

DISCIPLINED ACTION PLANNING DRIVES EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Originally published in Human Resources Planning, vol. 29 no. 4, 2006



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Human Resource departments can maximize the value of an employee survey by designing survey instruments that align with business goals and paying careful attention to follow-up action plans. The experience of Arbitron, Inc., an international media and marketing information firm, demonstrates the measurable business impact of effectively managed employee surveys. In 2003, Arbitron surveyed its part-time call center population during a period of significant internal growth and external competition for top talent. The survey results showed a decline in favorable responses among part-time staff across several key measures. The call center leadership responded by working with employees to identify priorities and commit to specific follow-up actions. The outcome? Unprecedented improvement in employee engagement as measured by the subsequent survey and improved retention of high performance employees.

DISCIPLINED ACTION PLANNING DRIVES ENGAGEMENT

The first step in a typical employee survey project is to design an effective survey instrument. This means making certain key decisions: What questions to ask? How many questions to ask? Are benchmark data available? Who to survey? How frequently? Before deciding how to gather data, the HR department must determine the organizational purpose of the survey. In other words, what organizational issues are driving the survey project, and what does the organization plan to do with the data it collects?

The real value of an employee survey is not in the survey itself, but in the follow-up process that translates data into action. Unfortunately, companies often fail to take the key step of using survey data to trigger change. Sometimes, managers do not know what to do with the results or do not have the time or energy to implement major initiatives. In other instances, line departments perceive human resources as the project “owner,” rather than the facilitator, and so assume that HR will take responsibility for follow-up. The result? A year passes, another survey is completed and the outcome reveals that little progress has been made.

Employee surveys do not have to be a vicious circle of disappointing results. You can achieve your objectives by taking a highly disciplined approach to survey action planning.

Action planning demands a multi-step, concentrated, ongoing process based on management commitment, time and accountability. No single strategy or process will be right for every company. A structured approach built with an understanding of the specific needs of the organization is essential for success.

ARBITRON: A SUCCESS STORY

Across the United States and Europe, call centers employ between one and three percent of the workforce (McBain, 2002). Improved technology has sparked a record increase in the number and size of call centers in recent years.



Attracting and retaining top talent within call centers is a challenge, particularly given the large number of employees required and the industry’s limited career advancement opportunities. Added to the challenge is the fact that engaging and retaining a large part-time population of any kind has proven difficult (Hillmer, et al., 2004). A strategic use of employee surveys, combined with effective follow-up action plans can, however, make a dramatic difference in engagement and retention in this type of challenging environment.

Arbitron, an international media and marketing research firm perhaps best known for producing the radio ratings in the United States, employs appropriately 450 part-time research associates in its two call centers. As representatives of a research firm, Arbitron’s call center employees must be highly skilled at breaking through the “clutter” of telemarketers in order to solicit the participation of randomly selected households nationwide in the radio ratings.

Arbitron has fielded an annual employee opinion survey since 1995. Every employee in the company is surveyed, and the company uses the data at both the corporate and individual organization levels to develop action plans. The company’s approach to employee surveys is simple and strategic. The company:

- Uses an employee survey that can be benchmarked against normative data and linked through quantitative research to business results
- Conducts systematic in-depth review and action planning around the results at all levels
- Organization Effectiveness group (the company’s version of HR) acts as consultants, not project owners, thus putting managers and employees at the center of the action planning process

Arbitron’s company-wide surveys and the resultant action planning processes have traditionally focused on the company’s total population of employees, rather than on part-time call center employees per se. In 2003, Arbitron added a second call center, increasing its part-time staff by 29 percent, with plans to more than double that population by the following year. With part-time staff making up almost one-third of the company’s total employee population, Arbitron recognized the increasing importance of effectively attracting, engaging and retaining this talent.

The 2003 survey, which was administered to approximately 450 part-time and 800 full-time employees, included 70 survey questions categorized around 13 themes, covering topics such as working conditions, customer service and pay and benefits. The data reflected obvious growing pains among the part-time population, whose responses showed declines in all but three

of the 13 theme scores from the previous survey. Each theme was evaluated using typical survey guidelines either as a strength (favorable results), mid-range or opportunity (improvement needed). Although six of the call center themes scored as strengths, two others, career development and employee involvement, scored as clear opportunities (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: CALL CENTER STRENGTH AND OPPORTUNITY MATRIX

	Call Center	Rest of Company
Working Conditions	S	S
Customer Service	S	S
Company Overall	S	S
Job Satisfaction		S
Manager	S	S
Work Effectiveness	S	S
Quality		S
Performance Feedback/Recognition	S	S
Employee Involvement	O	S
Senior Management		S
Training		
Pay and Benefits		
Career Development	O	
\$ of Respondent Base	33%	66%

The results also showed that 36 percent of Arbitron’s call center employees planned to leave the organization within the next 12 months. Nearly 30 percent of these employees cited career development as a contributing factor. Although the company’s call center turnover rate is much lower than industry norms, Arbitron was concerned about retaining high-performing individuals in this environment, particularly given its exacting performance standards.

Arbitron compared the opinions of its call center employees with those of other U.S. call centers by using WorkTrends™, a normative database of worker opinions across the country gathered annually. WorkTrends provides employee survey benchmarks on topics including leadership practices, customer orientation and employee engagement. Arbitron found that its call center employee data were similar or more favorable to the call center norm in work effectiveness, management, pay and confidence in the future of the organization; however, Arbitron’s call center employees rated certain aspects of job satisfaction and customer service much less favorably. This amplified the company’s concerns. (Figure 2 compares sample items for Arbitron’s call center to WorkTrends call center norms.)

FIGURE 2: SELECTED ITEM LEVEL RESULTS COMPARED TO WORKTRENDS

Selected Survey Topics	Percent Favorable		Difference in % pts
	Arbitron Call Center 2003	WorkTrends Call Center Norm	
Job Satisfaction			
I like the work I do	65	76	-11
Job makes good use of skills and abilities	56	68	-12
Work gives me a feeling of personal accomplishment	52	68	-16
Customer Service Topics			
Strong emphasis on customer service	76	83	-7
Customer problems corrected quickly	48	62	-14

Attrition is expensive and detrimental to any organization. An estimate of the cost of turnover for an employee at a call center is as much as one year’s salary (Hillmer, et al., 2004). Research shows, however, that the higher the level of employee engagement, the less likely that the employee will look for a new job. Because call centers generally experience high levels of turnover, even small improvements in employee engagement can produce substantial improvements in the bottom line (Brooks, et al., 2006).

Given the call center’s importance to the overall mission of Arbitron, the company identified employee engagement and retention of high performers as high priorities and tasked call center management with leading a strategic feedback and action planning process to improve the work environment and culture within the call center. Their goal? To see measurable improvement in the survey results the following year.

ACTION PLANNING FUNDAMENTALS

In developing its follow-up process, Arbitron adopted the “7-Step Model” as a framework for effective survey feedback and action planning (see Figure 3). This action planning model has been successfully implemented in thousands of business units internationally.

Step 1: Understand Results. Review your results to understand the overall picture, including strengths and opportunities.

Step 2: Establish Priorities. Select two to three key areas of focus for follow-up. Addressing too many issues dilutes your planning and results.

Step 3: Communicate Results and Priorities. Prepare and communicate an overview of the results to employees.

Step 4: Clarify Priorities. Find out not just what employees think, but why they feel the way they do. Do not jump to conclusions about the results. Instead, use face-to-face meetings to understand employee motivations and points of view. (See Figure 4: What-Why-How model)

Step 5: Generate Recommendations. When communicating with managers and employees, brainstorm ideas to address priorities and generate recommended action items.

Step 6: Develop and Implement Action Plans. Convert recommendations into formal action plans that include specific objectives and clear accountability.

Step 7: Monitor Progress. Hold periodic reviews to ensure objectives are achieved.

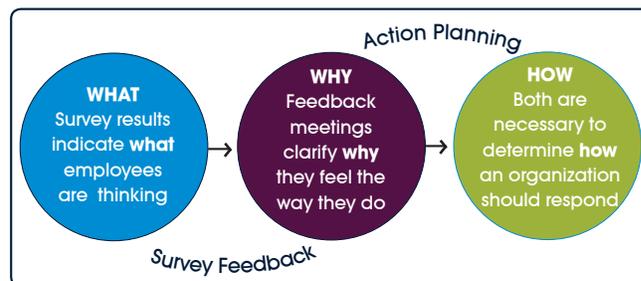
FIGURE 3: SEVEN-STEP MODEL FOR SURVEY FEEDBACK AND ACTION PLANNING



CLARIFICATION IS KEY

The What-Why-How model (see Figure 4) illustrates the vital middle step between obtaining survey results (the “What”) and determining how to respond (the “How”). Too often management teams and HR departments misinterpret survey data or draw incorrect conclusions about the survey results and wind up implementing ineffective follow-up programs. The middle step of this model calls for careful analysis and clarification of why employees responded as they did.

FIGURE 4: WHAT-WHY-HOW MODEL



Determining the “Why” is much like determining the root cause. To use a medical analogy, the “What” may indicate that a patient has a fever. Before deciding on the proper treatment (the “How”), the physician must first determine the reason or the cause of the fever.

Answering the “Why” question most often involves small staff feedback sessions, but can be handled effectively using multiple methods. Arbitron’s call center management team used a two-step process by obtaining input from call center management and then confirming management’s analysis and priorities through a series of all-staff meetings.

During the management action planning meeting, the team reviewed historical trends in order to maintain or enhance best practices and policies. They also discussed opportunities and negative trends to determine whether immediate communication or other initiatives could be implemented to improve these areas. The management meeting produced a short list of priorities: career development and employee involvement.

Once management meetings were complete, the company involved the call center staff to obtain their feedback and seek agreement on the identified priorities. The company held a series of meetings with all call center employees, paying careful attention to times that would allow for greatest attendance. These meetings were highly positive and dynamic, and provided an open forum for communication.

During the employee meetings, the group reviewed the results of the survey and discussed why employees responded as they did. In a non-defensive tone, the management team carefully pointed out the positive efforts already in place, including training seminars, career development initiatives, staff promotions and other employee-focused initiatives. Next, managers provided an opportunity for employees to discuss their ideas for improving the call center. Ideas were recorded on flip charts, and each employee was given three stickers to “vote” for the ideas he or she felt would yield the greatest benefit. Management used the results of the vote to prioritize initiatives.

Not all ideas were practical, but most were creative and constructive. Arbitron’s call center management team was ready to take action.

ACTION PLANNING REQUIRES ACTION

Most survey researchers would say that if you are not prepared to act on a survey, you should not do one. Employees who share their thoughts and ideas with the organization will expect (not unreasonably) that actions will follow. If employees perceive the survey as a hollow exercise, they may wind up more frustrated and disgruntled than before the survey was taken.

Based on the feedback of management and staff, Arbitron’s call center management team implemented a short list of specific actions. Some were simple, inexpensive and quick to fix. Others were more complicated, time consuming and expensive. Some action plans involved the entire call center organization, and others were specific to individual locations. Here are some examples of the feedback received from employees and the actions taken as a result:

Career Development Initiatives

- *Feedback:* Hard to access information on career opportunities within the organization
- *Action Taken:* Move the job posting board to a more convenient and accessible location
- *Feedback:* Limited advancement opportunities because of lack of basic computer skills
- *Action Taken:* Offer training in MS Office applications, taught by full-time staff with strong knowledge of these applications

Involvement Initiatives

- *Feedback:* Under-informed on important company information
- *Action Taken:* Hold regular town hall meetings to discuss current employee issues and monitor progress of action plan implementation
- *Feedback:* Lack of involvement in decisions that affect work
- *Action Taken:* Ask employees to serve on numerous feedback teams focusing on script changes, incentive pay and methodological changes

The company also implemented other initiatives, such as installing a new air conditioning system to improve air quality and improving employee’s accessibility and connectivity to the Internet.

MEASURABLE RESULTS

There are few better ways to demonstrate the success of an action planning program than through new data. In 2004, Arbitron continued its strategic employee opinion measurement system. Results for the company as a whole remained largely unchanged from 2003, but the call center scores showed dramatic improvements. The focused, disciplined process of understanding and acting upon the data within the call center had a measurable impact.

The scores for the organization’s two priorities, employee involvement and career development, increased significantly. Employee involvement jumped 12 percentage points in

favorability for call center employees, compared to a one percentage point decline for the rest of the organization. Career development increased five percentage points in favorability for call center employees, but decreased by three percentage points for other employees. Other themes for call center employees also saw significantly favorable upward trends. The favorability rating for training increased 10 percentage points among call center employees, but remained unchanged among other employees. Favorable perceptions of the company overall increased by seven percentage points among call center employees, compared to a three percentage point decline for other employees. The follow-up efforts among call center staff showed clear results (see Figure 5).

FIGURE 5: COMPARISON OF 2003-2004 ARBITRON THEME-LEVEL EMPLOYEE SURVEY RESULTS

Survey Themes	Percent Favorable			
	2003 Call Center	2004 Call Center	Call Center Change 2003-2004	Rest of Company 2003-2004
Working conditions	72	75	+3	-3
Customer service	67	72	+5	-2
Career development	46	51	+5	-3
Manager	73	79	+6	+2
Company overall	69	76	+7	-3
Job satisfaction	69	67	+8	0
Work effectiveness	69	77	+8	+1
Quality	58	66	+8	-3
Pay and benefits	62	71	+9	-2
Performance feedback and recognition	67	76	+9	-1
Training	58	68	+10	0
Executive management	52	63	+11	-1
Employee involvement	49	61	+12	-1

The survey questions addressing aspects of job satisfaction and customer service previously addressed in Figure 2 also showed significant improvement in favorability (see Figure 6).

These action planning efforts have had a lasting effect. Results from Arbitron's 2005 survey show continuous improvement in the call center, with increased scores across all themes. The two areas of primary focus, career development and employee involvement, have increased nine percentage points and 14 percentage points, respectively, in comparison to 2004. Both areas are now scored as mid-range, rather than opportunities.

FIGURE 6: COMPARISON OF 2003-2004 ARBITRON CALL CENTER SURVEY RESULTS ON SELECTED TOPICS

Selected Survey Topics	Percent Favorable		Difference in % pts
	2003 Call Center	2004 Call Center	
Job Satisfaction			
I like the work I do	65	71	+6
Job makes good use of skills and abilities	56	62	+6
Work gives me a feeling of personal accomplishment	52	61	+9
Customer Service Topics			
Strong emphasis on customer service	76	84	+8
Customer problems corrected quickly	48	54	+6

Why did the scores for the rest of the employees remain stable or decline? There were two fundamental reasons:

- Although the same action-planning processes that were employed in the call center were also followed for the remaining full-time employees, there was less of a dedicated focus on improving the results for the full-time population. Full-time employee survey scores had been on an upward climb for many years and were beginning to plateau. The call center scores had routinely pulled overall scores downward.
- Emerging issues facing full-time employees in the 2003 to 2004 time-frame negatively affected their opinions. For example, the company was growing at an explosive rate, but the needed improvements in the physical workspace were not keeping pace. While waiting for new accommodations, employees were temporarily sitting in aisles, at the back of the auditorium, and in tiny work spaces. The 2004 results for the Working Conditions survey theme reflected those circumstances. Fortunately, as the accommodations improved, so did survey results. The 2005 results on the Working Conditions theme for full-time employees rebounded, improving two percentage points over the 2004 results.

WHAT IT MEANS TO YOUR ORGANIZATION

Managing a call center staff usually involves multiple shifts, part-time staffing and high turnover rates. According to U.S. norms from the WorkTrends survey, only 52 percent of call center employees intend to stay with their organizations, compared to 61 percent of WorkTrends employees overall. Job satisfaction, quality issues and feelings of accomplishment are also much lower in call centers.

Despite these unique challenges, Arbitron's experience demonstrates that an effective employee survey program—with the proper follow-up action planning—can improve engagement and retention in call centers. Arbitron's commitment in these areas is also paying off through consistent financial growth and an industry reputation for innovation.

The survey follow-up process implemented by Arbitron to achieve improved results can be applied to any organization in any industry. Process, discipline, management accountability and ongoing commitment to measurement are fundamentals of survey design and action planning for any organization.

The phrase “what gets measured, gets done” does not always apply. Many organizations do little to get the proper value from their survey results. If you intend to take the time and spend the money to administer an employee survey, have the resources in place to act on it and use the data as a road map to obtaining the business results you want. ■

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ABOUT KENEXA

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