



# The Pros & Cons of Employee Surveys

The employee survey, sometimes referred to as an "attitude" or "opinion" survey is one of several means owners have for stimulating upward communication. Within the Occupational Health and Safety World we utilize these types of surveys to have pulse on our Safety Culture.

Employee surveys range from highly structured, all-encompassing surveys to narrowly targeted surveys that address a single issue with a limited number of employees. Some degree of structure is necessary for this formal channel of communication because you must prepare survey questions carefully and establish mechanisms for processing responses.

## **Benefits:**

A business can benefit in several ways from a thoughtfully designed and administered employee survey. Such a survey can provide pertinent information about what employees feel about working conditions, hazards in the work environment, management commitment, perceived initiative or program benefits and success, relationships with co-workers, communication within the company, commitment to safety, quality of supervision and many other culture criteria. It can also facilitate inferences about the morale of the work group and employee perception of company image. Yet accessing these benefits involves some potential risks.

## **Drawbacks:**

It's common to encounter surveys consisting of numerous questions addressing all aspects of employment from company image through communication, management behavior and all dimensions of working conditions. You can conduct such surveys by either distributing survey forms to be completed and returned or convening employee groups to complete survey forms then and there. Both methods have drawbacks.

Employees who don't want to spend the time and effort, as well as those who may be uneasy coming up with answers, will ignore a mail-in or turn-in survey. Overall response is often sufficiently low, limiting the usefulness of results. Also, results can be biased by responses from those who feel strongly enough about topics to use the survey for venting their feelings.

Survey participation is much greater when the forms are completed in an individual or group setting. However, these one-on-one or group meetings are costly in terms of personnel. Also, individual or group setting can't guarantee that individuals will take the survey with any better attitude than if they were to do so independently. But that is what we are measuring – peoples perceptions.



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A number of survey problems reside in employee differences. Not all employees possess the same degree of literacy, so even in the best surveys some statements will be misunderstood by some employees. Also, responses to any given question can be swayed one way or another by the way the question is worded.

One of the greatest problems with employee surveys involves the expectations the survey creates. For a survey to be taken seriously, most employees must be convinced that it's being conducted for constructive reasons. Employees must believe that management wants to know what achievements are made and what problems exist so circumstances can be improved. Even if this desire to make improvements isn't a stated survey objective, it's there loud and clear by implication. Employees expect that management will do something about problems that come to light. Expectations created by a survey become a major problem if they remain unfulfilled after it is completed.

Sometimes management will have little idea what might be revealed by an employee survey. Some top managers seem to believe that no serious problems exist simply because they haven't heard of any. However, when top management has heard nothing, it's often because upward channels of communication aren't working (for far too many possible reasons than can be addressed here). In a worst-case situation, a comprehensive survey can blow the upward channels wide open and instantly reveal a load of serious problems. Unfortunately, the occasional reaction to such negative surprises is to bury the survey results—or at least the strongly negative parts—and thus further alienate employees.

## Positive survey approach

A potentially constructive survey might be undertaken as follows:

- Investigate first. Talk with first-line managers; the folks supervising the people who do the hands-on work can usually provide insight into existing problems. Carefully analyze turnover data and exit interview information if available. In other words, have some idea of what might surface before surveying.
- Focus the survey.
- Focus the questions. Make them as clear and unambiguous as possible.
- Make a carefully worded, realistic commitment to address the survey's results. Don't promise to solve every problem that surfaces, but do promise to make a good-faith effort to improve circumstances based on what's learned.
- Conduct the survey in individual or group fashion. In spite of potential problems, this approach will net more responses and increase quality of responses, than a survey completed via computer or paper based.
- Publish complete survey results, hiding nothing.
- Honor your commitment to make a good-faith effort toward improvement.



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