also used, albeit not as widely. The 10-point scale was the least-used scale to represent the survey results.

*“Never confuse activity with accomplishment.”*

—John Wooden

## Recommendations

1. Senior managers should take a long, hard look at their engagement surveys and consider whether they are truly accomplishing their purpose. What is the return on investment for the current approach? Is it just a “tick the box” event to satisfy the needs of HR or senior management? Or is the information being received seriously by the rank and file and providing useful information for improvement?
2. Specifically define what you want to learn from the data. Narrow the focus to ensure the questions are designed to articulate the behaviors and practices that influence the organization’s desired outcomes. This means giving specific definitions to terms like *engagement*, *satisfaction*, *happy employee*, and the like.
3. Put rigor into the design of the questions. This requires knowing the difference between “lagging indicators” (Lags) and “leading indicators” (Leads). Lags are the resultant opinions/judgments of an event or situation that have taken place. All too often survey questions are asking employees lag questions. A typical question we often see is:

*“Would you recommend this organization to friends and family members as a good place to work?”*

This is a lag question. It prompts an opinion or judgment from the respondent, but reasons or causes that influenced the answer are not provided. This leaves the manager or supervisor guessing how to address the problem.

The result of lag questions is a quantified score of another’s opinion or judgment with no information regarding the event or situation that created the opinion or level of satisfaction. Providing a manager or supervisor with employee opinions/judgments without providing the underlying “why” sends the manager or supervisor on a scavenger hunt, searching for solutions to the lag measure. Trying to solve a problem without knowing what caused it in the first place, can lead to wrong issues being addressed and perhaps even worsen the situation. This is a primary reason why survey results remain flat over time.

4. Design effective lead questions. Leads are the situations, events or practices that significantly influence the lags (opinions/judgments regarding satisfaction). Obviously, to develop effective lead questions, we need to be clear on what lags you are attempting to measure. For example:

*“My manager takes timely corrective action with employees who are not performing well.”*

Effective lead questions tell you if the goal or objective is being influenced in a positive or negative manner. Lag questions only tell you how well the goal or objective was achieved. This is a critical distinction. Obviously, if an employee feels that their manager “takes timely corrective action with employees who are not performing well” they are more likely to feel better about “recommending this organization to friends and family members as a good place to work.” The first is within the manager’s control, the second is not.

A lead question tells the manager what they need to work on to influence the ultimate, positive lag. It is difficult to do anything about lag scores without understanding the leads that influence them. Lead measures are easier to influence, and provide managers and supervisors with definable actions to improve the issues the survey is addressing.

5. What creates improvement? This question has been thoroughly researched by Dr. Anders Ericsson of Florida State University. The ultimate answer is “deliberate practice.” In order to engage in deliberate practice, people must be able to identify the vital behaviors that influence desirable outcomes. Without such identification, there is a lot of activity with very little improvement or accomplishment.

Determine vital behaviors to design lead questions. The breakthrough research from influence experts such as Dr. Ethna Reid is that improvement and change come from focusing on just a few vital behaviors.

Survey results usually do a very poor job of identifying the vital behaviors managers need to change to improve quality of work-life and overall business results. Without such information, management often runs off in search of answers to solve employee satisfaction issues, implementing any tactic that comes to mind.

- a. Determine what behaviors and practices will drive your desired outcomes—quality of work-life, engagement, satisfaction, productivity, overall business results, etc.
  - b. Use those behaviors and practices to design “leading indicator” questions that give managers and supervisors specific feedback on what they can do to effect relevant and appropriate improvement in the organization.
6. Consider using a 10-point scale for attitude surveys. While other scales can and will work, research by the Bain Company, and others, have shown clear and practical advantages to the 10-point scale.

*“It’s not enough to do your best; you must know what to do, and THEN do your best.”*

—Edward Deming

- a. It is more intuitive for the respondent. People can easily relate to what value the 10-point scale is providing—think of 90% as an A and 80% to 90% as a B, and so on.
- b. Most people already think in units of ten; for example, consider scores in gymnastics (“a perfect 10”). The 10-point scale can provide a more accurate and specific assessment of an issue.
- c. This scale format decreases perfection bias. A predictable number of people never give the top score for a variety of reasons. With the 10-point scale, the score of nine is weighted as equally as a ten, allowing for recognition of top performance.
- d. The 10-point scale provides an early warning when a past score of ten drops to a nine. Action can be taken with minimal impact.
- e. This scale decreases transposition difficulties. A predictable number of people will provide a score of one when they intend to provide a five or a seven—think of “1” as being the best or #1.
- f. The 10-point scale has been proven to be less susceptible to score inflation.

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## Summary

Our findings tell us that much more rigor and attention are required. The search for valid information for organizational improvement requires a significant investment. Conducting employee attitude surveys solely for the sake of having one creates unintended consequences that make conducting them more harmful than helpful. Our research indicates a less-than-effective use of these surveys aligning with our anecdotal evidence from the past several years.

The rank and file often feel these surveys are inaccurate or untrue. They are provided with information that does not tell them what to change—only that people are dissatisfied—and they wind up “chasing the score.”

Finally, it seems that senior-level management live in a “happier world” relative to the rank and file when it comes to the value and usefulness of employee attitude surveys.

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## About Impact Achievement Group

Impact Achievement Group is a training and performance management consulting company that provides assessments, coaching, story-based interactive workshops, and simulations for managers at all levels of organizations worldwide. Impact Achievement Group helps companies

dramatically improve management and leadership competency for bottom-line results. Company experts Rick Tate and Julie White, Ph.D. are internationally recognized authorities in leadership development, human performance, customer-focused business strategies and workplace communications.

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