



Don't Do a Survey

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

In most organizations, when managers want to know how people are feeling, they do a QWL (Quality of Work Life) survey to find out. There are more direct ways to identify what people are thinking. By simply discussing the need for a survey, the most insightful data is already spilled all over the table. To mop it up, you need to improve the level of trust in your organization.

Taking an employee engagement survey usually does not reveal trust weaknesses or their causes because in low trust environments people will either not be totally honest or be turned off by yet another survey to gather data. Most people believe the data will sit in a desk drawer anyway, and it will not provide real change. How many times have you heard employees say, "They keep doing these satisfaction surveys, but nothing ever changes around here"? Taking a survey feels like progress to a management team with their hearts in the right place. They believe they can dig in and really understand the problems in depth, but I believe there is a far easier and more accurate way to get the data in most cases.

In an environment of high trust, the information about what is working well and what needs to change is as ubiquitous as the air we breathe. People do not need to fill out boxes in a computerized screen to identify the most pressing needs. Improvement opportunities will be offered up continuously, and action can be taken immediately, not after 11 staff meetings to discuss the 27-page summary of the employee satisfaction survey.

The illusion of progress made by taking a survey happens in nearly every organization because managers are not thinking of alternative methods. Besides, the survey gives managers something to talk about and point at to demonstrate they care and are trying to understand. A better way to make progress is to identify which management behaviors are causing people to hold back the truth out of fear for their job or something else. Rather than contemplating an employee satisfaction survey, Management should be asking themselves questions such as:

1. How can we change the culture to eliminate the need to take surveys in the future?
2. How can we modify the way we interact with people so we always know what is on their minds when problems are small and can be easily resolved?
3. How can we get more time in the workplace to chat with people rather than be cooped up in our offices composing e-mails, or sitting in boring meetings?
4. How can we continually test our understanding of what is happening in the hearts of people by listening and watching their body language?
5. Why do we have an insular management team? When we look around the room, why do we not see more workers in our meetings?
6. Why do the people think our values are not consistently practiced? We say people are our most valuable asset, but do we always make decisions that support that ideal?
7. Why are our goals not fully understood or supported by the people doing the work?

If management energy is focused on creating a real environment where people are not playing games with each other in order to survive, then improvement ideas will flow like water down a mountain stream. If the culture is frozen by fear, the resulting ice makes it necessary to have a blast from a survey in order to move the water, and the data will not be accurate due to fear or apathy. The survey blast does not change the underlying cause and thaw things out to a more fluid state. It only temporarily provides questionable data so there is an appearance of progress. If managers and leaders would ask questions like the ones above and seek to gain information in those ways, the progress will be far easier to achieve and more robust.



Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations. For more information, or to bring Bob in to speak at your next event, **contact him at www.Leadergrow.com, bwhipple@leadergrow.com or 585.392.7763**