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### Employee Surveys Find Missing Links Between Training and Application

by Amy Pearl

Why isn't my team embracing our new sales process? Why isn't the manager using skills taught in our leadership development program to inspire people to achieve goals? Why don't customer service representatives demonstrate the right soft skills after attending our in-house university programs? These questions are pondered by sales and marketing executives every day. They sent their crew to training, but don't see new skills being applied on the job.

Participant feedback indicates employees enjoy training and think their new skills will make a difference. So, what's the hold up? The answers might just be found within employee survey results. Often circumstances in the work environment keep employees from effectively applying new skills, and a yearly employee survey can identify those obstacles. A well-prepared and well-executed survey will assess:

- The commitment of your workforce to business strategies and goals.
- How ready and willing the team is to embrace future changes and tomorrow's business needs.
- How your culture, talent, and people practices give you a competitive edge over your competition.
- High-risk areas such as poor leadership, impediments to communication, and dysfunctional teams.

Traditional needs analyses identify knowledge, skills, and behaviors to be developed. Employee surveys take the extra step to identify organizational changes necessary for new skills to be applied. Sorting data by departments, locations, and other demographics will pinpoint populations that require specific actions and the best approaches for learning, allowing you to manage costs and effort associated with employee development. In addition, repeating your survey year after year creates an objective way to measure the long-term

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impact of development programs.

### The evidence

Organizations of every size and industry sector have used employee surveys to identify missing links between training and application to get better results. Here are some examples:

- Leaders of a residential real estate company knew the key to growth was attracting and retaining the best independent realtors in the industry. They had a lucrative commission program and great advertising, but still lost agents to competitors. A survey in 2000 revealed associates' poor perceptions of managers who didn't demonstrate the behaviors they felt were essential for employees, especially leaders. After launching an associate recognition program based on newly defined core values, they invested in an intense leadership development program. By 2004, perceptions of leaders and workplace behaviors catapulted to new levels and today, that organization is ranked in the top 25 real estate organizations in the country.
- A customer service program was introduced to all 1,200 employees of a community hospital. The new approach encouraged employees to "act on the spot" in order to exceed patient expectations. During the training sessions, employees were surveyed to identify specific obstacles that kept them from answering questions and addressing patient needs immediately. Over 100 specific ideas were generated, from facilities and operational changes to improvements for staff meetings and employee communications. Goals were established for each department, and managers' incentives were awarded based on achievement of these goals.
- A fourth-generation leader of a manufacturing components distributor knew he could no longer compete with his traditional product and pricing model. The future would require a more consultative, relationship-oriented approach to solutions selling. He invested in a widely recognized sales training program, including workshops and individual coaching sessions. When results weren't achieved, a formal assessment revealed that some employees had the right personality for a relationship management position, while others preferred the routine of a commodity business. He changed hiring practices and created detailed, objective measures of individual performance. In three years, the company added five industries to its areas of expertise and expanded geographically without increasing headcount.

## General findings

Similar trends often exist among organizations, regardless of industry sector. In our research, over 90 percent of survey respondents are committed to their customers, have a clear understanding of their day-to-day duties, and have access to the best techniques and tools for their jobs. Over 95 percent are open to more learning opportunities, as well as more performance feedback and recognition from their managers.

Disturbingly, as many as half of all respondents reveal poor workplace communication. This stems from having ineffective managers. They also report poor problem solving capabilities in their organizations, and feel the most difficult issues are not addressed. These weak links must be repaired before the benefits of training initiatives can be fully realized.

## Helpful hints

To maximize the effectiveness of your survey process:

### Start with business strategy.

What are your key business goals? How do you create value for customers? What competencies, behaviors, and people practices are critical for success?

### Ask the right questions.

Go beyond an assessment of needed skills. Evaluate commitment to the business plan as well as perceptions of leadership, trust, teamwork, communication, and other critical success factors.

### Administer the survey.

Internet survey providers make it easy, but some employees might not be comfortable with the anonymity of the process. A third-party survey provider will collect and tabulate results, while adding confidentiality and expertise throughout the process.

### Analyze findings.

Dig deep into your data to understand perceptions of both strengths and weaknesses. Identify threats to your training efforts or problems to be addressed before training even begins.

### Plan and prioritize.

Don't bite off more than your organization can chew. Set the pace with problems that can be fixed within 90 days. Then, tackle one high-effort problem at a time, or focus in one department or location to gain ground.

**Follow up and evaluate.**

Plan to conduct your employee survey annually to assess your progress, build accountability, and identify new opportunities for improvement.

Organizations spend countless hours analyzing data to support new business ventures, new technology, or even a new copy machine. Yet, seldom do they analyze the investment they make in their people. Surveying employees to analyze the missing links between training and application will yield a much higher return on your training investment.

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