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Get the Most from Your Employee Research (October 2010)

You are running a great organization, one that everyone wants to be a part of. Or are you? An effective way to tell is to survey your company's employees. Doing so will enable you to find out what is working well for the organization, and also what improvements can be made. How do you ensure that employees participate? Here we touch on a few ways that will help you increase your response rate and get the most value from your research.

★ Involve the Top

Consider involving the head of your organization to generate interest in an upcoming survey program. You can accomplish this by inserting your CEO's signature into a company-wide memo or email letter or by having him/her make an appearance at staff or departmental meetings to personally invite employees to take part. It is important to show a top-level commitment to the survey effort.

★ Spread the Word

Awareness is critical to the success of an employee survey. Prior to launching your survey, be sure to get the word out. Word of mouth is one of the easiest and most effective ways of advertising, so be sure to publicize the survey program and get people talking. You want to make sure that employees are aware of the upcoming survey administration and that their input is an important factor in making a difference within the organization. There are a variety of relatively easy ways to help spread awareness:

- ★ Insert notices in employee paychecks
- ★ Send an inter-office memo
- ★ Announce it in a staff meeting
- ★ Post information on your company's Intranet or bulletin board
- ★ Mention it in an employee newsletter

★ Invite

For online surveys, organizations often choose email as the primary means to invite their employees to participate. Sending out email invitations is relatively inexpensive and reaches a large number of people quickly. However, knowing your audience is crucial to a successful email send. Pay careful attention to the best time for your organization's survey administration period. You want to make sure that as many employees as possible are given the chance to participate, and that they are aware of the administration period (i.e. start date and end date). Be careful not to schedule administration when a large number of your employees are on paid time off (vacation, holiday periods, maternity leave, etc.). You may also want to avoid scheduling during your organization's "busy season" or on "busy days." Avoid sending email invitations on Fridays when employees may push it aside and forget about it in preparation for the start of their weekend.

★ Remind Remind Remind

Once the initial email invitation is sent, you will most likely see a steady response rate for the first few days. You will want to remind employees a few days later, just in case they forgot or accidentally deleted or lost the information needed to participate. Two to three reminder emails have proven to be highly effective in boosting response rates. Be careful not to send reminders too close together or too often. Typically the first reminder should go out a few days to a week after the initial invite, with a final reminder a day or two before the end of administration. Be sure to include the due date each time so that employees can plan their time accordingly.

★ Respect and Value

An employee's time is valuable, not only to them, but to the organization as well. Many employees want to be as productive as possible when they are "on the clock," however, when "closing time" arrives, they'd like to be able to leave work behind. Make it a point to inform employees that their participation should be on company time. For paper surveys, doing so should be a simple task; however, conducting online web surveys could be problematic for some organizations. For example, employees who are on the sales floor or stock shelves may not have direct access to a computer during their work shift. Consider setting up a workstation in a break room to increase participation from these classes of employees.

You may also want to consider offering an employee breakfast, lunch or even compensatory ("comp") time as an incentive to participate. Actions such as these will show that you strongly believe participation is important and have gone the extra mile to ensure a high response rate.

★ Keep it Confidential

Confidentiality is also a key factor in whether an employee will participate, and whether they will provide open, honest feedback. Be sure that you are clear to employees as to how data will be analyzed. For example, if a department has less than five employees reporting, will their data be broken out by demographic items such as age, gender, tenure, etc.? Doing so could be a breach of confidentiality as individuals may be indirectly and inadvertently identified. If you are using personal identification numbers (PINs), consider who will have access to the raw data. Using a generic URL, where data cannot be tied back to an individual may eliminate the concern of confidentiality; however, you will need to be sure that you are satisfied with the level of reporting possible. Again, knowing your audience will enable you to make the best decision you can in order to make employees comfortable with participating, and to ensure that you get the information you need in the end.

★ Share the Results

Most importantly, be sure to share the findings with your organization in a timely fashion. Your employees took the time to provide their feedback; now you need to give them the time to act on it. Let them know that you have heard what they said and are working to set forth an action plan, if possible, to improve the organization. Chances are you are going to want to gather their opinion again in the future, so be sure you have set forth a good example to follow.