



Are Employee Surveys Dead? What About For Safety Culture?

Insights

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I recently read an article stating that over one-half of 250 HR respondents thought that the traditional employee survey is dead. Most respondents felt that the future of employer research was “qualitative” rather than “quantitative,” and 80% believe that mobile technology will become the most common way for employees to voice their opinions.

A summary of the article in [HR Magazine Co. UK](#) observed that, although respondents believe mobile technology would be the most common means of surveying employees in the future, most respondents did not have the social technology to gather such feedback. As one commentator wryly observed, it was amusing that “a survey has been used to predict the demise of employer surveys. . . . much of the report is expressed in terms of the percentage of people who agree with this or disagreed with that.” This commentator went on to note:

This tells us that numbers and words are important as bench marks and as illustrations of how communities think and feel. The authors have failed to generate an alternative method to surveys in pursuit of the cause they discredit surveys....

As with all things, surveys or otherwise, it's not what you do, it's the way you do it. There are good surveys and bad surveys. Yes, we should embrace new technologies, as all good providers are, but let's not pretend that the need for quantitative analysis (and resulting action) is dead.

My Observations

I agree that traditional surveys still have a role in the workplace, and their effectiveness largely depends upon how the survey is employed. My first observation is that many employers do not use **any** type of employee survey, and also do not employ any other quantitative or qualitative methods to take the temperature of their employees.

My second point is that a “qualitative” process, such as supervisors interviewing employees or using focus groups or any other method of promoting conversation is superior to a survey. As a labor lawyer, I would obviously prefer that employers regularly conduct qualitative surveys of employees and avoid the problems that may cause union activity or litigation. Many employers suddenly seem to “get religion” during a union drive and wish that they had earlier taken steps to learn why employees believed that they need a third party between them and the employer.

However, the reality is that many employers do not believe that they have the time, and their supervisors do not have the training to effectively seek qualitative input. Given this workplace reality, a quantitative employee survey may be far better than no effort.

My third observation is that if an employer does not follow up on survey results, they will make things worse than if they never asked. When I was a *“baby lawyer”* in the early 80’s, I responded to union and other legal problems at a now defunct company where the problems had been triggered by the employer’s failure to act on employee survey results. When I found the survey results literally gathering dust on top of a filing cabinet, I was horrified to see countless *“specific”* references to discrimination, unfairness, inability to be promoted, favoritism, and basic failures, such as non-working water fountains and filthy bathrooms.

Using Employee Surveys For Specific Issues, Such As To Determine Your “Safety Culture”

While the traditional employee survey may be declining in popularity, its use is increasing as a means for employers to determine their *“safety culture”* and take actions to improve it. I encourage managers to conduct discrete surveys of both employers and employees, and then compare the disconnect between responses. Nowhere is the disconnect more apparent than in the case of safety. I never met a CEO who did not assure me that safety was the company’s number 1 value, and they meant it. However, when their employees were surveyed, or they came under the fine tooth comb of an OSHA inspection, the executive learned that safety was taken for granted.

For this reason, I encourage employers to survey employees about their company’s safety practices, supervisor attitudes and safety and work practices; i.e., to determine their “culture.” But the employer may not like the answers to their survey questions.

A survey of several thousand skilled construction craft employees revealed that **93% of respondents felt that their company was currently at risk of an injury or death** caused by *“avoidable workplace attitudes”* such as tolerating the incompetent employees or having a *“just get it done”* or *“this is overboard”* approach to work and safety.

Half of those same respondents stated that they were actually aware of an injury or death caused by one of these attitudes.

Even more troubling, despite their concerns, only one quarter of respondents said that they would speak up and try to correct unsafe conditions. To put this in simple terms, only one in four employees said that they would tell an unsafe coworker to use fall protection. Do you think that any of those employers expected responses from highly skilled craft workers?

How would your employees respond if asked some of the following questions?

(Agree/Disagree/Strongly Agree/Strongly Disagree)

- We practice at the jobsite what is in our Corporate Safety Policy.
- I always receive job-specific training.

- Supervisors hold us to safety rules.
- Our contractors work safely.
- Management is serious about safety.
- We cover safety issues for the job each day.
- I hold coworkers accountable for safety.
- Co-workers can help each other to work safely.
- It is only a matter of time until I am involved in an accident.
- Sometimes I am not given enough time to get the job done safely.
- This is a safer place to work than other companies where I have worked.
- I am encouraged to report unsafe conditions/near misses.
- Management turns a blind eye to safety issues at times.
- Some safety rules and procedures are not really practical.
- Safety is one of the first things upper management talks about.
- Upper management seldom comes on the floor.
- Upper management is involved in safety training.
- Upper management is involved in new employee orientation.

No survey obviates the need for frontline supervisor to remain alert and to talk to their employees. Survey results will be meaningless if no one in top leadership champions the process. Employers, like children, do not much care about our words; they observe our actions.

Don't get me wrong. I am excited about the new technologies and methods described in the survey. There is a great deal of information to mine from their findings. However, I would be pleased to see any additional efforts by employers to learn what employees really think.

Howard

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Howard A. Mavity

Partner

404.240.4204

Email