



Seven Myths about Employee Surveys
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Below are seven myths about employee surveys. They are based on the questions we've heard from clients over the years. The myths are found in bold text below and our attempt at debunking each myth follows.

1) Only dissatisfied employees respond to surveys. Unhappy employees aren't the only ones who want to share feedback with management. Employees who have a connection with their employer truly want to help their company become a better place to work. Completing an employee survey is one way of they can be better organizational citizens. Methodologically, this myth becomes even less of a concern if the survey has a healthy response rate (at least 65% for a broad-based all employee survey).

2) You have to address everything that is rated low or unfavorably. Conducting an employee survey will likely lead to some areas that need attention. The misconception is that every area of the survey that is rated unfavorably needs to be addressed with an intervention. In reality, businesses are designed to "do business" and not to be a machine for survey action planning. A good survey will have a process in place or use a framework to help management prioritize the findings and identify the 2 or 3 areas that will have the highest impact on the organization. For some ideas on this, please refer to our piece on Actionable Employee Surveys.

3) Employees think management will use survey results for malicious reasons. When a survey is conducted in a climate of mistrust, it is understandable how employees may think management may use the survey for nefarious purposes. Employees may fear that management may use the survey to identify dissatisfied employees or poor supervisors (based on employee feedback) and make subsequent decisions. Conducting a survey and being frank with employees about how the results will and won't be used and then making sure to communicate key findings and your plans for action can actually help build trust between management and employees. Once you've done so it is also important to continue to communicate with employees as action plans are implemented.

4) Web-based surveys aren't really anonymous. Web-based surveys provide a highly efficient and cost-effective means for gathering employee feedback. However, some employees may question the anonymity of web-based surveys given the ability to track IP addresses, email addresses and other related information. However, if deployed correctly, a web-based survey can be anonymous. In order to do so, you need to make sure there isn't a way to identify individual

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responses. That means email addresses shouldn't be assigned to individual survey responses, employee identifiers shouldn't be used to gain access to the survey and individual pins should be avoided as well (especially for first few times the survey is conducted). Using the same url (or web address) and the same password helps communicate to employees that their responses are anonymous. If you can't ensure your survey is anonymous (anonymity means there is no way to find out who said what) then you want to make sure you will keep the results confidential - commit to only reporting results for groups of a minimum size (usually 10).

5) You have to report results for every group with 10 or more respondents. The practice of reporting results for groups of 10 or more respondents emerged as a way to protect the confidentiality of survey responses (see myth 4). However, this practice has also morphed into a view that one must report results for all groups with ten or more responses regardless of the group's ability to act independently on the survey findings. Following this practice can lead to overburdening lower level managers with too much information as well as diluting accountability for action. The latter may lead to each level of the organization deferring accountability for action to lower levels.

6) Employee surveys measure the "touchy feely" topics and don't drive business outcomes. Employee surveys were initially conducted by management to avoid negative occurrences like employee dissatisfaction and unsafe work conditions. There was very little connection of the survey content or strategy to business outcomes or objectives like employee engagement, quality, customer satisfaction or customer focus. As the importance of human capital began to rise, organizational researchers were able to demonstrate the linkage of employee satisfaction to business outcomes. Over the last twenty years or so researchers have been able to demonstrate the link between employee attitudes and customer sales, satisfaction and loyalty.

7) Acting on the survey findings is very expensive and time consuming. A survey can be time consuming and require some resources (either by devoting internal resources or by hiring a third party consulting firm). However, acting on the findings doesn't have to be a bank-breaking endeavor. Sometimes simply communicating more to managers, encouraging teamwork or boosting senior management visibility can go along way to improve employee perceptions of workplace and organizational effectiveness. When bigger issues evolve that require additional resources it is important to let employees know that you've heard and will take their feedback into consideration as resources allow you to do so. When resources are thin, asking employees to participate in the action planning process can be an efficient way to develop ideas to address issues without dedicating a lot of external resources.

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