

Get the most out of engagement surveys

Go beyond numbers to assess employee satisfaction, motivation and effectiveness

BY PAUL WARNER

Many companies have used employee engagement surveys for years but found the process has become stale and the results are not eliciting change or improving performance. But, properly done, these surveys can increase organizational performance and leadership effectiveness — as long as employers delve into the data to understand the factors behind the scores.

There are several common problems companies encounter in doing employee surveys. Many do not really measure engagement but instead look at satisfaction or commitment, or show only the outcomes of engagement, with just one metric. If results say morale is low, many action plans just target satisfaction or happiness, trying to make employees feel good.

Surveys can also focus too much on increasing engagement scores rather than boosting performance, or rely too much on external benchmarks, losing sight of what's happening internally. The process can also be an inhibitor of engagement, as workers become frustrated with annual surveys, so participation rates go down and people become skeptical.

The definition of engagement ranges from "commitment to organization," "satisfaction with job," "passion for work," "discretionary effort" or, most commonly, all of the above. But there are three factors that converge to form engagement:

Satisfaction: The positive or pleasurable emotional state resulting from a job.

Motivation: The energy driving human behaviour at

■ EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Predictors, inhibitors

To understand the whys behind the numbers of employee engagement surveys, common predictors for full engagement include:

- Understanding how your work contributes to the overall mission and goals of the employer.
- Feeling your work is valued by an immediate supervisor.
- Having the tools and resources necessary to perform your job.
- Feeling motivated to perform a job to the best of your abilities.

And common inhibitors include:

- Fear of retribution if you speak up.
- Lack of clear incentives to do good work.
- Lack of regular feedback on performance from immediate supervisor.
- Unreasonable amount of work.

Source: *DecisionWise*

work, intrinsic or extrinsic.

Effectiveness: An employee's ability to perform her job in a way that meets the expectations and requirements of co-workers and customers.

In administering a survey, employers should look at the results to find out if an issue falls into one of these areas, rather than speaking generically about engagement levels. For example, a company might have a relatively low engagement score but, in breaking down the scores, find effectiveness and motivation are low but satisfaction is high. An organization could discover it has focused too much on boosting satisfaction at the expense of the other factors. But if all three are aligned with solid scores, there is true engagement.

Spectrum of engagement

When it comes to measurement, there are three basic ways to look at engagement: an overall average of scores on an agreement scale, a one-question average and a "top-box" average of the "strongly agree" scores. But these measure-

ments are only one part of the engagement equation. Employers must also work backwards to figure out why the results are that way.

It's important to look at the full spectrum, from the fully engaged or "strongly agree" to the actively disengaged or "strongly disagree" people who see things within the culture and environment that inhibit their engagement.

But there can be so many responses of four (on a scale of one to five) that it is hard to isolate the predictors. People usually reserve an answer of five for questions they feel very strongly about, so separating the fives and ones and twos can isolate the predictors and inhibitors.

In looking at the spectrum, a profile of an engaged or disengaged employee emerges:

Actively disengaged: An employee who is bored and frustrated at work, sarcastic about work, speaks poorly about company leaders, looks for ways to find blame and quits mentally but stays physically.

Disengaged: An employee

who often feels underutilized, spends time taking care of personal needs, does just enough to get by and not get in trouble and stays largely for pay.

Passively engaged: An employee who does what she is told, sticks to what she knows, takes few risks, faces many barriers outside her control, is rarely stretched by assignments and feels "it's a job."

Fully engaged: An employee who is constantly learning and taking calculated risks, feels stretched beyond her comfort zone, takes personal satisfaction in the quality of her work, finds work stressful but rewarding and fun and loves her job.

Companies that use external benchmark comparisons based on one overall engagement score can become slaves to the numbers and make misguided conclusions. They may also focus too much on results and not enough on performance. With internal benchmarks, companies can identify top and low performers by putting people on the spectrum. They can create a model for high engagement, profile disengaged workers and assess the drivers and inhibitors of engagement.

Organizations can go even further with internal trending, comparing results with previous survey administrations, showing how engagement changes with different events and testing the efficacy of change initiatives.

In not only looking at the outcome but the overall engagement score and working backwards, employers can look at the predictors of full engagement, and the inhibitors, and work from there.

Paul Warner is director of consulting services at the management consulting firm DecisionWise in Provo, Utah. For more information, visit www.decwise.com.