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Can an Employee Opinion Survey Help in a Down Economy? By Richard A. Sherwood, SPHR

Today's challenging economy is forcing many organizations to scrutinize their budgets and, in some cases, downsize their workforce. When a reduction in force occurs the employees that remain often feel guilty, are less motivated to perform, experience limited career prospects and are concerned about their financial future. How can management keep these employees engaged to improve the chances for the future success of the company?

Consider an Employee Opinion Survey

While many HR practices are difficult to quantify, progressive leaders understand that there is a direct correlation between employee satisfaction and high levels of productivity. Leaders interested in developing high performance work teams know that they must find out what motivates and satisfies those remaining employees. Following a reduction in staff, employees are thrilled when management solicits their opinion and ideas. This will often help them focus on the future. It reignites their motivation to excel, reduces apprehension about the future, encourages creative thinking and offers them a vehicle for proposing new ideas. One of the

most powerful vehicles for accomplishing this is the anonymous employee opinion survey.

Three Steps to Improve a Survey's Effectiveness

Any company thinking about tapping their employees for their ideas should play close attention to (1) the *survey planning process*, (2) the *development of action plans* following the collection and analysis of employee data and (3) maintaining ongoing *accountability efforts* to ensure that management follows through

"Surveys are part of the culture, encourage employee engagement and are an effective management tool."

with the goals and objectives established as a result of the survey. If these three steps are followed, the survey becomes an effective engagement tool following a restructuring or downsizing effort.

Survey Planning Process

Developing a survey, which is ideally done thirty to forty-five days after a reduction in force, requires investing some time in determining what areas the sur-

vey should target. This can be accomplished by a focus group or in special meetings during which pertinent issues are identified. Typically, surveys incorporate questions that allow employees to provide feedback on such things as their new responsibilities, current and projected work load, the company's priorities, teamwork, the health of the organization and their overall satisfaction in a variety of areas. Taking extra time on the front end pays off because it results in relevant survey questions that provide the specific information desired by the company and more revealing employee responses. Identifying issues with respect to a recent realignment or restructuring allows the company to identify and respond to the specific concerns of its employees.

Ongoing communication from Human Resources about the survey and participation levels is critical to the success of the initiative. High survey participation indicates employee engagement and support for the survey process. A wealth of information is often uncovered by a survey and can serve as the employer's motivation to address long-standing

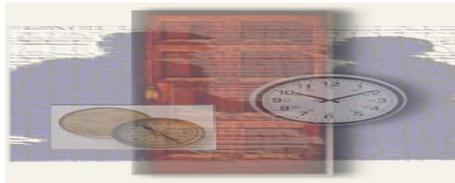
challenges and employee perceptions following a downsizing. Communication of the survey results to the employees following the analysis of the data is critical to the success of the initiative and, consequently, to the success of the organization.

Development of Action Plans

Far too often, management sighs in relief once the surveys are completed and the data is analyzed. However, it is extremely important that the completion and analysis of the survey not be considered the "end product". The key to a successful survey lies in the next steps, which include reviewing the reports and employee comments, identifying key issues, and establishing sound action plans for the future. The employee survey activity and action plan development process is typically a multi-step process that occurs throughout the survey period culminating with the adoption of corporate-wide action plans.

Each year, management invests in their employees by taking the time to provide them with concise feedback about their performance and helps them set personal performance goals for the future through the annual performance appraisal process. This exercise occurs during both expanding economic conditions and times in which a challenging business climate prevails. The leadership

team should view an employee survey as a performance review for the organization. Surveys provide an overall satisfaction rating and identify employee perceptions about the company's accomplishments and challenges. Surveys can provide valuable data that clarifies employees' acceptance or resistance to new corporate goals and objectives following a reduction in force. Employee surveys conducted in both good times and bad show management's commitment to the success of both the organization and its employees.



Human Resources professionals should view the anonymous employee survey as an ongoing management tool and give serious consideration to making the process part of the culture. Employee surveys in a down economy are even more important because they provide a key performance metric of the overall health of the company. The annual employee opinion survey process will ensure that employees are strongly aligned with the strategic goals of the organization.

Accountability Efforts

The survey process will only be

successful if the company holds management accountable for the agreed upon action plans. Successful companies incorporate the action plans into the executives' and management's performance reviews and meet quarterly with these key personnel to ensure that progress is being made. Companies that have conducted an engagement survey and acted on the results experience a strong alignment between the employees, business partners and customers. When the economy improves, the organizations that have used this management tool will be better positioned to expand and increase market share.

In Conclusion

By conducting an employee opinion survey, the HR professional can obtain valuable information about the company's workforce. A survey will assist the leaders in determining if their managers are respected, identify any communication roadblocks following reorganization, assist with fostering a collaborative work environment based upon the new paradigm and ensure that the strategic vision of the organization is aligned with the realities of a challenging economy. Employees who are engaged are far more productive than those who are not. Many companies report that soliciting their employees' opinion was the best step they could have taken to return to profitability.

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