

## Pitfalls and Tips When Administering Employee Surveys

*From an Experienced Employee Survey Vendor:*

### *Author Biography:*

Mark Robledo has twenty years of experience as an organizational development consultant, a team facilitator, strategic planner, and an employee focus group moderator. Mr. Robledo is also the President and CEO of The Crossroads Group, Inc., a firm specializing in the provision of both patient and employee satisfaction & engagement surveys since 2005.

Having worked with dozens of organizations designing and implementing employee survey projects as well as moderating employee focus groups both pre-and post-survey implementation, Mr. Robledo has identified many common pitfalls associated with online employee survey administration (the most common methodology). These pitfalls can ultimately prevent organizations from capturing detailed, valid, and representative employee perception feedback, damage the employee-employer relationship, and prevent leadership from accomplishing the goals which are designed to be supported by the employee survey process.

### *The Pitfalls:*

**Communication with Employees:** One potential pitfall with any survey process involves insufficient communication regarding survey objectives, process, and follow-through. Any survey process should be well-communicated both before and after the launch. Elements of pre-survey launch communication must include the purpose of the survey (to help the organization to continuously improve) and how the survey will be administered (methodology) and in the case of employee surveys incorporate a strong emphasis on confidentiality. Communication must include information related to how results will be shared and how they will be used to make the organization better for those completing the survey (both are strong intrinsic motivators).

**Confidentiality, Confidentiality, Confidentiality:** Perhaps the most significant pitfall with any employee survey process involves real and perceived confidentiality. It is not sufficient for the survey process to be confidential; the survey process must be perceived to be so as well by those who are expected to participate in the survey. For the prospective employee respondent, survey participation is at its core a risk-reward proposition. The reward is the opportunity to share concerns, vent, and possibly make the organization that they work for better. The risk is that sharing candid feedback might at some point jeopardize their standing in the organization (particularly as it relates to sharing feedback regarding senior leadership and/or their manager). To secure representative participation rates as well as honest and candid feedback, employers must simultaneously increase the reward proposition while decreasing risk for the employee. Otherwise, response rates will be less than optimal and survey results will not represent the true perceptions of employees.

Confidentiality must be repeatedly emphasized throughout the survey process (and even after). It is important to clarify with respondents the definition of confidentiality; confidentiality is not synonymous with anonymity (even in healthcare, employees confuse these terms). Ultimately, a third-party-administered survey process can be confidential while not being anonymous since the survey administrator knows the response identities of respondents. This is essential for the survey administrator to be able to ensure only one response per individual, send reminders to non-respondents

(only), and pipe demographic data into the survey form for cross-tabulation analysis (e.g. scores by site, by job title, etc.). Trust will be built during subsequent survey administrations when employees see that results are both shared and used in a positive manner to improve the organization, and the process is indeed a safe one in that confidentiality of respondent feedback is carefully persevered.

**IT-Related Pitfalls:** In addition to the pitfalls above, there are operational pitfalls which may occur. There are few things worse than announcing a survey on a given launch date, only to experience IT-related delays on the launch date. Areas to assess include trusted sender IP addresses, rate control exemptions (for mass e-mail), tech support protocols, and firewall restrictions. For any online survey, it is very wise to ensure that IT is involved in advance to ensure that there are no technical issues when you go live with the survey. On the reporting end, it is important that results be cross-tabulated in a manner that does not compromise respondent identity.

**Question Wording and Scale Selection:** There are numerous potential pitfalls related to question selection, scale selection, point computations, and/or longitudinal trend analysis or benchmarking. We recommend either using an experienced survey vendor for questionnaire design or using a standardized questionnaire from a reputable source. Except for qualitative open-ended questions, we recommend avoiding questionnaire questions which are developed in-house due to the pitfalls which may occur with question wording. The wording of questions used in a survey can also create bias or skew results (which can be intended or unintended). The meaning of the question to a respondent may differ from the meaning intended by the developer of the question (validity).

For scale selection, we recommend a Likert scale (such as Agree-Disagree) which does not include a “neutral” *Neither Agree nor Disagree* middle option since this option is sometimes confused with a “non-Applicable” scale option and can thus skew results downward. We do recommend however including an “NA” option to allow respondents to opt out of a particular question if they feel that they are either unable or unwilling to respond to the question (note: forced-entry questions may result in abortion of the survey). For background questions (such as respondent demographics, location, job title, etc.), we recommend piping this information into the survey rather than asking these questions. Respondents are often hesitant to answer these questions (confidentiality concerns) and piping will result in a shorter survey.

With regards to benchmarking and longitudinal comparisons, be wary of the pitfall of comparing your survey results to either a benchmark which consists of survey results which were obtained through a methodology which differs from your methodology (even if the questionnaire is the same) or even to previous survey results for your organization if the methods for survey administration, the scale used, or the questions used varied in any way. Any benchmarking comparison group should be well-defined and include comparable organizations (particularly as related to industry), using the same questions and methodology. If switching to a new vendor or process, there may be some value in comparing results to historical baseline data, but proceed with caution and make this clear when sharing results. Comparing your survey results to a benchmark which only uses the same questionnaire (rather than the same methodology) can result in a very misleading comparison.

**Survey Duration and Timing:** Another potential survey pitfall relates to the amount of time given to respondents to participate in the survey. If you do not provide enough time for respondents to complete the survey, you risk a low response rate. If you provide too much time, you delay results reporting and risk having respondents procrastinate until a later date, as they have plenty of time. For most employee

surveys, we recommend a two-week sampling period, with a possible one week extension (provided at the end of week two). We also recommend launching the survey early in the week and in the morning (generally a Monday morning) to increase response participation. Surveys can be administered at any time of the year, with peak summer vacation weeks best-avoided and early January representing a great time to launch a survey. In terms of frequency, we recommend six month intervals if your organization is proactively using the survey results to drive change, or annually if the organization is moving at a slower pace.

**Questionnaire Length Pitfalls:** There are many areas which can potentially be assessed on an employee survey. We recommend not going “too short” in terms of questionnaire length, as you may end up depriving yourself of valuable information. We do recommend careful selection of survey questions to ensure that the questions are not redundant or repetitive in nature and that the survey does not get too lengthy. We also recommend including open-ended text insertion opportunities throughout the survey (rather than only at the end), to enable top-of-mind entry while the topic is being rated (much valuable information will be obtained). Given the importance of the top, employees generally will not mind answering a fifty-question (or more) employee survey if the survey is only administered once a year and they are able to complete the survey at work or at home. We have administered 100 question employee surveys with a strong response rate.

**Incentive Pitfalls:** Incentives are safe to incorporate, and can add a positive dynamic to the survey, if they are fairly rewarded and do not compromise respondent confidentiality (again, this is where third-party involvement can be very advantageous). Incentives often enhance participation rates and communicate to respondents that their involvement is appreciated. Incentives can be offered either as individual incentives (one large reward or smaller rewards available to more individuals) and/or team incentives (e.g. the site with the highest response rate) are appropriate. It is very important to emphasize that the selection of winners is random and managed by the third-party entity administering the survey (to mitigate any potential pitfalls regarding fairness or confidentiality).

**Cost and Vendor Pitfalls:** Given the myriad of potential pitfalls in survey administration described previously, selecting the right survey vendor (if any) is a critical decision. Self-administration of the survey process is an option, however there are pitfalls. The lure of potential cost savings to be gained by self-administering a survey must be balanced by the risk of forfeiting a genuinely actionable survey result (which may in turn have much greater unintended consequences related to employee engagement and retention). Many organizations attempt to self-administer employees, only to realize that low response rates, employee confidentiality fears leading to reticence to either participate or be candid, and greater than anticipated technical and analytical challenges deter their efforts in the long-run and cause them to look for alternative methods. For a measure as strategically important as employee satisfaction and engagement, it is important that organization not be “penny wise and pound foolish” by selecting a process which will not yield actionable information.

Regardless of how much confidentiality is promised, or how good the in-house technology and/or expertise, employees will very often be hesitant to candidly participate in a process which is managed by the organization that they work for, for fear that their identity will be associated with their responses. While these concerns still may exist with third-party administration of an employee survey, they can be greatly mitigated when the survey process is entirely managed by a third-party, and confidentiality assurances are made by both the employer and the independent third-party survey vendor.

There are also pitfalls to be avoided when contracting with a survey vendor. Pricing and value-proposition varies greatly by-vendor, as there is much ‘in the details’. At a minimum, reporting should include scores by-site, by-manager (where response count permits), correlation and importance metrics, provider-specific metrics, and robust reporting of verbatim comments. Reporting by-department and Job Categories (which you have input into designing) is critical, as there will be wide variances across. Correlation and/or Importance metrics (to help prioritize actions), should also be included as well as industry benchmarking of results and a ‘raw data export. A walk-through of survey results should also be provided upon completion of the survey at no additional cost. The questionnaire should employ skip-logic, a password to protect the integrity of the process, and enable data piping of background demographics to reduce the length of the questionnaire and ensure accurate insertion of this information. Vendors should also offer the ability to provide field-tested benchmarked questions as well as provide custom question development related to learning objectives. There should be no significant cost for questionnaire expansion if the survey is conducted online and the vendor should handle the “drop” of the survey and provide respondents with the ability to contact them if there are questions or concerns related to the survey process. We also recommend contracting with a vendor which will not penalize you if you decide not to continue with that vendor beyond the first (baseline) survey administration. We recommend comparing at least two to three survey vendors before committing to a third-party to conduct your survey.

**Using Employee Survey Results:** A common pitfall involves administering an employee survey and then failing to communicate survey results to those who participated, failing to act on the information gained, and/or not communicating to employees who the survey results were used by leadership. This pitfall will frustrate some employees and will likely result in lower participation rates for future surveys. More importantly, the organization misses the opportunity to utilize the feedback from one of its most important stakeholders. Using survey results is a key strategic imperative. Strategies employed may vary across organizational sites, departments, and/or job functions (e.g. Front Desk staff may have very different scores and priorities vis-à-vis providers, and this may vary by-manager or site). Correlation and/or key-driver analysis can help prioritize efforts around items which have the most significant impact on overall satisfaction and/or engagement. Individual manager scores can be used as a coaching and development tool at the individual level, using a robust set of manager/supervisor questions as metrics. Employee focus groups (ideally moderated by a third-party) are sometimes implemented in follow-up to a survey to discuss (and probe) the results in greater detail for additional insight.

Any key findings related to the survey, as well as actions which are either already in-pace (and validated by the survey) or being developed (in response to the survey) should be shared with employees. This will improve buy-in on the implementation side and convey a message that the organization takes employee feedback seriously. Select employees (from among top-performers) to be a part of the development of actions related to opportunity areas, perhaps as part of a task force or committee. Low scoring areas which are weighted heavily in terms of importance should receive the greatest emphasis in terms of resources geared towards improvement efforts. Recognizing in-house best-practice managers, departments, and/or sites and cross-pollinating internal best-practices throughout the organization is also a wise approach. Sharing a set of high-quality actions targeting high-priority opportunity areas will not only better the organization, but will prevent a pitfall which may generate cynicism among employees (“nothing was done with the survey”) while conveying a message that leadership cares about and responds to the feedback provided by employees.