

Steering by Assessments: Using Employee Feedback to Guide Future Plans

Democracy is the only system capable of reflecting the humanist premise of equilibrium or balance. The key to its secret is the involvement of the citizen.

John Ralston Saul

It's a great time to engage a positive outlook on the future of our organizations. Although the economy still has its ups and downs, it's at least slightly more stable than we can say about the past few years. It's time to find a way back to growth. Regardless of sector, in order to thrive, it's necessary to build a plan for growth. Finding the time to take inventory and strategize for a new way and a new day is an important place to start. A formal assessment is a great way to do just that.

What our clients are saying:

- *It feels like we're stuck, not moving forward.*
- *People aren't willing to think out side of the box or engage with moving the organization forward.*
- *I'm afraid to ask people what they want because we can't give them anything.*
- *Morale seems to be really low and it's impacting our ability to serve clients and do business well.*
- *I don't even know where to start.*

A first step in making a plan to move forward is to take inventory. What tools do you have? What is your staffing like? What is the motivation and morale level of the workplace? What needs to be developed or refined to get all systems to "go?" What are your core capabilities and what are the strengths of the current workforce?

Many variables need to be assessed to make a plan that can capitalize on the resources available. But taking the time to make an assessment and build a plan that incorporates strengths, amends challenges and sticking points, and engages the workplace in cultivating success will ensure growth and make for a great place to work! Enlisting employees in gathering the information will provide them with a sense of contribution and ownership. It will also ensure the critical insight that is needed to have a clear understanding of the state of the organization is obtained.

"I like to think that a lot of managers and executives trying to solve problems miss the forest for the trees by forgetting to look at their people -- not at how much more they can get from their people or how they can more effectively manage their people. I think they need to look a little more closely at what it's like for their people to come to work there every day."

Gordon Bethune, Continental Airlines

Steps to obtain and utilize employee feedback:

1. When is it a good time to seek feedback?

It's common to get "stuck" on this very question. It feels scary to solicit feedback. Customary fears are:

- Not wanting to hear the negatives you think you're going to hear.
- Not feeling like anything can be done to "fix" the issues that may arise.
- Having a bad track record in terms of not following through on previous feedback.
- Not having time or resources to obtain feedback or make plans based on feedback.

The good news is there are two simple rules that are helpful for determining when it's a good time to seek feedback:

1. Ensure there are resources to plan for obtaining feedback and conducting the assessment work.
2. Ensure the executive team is on board with receiving the feedback and incorporating it into organizational planning efforts.

Beyond those two simple rules, it's always a good time to seek feedback! But it is important to ensure there will be follow through. Those who provide input need to know they were heard, even if their particular feedback won't be utilized in a formal plan or solution.

In our experience, what you think you'll hear will likely be confirmed, but you'll get a lot of bonus points for seeking feedback – and that will go a LONG way in terms of motivation and morale.

"Employees will only complain or make suggestions three times on the average without a response. After that they conclude that if they don't keep quiet they will be thought to be troublemakers or that management doesn't care."

Peter Drucker

2. How do I go about getting input from employees?

Having a solid plan for how feedback will be obtained is the first step in ensuring the efforts are executed well and will be successful. It is a good idea to start by engaging the support of some key stakeholders in the organization. Designate an executive sponsor, assign a project manager, and create a small committee of individuals who represent the organization. Together, there are several things that need to be identified:

- What type of questions do you want to ask/know the answers to?
- What is the format for obtaining input; in person, on the phone, focus groups, via email/electronic survey format or a combination of formats?
- What tool(s) will be used for gaining feedback – a formal assessment, an online tool, design informal questions to be asked in person, purchase an assessment and employ consulting support?

Once the questions and the tools are selected the plan begins to form. The next step is to create a timeline with clear milestones and a communication plan for encouraging participation. It is also critical that efforts are made to keep feedback and comments anonymous and the intent to do so is communicated to all participants.

3. How do I conduct an assessment?

In cases when the assessment is conducted in a variety of formats – such as interviews as well as an online survey, it is important to be open about the rationale for such decisions. Everyone should feel they have a chance for their voice to be heard.

The phases for conducting the assessment are as follows:

1. Communicate the assessment and intentions (email, meeting, all-hands event, etc) in a variety of formats. Engage the “committee” and management to spread the word and encourage participation
2. Begin conducting the assessment and collection of feedback – be clear about deadlines
3. Send reminders about final opportunities to provide input
4. Closure of assessment – appreciation for participation, plans for sharing the feedback, and plans for moving forward with the input received

4. I have all this information, now what do I do with it?

Often it is overwhelming to see the amount of ideas and information received from seeking feedback. The first step to making sense of it all is to create themes – identify the thoughts/ideas that occurred the most frequently. Those are shared by the most individuals so will likely have the biggest impact when responded to.

- Prioritize the feedback by frequency of occurrence and then ability to respond to it
- Create a summary to put all the key takeaways into a succinct format
- Engage the leadership team in filtering through high points, low points, and where to invest some energy
- Create sub-committees (with an assigned executive sponsor) to work through the items that can have an impact on the workplace or the organization’s ability to grow and make a plan for utilizing the feedback in planning efforts
- Involve the leadership and management teams in building these plans into the larger organizational strategies
- Leverage the findings to engage managers with their staff. They can continue the “conversation” in team meetings, performance reviews, casual conversation and bring it back to the leadership team as a great way to dialogue about moving the organization forward

Gaining the input of the workplace and using it to plan for a new future is a perfect way to engage employees. An employee who has a voice and is heard is an engaged employee.

If an employee is engaged, it means that they feel they have a stake in the outcome - an honest desire to contribute to something greater than themselves, or even monetary gain.

Richard Gorham

What not to do:

- Seek feedback from only a “special” few individuals. Assessments are a great way to engage all employees and let everyone feel that they play a role in making the organization successful. It’s critical that everyone feel they have an opportunity to provide input. If they feel left out, they will more than likely undo the positive energy by voicing their negative feelings.
- Use formal assessments as the only way to solicit input or “hear” employees. It’s important to cultivate a culture that is open for feedback all the time. Employee input is a valuable resource. Often their ideas and thoughts can make the difference in serving the customers, reducing costs, and increasing revenues.
- Obtain feedback and do nothing with it!

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