

What Do Your Employees Think?

Early on in my consulting career I worked on a project for a new, state-of-the-art, livestock processing plant in Manitoba. It had high turnover and absentee rates and management wanted to know why. I toured the workplace and interviewed employees to get their input. Based on this, I recommended that the company add color and visual variety to what was a sterile, clinical facility.

Management paid me for my study but chose, instead, to accelerate hiring and seek government subsidies, to attract more employees. Six years later I checked up on the company and learned that they were still unable to run at full capacity because they could not retain employees. This reinforced my belief that while inviting employees to share their opinions is crucial, there's no point in doing so if you aren't going to listen to what they have to say.

Go directly to employees and ask them what is turning them on – or off – about their jobs, their supervisors, and the company as a whole.

Too often employees express their opinions only to each other, friends or family. They may try to express themselves to their managers, supervisors or team leaders, but because they don't want to be labelled as whiners, they will often keep complaints vague. Even if they are honest, front-line managers, supervisors and team leaders may shrug them off. This means low employee morale often remains unknown by senior management until it's too late.

Fortunately there's a better way to get this information. Go directly to employees and ask them what is turning them on – or off – about their jobs, their supervisors, and the company as a whole. There are three different approaches you can choose from, depending on your particular situation.

- 1. Opinion Surveys:** one manufacturing company I worked with in St. Catharines, Ont., wanted to know how its human resources department was perceived by employees. We used a web and paper-based process to administer the survey and about 40% of the 375 employees responded. It turned out that training and succession planning were both under served. To fix this the HR team created a priority action plan, committed to a bi-annual survey, and targeted future surveys to obtain a 60% response level.

In another case, a Mississauga, Ont., automotive-parts provider with multiple plants had a union-free strategy. Four major languages were spoken at its plants. The firm needed to know how consistent or inconsistent its employee relations practices were across all plants. Capitalizing on existing shift-startup meetings, multilingual spoken surveys were conducted with each shift. These surveys identified inadequate employee parking, poorly equipped meal rooms, and a lack of supervisor contact.

- 2. Employee Team Meetings:** a Brantford, Ont.-based food processor wanted greater employee participation in continuous improvement. To achieve this, its shift teams were trained in quality manufacturing and they were given the freedom to develop their own metric charts. In the end, each team was

tracking its shift by shift outputs, set its weekly quality targets and reported progress to the operations director.

In a different example, a City of Toronto service division wanted to monitor process deviations, set shift production assignments, and integrate preventive maintenance priorities. The solution was to communicate all of this through employee-led shift meetings.

- 3. One-on-one Conversations:** to learn more about what's on its employees' minds, a West-Toronto parts finisher started a quarterly employee-to-supervisor conversation process called "Speak Up". The agenda for these 30- to 45- minute conversations was determined by the employee. These conversations were not about production issues but, rather, focused on the employees' concerns, issues or questions. Human Resources monitored the process to ensure that supervisors were consistent and provided timely feedback to employees.

Another company that wanted employee feedback, a retail-product dairy operation, used monthly performance discussions between each union employee and his or her team leader. These discussions focused on department outputs and the employee provided suggestions and feedback on process improvement.

Each of these employers found ways to create an environment where employees feel comfortable communicating their feelings and ideas. This helped these organizations achieve their strategic goals, because engaged employees are motivated employees. It's not hard to open up the conversation and the benefits are almost immediate. Talk to your employees, listen to what they have to say, do something about it, and you'll engage their hearts and minds.

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