

5 Tips to Improve Response Rates: Confidentiality in Employee Surveys

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Employee surveys are a vital tool for organizations to gauge employee satisfaction, levels of employee engagement, and to better understand the employee experience. However, a common concern among employees is whether employee surveys are confidential. These apprehensions stem from fear of retaliation, skepticism about anonymity/confidentiality, or doubts about how the data will be used.

Understanding the Issue

A recent social media post I discovered illustrates how one jaded employee feels about this issue. The anonymous poster wrote:

“On a related note, whenever HR sends out a survey, my answers are always glowing and positive.

- * Boss is a jerk IRL? — In the survey, my boss communicates well, is inclusive and respectful.
- * Corporate organization is disorganized and ineffective IRL? — My answer: Organization is effective in making resources easy to find and supports us in our projects.
- * Are you happy with the office culture? — Oh yes! Greatest place ever to work!

Here is this person's final assessment, and it is not encouraging:

The sooner you realize that 1) HR is there to protect the company, not the employee, 2) surveys aren't usually confidential, 3) surveys aren't there to help you, 4) they won't result in any real changes, 5) are most likely used to weed out the malcontents at work when things slow down, the happier you'll be in answering HR surveys.

Addressing the Concern

So, what can be done to address sentiments like these? For certain, we need to ensure that surveys result in meaningful and helpful changes. This is job number one. In addition to this core imperative, here are five other tips to consider:

Tip #1: Transparency

Be transparent in whether the survey will be anonymous, confidential, or open. Sometimes we use the terms anonymous and confidential interchangeably, but they are different concepts, and they impact how a survey is configured and managed.

Anonymous Surveys

Anonymous surveys are those where an open, generic invitation is sent to the employee and there is no way to identify who said what. This means anyone with the invite can take the survey, including an employee's family members or a robot halfway across the globe. The challenge with anonymous surveys is that response rates are low and there is no way to correlate feedback received against demographic information such as location, tenure, gender, etc. You can ask a respondent to provide this type of demographic information, but most respondents decline providing this information because they believe it makes it more likely they can be identified by the organization.

Confidential Surveys

Confidentiality happens when an organization hires a third-party, like DecisionWise, to help it administer the survey and to ensure that answers are aggregated when presented to leaders and managers inside the organization. By using grouped responses (i.e., bucketed answers), it makes it more difficult for leaders to pick out who said what. When conducting confidential surveys, no promises of anonymity should be made. Instead, the organization should explain how aggregate responses work. Focusing on confidentiality is a vital way an organization demonstrates that it takes confidentiality seriously and is attempting to find an acceptable middle ground for the employees and the organization.

Open Surveys

Open surveys are where an organization makes no promise as to whether the responses will be tied to an employee's identity. These types of surveys are great when confidentiality is not needed, such as getting input about changes to a floorplan or having employees choose between various technology options.

Transparency Earns Trust

The key point is that trust is earned when organizations are upfront about their employees' confidentiality concerns, and they communicate clearly and consistently about the survey's confidentiality standards. Tell your employees exactly who will see the feedback they provide. Consistency in this regard builds trust and helps employees see the process as one requiring mutual trust and engenders a feeling of partnership between management and the workforce.

Tip #2: Use Communication Campaigns

Develop and implement supporting communication campaigns when conducting employee listening programs. Communication campaigns are a great way to be transparent (as noted above) and to help build trust with the workforce. Here are some suggested best practices to think about:

1. Start Early and Be Strategic:

Timing: Choose a strategic time to launch the survey. Consider organizational events, holidays, and other factors that might impact participation.

Announcement: Send out an organization-wide email or communication from senior leadership to introduce the upcoming survey. Clearly communicate the start date, planning schedule, intended outcomes, and action plan.

2. Core Themes in Communications:

What We are Measuring: Help employees understand what engagement means. Explain why it matters and how it impacts the organization. Avoid jargon and make it relatable to everyone.

Survey Purpose: Clearly state what the survey aims to achieve. Highlight its role in gathering insights, identifying blind spots, and driving positive change.

Confidentiality Assurance: If this is the plan, reassure employees that their responses are confidential and encourage honest feedback.

Survey Process: Explain how the survey process will work, including participation, timing, and follow-up steps.

3. Communication Phases:

Before the Survey:

CEO Announcement: Have the CEO or top leadership send an email thanking employees for their participation and outlining next steps.

Team Meetings: Encourage team leads and managers to express gratitude verbally during team meetings.

During the Survey:

Targeted Communication: Focus on teams with low response rates. Remind employees during meetings and send additional reminder emails.

After the Survey:

Follow-Up Email: Send a follow-up email from the CEO, emphasizing commitment to acting on feedback.

Share Actions: Publicize the actions you will take based on survey results.

Metrics: Include relevant metrics in your communication.

4. Results Overview:

High-Level Results: Share participation stats, top and bottom survey results, and the plan of action. Focus on broad organizational trends.

Positive and Negative Results: Include both positive and negative feedback. Acknowledge weaknesses and demonstrate intent to address them.

Organizational Context: Highlight results that apply company-wide, not just team-specific details.

Transparency: Be open and honest about the results. Avoid sugarcoating or downplaying issues.

5. Multi-Channel Approach:

Use various communication channels: emails, town hall meetings, intranet, posters, and team huddles.

Consistent Messaging: Ensure alignment across all channels to reinforce key themes and messages.

Tip #3: Monitor the Process and Overcommunicate

Monitor listening programs to ensure confidentiality is being respected, and always assume that more communication is needed. If you find someone is trying to decipher who said what, take the time to address this behavior and explain why it is counterproductive. Also, anecdotally it said that we underestimate the number of communication attempts that are needed by a factor of at least three. Some say it is as high as ten when dealing with big vision changes.

Tip #4: Take Action Based on the Feedback

As noted earlier, maybe the most important way to improve survey participation and quality is to build trust in the process. This comes by acknowledging you have received the feedback, that you understand what it means, and that you have taken actions to address what was learned. In addition, do not assume that the employees will necessarily perceive nor appreciate the changes you have made (or will make) and that the impetus for the changes was the feedback you received. Our advice? As you start next year's listening campaigns, take the time to connect the dots on what was learned, and then fixed, from prior listening campaigns. If you are unwilling to fix things based on what you learn, then it is better not to run the survey.

Tip #5: Hire a Third-Party

Consider using a third-party to administer your key surveys. These include annual engagement surveys, exit surveys, eNPS surveys, etc. Pulse surveys are less formal and may not require the same level of confidentiality. Using a third-party will add confidentiality and reassure employees that their responses cannot be traced back to them. Using a third-party demonstrates you are serious about the feedback, and you are doing what is possible to preserve confidentiality.

Case Study: Implementing Changes

Consider a case study from one of our clients. A healthcare organization was frustrated with their employee surveys and low participation rates. In response, they hired DecisionWise, as a third-party, to configure their software and preserve confidentiality in their listening programs. Most importantly, they communicated this change to their employees. They also shared how previous survey data had led to tangible changes in the organization. The result was a significant increase in response rates and more candid feedback.

Conclusion

Ensuring confidentiality in employee surveys is not just about protecting respondents' identity; it is about building trust. By addressing employees' concerns and demonstrating the value of their feedback, HR professionals can enhance the effectiveness of their surveys and foster a more engaged and satisfied workforce. Remember, a survey is only as good as the honesty of the responses it garners. As HR leaders, it is our responsibility to create an environment where employees feel safe to express their true feelings and opinions.