communication and action-planning toolkit

using surveys to achieve change in organisations
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credits

We have used a combination of our own and client-developed materials, and would like to thank all those clients who have submitted material.
Introduction

In early 2008, 298 organisations participated in a teaching and research project run by Voice Project and Macquarie University. In total 3079 employees took part. This research showed that organisations that feedback and act on survey results have almost double the levels of engagement among employees. We cannot overemphasise that it is what you do with the survey results that counts.
Part one: feedback and action-planning process

1. feedback results

It is important to feedback survey results to staff as a sign of respect for staff and acknowledgement of their efforts to improve the organisation. It demonstrates a desire to involve staff in understanding and using the results.

Tips

- Feedback sessions should be scheduled as soon as possible after receiving results, and a maximum of three months from the close of the survey. Ideally, your feedback and action-planning steps can be included in your survey timeline and your pre-survey communications to staff and management.
- Feedback is best cascaded in a top-down manner so that each level management has time to understand and absorb results, and can facilitate feedback at the lower levels.
- Have senior management present at the feedback sessions to acknowledge and own the results.
- Use multiple communication channels to reach the maximum number of staff.
- The focus should be on understanding the results, identifying issues and possibly identifying gaps where further investigation is needed. This allows time for staff to understand, accept and digest results. If you plan to use the feedback sessions for problem-solving or action-planning then you will need to schedule adequate time.
- Remember to thank staff for their participation in the survey process and recognise those who made a particular contribution.
- Remember to include information about the decision-making and action-planning process, and the role of managers and employees in this process.
- Be constructive and positive. Make sure you highlight and celebrate your strengths. Assure staff and managers that they will not be punished for poor results, but they will be held accountable for taking action on issues that the survey raises.
What is the best way to feedback results?

- The most effective way to feedback results is face-to-face communication. Schedule small departmental meetings, in which results for that work unit are discussed in the context of broader organisational results. Encourage staff to participate in the interpretation and analysis of the findings, and so help management understand what the quantitative results mean in the context of their particular work unit.
- Have the CEO present the overall survey results to employees in large ‘town hall’ meetings or ‘road show’ to different organisation sites.
- Distribute a written or video summary of results on the intranet, online interactive presentations, organisation newsletter or booklet. You can use the results as highlighted in Voice Project’s Executive Summary, or create your own summary framed by your organisation’s strategy and priorities. An organisation wide web cast can feature either the CEO, or CEO and Voice Project consultant talking about the results.

Who should feedback results?

Generally feedback is most effective when given by line managers rather than Human Resources (HR) or Voice consultant. Most managers will need the support of HR/Voice to equip them for this task. Work through the results for the work group with the manager to ensure they understand how to interpret the results, can ask questions, and have time to absorb the issues. Help them select the data to be presented, and develop an agenda.

There are some exceptions when it will be more appropriate for HR or a Voice Project consultant to run the feedback sessions. In organisations where there is a low level of trust, having an external person feedback results maintains the credibility of the results. Also, there may be particular work groups who have low scores for Supervision or Diversity (e.g., bullying issues). Having an independent person deliver results can lead to a more constructive meeting.

*See templates and examples of feedback to staff in part two.*
2. Understand issues

Dig deep for underlying root causes – solutions will only be effective if they are targeted at the real problem, not superficial issues. Keep asking ‘why’ this problem exists, and then ‘why’ again. For example, if there were significant negative responses to the statement "My organisation is good at selecting the right people for the right jobs,” managers should explore with employees why they think that, and what gets in the way of making better decisions.

Tips

- Feedback sessions in small work groups provide the opportunity to understand results in greater depth and in context. Staff can explain any ambiguous results, provide specific examples of issues around particular management practices or systems, and help prioritise the most important issues to be resolved in their area.
- While line managers and teams can look at group results by department, HR managers need to examine the results for other groups of employees e.g., by age group, critical roles, or tenure. There may be particular issues that can be tackled in a strategic and targeted way with specific groups.
- If necessary, identify volunteers to gather further information around survey-identified issues before the action-planning meetings.
- Some issues are too sensitive for staff to discuss in front of managers. In these cases it may be helpful for a Voice consultant or another external party to run focus groups. As the name suggests, these sessions are targeted to one specific area and conducted in an open, safe, and comfortable environment in which employees candidly discuss their experiences and perceptions of the workplace.
Questions to help interpret and understand results

1. What are the group’s strengths and areas for improvement based on Percentage Favourable ratings? Look at both the broader survey areas (such as Purpose and Property in the standard Voice Climate survey) and individual practice areas.
2. How do these results fit with your own perceptions of the group?
3. Where are the group’s results different to the organisation as a whole and/or industry benchmarks?
4. If there has been some time between survey administration and reporting, have there been any changes in these areas since the survey was run?
5. Which areas are having the biggest impact on staff Passion and perceptions of Progress?
6. What conclusions can be drawn from the results in relation to the group’s core mission or strategic goals?
3. Prioritise issues

In order to focus efforts, we recommend organisations choose only three areas for improvement at each level or work area. According to the Pareto Principle, 80% of an organisation’s problems stem from 20% of the causes. Focusing effective change in a few areas will most likely have a flow-on effect to other areas.

Tips

- Some Voice survey reports include information to help prioritise issues, such as a ‘gap analysis’ and ‘blue bars’ which measure the impact of issues on employee engagement (Passion) or client satisfaction and bottom-line results (Progress). However, it is important to explicitly agree on criteria for prioritising, including organisation purpose and values, and factors such as cost, speed of implementation, health and safety, and legal or other risk.
- Other sources of data should also be included in decision-making, such as internal audits or client feedback.

For example, in one of our client organisations, Technology did not emerge as an area for attention in the survey analysis – staff’s experience of technology was largely problem-free and it was not significantly impacting on their ability to perform their jobs. However, IT experts had identified critical issues with their aging technology that would soon impact performance if not addressed immediately.

- Improvement action planning should combine both ‘top down’ and ‘bottom up’ processes. The priorities for the organisation can be identified, communicated and acted upon at the senior management level, then local units should tackle the things that they have direct control over and escalate anything else back upwards. They should also have some scope to identify additional team-level priorities.
- Do not forget to identify opportunities to leverage your strengths, as well as work on improvements.
4. Plan actions

There are four simple steps in action-planning:

1. Clearly define the problem to be addressed. This may have already been started in the feedback sessions.
2. Identify potential root causes to the problem. Try to encourage staff to look at the problem from different perspectives such as resources, systems, processes, people, or environment.
3. Generate and agree on possible solutions to the problem. Use brainstorming or some other non-judgmental activity to generate as many ideas as possible. Then reach group consensus or use other decision-making processes to agree on solutions. This can be as simple as recording ideas on flip charts, and then giving each employee three stickers to ‘vote’ for the ideas they feel will be of greatest benefit.
4. Develop the action-plan steps and follow-up procedures. Be sure to implement some ‘quick wins’ for immediate impact, as well as planning for the longer term.

Tips for conducting an action planning meeting

- In order to focus the action-planning upon what’s most important to the individual or group, start action-planning with a review or exploration of the mission, vision, values, guiding principles, higher-order goals, etc.
- Plan to address only one or two issues, or break into smaller groups to focus on one issue each.
- Action-plan the high-priority items first.
- Focus on issues as they relate to the group so they are directly actionable by the staff in the room (what can we do, rather than what we want management to do). However, make recommendations for action even if the issue is beyond the group’s direct control. These can be passed on appropriately, and they may even identify ways the issue can be partially addressed at a local level.
- Record discussion and decisions and keep with any formal survey action plans; They can then be communicated to senior managers and the CEO. Use a simple template for designing and documenting a good action plan (see the Voice Action Planner in part two).
• Have a variety of methods for people to bring forward issues or ideas – some less threatening than others. For example, using post-it notes or discussing ideas in pairs or small groups first.
• Clarify administrative procedures for tracking implementation and progress.
• Consider using an external facilitator (from Voice Project or other service providers) who will bring objectivity, experience and skills to run a psychologically safe and productive meeting.

Feedback summaries and action plans should be reported back up the organisation to higher levels, and communicated to staff.
5. Implement plans and monitor progress

It is important that HR staff are perceived as facilitators not ‘owners’ of the change process. Senior management must set a sincere expectation that plans will be developed, implemented and reported. They can hold managers and teams accountable for planning and taking actions, providing all the authority and resources they need.

Tips

- Actions emerging from the survey process can be built into team and manager KPIs, reviewed regularly, and linked to rewards and recognition systems.
- Responsibility of ensuring the change takes place must rest with an individual staff member (not the team as a whole as there is a tendency to assume that the task ‘has been done’).
- People with responsibility for achieving goals should be required to regularly review progress and report back to a more senior manager.
- Consider posting all action plans developed for addressing issues raised in the survey process onto a public website. This provides incentives and accountability for action, as well as serving as communication tool to view other plans to spark ideas across the organisation.
- The Voice Action Planner (see part two) helps managers set targets and measure improvement in subsequent staff surveys or other relevant performance indicators.
- Monitor and evaluate strategies through small ‘pulse’ surveys. These can be run around just a few target issues to measure progress between larger scale surveys. Adjustments to initiatives can be made according to feedback. In tailored surveys, you can also add Voice Project’s ‘Survey Response’ items: I received feedback about the results of the last Voice Climate Survey; I have seen improvements in this organisation/work group resulting from the last Voice Climate Survey.
6. Communicate actions taken

Often organisations can implement many changes after the survey but these are not recognised in the follow up survey results. Unless staff are aware of actions that have resulted from the survey they perceive it to be ineffective. Regular communications linking change and improvements (small and large) to the survey initiative will enhance the credibility of and commitment to the survey process. Take advantage of the multiple communication channels at your disposal (e.g. email, newsletter, meetings, intranet, forums, bulletin boards etc.) and say ‘Remember this is what you said in the survey, and this is the action we have taken as a result.’

Tips

- Add a ‘Survey Update’ column to your employee newsletter/publication. The columns consistent theme should be ‘Here’s what you said, here’s what we did.’
- Add a set item in every supervisor’s staff meeting agenda to discuss updates to the Voice Action Planner. By involving and continually communicating information to the employees, it will help ensure that the action plans that management established are meaningful, accountable, and successful.
- At senior reporting meetings, ask senior leaders to share their thoughts on staff actions that have been particularly effective and then publicise these actions to all teams. Encourage teams to consider these successes and adapt them, if needed, to create similar results in their own teams.
- Tailor your messages to the different audiences (e.g. leadership team, managers and staff) – see part two for ideas.
- Ensure your leadership team reinforce consistent messages about the actions that will be taken as a result of the feedback.
- Develop a communications plan.
Part two: tools and templates

7. Guideline for running a business unit feedback session

Preparing the session

1. The business unit manager should review all the survey results documents. These may include:
   - Overall results – from the organisation as a whole and/or the broader function that this business unit belongs to. What are the key strengths and development areas?
   - Business unit quantitative results (the report with the traffic light colours).
     - Where are these results the same or different to the overall themes?
     - What are the strongest rated scales and items?
     - What are the lowest rated scales and items?
   - Interpretation guidelines – these provide an explanation for the different numbers and statistics used in the quantitative results.
   - Business unit open-ended responses - Identify some comments which may help illustrate the overall results.

2. Identify who will facilitate the session. Typically the business unit manager is best-placed to facilitate the session. However, an independent facilitator (e.g. Organisational Development Unit or an external consultant) can be useful if there are concerns about the willingness of staff to directly discuss issues with the manager.

3. Book the session. Typically, one to two hours is needed for the results to be explored and clearly understood.

4. Prepare materials needed for session
   - Projector (optional).
   - Copies of business unit reports – quantitative and open-ended responses. If the open-ended response report is lengthy (four or more pages), it is often useful to send this out before the session to all staff members as pre-reading.
During the session

1. Purpose:
   - Communicate the purpose of the session (e.g. to communicate and explore the feedback given by staff in the recent employee survey).
   - Ask if anyone has any other expectations of the session.

2. Session parameters:
   - Time available.
   - The focus is on exploring issues and not discussing specific individuals.

3. Communicate quantitative results:
   - Refresh staff about the survey itself (e.g. when it was conducted, who was invited to complete it, anonymous nature of survey, and the minimum number of people needed before a business unit report was generated).
   - Highlight the overall organisation results (response rate, key strengths, likely action areas).
   - Review the business unit quantitative results as a group (either with handouts or screen).
   - Explain how to read the high level results (using the interpretation guidelines as a reference):
     - the overall outcome measures (e.g. Passion, Progress).
     - the different management practices and systems where staff provided feedback (e.g. Learning and Development).
     - Statistics (e.g. Sub unit % fav, traffic light colours, % NA, distribution bar chart, organisation % fav, all industry percentile rank).
   - Review feedback to specific questions/'items’.

4. Explore results:
   The following questions can be used at any point to facilitate the group in reviewing the information:
   - What are the strengths for the business unit? What is being done well in this business unit which makes XX a strength? How can this team/business unit maintain or improve on this strength?
   - What are the weaker areas for the business unit? Why has area YYY been identified as a weakness for our business unit? What has to change before YYY can become a strength?
   - How similar are the business unit results to the overall results?
   - Which areas have the most impact on outcomes (e.g. staff passion or progress) in this business unit? (if blue bars are available)
   - Which areas does the team feel are the most important to focus on?
5. Communicate Open-Ended Results
   - Highlight the key themes from the organisation as a whole
   - Review business unit feedback:
     - If the report is three pages or under, provide enough time for staff to read responses.
     - For longer reports, seek feedback on themes identified in pre-reading for session.
   - Questions to consider
     - How similar are the business unit results to the overall results?
     - To what extent do the comments fit with the quantitative feedback?

6. Confirm next steps
   - What are the two or three priorities that need to be addressed?
   - When and how will action planning occur for these issues?

7. Thank staff for their contributions to the survey and the discussion.

After the session

1. Circulate to the team a summary of the discussion.
2. Confirm how action planning will occur on the identified issues.
3. Is there a need to communicate to HR or senior managers about the outcomes of this session?
8. Action-planning template

Your Voice action planner

*It is recommended that staff who are accountable for implementing actions on this plan have their action written as an objective in their WPPR through the iPerform system*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority Area</th>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Action(s)</th>
<th>Timeline for the completion of each Action</th>
<th>Resources required (if applicable)</th>
<th>Person accountable for each action</th>
<th>Status of action (quarterly review)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>