

BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE SURVEY FOLLOW-UP: EXECUTION, IMPORTANCE, RESOURCES



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Most large companies today conduct regular employee surveys and use them as a key talent management measurement tool (Kraut, 2006, cited by Wiley, 2010). These survey programs typically are aimed at supporting the overall business strategy and, in particular, the human capital management strategy. The results are used to influence executive decision making and to create change across the organization when needed. At a more basic level, and in employee-centric organizations, the survey exists to ensure the employee voice is heard.

Despite widespread use, HR practitioners continue to face challenges related to the survey feedback and action planning process. These concerns prompted the Kenexa® High Performance Institute (KHPI) to survey a large group of survey practitioners to try to identify the cause of the challenges, and to begin providing some answers to address those challenges. The group KHPI surveyed included the following consortia (which exist to provide its members with benchmark survey results): Mayflower Group, Information Technology Survey Group (ITSG) and the Racer Group. In total, responses from 31 survey practitioners were analyzed.

This white paper summarizes the research findings and offers best practice solutions to help organizations maximize the impact of the survey follow-up process.

SURVEY PROGRAMS ARE EFFECTIVE, BUT BARRIERS PERSIST

On the face of it, the internal practitioners KHPI surveyed were confident their survey programs are being handled effectively. Three-quarters (75 percent) of respondents evaluated their post-survey action planning processes as effective in producing positive change, and just six percent rated their processes as ineffective, with the remainder weighing in as neutral. However, it's not all as straight-forward as these headline data suggest. When KHPI used an open-ended question to ask directly about the most significant barriers to overall survey follow-up effectiveness, respondents' answers shed light on some of the most common challenges (see Figure 1).

The top three barriers for survey practitioners concern: the execution and importance of the survey programs, as well as resources associated with action planning post-survey. Together, these issues accounted for 81 percent of all of the identified barriers.

ABOUT KHPI

The Kenexa High Performance Institute (KHPI) features a multidisciplinary team of highly qualified professionals with offices in London and Minneapolis. Executive director Dr. Jack Wiley oversees rigorous, global and innovative research and development programs, spanning all aspects of human capital management. KHPI produces books, academic papers for top journals and practitioner articles. For more information, visit www.khpi.com.

FIGURE 1: BARRIERS TO PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS

Content Category	Category Description	% of Comments
Execution	Follow-through; maintaining momentum	34
Importance	Management (especially executive) attention and support	27
Resources	Especially time, but also training, technical, financial	20
Prioritization	Focus, while also avoiding analysis paralysis	10
Accountability	Holding organizational members responsible; ownership/clarity	7
Tracking Action	Tracking action and monitoring change	2

The verbatim answers from the respondents give an insight into the issues being faced by survey practitioners. Listed below are typical responses of HR practitioners for the top three barriers to an effective survey program.

EXECUTION

- Leadership and management don't always act on their actions. They often leverage the survey to identify areas for improvement, but don't always follow through on the necessary actions.
- Some managers don't take the work or their results seriously (e.g., don't share results with employees or don't set up an action plan).

IMPORTANCE

- If senior leaders were more vocal about the strategy and reason the survey is important, I think that would trickle down to the frontline. Our survey, strategic though it is, lacks that champion at the senior leader level. Furthermore, I think many managers here struggle to really dive in to the recommendations for change that the survey provides.
- We had leadership's attention and they viewed it as critical information at the time, but given other business issues it was put on a shelf.

RESOURCES

- Lack of time and resources poses additional challenges
- Limited time leaders can devote to it given other priorities

What is interesting about these top three barriers to effective survey follow-up is that they all relate directly to senior management—leaders fail to implement action plans, need to be more vocal in their support of the importance of follow-up, and struggle to find time to implement.

LEADERSHIP IS A BARRIER TO PROGRAM SUCCESS

Why does senior management appear to be the cause of so many barriers to survey success?

When survey practitioners were asked about how their survey addressed the most important concerns of leaders, less than half agreed that it facilitated leadership development or contributed to customer satisfaction, top-line revenue growth or bottom-line financial performance. In other words, over half did not view this supposedly strategic measurement program as addressing the most important concerns of top executives.

Executives and senior managers are going to regard as important, and execute and provide resources for those organizational initiatives that help them achieve the greatest business success.

No one would argue, especially with all the research support to the contrary, that employee engagement is unimportant, and indeed 16 percent of the changes emanating from survey programs are identified as improving employee engagement (Figure 2). Yet even for these companies with sophisticated survey systems, fewer than 10 percent of the changes related to the customer experience (as in improved external customer satisfaction and loyalty) and strategic alignment (such as ensuring the overall survey program and its resultant action plans are aligned with ongoing business strategy).

FIGURE 2: CHANGES BASED ON SURVEY PROGRAM

Content Category	Category Description	% of Comments
Support for Change	Development of new initiatives, policies and programs	17
Communication	Improved sharing of information about results/action plans	16
Employee Engagement	Improved employee opinions about their experience at work	16
Leadership Development	Development of new leadership programs, models and training	13
Employee Recognition	Development/enhancement of employee recognition programs	12
Employee Development	Creation, enhancement of career development programs	12
Customer Experience	Stronger orientation toward customer satisfaction/loyalty	8
Strategic Alignment	Ensuring survey/action planning efforts are strategically aligned	6

SURVEY METRICS LACK ORGANIZATIONAL FOCUS

One way to determine the strategic value of an initiative is to look at the way it is measured. Figure 3 shows how the participating companies evaluate the success of their survey follow-up and action planning processes. At the top of the list of metrics is the employee survey response rate. At one level, this is understandable: Without executive support, survey response

FIGURE 3: METRICS USED TO EVALUATE SUCCESS

Content Category	Category Description	% of Comments
Response Rate	Response or participation rate	29
Score Improvement	Improvement on targeted survey items, dimensions, indexes	27
Employee Perception	Survey items measuring employees' perceptions of change	15
Other	Behavior change, metrics on programs resulting from survey	12
Action Plan Tracking	Tracking completion of action planning process/plans	10
Business Outcome Link	Internal (attrition) and external (customer sat) measures	7



rates are likely to be low and employees are unlikely to continue to complete surveys if they don't feel their earlier responses have been acted upon. At another level, this finding is disappointing because it lacks a link into broader organizational goals and targets.

What is more interesting is the finding that the least commonly relied upon metric to evaluate program success is the link to a business outcome, whether that be a link to an internal measure, such as employee attrition rates (e.g., among high potential talent), or a link to an external measure, such as customer satisfaction and loyalty scores. Establishing such links clearly represents more of a challenge than simply tracking survey response rates. But one has to wonder: If the most common metric used to evaluate survey program success was a clearly established link to a business outcome, would the top three barriers to survey follow-up success still be failures in execution, lack of perceived importance and inadequate resources?

In recent decades, linkage research has developed to such an extent that it is now very possible to use, for example, customer satisfaction measures as metrics for survey success. It is known that employee responses regarding the customer orientation of the organization are clearly linked to the customer experience. While some of the most sophisticated survey programs recognize the value of this organizational link, our research reveals that most organizations still have some way to go.

BEST ADVICE FROM LEADING PRACTITIONERS

In terms of survey program management, the respondents' extensive experience provides valuable guidance for those embarking on their own employee surveys (see Figure 4).

Almost half of everything learned, or best advice, is captured in the first two categories. The category of effective processes refers to having the organizational processes in place for collaboration,

involvement and effective follow-up on survey results. The category of communication refers to communicating effectively about survey administration, results and action plans. If we add the next two categories into the discussion—accountability and executive sponsorship—we tally 86 percent of the total of everything learned and best advice. Accountability is defined as clarity around ownership of the follow-up process and being able to hold others accountable. Executive sponsorship is exactly what one would suspect, namely having senior leaders who champion the survey program. Interestingly, the second, third and fourth categories of best advice and most significant learning are not about tools and information technology per se, but rather about the “internal management” of the program.

In their own words, below are the most illustrative comments for each of these four categories.

BEST ADVICE: EFFECTIVE PROCESSES

- Collaboration: Involve all parties actively. Share best practices across teams
- Execution: Avoid letting survey action planning develop into an industry and an isolated event. It's what you do with action plans that matter
- Follow-Up: Keep it simple and don't set too many expectations. Give them a simple process to identify opportunities, and ask for one or two main objectives for the year. Also, give them an outlet to roll-up items that should be addressed at higher levels

BEST ADVICE: COMMUNICATION

- The simplest thing of all: Results must be shared with colleagues. Asking them to fill out a survey and never sharing the results is worse than never asking them to fill it out in the first place
- Continually communicating the progress of the action plan is key. Employees might notice changes in their work environment, but they do not always tie it back to the feedback they provided on the survey

BEST ADVICE: ACCOUNTABILITY

- Build accountability for action planning down to the individual manager level—without accountability, it may not happen
- We distribute data to our directors with five or more respondents. Creates more accountability and ownership of data
- Accountability and team ownership drives change

FIGURE 4: SIGNIFICANT LEARNING/BEST ADVICE

Content Category	Category Description	% of Comments
Effective Processes	Processes for collaboration/ involvement and follow-up	28
Communication	Communication re: administration, results and actions	21
Accountability	Holding others responsible; ownership/clarity	21
Executive Sponsorship	Having senior leaders champion the survey program	16
Resources	Especially time but also training, technical, financial	9
Measurement	Measuring only what can be changed/improved	5

BEST ADVICE: EXECUTIVE SPONSORSHIP

- Senior leadership has to be the role model for survey action planning. Managers need to see that there is a benefit from making positive changes to the work environment based on survey feedback
- You have to have commitment from the CEO and the management committee. Bottom-up does not work as well as one might think

WHERE SURVEY PRACTITIONERS GO FROM HERE: AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

The survey results provide a valuable benchmark regarding survey feedback and action planning practices and successes among some of the most sophisticated employee survey programs in existence today. The results also point to aspects of survey programs that can be further strengthened, even among this elite group of participating companies.

In particular, there are three key areas for improvement:

MATCH BUSINESS STRATEGY AND SURVEY CONTENT

As noted earlier, the majority of large organizations today use employee surveys as a continuous improvement methodology. Research (Wiley, 2010) indicates the use of surveys is increasing and likely to continue to do so over the next generation. Many organizations survey because it is a good thing to do and shows interest in the welfare and morale of employees, and because other organizations against whom they compete also are doing so. These are understandable reasons, but these initiatives will produce their greatest return-on-investment only when they are seen as part of an organization's business strategy.

This survey of survey practitioners actually produced results quite relevant to this point. Ninety-four percent of respondents rated the overall survey program's support of the organization's business strategy as effective (in the broadest sense). Indeed, 78 percent of respondents rated the quality of the design of their survey instrument as strong. However, only 54 percent rate the survey's connection to the organization's overarching business strategy as strong. There could be several reasons, but many survey programs are implemented without proper regard for the organization's corporate strategy for success.

Consider the Strategic Survey Model (Wiley, 2006) presented in Figure 5. The model asserts that there are four fundamental reasons why organizations conduct surveys. These reasons fall on a continuum of defensive to offensive reasons.

The four reasons are:

- To identify warning signs of trouble within an organization ("union vulnerability")
- To evaluate the effectiveness of specific programs, policies and initiatives (such as a survey devoted to the topic of diversity and inclusion)
- To gauge the organization's strategy as an employee of choice among its workforce (such as a traditional employee engagement survey)
- To predict and drive organizational outcomes, such as customer satisfaction and business performance (as with a high performance-engagement survey) (Wiley, 2010)

FIGURE 5: STRATEGIC SURVEY MODEL



This model is important because if you are clear about the purpose of a survey, you can better design the content of that survey. Employee survey content that best predicts employee retention or commitment is not the same as survey content that best predicts customer satisfaction with an organization's products and services. To measure employee engagement, the most important topics to include are confidence and trust in senior leadership, the extent to which immediate managers treat their employees with respect and provide them with recognition, growth and development opportunities, and the job-person match. To use a survey as a means of predicting customer satisfaction and loyalty, the most important topics to measure are the strength of the organization's customer orientation, the emphasis placed on the quality of products and services, the extent to which employees are trained to do the work they are asked to perform and their degree of involvement in decisions that affect their work.

In the end, executives will only be fully supportive of an employee survey if they can see how it aligns with business strategy. The more relevant the content of the survey to business strategy, the more it informs progress against that business strategy by giving

executive management critical feedback. Not only that, when executives see this clear link to business strategy, they are more inclined to follow through on actions and dedicate the right resources for effective survey follow-up.

SECURE GREATER MANAGEMENT ACCOUNTABILITY IN SURVEY FOLLOW-UP AND ACTION PLANNING

In their own words, this is what survey respondents said about the topic of accountability:

- We have to work on creating a culture that enhances managers' accountability for implementing changes
- Top managers aren't engaged in driving accountability for lower level action planning and there is no clear set of expectations coming from senior leadership
- Okay at action planning, run out of steam before taking action

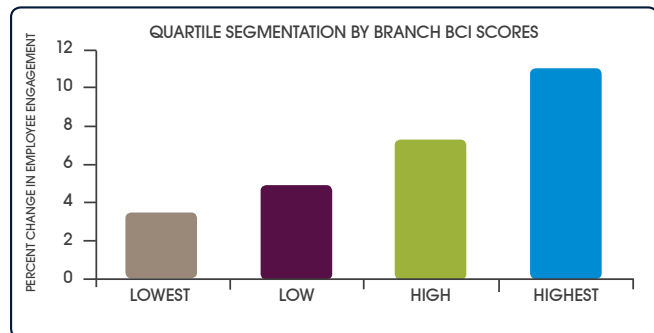
It's an area that challenges many survey practitioners. A technique found to be very helpful is the Behavior Change Index (BCI) methodology. Essentially, this technique allows organizations to gauge the success of its action planning efforts, while at the same time exerting pressure on executives and managers for effective follow-through. It can easily be embedded into a pulse survey as well as the survey instrument used in the normal organizational measurement cycle. The only drawback is that it requires a baseline of survey activity and cannot be used the first time a survey is conducted.

The power of the methodology is inherent in its content. While there can be alternative versions of the methodology, our default version consists of the four following employee survey items:

- The results of the survey have been communicated to my group
- I was given the opportunity to discuss my questions and ideas about the results of the survey
- My manager has taken action based on the feedback from the employee survey
- The executive leadership of the organization has taken action based on the feedback from the employee survey

This methodology has proven very successful. Figure 6 (Wiley, 2010) shows just one example case study from a logistics organization. Branches of this transportation organization were segmented into four quartiles based on the favorability of their BCI scores. We then computed average percent improvement in Employee Engagement Index (EEI) scores for those branches comprising each of the four BCI quartiles. In almost step-like progression, those branches with successively higher BCI scores are the same branches producing the greatest improvement in employee engagement.

FIGURE 6: LOGISTICS ORGANIZATION CASE STUDY



At its core, the BCI methodology is about change management and helping organizations achieve their survey feedback and action planning goals. The main value of the technique is its ability to overcome resistance to change and encourage survey follow-up. The technique relies upon the old adage of what gets measured, gets done. If managers and executives know their success in survey feedback and action planning will be part of their (and their managers') survey report, additional energy is generated for effective follow-through. Organizations that use this method to its full benefit also are able to recognize and reward managers who perform well on their index score. The technique also allows organizations to identify and publish best practices in survey follow-up, creating the possibility for intra-organizational learning.

SECURE THE BEST SUPPORT FROM THE LEADERSHIP TEAM TO MAXIMIZE ROI

The teams that are the best at conceptualizing, implementing and following through on their survey programs have a number of features in common. Here are three:

They understand the importance of having a clearly defined and articulated value system

With a well-defined value system in place, it becomes much easier to develop a survey program that directly supports the human capital and overarching business strategies. If the survey measures what is important to the organization, the results it produces will readily guide leaders and managers to the right priorities for follow-up. Leaders and managers will be more energized for survey follow-up, which is exactly what employees want.

They believe in performance management—holding executive and managerial staff accountable

Organizations that fail to sustain improvement in employee survey results from year to year tend to share one common feature: they don't hold accountable those executives and managers who receive reports of survey results. The BCI methodology discussed above is relevant to this point. At

the very least, higher-level managers should, at the time of performance evaluation, take into consideration how effectively the subordinate manager followed up on the most recent survey. It is important not to overly focus on the absolute survey scores or how they compare to an internal or external comparison, but to place more attention on the quality of the survey follow-up plan. That takes time and energy—it is also what produces the best outcomes.

This echoes what respondents to the survey offered:

- A barrier to our success is leadership and management “acting” on their action plans. They often leverage the survey to identify areas of improvement, but don’t always follow through
- Build accountability for action planning down to the individual manager level...without accountability, it might not happen
- Our challenge is that we don’t have an organization-wide system to track action planning. We have to work on creating a culture that enhances managers’ accountability for implementing changes based on employee survey feedback

They are persistent

While perhaps the simplest, this could also be the most important lesson about sustaining change. It could also be the most obvious given that sustained improvement demands persistence. Fundamentally, persistence has to do with continuing a course of action despite change or interference. Organizations that have outperformed their cohorts on sustaining improvements in survey results are those whose leadership is persistent in using employee input and observations as a primary foundation of organization development.

In their own words, respondents had this to say about persistence:

- We often lose momentum after the survey if there is a major company event and then it’s hard to re-engage
- Often the issues are large and the organization does not have the appetite to stick to the plan long enough to create change
- A top challenge is staying the course—patience

A properly developed and implemented employee survey system can be one of the most powerful tools available to management. When done well, it plays a crucial role in assessing the effectiveness of business strategy and maximizing the potential of its human capital (Schiemann and Morgan, 2006, cited by Wiley, 2010). The results of the survey show that the practice of surveying is improving in sophistication and effectiveness, but still more needs to be done to maximize ROI. In particular, we should be looking for strong business metrics to evaluate success, ensuring that survey results are acted upon effectively and demonstrating to leadership that their support is critical to success. ■

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ABOUT KENEXA

Kenexa is in the business of improving companies and enriching lives, because to us, business is personal. Our unique combination of content, technology and services provides the insight and expertise to deliver products and solutions across the entire employee lifecycle. Where other companies focus on just one piece, we focus on bringing all of the pieces together to create the best picture for your company’s success. With every person we recruit, every assessment we administer, every technology solution we deliver, every survey we conduct, every leader we develop and every compensation strategy we support, lives are impacted by our craft.

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