

Precisely mapping the construct of engagement
Psychometrically balanced survey questionnaire
Advanced statistical interrogation
High-end graphical reporting

Engagement Initiative Best Practice

Strategy for delivering an effective engagement survey



- ✓ SURVEY OBJECTIVES
- ✓ MANAGEMENT BUY-IN
- ✓ STAFF COMMUNICATION
- ✓ SURVEY LOGISTICS
- ✓ EXTERNAL PRACTITIONER
- ✓ POST SURVEY ACTION
- ✓ BUSINESS METRICS

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Introduction

By now it's probably reasonable to assume that you have already bought into engagement and its associated benefits. This paper isn't designed to dictate exactly how you should manage your engagement initiative, and it is by no means exhaustive, but it does give a steer on some key considerations when aiming to deliver best practice throughout your engagement project.

Best Practice

RATIONALE & OBJECTIVES

The generic benefits of heightening employee engagement are well documented¹, for example higher productivity, greater return on human capital, reduced staff turnover and higher employee self-efficacy. You may have already included these elements in the rationale for your initiative. If not, showing the reasoning for your survey up front by trying to identify specific areas that your organisation wants to target for improvement will help garner support. The real issues will become evident once you have the results, but explaining clear intentions and articulated goals before you start will provide clarity and purpose for your management team. In addition, creating the link between survey results, action plans and business metrics will prove to be a strong indicator and will demonstrate the importance of the initiative to your workforce.

MANAGEMENT BUY-IN

Your senior executives must buy into the initiative and support the investment of funds and time for the research and post-survey activities. Furthermore, and critically, the middle and front-line management teams need to be fully on board with the scheme and genuinely believe in its value. If this level of commitment is achieved with your managers then you will stand a stronger chance of capturing the attention of your employees. Generally, when managers understand that they will gain a comprehensive insight into the minds, attitudes and opinions of the people who work for them, how much energy and commitment they are pledging and why, the interest steps up a gear. It is also important to involve and engage any key stakeholders who could potentially influence the process, such as a trade union or works council representatives.

RESPONSE RATES

Given that your research will be costly and that it will be used to fuel decision-making at senior level, it is essential to achieve a high level of employee participation to ensure that the findings accurately reflect the opinion of the target population (confidence level). Low response rates will bring the validity of results into question, and in some organisational areas and departments there may be insufficient data to support effective action planning. Perhaps more concerning is that a low response rate sends out a palpable message that your employees are disengaged, or feel that their opinion would not be valued or acted upon. Whatever the reason for weak participation, it will have a negative effect upon the return on your research investment. Participation rates are often proportional to how well the survey process has been communicated and implemented, so a well-designed and properly executed project will lead to higher response rates.

SURVEY BRANDING

Consider branding the engagement initiative as a whole, or even just the survey. A graphic or logo and a catchy, meaningful tag line will create an identity for the process and amplify its importance. Branding can also provide continuity through each stage of the initiative and establish it as a progressive undertaking, being used in follow-up activities and in future surveys. Having a brand will connect the survey to the organisation and enhance the perception of its value and relevance.

ENGAGEMENT PRACTITIONER

By commissioning a high-end engagement practitioner, rather than doing it in-house, you will avoid the many technical pitfalls associated with measurement, analysis and reporting², such as poor survey design and question psychometrics, not mapping the true theoretical basis of engagement, inadequate enquiry and the lack of advanced statistical modelling. Furthermore, you are more likely to get candid and accurate responses via an intermediary - your employees won't be tempted to respond more favourably just because they know you're dealing with the detail.

When selecting a practitioner you should balance their pricing against the quality of their output so you can ascertain the true value of what you are purchasing. Often surveys are significantly overpriced and you don't always 'get what you pay for'. The large consultancy houses commonly try to justify their high pricing by emphasising their worldwide presence and the millions of respondents in their so-called 'normative' benchmark bucket, whereas they should be pushing their progressive and sophisticated output. The best option is exploring the boutique and freelance providers as they can offer tailored expertise and a high-end product at a mid-range price.

ANONYMITY

Maintaining confidentiality is critical to the success of any survey that has been sold to the workforce as being optional and anonymous. It only takes one incident or minor indiscretion and the whole process could lose credibility very quickly. Research shows that on average 35% of employees are afraid to speak their mind at work through fear of reprisal. So to ensure you capture as much candid feedback as possible, people need to know that their opinions will be kept completely confidential. A good way of gaining this confidence is by outsourcing the survey project to a third party rather than running it internally, which as stated has other inherent problems. Ensuring anonymity throughout the process will secure honesty and maximise response rates.

While demographic information is valuable (age, tenure etc.), keep such questions to a minimum to avoid concerns about individuals being identified from their demographic profile. If anonymity has not been stressed at the onset then people may bail out when they get to the demographic section through fear of being identified. The rules should be made clear at the start, such as: (a) no individuals will be identified during the analysis; (b) no small groups (under 10 people) will be directly or indirectly identifiable in any reports; and (c) any team under 10 people will require sign-off from all members to release the reports for their team. A reputable practitioner will insist on strict confidentiality guidelines to protect the integrity of the product and the anonymity of respondents, regardless of client pressure.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

Your communication strategy is a critical part of the survey process and must not be overlooked. Let people know that the survey is coming, why it's being done and what you are expecting to do with the findings. Communicating your survey initiative to your people should not be done as part of a standard weekly brief or carried out by the easiest method possible. It needs to send an underlying message that 'the survey is very important'. Ask your CEO to communicate support for the initiative throughout the organisation and explain why it is key, as this will have high impact. Communication can be done in a variety of ways, but it must be prominent and carry importance, such as your company newsletter, a staff announcement, a formal briefing or a letter to each employee.

Choose the best communication plans and methods that work for your organisation. Don't rely on copying what has happened elsewhere as organisations are fundamentally different. Here are a few key pointers to help you devise a communication plan:

- **Pre-survey management orientation**
 - CEO/senior head should communicate personal commitment to engagement, the rationale behind it and the expected benefits.
 - CEO/exec team/HR should meet the senior leadership team to gain commitment, agree a realistic timeline and the survey logistics.
 - Senior leaders should secure buy-in from their front-line teams by explaining the benefits in terms of performance, ROI, turnover, employee self-efficacy etc.

- **Pre-survey employee orientation**
 - CEO/senior head should communicate personal commitment to the engagement, and the 'gain share' for both employer and employee.
 - All communication to employees must have a positive tone and should seek to gain their trust in the process and its outcomes.
 - Provide details of the objectives of the survey, the timeline, the logistics and how the results will be shared.
 - Emphasise the confidentiality and anonymity afforded by using an external company to carry out the research.
 - Emphasise the need for brutally honest responses and full participation so everyone's voice is heard.
- **Mid-survey employee communication**
 - Invite all employees to participate in the survey and remind them of the benefits of taking part.
 - Management teams should 'rally the troops' during the survey to maintain the momentum and enhance response rates.
 - Response numbers should be tracked so reminders can be sent to the locations or departments that are responding slowly.
- **Post-survey employee communication**
 - Thank everyone for taking part and their honesty, keeping the tone positive regardless of any disappointing response rates.
 - Explain the next steps: detailed external analysis > develop action plans > share results and plans (give an approximate date).
 - Once the appropriate format and the depth of detail to disseminate have been agreed at organisational level, managers should personally and openly explain the results to their teams.
 - Be extremely careful not to single out small groups of people or any individuals when sharing results and exercise discretion and tact when communicating about departments that had less favourable results.
- **Ongoing communication of progress**
 - Establish a structured approach to monitoring and broadcasting the progress against the joint action plans.
 - Quantify and openly celebrate success with employees and identify areas that require further support or focus to get on track.
 - Publish the metrics used for monitoring progress in order to sharpen the minds of those accountable for delivering actions.

SURVEY LOGISTICS

Think about how, where and when you will enable your employees to complete the survey. Given this is a work-based initiative it should be carried out during work time and not disadvantage individuals in any way. The location for completing the survey should be clean, tidy, quiet, comfortable and offer a degree of privacy to make sure you get honest responses. Setting up a dedicated survey room will show people that you are taking it seriously. Run sessions for small groups where questionnaires, whether online or paper, are completed in this 'safe' environment. It may at first seem excessive but a locked strong box would add an element of control over the depositing and security of completed paper questionnaires and send a strong message if confidentiality appears to be a concern. For a large group paper surveys could be carried out quietly in a meeting room after a staff briefing.

The period for survey completion should be short enough to get people motivated but must be long enough to catch people who are not immediately available, possibly working away, on holiday or off sick, so three weeks is a reasonable timeframe. Tracking levels of participation throughout this period will enable you to send targeted reminders to locations or departments with lower response rates. Generally, if the survey has been marketed well, response rates from employees should be very good with a high confidence level. If expectations are low then consider options to enhance perception and participation, but avoid offering incentives to reward high response rates as this can lead to bogus submissions. Lastly, if practicable, the best time to complete a questionnaire is when people have optimal cognition, which is in the second quarter of a working shift, so if you work from 8am to 5pm you would complete the survey between 10am and 12 noon.

TRANSPARENCY

Before communicating the results to your employees it is important to determine, at organisational level, the appropriate format and depth of detail for dissemination. Depth of detail here does not mean being economical with the truth; it means ensuring that you're not communicating too much detail that could go beyond your employees' general level of comprehension. The detail suitable is different for each organisation and is also determined by the capacity of your target audience. Once the format and level of detail are agreed, managers should share the results and action plans openly with employees to maintain trust. Problem areas should never be disguised or omitted and the results must be transparent. Managers should personally explain the results to their teams, highlighting both the positives and negatives. Employees will generally already know what the problems are so identifying them, accepting them and having plans to make improvements will gain credibility and respect.

SURVEY RESULTS & ACTION PLANS

Embracing the results of your engagement research and forming relevant action plans is a critical step. In particular, if the results uncover areas for development within your management teams, accept and act on them. Transformational leadership is a major conduit for enhancing engagement, so investing in your managers and front-line leaders to give them the knowledge, understanding and training to deliver on your action plans is a high-leverage tactic. Some other important considerations are listed below:

- **Key Drivers**

When reviewing the statistical analysis, focus your attention on the key drivers that returned the least favourable results. These key drivers are your highest priority for action to improve engagement and loyalty. Key drivers are those factors that are statistically significant, have practical importance and are fully actionable.

- **Benchmarking (debunked)**

Many senior leaders want to survey their organisation to see how they stack up against competitors. Sadly, what this really produces is companies taking comfort in knowing they are 'about average' instead of striving for excellence in their own right. More concerning is that the practice of external benchmarking against normative data is technically flawed³. Instead, the optimum benchmark for your organisation is an internal one. Establish internal baseline targets for engagement, continuously improve on results and measure the progress in your organisational performance metrics; don't get caught up in the external benchmarking trap.

- **Joint Action Plans**

To get the most out of your initiative, agree a consistent and combined approach to follow-up actions across your organisation. This unified approach will prevent departments from operating in 'silos' and offers the best opportunity to deliver the cultural change that may be required to enhance levels of engagement. That said, you do need to consider the variations in working practices and needs in different divisions and departments, and take into account any differences in their responses. Some organisations involve employees in the planning process, but this depends on your corporate culture and the nature of the problems faced. When formulating action plans try to identify some 'low-hanging fruit' that will have immediate impact as well as the areas for longer-term cultural development.

- **Take Action!**

We now live with a fast-paced business and working environment, so delaying action following your survey may lead to a loss of momentum in the engagement initiative. If you operate in an environment that changes its face regularly then the shelf life of your research findings may be shorter than normal. In any event, it is important to move swiftly, not only to maintain credibility and buy-in, but to ensure that improvement plans are still relevant and fresh. It also goes without saying that there must be a demonstrable commitment to take action based on the survey findings or the initiative will nose-dive and your workforce will be highly cynical and less responsive next time round.

Lastly, asking your provider to customise a survey to 'suit your organisation' is unsound as it is likely to undermine the construct of engagement². However, it is acceptable to include one or two additional questions in your survey to gauge opinion on specific areas of interest. This can provide valuable feedback to fuel key business decisions and capitalises on the opportunity presented by an organisation-wide survey.

MEASURE IMPROVEMENT

Although there may be some areas you can act on straight away for immediate impact, you should recognise that enhancing psychological engagement and corporate loyalty within an organisation generally requires a long-term cultural shift rather than a quick fix. The notion of doing a survey, finding the issues, fixing them and the numbers go up in six to 12 months is somewhat short-sighted. You will need to manage employee expectations so that everyone understands that it takes longer to nurture cultural change.

It is important to measure the effects of any action you take arising from the survey results and these need to be linked to improved business metrics. Linking metrics in this way will highlight the true value of carrying out the survey and will reaffirm to everyone that it wasn't just a paper exercise. Metrics to monitor overall business progress include voluntary turnover, absenteeism, productivity, profitability and customer experience. It would be pertinent to include some employee-related metrics too to support your CEO's promise of gain share. The impact on employees can be more difficult to quantify outside of the metrics of productivity, stability and attendance, but with follow-up surveys completed annually it will be easier to highlight progress that is of personal benefit to employees in terms of fulfilment, advocacy, self-efficacy, pride and so on. In the interim it may be appropriate to highlight events such as individual or team success stories, achievements and promotions.

To get maximum value from your employee research, consider conducting an annual survey. This will enable you to identify in detail areas that are improving and those that require more focus. Some practitioners offer pulse surveys which are short, frequent surveys designed to track progress against your annual survey improvement actions. These can help maintain the message that you are serious about engagement and provide a valuable monitoring tool. Running a pulse survey program is a good idea however doing an interim full survey six months after an annual survey is not. You will be mid-flow with your mainstream actions and it is likely your workforce will have limited interest for another long questionnaire.

CELEBRATE SUCCESS

In the rapidly changing business arena it's all too easy to focus on the next objective on the road map without stopping for a moment to reflect on what's already been achieved. If you ignore your wins then you are missing an invaluable opportunity to recognise success, inspire your team and strengthen your organisation's leadership brand. Celebrating success also validates your original goal setting, motivates teams to achieve even more, focuses on the positive rather than the negative, unites everyone centrally around a positive outcome and reminds people that they are part of a winning team.



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high-end employee engagement metrics for the discerning organisation

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