

## Employee Engagement Surveys

### What are the Stakes if Nobody Holds Them?

#### *The Importance of Organizational Commitment and Support for Successful Employee Engagement Initiatives*

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Over the last three years, the vogue of using employee engagement surveys has become a mainstream practice in businesses worldwide. The question of its effectiveness has been raised and explored by many practitioners in the field of organizational development, as well as by line management in organizations. Over the many years of practicing OD, I've seen enough to understand the reason for this skepticism.

In my opinion, the issue is not whether the employee engagement survey is effective or not; the truth lies in how the survey is positioned. When I consult an organization regarding the deployment of an engagement survey initiative, I always raise the following questions:

***Who is/are the stated sponsor(s) for the program? What are their stakes in this initiative? Do they have the leverage and credibility to make it a success?***

A client approached us with a desire to implement a company-wide employee engagement survey based on a newly adopted set of organizational values. Their purpose was, "to use the survey as a way to create an awareness of the behaviors managers need to exhibit in order to obtain an engaged population and culture." When asked about the organizational buy-in, the VP of HR referred us to the CEO who clearly and unequivocally stated, "The company needs to shift its culture in order to survive the current business environment and my job is at stake if the employees are not engaged in the sustainability and success of the organization." Obviously, explicit buy-in at the top level greatly increases the chance of any successful employee engagement survey initiative. However, endorsement from the "big boss" does not guarantee that the process will be effectively rolled down through the organization.

***Who are the key stakeholders within the system who can ensure the implementation? Are they committed to the process, or are they simply complying?***

Many times, key stakeholders are left out of the engagement survey strategy and deployment process, particularly when there is strong sponsorship from the CEO or another senior executive in the organization. We often find that organizational engagement surveys are carried out by HR in response to a request from a senior executive, with little or no backing from other important members of the organization.

Several years ago, the Senior VP of HR of one of the largest medical supply manufacturers in the U.S. asked us to help them develop and implement a values and engagement program in conjunction with an HR planning process. According to the Senior VP, the CEO had asked her to make this initiative a key priority, and even went so far as to designate it as one of her four performance management objectives for that year. We moved forward with the request, starting with a pilot at the corporate level.

The deployment went relatively smooth, and spawned some minor modifications/improvements to the process as a whole. With the pilot under our belt, the program was moved to the specific business units. To our surprise, we encountered tremendous resistance from the business units in the form of cancelled meetings, low attendance to related training sessions, etc. At this point, we decided to have a meeting with the Senior VP of HR and the HR staff from each business unit. During this meeting it became abundantly clear that the presidents of the two largest divisions did not endorse the initiative and even viewed it as an intrusion of corporate mandate into their operations. They feared that the results of the survey would put them in danger of losing talent to the smaller, faster growing divisions. We realized that these division presidents were bowing to the request of the CEO but neglecting to commit to the engagement initiative through endorsement within their business unit. The result was a full year's delay in the deployment, as well as the tremendous cost of rounding up the disengaged stakeholders.

***Effective survey positioning is the key to deploying a successful engagement survey.*** When developing the engagement survey process, there must be a sponsor for the initiative. This sponsor must have the credibility and influence to create buy-in throughout the entire organization. The key stakeholders must also be involved and committed to the process in order to ensure successful deployment of the survey and the implementation of the action plans that come out of the survey data in order to drive a successful engagement culture. When key members of an organization are not supportive of an employee engagement initiative, the cost becomes greater than the gain and there is loss of credibility and increase of skepticism in the eyes of the employees that the program is aimed to engage.

