

They Love Me, They Love Me Not

GETTING EMPLOYEE FEEDBACK,
AND PAYING ATTENTION TO THEIR
CONCERNS, IS KEY TO HIGH
MORALE AND PRODUCTIVITY IN
YOUR ORGANIZATION.

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“Sensitive, has a hand on the pulse of employee opinions; employees with personal concerns are always welcome to seek help from this manager.”

Does it sound like these phrases describe the typical financial manager? After you stop laughing, you just might want to read the rest of this article because, of course, the image of many financial managers is quite different. While we have a reputation for being measurement-oriented, hard-nosed, dollars-and-cents people who can be counted on to provide wise counsel to management, sensitivity to employee concerns isn't usually one of the common descriptors.

So, why don't we just keep on doing what we do well and leave the sensitivity, hand-holding, bleeding-heart kind of stuff to the human resource people? The simple answer, as trite as it might seem, is that it really is true that you will succeed or fail based on what your employees do. If employees aren't highly motivated to produce high-quality financial work, everything else you do won't get the job done.

We do know some things about the relationship of employee morale to actions that employees take. First, while many people take jobs because of salary or position, it's common knowledge that people often leave jobs because of dissatisfaction with their managers. And if you as a manager aren't attuned to employees' feelings, the first you may learn that they are dissatisfied is when they slap their resignation letter down on your desk. Keep in mind the total cost of replacing a professional is around 150% of the person's salary, according to recent estimates. That alone should get your attention.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO REMEDY THE SITUATION

Don't get discouraged. The good news is that since you've read this far you really are interested in taking steps to keep your hand on the pulse of employee opinion. The five-step approach to improve employee morale is:

- ◆ Determine the views of employees;
- ◆ Develop an action plan;
- ◆ Communicate the results and action plan to employees, and discuss it with them;
- ◆ Fix the problems you can address; and
- ◆ Start the process again.

Actually, the toughest step is to determine the views of employees. Once you've done that you can follow the other steps in the model. It may sound like Management 101, but you must learn what employees think before you can move on to the next steps.

There are a number of approaches you can use to determine the views of your employees and get a sense of your organization's morale. Some approaches that will work in a big organization wouldn't be appropriate in a much smaller company. Armed with a menu of choices, you need to decide which approach fits your environment. Of course, you aren't limited to using just one approach.

The following sections illustrate successful approaches used to obtain employee feedback. A small unit (like a department) in a large organization would probably be able to choose from among all the strategies listed. Many of these tools are borrowed from management experts, both well-known and obscure. You also may decide to modify some of the approaches to fit your organization or way of doing things. That's fine, but don't solicit feedback unless you are willing to act on it and communicate the results and an action plan to your employees. Also, in the feedback approaches where anonymity is an advantage, be sure that you ensure confidentiality of results.

Index Cards

In this approach you encourage employees to write out comments or questions on 3 x 5 cards and send them to you via interoffice mail. The submitter may be anonymous if desired. You commit to answering all of these communications using a staff meeting, posting on the bulletin board, letter, e-mail, or other vehicle.

Please-See-Me Time

Lt. Gen. William G. Pagonis, who headed up the theater logistics command in the Persian Gulf War and is now the executive vice president of Supply Chain Manage-

ment at Sears, used this approach effectively. All he did was schedule 15-minute periods and label them as "Please-See-Me" time. Anyone in his large organization could call or see his secretary and get one of the blocks of time to sit down and talk to the boss. Pagonis checked carefully to see if the times were being used. If they were, then he opened up more blocks on his calendar. If they weren't being used, he put extra effort into communicating that the time slots were available. Obviously, anonymity isn't possible with this tool, but the opportunity for an open dialogue is an advantage.

The Open Door

You've probably heard of this one: "My door is always open to anyone who needs to talk to me." A great idea, but make a commitment to stick to the promise before you roll out this program. If someone uses the open door and finds out that you really aren't available or that your mind is on something else, the program will fail. This approach can be used at all levels in an organization.

Management by Walking Around (MBWA)

Yes, Management 101 again, but do you really practice it? You can learn a lot by just walking around your department and asking, "So, Joanne, what are you up to these days?" When was the last time you did that? The times you went out with a specific goal or question in mind don't count. This approach is intended to discover those things that you aren't aware of and to get to know your people—not as a means to answer specific questions.

Skip-Level Interviews

This approach consists of a meeting, roundtable, or luncheon with one or more people in your organization that are more than one level away from you. In other words, the people don't report directly to you, but they do report to a manager further down in your organization. The format would vary depending on the number of people involved and whether or not it is conducted as an open forum, such as a luncheon, or privately in an office. In any case, you should have a prepared set of standard questions along with some that are specific to your organization. For example, you might ask, "Dan, now that the new accounts payable system is up and running, what do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of the system?" To obtain valid input, all your questions should be open-ended in nature so that they can't be answered with a simple "yes" or "no" or a number. Be sure to include a general, catchall question, such as, "Are there any other things that I should be aware of?"

I've also found this approach helpful when I take a new management position. That time is usually a really busy period, and getting to know employees as people can easily become a low-priority item. Putting skip-level interview sessions on my calendar helps ensure that I keep my finger on the pulse of employee morale.

Employee Coach

The employee-coach technique is a great way for people at the top of an organization to stay in touch with the employees many levels below. Ginger Graham put this tool to good use when she was named CEO of Advanced Cardiovascular Systems. She appointed a coach who worked on the loading dock, sought out the views of employees, then met with her frequently to let her know how she and her actions were perceived. The coaches in the organization were trained to ask probing questions and focus on behaviors as well as provide executive management with feedback and recommendations on how they were perceived in the workplace. In turn, the coaches were able to report back to employees on the results of their feedback sessions with executives.

Split-Screen Feedback

This approach to employee feedback is one of my favorites because it involves no real preparation or cost, and you can use it in almost all settings. At a staff or other meeting have everyone draw a horizontal line across the middle of a piece of paper. In the top half, everyone must list at least one positive thing about the department, manager, and so on, and in the bottom half, everyone must list at least one negative thing. While one item is the minimum, there is no maximum number of positive or negative items. Be sure that employees know that you don't need their names, just their honest opinions. Then you categorize and summarize their thoughts and discuss them at a future meeting.

The results from this feedback can range from the mundane to the profound, but I've found they always provide additional insights into how my management style is perceived. Moreover, they show my employees that I care about their views. In one instance there was a general feeling that the cafeteria food was less than satisfactory. My idea of a business lunch was an apple at my desk, and my peer managers traveled frequently, so we were clueless on the quality of cafeteria food. This was an easy problem to fix, and it provided a clear message to employees that feedback to management brought results. In addition to improving morale, this method showed

employees that if there were a serious issue, it, too, would be addressed.

What's Good/What's Bad

This tool is a variant of the Split-Screen Feedback approach. I find it to be a feedback mechanism that's very useful when you begin managing a new department. You really want to get a feel for the morale of the department, but people don't know you well enough for trust to have developed. At an early department meeting, ask them to take a sheet of paper and on one side write the good things about how the department has been run, including policies and management. On the other side, have them list the bad things. If you think that anonymity might be an issue, ask that they be submitted to a secretary or to a volunteer who will have them typewritten. I've found that the results are a great way to get an open dialogue going with the department. In one case I presented the summary at every staff meeting for a year and discussed how we were doing. In a couple of cases, the consensus was "not any better," but at least we had an open, honest dialogue.

Formal Employee Opinion Surveys

If you work for a large corporation such as Verizon or IBM, you probably send around surveys to your employees once every year or two. These surveys usually have both closed-ended questions in which the respondent must choose a rating for a particular question and open-ended questions where the respondent provides narrative comments. So the results will be both quantitative and qualitative in nature. All the tools discussed previously are qualitative in nature—you get detailed views, but they can't be added up and compared to other results.

If you work for an organization that conducts these surveys, it usually will provide lengthy instructions on how to use them, but here are a couple of additional recommendations. First, make sure that your employees know that you take the results seriously and that you will take action on them. Second, if the results aren't what you would like them to be, try not to take it personally. For example, let's say that the numerical results and write-in comments are clear: They view you as an insensitive clod who doesn't care whether employees live or die. On the other hand, you know that you are a very sensitive person who really does care about employees. Trying to stuff your "true view" down the throats of employees isn't going to change their view. I suggest that you accept their *perception* of your sensitivity as being accurate. Thus, you

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deal only with their perception, not on whether or not you really are insensitive. This will help when you discuss the results with your employees (e.g., “it is clear that I am perceived as an insensitive clod”). Then you can work on changing their perception through your actions, which may be as simple as implementing management by walking around (yes, it’s okay to use a feedback tool as part of an action plan) or taking notes about the personal lives of employees and asking about them periodically. To repeat, while you may not agree with their view of you or the organization, remember that they are providing their perception. It’s up to you to change that perception if it isn’t an accurate representation of reality.

If your organization doesn’t conduct a formal employee opinion survey, you may decide to conduct your own, either for the entire organization or for your own group. Just be sure, however, that you have the knowledge to construct the survey, conduct it, and analyze the results. A

poorly designed and conducted survey is probably worse than no survey at all. If you need help, there are a number of organizations that can provide it. See the sidebar for details on these organizations and some other sources of information on employee opinion surveys.

The survey may be conducted using e-mail, pen and paper, telephone voice response, or the company intranet. A 70% response rate is about average. You may find it useful to use questions that have been used by other organizations so that you can examine your results in a larger context. You may also want to see examples of correctly worded questions. For example, you can obtain a copy of Aon’s “United States @ Work Survey” by going to their website. Then you can examine questions that they ask and use them as a guide to help you construct your own questions.

I suggest that you retain the results of surveys you conduct in order to compare them to the results of future surveys. As long as you use identical wording from survey to survey, the numerical results can be compared. While the numerical results of a single survey are valuable, the trend of the results from survey to survey may be even more important.

I once took over as controller of an organization, and shortly thereafter it conducted an opinion survey. One finding was that only 30% of my employees were satisfied with their career progress, which was far below the organizational average. We implemented an action plan to address the issue. A year later another survey showed 55% satisfaction with career progress. This level was still lower than the career satisfaction for the entire organization, but the survey-to-survey improvement was the more important measure.

You now have an arsenal of techniques that can be used to determine the views of your employees. I encourage you to use at least one of them to obtain feedback, develop an action plan, communicate it to employees, fix the problems, and then continue to solicit employee feedback. The result will be improved morale and retention in your organization. ■

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Where to Learn More about Employee Feedback Tools

Publications

Allan H. Church and Janine Waclawski, *Designing and Using Organizational Surveys*, Gower, Aldershot, UK, 1998. A book that seems to be designed to help you actually conduct a survey, it includes many examples, but the authors are enamored with statistical analysis methods, and it can be heavy going at times. Still, there is much here for both the novice and the experienced person.

Joe Folkman, *Employee Surveys that Make a Difference: Using Customized Feedback Tools to Transform Your Organization*, Executive Excellence Publishing, Provo, Utah, 1998. Much easier to read than the Church and Waclawski book, but it has more “sizzle” than “steak.” While what you learn here might not “transform” your organization, it should enable you to conduct a meaningful survey.

Allen I. Kraut (ed.), *Organizational Surveys: Tools for Assessment and Change*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1996. With contributions from many experts in the field, this book provides a good high-level view of the subject. It is less useful, however, as a “how-to” guide to designing and conducting surveys.

Palmer Morrel-Samuels, “Getting the Truth into Workplace Surveys,” *Harvard Business Review*, February 2002, pp. 111-118. If you are planning to develop your own formal employee opinion survey, this article is absolutely mandatory reading. The author provides 16 succinct guidelines for superior survey design that will prevent you from making common errors and maximize the value of the results.

Websites

www.aon.com. This organization has conducted workforce commitment surveys for a number of years, and you can see summaries and obtain full survey results by visiting the site.

www.employeesurveys.com. The site provides sample surveys.

www.improvenow.com. At this site employees can set up an Internet survey of their boss at no charge. Or a manager can initiate the process for a cost of \$9.95 per respondent. The survey is 60 questions long. An interesting site and one you should visit.

www.perseus.com. This consulting organization provides sample surveys and white papers on the subject.

www.walkerinfo.com. Walker Information provides white papers and general survey information.