Paper PM05

Navigating Anonymous Employee Feedback: A Manager's Guide to Constructive Action

Lynn Clipstone, PPD, Remote based, UK

ABSTRACT

In today's dynamic workplace, anonymous employee surveys are vital for understanding team sentiments. However, transforming this feedback into actionable strategies, while remaining detached from the sometimes critical feedback, poses significant challenges. This presentation will draw from my years of experience to help managers effectively review and act on survey results. I will share tips on motivating your team, as a manager of managers, to develop actionable strategies. We will focus on the primary themes and different lenses to look at this with. We will also look at cultural differences within and between teams to understand and harmonise global results. Join me to discover how you can turn anonymous feedback into a catalyst for positive change, enhancing both individual well-being and organizational success..

INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on my years of experience gained responding to, receiving and supporting managers through the usually annual anonymous employee survey. In my paper, I hope to share those insights to aid you in preparing for, receiving the results of and ensuring enduring actions are determined to reach organizational success. As such, the paper is my experience and not reflective of my company.

DEFINITIONS AND WHY FEEDBACK IS IMPORTANT

One definition of feedback is "information about reactions to a product, a person's performance of a task etc. which is used as a basis for improvement". Indeed, Bill Gates is quoted as saying "We all need people who will give us feedback. That's how we improve".

This feedback and the resulting improvement shows that it is difficult for self evaluation alone to drive necessary change. Rarely is one person able to reflect multiple viewpoints.

There are many different ways that feedback can be solicited within organisations. Engagement surveys (usually annual in frequency) measure employee satisfaction, motivation and workplace culture. These are usually anonymous and allow a large volume of data to be collated on a variety of areas. Next are pulse surveys. These may be highly targeted to a particular focus area and will give more immediate results with fewer data points collected. They can monitor employee sentiment or emerging trends, and may or may not be anonymous. Exit surveys are another way to collect individual data, and are opportunistic in nature, reliant on exiting employees being willing to share their thoughts on the company and the reasons for their departure. These are not anonymous, although the responses could be maintained confidentially depending on employee wishes and company policy. A final type of feedback would be that solicited during employee reviews, which again is not anonymous, but would not usually be shared with individuals directly.

This paper will focus on the anonymous employee survey. This is usually a mass collection of data over a defined period of time. It is sent to all staff within an organization and although metrics on department/function response rates may be shared, individual names will not be attached to the data. For this reason, a third party may be engaged to further encourage responses. Data will be available to different levels within the organization.

PREPARATION

Most managers may not think of laying groundwork before the survey starts, but this is a unique time to capture what will be top of mind for those responding when the survey is released. Starting a few weeks ahead of the survey being released, capture what is happening in the department. Have there been any changes to systems, processes, workload, environment… the list goes on! At this stage, I would encourage you to not be restricted to those items which you know have had impact. Smaller events may have more significant impact than you think, and all this adds to a complete picture.

When considering events or changes, don't just think of negative impacts, such as changes to environments that were difficult to overcome, new processes which take time to learn etc. Positive events can have real impact, and often beyond those who are impacted by the event.

If this is a repeat survey, you may have been revisiting your prior actions through the year. Now could be a good time to refresh your team on what you had as your focus areas over the past year. Their insight in the staff survey on whether this has had the desired impact will be a good comparison you can make when receiving your next results. Hopefully you have been checking in on your actions regularly though and should already have a good idea that you are on track!

Encouraging staff to participate in the survey is important – the more data you collect, the more complete the picture across the team on where you can focus next or what has been going well. They may not appreciate what happens with the results – ensure your team understands the Why. Why do their responses matter. Why is it important to have a diverse set of views represented.

DURING THE SURVEY

It is important while the survey is in progress, to continue adding to your list of events that may be shaping the responses being provided. Monitor the morale of staff – has the survey landed at a particularly busy period with lots of focus on projects? You may also be receiving completion metrics, which will allow you to continue to encourage staff to respond, or thank those for making its completion a priority alongside their days work.

Don't forget to answer the survey too! Your feedback and unique perspective is just as important to your management team. You may have a very different view on the organization, and this diversity in perspective is also important to reflect.

POST SURVEY

It's done! The survey is complete and its just a matter of time before you have the results and can start to analyse the data. Thanking staff for their time and engagement, along with laying out rough timeline when you hope to share the results with them will give them confidence that their input will matter. Consider how long you will need to process, analyse and formulate plans from the results. Dependent on the size of your organization, there may be multiple cascade points from high level org views, to department summaries, down to the managers and their direct reports. This means staff may be viewing different commitments, based on results which may look very different to those you will share with them. Help them understand the likely summaries they will see and when, as these will potentially be available at different points.

You may also receive training in the reports you are to receive, and guidance on handling feedback. It is always worth refreshing yourself on this training to ensure you understand the tools at your disposal and how you can start to understand your results.

RECEIVING YOUR RESULTS

I always like to set time aside to read through my report in its entirety. I try to take a balanced view as I walk through the sections. It is worth stating, that as tempting as it may be, it is probably preferable to avoid trying to identify individuals from their responses. Comments may be particularly revealing. You may have results suppressed if you have under a certain number of responses, so you will need to consider how you can understand your results with your next level manager.

It can be difficult looking through results when you feel what they are telling you isn't reflective of your viewpoint or understanding of the situation. This is when the list you made prior to and during the survey, may give you more insight into the results, particularly if a few months have elapsed. Contextualizing results in this way may give you a better understanding of how events shaped peoples thoughts – this is when the smaller events you thought were less impactful could really show their true impact.

Consider any questions that could be open to interpretation, at the various staff levels within your team. For example, a questions like "How effective do you feel Senior Leadership were at communicating this year?" may mean different things to difference levels of staff. Senior level employee may consider Senior Leadership to be individuals at a very senior level within your organization, often outside of your department. To a more junior member of staff, they feel this relates to your department leadership, as this is where their horizon of awareness extends to.

Avoid seeing responses as personal. Receiving a low score for effectiveness of communication around company goals for example may not mean that you didn't help to connect the team with the goals – they may not have bought into the goals as they were too high level/too "corporate speak" to resonate/failing to understand how their personal goals connected to corporate goals or similar. Once you have chosen your areas of focus, having small group discovery sessions can help you understand how you can improve the score next year, and what this would look like to your team.

As a second level manager (or above), you may be supporting managers in interpreting their results while trying to process their feedback to the survey. This is an opportunity to model your response with open questions, soliciting their thoughts on focus areas and how you can support them in areas of need while celebrate the success areas with them. You may have managers who have been surprised with their results and are struggling to formulate their response to their team. Time to absorb, rationalize and process results can be important in these situations. There should always be support from services like HR if there is particular cause for concern.

When evaluating your managers results, comparing across the team can help to identify where their development and success areas are, but can also introduce difficulties if you have diverse teams reporting through to you. Differences such as seniority, tenure, location among others can influence how we are predisposed to respond to surveys. Some may have no issue giving a 5/5 response while others will find it difficult to stretch to such a positive response and hover more around neutral. This can be important to keep in mind.

You may have access to data such as the average rating per question for the department or company as a whole for comparison, so you can contrast your results against a larger, and more homogeneous, pool of staff. This can be useful as a check in to see areas which are uniquely different for your team. Consider the size of company or department – how different is the majority of the larger pool to your team to understand which is the more accurate comparison. With so many mergers and acquisitions within our industry, companies are often made up of many different areas, so what is a small problem to your team, may not be a problem at all across the wider company, leading you to believe you have a bigger issue than it really is. The best benchmark, where you have a consistent team and survey questions, is to see how your results differ from the past set of results. Did you have the impact you wanted in your focus areas? Have any areas increased or declined? With department restructurings common, you may find you don't have the same team as past years. Trying to find an equivalent higher grouping may be your best opportunity to have a comparison but don't be afraid to start again if you feel there is no comparison that would help you to use the lens of change over time. You can evaluate where you have areas of concern where you can influence change, and areas where you won't be able to influence, such as a new company policy that is unpopular for example. Spotting trends around retention, morale, career growth and professional development can be areas where you can see the biggest impact when discussing the results 1 on 1 with your reports.

Using data visualization can be a great help. Heat maps can be effective to allow you to see across teams, understand where the areas of strength and improvement are and to identify differences between teams, bearing in mind the comments above around the influences for highly positive or negative responses, versus a more neutral response. An example of a heatmap is given below, where scores are attributed to each question on the horizontal, and teams on the vertical.

88	94	100	95	100
81	97	98	95	100
69	94	95	90	96
81	88	90	95	83
74	92	94	94	93
75	94	93	95	96
72	84	90	85	96
69	75	95	90	88
74	80	91	87	90
81	75	85	90	88
66	78	93	90	79
84	72	95	85	92

In the above example, you can see where the more positive-responding teams are (light blue to dark blue), but also where you have common issues per question (light pink to dark pink). It's a useful overview to quickly identify where to focus.

The ideas above primarily deal with responses based on a scale, but how to interpret any comments you may have collected? You may be tempted to use AI for this – it's the new tool to use and it can be very helpful, but this is where you need to carefully engineer your prompts to avoid hallucinations or AI over generalizing the nuances in the comments. Coding comments as positive, neutral or negative and reviewing this by question, or question grouping could be helpful. The humble word cloud can also be helpful, though reducing comments to phrases to generate meaningful word clouds will be important to consider.

COMMUNICATING YOUR RESULTS

When communicating your results, I always try to be as open and transparent as I can. It will be difficult to try to influence all areas of concern within your results, but don't be afraid to acknowledge them. Choosing 2 or 3 areas of focus will help you to work on the largest areas of concern, that you are able to effect real change for. Explain why you have chosen those areas and ask your team for their thoughts – are they truly the areas they want changing. Perhaps with time, what was the cause of their rather negative response, has now changed, resolved or become insignificant, especially if a month or 2 have elapsed. Gain your teams buy in with what would help them to feel more positive to the areas of focus and commit to an improvement plan around those points. This may mean a quarterly check in is important if it is an entire year focus, or a shorter term undertaking. Allow the opportunity for private feedback in your 1 to 1 meetings, along with encouraging staff to provide direct feedback to you on how you presented the results and how you could improve. This is a great way to model how you want your managers to communicate and follow up with their teams.

FOLLOW UP

It can be easy once the excitement of results has faded away, to store the objectives you committed to away. Diarize time to follow up on these items while they are fresh in mind and commit to routine updates on progress. Do you want the same results in the next survey or do you want a fresh challenge!

It is also a good time to reflect on the steps you took above. What changed this year that made a difference? How could you approach situations differently? How do you want next years survey to turn out – a huge success I hope, with deep insights, a team comfortable with responding because they have seen the commitment you gave it over the year prior.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this paper, can been seen as feedback being a continual loop of response, evaluation, action and checking back for effective action outcomes. Ensuring you have teams comfortable with giving feedback, and management teams set up to be comfortable with receiving and acting upon these responses will set your organization up for future success.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Your comments and questions are valued and encouraged. Contact the author at:
Author Name: Lynn Clipstone
Company: PPD Clinical Research Services
Address: Remote based, UK
Email: lynn.clipstone@thermofisher.com
Website: www.thermofisher.com/ppd