

Engagement Survey and Action Work Plan

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Introduction

Conducting employee surveys is a widespread organizational development practice in many institutions and businesses. Remarkably, the past two decades have seen an impressive boom in surveys focusing on employee engagement.

Most often, though, the fancy word “Engagement” goes hand-in-hand with another popular concept of “Action Work Plan.” The first one is a diagnostic tool, while the second – a tool for organizational development. To understand why they usually go together, it is useful to draw parallels with healthcare, where one’s body diagnostic (survey) is always followed by a treatment (action plan).

In this paper, I will argue that diagnostics without treatment are a waste of resources. It is therefore essential to combine the two to achieve a maximum boost in organizational performance.

The Concept of Engagement

Employee Engagement (EE) is commonly defined as the degree to which employees are driven to actively contribute to the success of the organization and willingly invest additional effort in accomplishing tasks crucial to attaining organizational objectives.

I’m often asked – “Why engagement and not motivation?” Engagement is a more active form of motivation. In other words, it is not only about motivation, but also about the willingness to apply discretionary effort to accomplishing organizational goals. One can be motivated, but act passively, i.e., sit in their comfortable chair and do very little for the good of the organization, or the team.

An engaged employee is actively looking for opportunities to contribute to organizational success. When employees are genuinely engaged, they can endure brief periods of reduced job satisfaction while remaining deeply committed.

In essence, engagement is a combination of attitudes and priorities that has a consistent and predictable impact on behavior. In survey questionnaires, it is often captured by measuring employee satisfaction, advocacy, commitment, pride, and other aspects.

Action Work Plan Made Simple

An action work plan is a set of activities that are meant to fix the problems identified in the course of an employee survey. By the degree of impact and the level of responsibility, all actions can be divided into the following three categories:

- Corporate, or strategic actions. Usually, these are taken on the highest top-management level and are meant to impact the whole organization or a business unit. For maximum effectiveness, such actions are cascaded down the organizational lines to be implemented at lower units.
- Middle, or department-level actions. These are developed and executed by the middle management and are often closely connected to the corporate action plans.
- Line, or immediate management actions. Developed at the lowest organizational level, these concern the work of small teams and individual employees.

Some of the best organizational practices make action work plans a part of business-as-usual practices. Teams get together as part of their everyday routine and discuss the results of employee engagement surveys. They identify the problems, and gaps, more commonly referred to as “improvement opportunities” based on the survey data, and they work together to develop actions that would cover the gaps.

I think that it’s in the best organizational interest to make action work plans a part of operational plans, which will maximize the efficiency of the action plans’ execution and the monitoring of their progress, respectively.

The Inseparable Duo

I believe that the combination of the engagement survey and action work plans is essential for a number of reasons.

Firstly, an engagement survey without action planning is a waste of resources – both financial and intellectual. Large organizations spend tens and hundreds of thousands of USD for running engagement surveys. They hire respectful subcontractors to help them run and facilitate the surveys, and devote substantial human resources and manpower to manage the process.

In some cases, up to 30K employees can participate in such surveys. If you calculate the cumulative time that they spend on answering the questions, and multiply that by the average cost per hour of their work, you'll most likely end up with huge money.

That kind of resources shouldn't be wasted for mere diagnostics and reporting good findings. Actually, many companies do just that – celebrate the good findings and do nothing with the problems identified.

Secondly, a survey without action planning is also a huge shock to employee motivation. Think about this – people spend time answering questions (sometimes for more than an hour), they express their concerns, and complaints, and suggest improvement activities. If nothing follows, and no actions are taken, they obviously get frustrated.

If the situation repeats for a number of engagement survey cycles, the frustration grows and motivation goes down – quite the opposite effect to what any employee engagement initiative strives to achieve, right?

How Can One Increase the Effectiveness of The Survey-Action Plan Duo?

To optimize the impact of Engagement Surveys and Action Work Plans, it is imperative to ensure the following conditions are met:

1. *The survey questionnaire is made up of actionable questions.* It means that employees' answers to any of the available questions can be easily converted into feasible action plans. A strong theory behind the questionnaire is as important as each individual question.
2. *The results of the survey are made ready and available for management and employees as soon as possible.* The contractor or whoever is in charge of the calculation and production of the results must deliver them in the shortest time possible.
3. *Employee participation in the survey is made strictly confidential.* The best answers are always the most honest answers; therefore, participants' anonymity must be ensured and there has to be no pressure from the management.
4. *Regularity of employee surveys is ensured.* Some organizations run engagement surveys once a year and then complain about the lack of employee involvement. To keep the employees interested, the interval between surveys must not exceed 6 months, and if it does, then the small so-called pulse or mini-surveys should be conducted in between.

My personal experience with engagement surveys tells that all the above-mentioned conditions must be met in order for the survey and the action plans that follow to have a maximum positive impact on organizational performance.

Conclusion

As you can see, organizations combine employee surveys with action work plans for a number of good reasons. The effectiveness of this combination can be further increased by minimizing the time lag between the survey itself and the action plans that follow, by ensuring the anonymity of survey participants, and by carefully designing individual questions to be actionable. Those who strive for perfection may also cascade the developed action work plans from the highest corporate level down to the smallest organizational units and make them part of their operational plans.