Chapter 7
Are Employee Surveys Disengaging Employees?*

Theresa M. Welbourne

Employee surveys have become a tradition in many organizations. They are done annually or every other year, and they cover a range of topics from diversity surveys, satisfaction surveys, culture surveys, benchmarking surveys, and new employee engagement surveys. In fact, surveys have become a critical foundation piece of employee engagement programs.

What is the effect of the survey itself on engagement? What if the endeavor of survey giving and survey taking as a first step in employee engagement actually disengages employees? Consider the following.

The comments below are taken from a survey of leaders about surveys. The sample is 370 executives, with about 40 percent in C-level jobs (CEO, CIO, CTO, etc.) and approximately 75 percent are VPs and higher. They come from large and small organizations, all types of industries, and they are primarily in the United States, but the sample spans the world.

- "They generally lead to an anonymous complaint session, for which our company has no use."
- "Poorly worded, do not address the real issues, fail to be acted upon constructively, and are typically used to manipulate employees."
- "They are biased; leading; extreme."
- "The focus is on fixing the numbers instead of understanding what is being said."

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While most of the 307 respondents did not take the extreme stand that surveys are evil, the organizers were also not surprised that only 11 percent of the senior leaders responding thought employee surveys were evil because it is a fairly extreme stance on the topic. Even though respondents did not overwhelmingly rate surveys as evil, based on the comments presented earlier, it is clear that respondents were not positive about surveys either.

OTHER DIMENSIONS OF SURVEYS

In addition to the “evil survey” questions, we asked a few more traditional questions about surveys. The overall response can be found in Table 7.1.

In reviewing these scores, it becomes clear that although not many leaders considered surveys evil, they do not think very highly of them either. A more thorough review of the data shows that the most favorable comments come from the people in jobs most likely to do surveys. For example, below is a sampling of comments from the respondents in the human resources (HR) field:

- “I have written them, and have participated in them. I believe, if done well, they can be a valuable tool in information gathering and continuous improvement.”

- “If surveys contain relevant content and are used they work great.”

- “Surveys are a valuable tool for leadership to assess the attitude of the workforce.”

Reviewing the data from the HR department respondents only, 28 percent agree that the annual survey is valued (versus 24 percent for the overall population), and 31 percent think there is a definite and high return on investment (ROI) from the annual survey (versus 27 percent overall). Lastly, only 5 percent consider the employee survey to be evil. Even though their comments are somewhat more positive, even the HR executives who are in charge of running employee surveys do not think very highly of them.

Even the positive comments from the executives responsible for doing employee surveys are not very glowing. There were no examples about measurable and positive results from an employee survey.

Table 7.1

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"They do not lead to improvements."
"They create some very negative feelings."
"They result in a lack of feedback and action, most leave you with a sense of 'why did I bother?'"
"They are generally too long, time-consuming, and lack a results orientation."
"Most of the time the information goes into a black hole or is used to 'beat people up.'"
"Surveys do not lead to improvements. It seems more like a 'check the box' exercise."

Surveys are clearly falling short of their objectives when it comes to understanding employee engagement. Melcher Publishing captured this disconnect in their 2005 large-scale study of employee engagement: "One area that also caused crossed wipers in our interviews was the stunning unconscious belief ... that their employee engagement survey wasn't just a measure of employee engagement—it was employee engagement."

When they asked respondents to define employee engagement, the authors of the report note that there were instances where respondents named the number of the survey questions as the definition of engagement. In other words, the survey itself— the instrument that the senior leaders cited in the above section talk about with disdain and anger—is the thing they say is employee engagement.

SURVEYS AND SURVEY DATA DO NOT EQUAL ENGAGEMENT

Reflect on your own experience with surveys for a moment. Surveys are an imposition and an intrusive hassle to almost everyone. The "no call" list came into existence because people were tired of being bothered by sales calls and survey takers. Surveys often are perceived as asking the same question over and over again; they usually take a long time to complete, and most employees would tell you that they see little action as a result of any survey. The onslaught of Web-based surveys has, in many ways, made the situation worse rather than better because now anyone can gain access to fairly inexpensive surveys, develop questions, deploy their survey, and then send it out to the employee population of choice. Very few organizations have mandates to control survey administration, and, as a result, managers and employees alike are becoming frustrated and annoyed by the plethora of surveys being presented to them.

It is this increasingly negative reaction to employee surveys that led to a survey of surveys. It is called the Leadership Pulse and has about 4,000 senior executives who participate in bimonthly surveys focused on key leadership topics.

In October 2006, participants were asked the degree to which they thought the annual employee survey and customer surveys were evil (given the ongoing nature of the project, the organizers added some lightness to the survey by using a rather extreme word for two questions). This was followed up with a few other, more traditional questions about surveys. For purposes of these questions, the following definition of evil was used: "a situation that is very unpleasant, harmful, or morally wrong."

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Table 7.2
Engagement-Disengagement Profile

<table>
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<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How many days was your employee survey open?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How many days after the survey closed did it take for you to see the results?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. If the results you are talking about in question 2 are not the complete survey results (all views of the data, all reports, for all managers), then multiply the number above by 10.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. How many questions were on the employee survey?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. How many days did it take to give a summary of the survey to the senior leadership team?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. How many days did it take to get results to the managers who have responsibility for doing something with the data?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. How many days did it take to get results to employees?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. How long did it take for the first action to occur in response to the data? (If you do not know the answer to this question, give yourself 500 points.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Add up all the numbers and consider your score below.

There are no mentions of ROI, and C-level executives did not discuss the ways they rely on employee survey data to help them make important business decisions. One may question whether employee surveys are simply an organizational habit, and because of this, there is little expectation for results.

SO, SURVEYS EQUAL ENGAGEMENT?

In order to put your own employee survey experience into perspective, think about the last employee survey in which you participated and complete the profile in Table 7.2.

If your score is between: 0 and 100 = You super-engaged your population 101 to 200 = You engaged the employees 201 to 300 = You somewhat engaged the employees 301 to 500 = You irritated the employees Over 500 = You implemented a disengagement survey

The profile analysis gives a high value of points to inaction because if you or others in your organization are not aware of actions resulting from the employee survey, the whole survey process itself is most likely disengaging employees. With the majority of people having unfavorable attitudes toward surveys, it is a real danger to think that surveys are engaging. The flaws and problems associated with using surveys must be clearly understood and fixed.

However, developing suggestions to correct a flawed process begins with a clear understanding of what's going wrong. Thus, the next section of this chapter is devoted to identifying the core problem with surveys and then finding ways to evolve employee surveys from disengagement to engagement tools.

WHY ARE THERE NO ACTIONS FROM SURVEYS?

The primary reason for lack of action in response to employee surveys is in denial of the data by managers. If managers deny their data, or if they don't believe the survey results, then they have no motivation to do anything with the numbers. The reasons managers can legitimately deny the legitimacy of the results of the survey need to be clearly understood before any interventions to transform surveys can be designed.

There are five deadly denial barriers—reasons managers do nothing with their survey data.

Deadly Denial Barrier #1: The Survey Data Are Old by the Time the Manager Receives the Report

If results from any type of employee data collection are delivered late, be it a survey or focus group, managers can very easily deny that the data are valid or accurate because their world has changed since the data were collected. They would be correct. Why should a manager take action on data that are old and no longer accurate?

Financial Services Company Case Vignette. During 2003, the senior VP of HR in a large financial services firm found that managers needed real-time data to help manage the high level of change taking place during that time (e.g., new leaders, multiple acquisitions, reorganizations). They used short "pulse" surveys (three questions on average) to collect weekly data from 24,000 employees. The system provided managers with weekly reports one day after the pulse surveys closed. The managers went through training to learn how to not only navigate the technology but also deliver actions in response to the data they received. Managers embraced the data and made quick changes. The communications department worked hard in hand with HR to advertise the quick wins (or "fix and tells" as they called it), and the result after only 10 months was an estimated first-year ROI of $17 million.

Survey transformation at the financial services firm:

- Shorter surveys more often (weekly; three questions in most weeks; occasionally adding to the base for additional deep dives on critical topics).
- Survey results delivered immediately to all managers within a day of closing the survey.
- Focus on data and dialogue, not just score taking (managers held accountable for taking action and discussing data and results with employees).
- Managers trained and expectations of results clearly articulated.
- "Fix and tell" strategy supported by communications department.
- Measurable results.

Deadly Denial Barrier #2: The Employee Survey Data Are from Only One Point in Time

In most cases, business data (other than employee surveys) are collected regularly, and managers respond to trend data (versus point-in-time data). Trend data are the
key for analyzing stock prices, financial performance data, sales, and more. Most managers do not choose one data point during the year (one snapshot) and seriously expect anyone to take a considerable amount of time and effort to respond to it (imagine responding to a stock price taken at just one day during the year). Managers are trained to analyze trends. But for some reason, managers are expected to make an exception for the employee survey (satisfaction surveys, culture surveys, or what have you). Managers are often then asked to develop a year-long action plan based on just one snapshot of data collected at one point in time. Managers don't buy this story, and that is one additional reason they deny their data. Point-in-time data are inferior to trend data.

**FTSE 100 Communications Company Vignette.** Virginia Ruthwell and Andrea Wyat-Budd worked together in the HR department of the wholesale division. Virginia's HR team was charged with making change happen in the business. But before they started, the HR team change effort, they engaged the employees in a process that involved initially weekly and later biweekly data collection from all employees (in the HR team) (200 employees). They wanted to obtain high-quality data on three key metrics: (1) employee energy or motivation at work, (2) key behaviors that drove their culture, and (3) attitudes toward organizational change. In addition to the quantitative metrics, they collected open-ended comments and then trended the responses to the open-ended comment data (key themes graphed and then trended). The qualitative question was divided into two sections: (1) what's working, and (2) what's not working.

Every week, the management team would meet (via meetings or phone) to discuss the employee data, track progress, and develop action plans around the metrics. These conversations were then shared with all employees. The senior VP in the team (Virginia) worked with her internal coach (Andrea) to develop strategic conversations with all employees and with her management team. They used the data to track progress, which then fostered a culture of "no excuses" and accountability. The results reflected a high degree of success in the HR team effort in seven months. Overall company employee survey scores for the team improved dramatically, and reaction from internal clients was positive as evidenced by the HR team winning more budget dollars for their work and the group receiving external awards for excellence. Even more important, the change undergone by HR was so successful that they took their lessons learned to the rest of the organization and were able to help change happen because they could show that they already succeeded within their own team.

**Survey transformation at the company:**

- Focus on trend versus point-in-time data.
- Data collected customized to reflect specific business needs.
- Data collected frequently (weekly or every other week).
- Weekly and biweekly conversations with management team.
- Management conversations with all employees to drive change.

- Teaching via first-hand experience: the HR team used their own success stories to help other leaders change within the company.

**Deadly Denial Barrier #3: Questions Asked Are Not Important to the Manager**

It doesn't matter if the survey designers from the HR world who are academics, practitioners, or consultants think that a question is important. And it really does not matter if the questions are scientifically valid in terms of predicting numerous business outcomes. If managers think the questions being asked in surveys are irrelevant, they will not care about the answers, and consequently they will not take action. Validation studies include one aspect that is often forgotten—face validity. This type of validity focuses on whether a question makes sense to the manager (as face value). If the survey question is not reasonable or applicable to the business goals guiding the organization, managers will not take action. Managers want data that will help them improve their performance. For instance, if the results of the employee survey questions suggest the managers should take employees out for dinner, bowling, or other such types of "HR touchy-feely actions," then the team in charge of the annual survey will be held in much disdain by the management population, so an additional key to success in driving action from surveys is developing questions that have face validity because managers can look at the question and realize the data coming back from the questions will help managers do their jobs better.

**Saturn/Spring Hill Manufacturing Case Vignette.** Annette Clayton was tasked with the job of making several critical changes at the Spring Hill manufacturing facility of General Motors (GM). The site was famous for bringing the Saturn brand to life. This is the manufacturing location that successfully attracted Saturn owners to take their vacations visiting an automobile assembly plant (they hosted homecoming day for customers). After years of creating a hub of Saturn being "different" from its parent, GM thought it was time for Spring Hill to abandon its "different" culture. It had spent years merging the best of what Saturn had to offer with experiences from other plants, and the result was a superior process that needed to be implemented in all GM plants. Changing the culture at Spring Hill was a significant challenge, and Annette embarked on the job with several key initiatives. One tool she used was a monthly employee survey of the salaried staff. Annette worked closely with her internal communications team to carefully craft survey questions and the follow-up process. She was very focused on developing a two-way, interactive communication strategy to drive home the messages she needed employees to not only read but also to believe and start acting upon. The question strategy was fluid, purposeful, and focused on the key tactical issues that needed to be dealt with each month. Her survey team asked for examples of what employees were doing in quality, rework, safety, and more. Annette personally spent hours reading employee comments, highlighting key points, and then strategically communicating this information to her direct reports and managers. The result of the purposeful survey strategy was a successful change effort and acquisition of funding needed to repurpose the Spring Hill plant for the future.
Survey transformation at Saturn/Spring Hill Manufacturing:
- Custom questions designed to drive monthly, tactical business needs.
- Questions included trended data and "influence questions" (questions designed to remind employees what the needs of the month were to drive change).
- Question strategy had a stable section for trend data and monthly custom questions.
- Real-time feedback to employees (monthly meetings to discuss results).
- Monthly surveys were used to drive change.
- High level of senior team involvement in development of questions and analysis of results.
- Measurable results, shared with board of directors, to obtain business resources.

Deadly Denial Barrier #4: The Data Do Not Have Enough Detail

Managers will not take action if they do not understand the meaning of the question and then the implication of the results. Even when the survey is designed for reliability and has up to 10 questions that measure the same construct (e.g., 10 individual questions that all make up satisfaction with a manager), it is still possible that all questions do not give managers enough detail to take action. Without action, there are no results. Instead, managers will argue about what the survey results really mean, and the time spent debating will result in more delays. As the interpretation discussion phase continues, denial barrier 1 rears its ugly head again. It can take so long to debate what the question means that now the data are old. Managers have even more reason to be in denial and take no action.

Manufacturing Firm Working on a Diversity Initiative Case Vignette. The diversity team in a large, Fortune 100 manufacturing organization embarked upon a diversity study. They were concerned about the lack of women and other minorities in their most senior leadership jobs. Their initial work was all done via the firm’s every-other-year all-employee survey. They took out the portion of the survey for the leadership team and compared women and other minority groups to the overall population of leaders. They found significant and striking differences in scores for a few of the questions, including one that was labeled a "diversity" question.

This item was worded similarly to the following: “It is safe to speak up here.” The management team was concerned about the low score on this item, but they did not take action to improve the score because they experienced denial barrier 1. The most senior executive team involved in reviewing the survey data asked the HR team sponsoring the diversity study two simple questions. The first question was, “Where is here?” As this firm had more than 200,000 employees, it was an important question. They wanted to know if here referred to the office, the state, the department, or something else. The second question was, “What does speak up mean?” Does it mean talking to the manager, writing letters, speaking up in a meeting, or writing emails?

The executive team did nothing with the data because they did not understand it, and thus they went into denial. Unable to drive action with the every-other-year survey data, the diversity team tried an alternative survey strategy. They conducted a short and fast pulse survey of the top leaders in the organization, and rather than asking over 60 quantitative questions (as they did in their big employee survey), they focused on fewer than 10 questions. And quite a few of them were qualitative. No one thought the senior executives would participate in the pulse survey because they are such busy people. However, with little effort (survey open less than two weeks), they had over 60 percent of the most senior executives respond. They printed out over 150 single-spaced pages of comments that clearly detailed how women and minorities were not able to speak up. The data were collected in two weeks, summarized within 12 hours after the survey closed, and presented to the top leadership team within days. There were no arguments about what people meant—if anyone denied the scores, they were given the 150 pages of comment data. Actions were subsequently taken.

Survey transformation as part of the diversity effort:
- One-time pulse survey conducted with senior executives.
- Data cut by gender and other groups of interest to diversity.
- Results shared within hours of closing the survey.
- Survey used open-ended comment data to create rich dialogue with senior executives.
- Data were compelling because all questions about why could be answered with the rich qualitative data.

Deadly Denial Barrier #5: The Department Composition in the Organization Changes over Time or the Structure of the Company Is Altered

Right or wrong, managers feel that the trend data and change scores are not reflecting the organization each manager runs when they are expected to take action. The old "mean" or average scores are for departments that no longer exist. This makes the trend data irrelevant or at least not very compelling, and then managers do not make the change score data serious. Given the types of changes many organizations make in a year, including mergers, acquisitions, and downsizing, denying managers say it’s almost impossible to really know if their employees’ real experiences are reflected by the scores—and if the scores are really relevant to the current conditions.

High-Technology Firm in Growth Mode Case Vignette. Fast growth is a problem envied by most leaders. This company did not want to lose its culture for people as it doubled and tripled in size each year. When the organization was small, it was easy for the CEO and senior team to make sure that all managers stayed true to the values, but as growth escalated, the most senior executive team lost touch with their employees. Thus, they needed to use systems and processes to make sure their culture retained its most important values. In an effort to retain the core culture, the firm instituted a monthly employee survey. The survey had allowed the organization to give up-to-date trend data to managers because senior management wanted to hold managers accountable for change. But holding managers accountable meant the data had
to be "bulletproof," and part of the challenge was making sure the data given to each manager were truly representative of the people they were managing today. They did not want change score data to reflect changes from "defunct department at point-in-time A" and current department at point-in-time B (today). Therefore, the process they used to survey required that data be stored at the employee level (which also necessitated using a third party to run the surveys to ensure confidentiality). Their reports were designed to be dynamic and not historic. Managers knew the data they received represented the attitudes of the people they were managing today. Reviews, accountability, and more could all be clearly understood. The dynamic nature of the reporting provided what the senior leaders needed to truly hold managers accountable for their trends versus simple point-in-time data.

Survey transformation at high-technology firms:

- Frequent data and reports delivered to managers.
- Updated trend data that enabled managers to lead forward (because they were dealing with data from people that reported to them today).
- Dynamic data reflect current employee population.

THE FIVE DEADLY DENIAL BARRIERS ARE ALIVE AND WELL IN ENGAGEMENT SURVEYS

Many employee engagement surveys still fall into the traps set by these barriers. Surveys are late, and inaccurate in many cases, asking questions that are not relevant or even worse not actionable. And employees simply write off the whole process. When surveys result in manager denial, then action is not taken, and the survey itself becomes a disengagement tool. They destroy trust; they make managers angry, and they continue a tradition of spending money on a process that does not work.

But probably the single most disengaging factor of surveys is that, whatever the reason for denial, managers simply don't take action on the results. Employees then conclude that the survey was just a time-wasting dog-and-pony show by senior leadership that might not be able to handle the truth. Even when they seem to specifically ask for it.

In a survey conducted by Mercer, results from over 1,000 surveys showed:

For organizations that conduct a survey and take follow-up actions, 84% of employees report a high degree of engagement... however, in organizations that conduct a survey but do not take follow-up actions, only 39% of employees report a high degree of engagement. The 45 percent-point gap in levels of employee engagement can have a significant impact on organizational success.

The case vignette was the story of success in transforming traditional annual employee surveys. However, we can go further and transform surveys into communication tools that are used to engage people in conversations. The dialogue is critical for employee engagement because the data and dialogue together engage employees.

In most of the case vignettes the companies decided to conduct more frequent surveys, but this is not always necessary. The move from traditional survey to an ongoing data and dialogue strategy involves steps that any organization can take. Frequency is one of those steps, but it is not the only one.

A MORE HELPFUL SURVEY ALTERNATIVE

To move the conversation and opportunities for innovation in surveys forward, (1) surveys and (2) data and dialogue tools are two points on a continuum describing employee engagement tools (see Figure 7.1).

Surveys

- One-way communication (you ask questions of the survey respondents).
- Focused on getting a score.
- Primarily uses quantitative data.
- Drives benchmarking (which means question wording cannot be customized).
- No guarantee that the survey taker's concerns will be met.
- There may be no action whatsoever; company may be content with score or only want the score.
- Focused on survey developer's agenda.

On the left side of the continuum, you find the traditional survey, which is a data-gathering experience only. The reason it has a negative relationship impact is that in most cases, the organization running the surveys promises more than it can deliver. Employees feel betrayed or even lied to if a survey is done and no subsequent action is taken. This perception is not conducive for employee engagement.

If an organization is doing a large, annual survey with many questions primarily to get benchmark data, with no ability to get results to managers quickly, and if it is using questions that are of interest to the benchmark company and not the manager, then it is best to admit the survey is not an engagement tool. Letting employees know that they can expect very little change as a result of this type of survey is the best policy. Honesty in intention will go a long way toward the survey at least not being a disengagement process. However, many employers fool themselves into thinking the denial barriers do not exist, and managers will somehow engage in doing something with data that shows up at their doorstep months after the survey is done.

Dialogue Tools

- Two-way communications.
- Qualitative data.
- Potential for ROI due to high level of tactical detail.
- High and positive relational impact, but for small groups.
Many organizations go from surveys to focus groups as a way to overcome some of the denial barriers. Dialogue tools can engage small groups of employees. But these types of dialogue processes cannot reach the entire employee population. Consequently, the dialogue is limited. Also, by the time the focus groups are done, even if they are illuminating, the data and dialogue may have less meaning than the survey results. If you do dialogue (focus groups, interviews, etc.) without representative quantitative data, you risk the error problem. A few people are not representative of the entire organization. Although dialogue is helpful, data and dialogue combined are more meaningful for driving action.

Data and Dialogue Tools
- Two-way and interactive communications.
- Focus on getting a deep understanding of a situation and then engaging the other party in a dialogue based on an initial conversation or collection of data.
- Scores are only used to start the dialogue.
- Questions are customized to the needs of the organization; benchmarking is incidental.
- Extensive use of qualitative data.
- Guarantee you will listen and drill down to take action, but no guarantee that all comments and dialogue will result in action.
- Focused on a business agenda and a desire to understand using the language of the population being studied.

Reviewing the vignettes again, you'll note that in every case the organization changed an annual survey to a more frequent process of gathering data. Perhaps more important, these organizations did not inundate managers with an overload of data. They provided strategic data for meaningful conversations, and they went out of their way to ensure that managers' time spent was worthwhile because the data were accurate, real-time, focused on the needs of the managers, and actionable. They embarked on data-and-dialogue campaigns, which employees felt were honest and which drove engagement in the kinds of behaviors needed to manage change, growth, and turnaround.

In today's work, where everyone relies on technology to communicate immediately, speed is essential. Old-fashioned surveys and limited dialogue tools are not enough to run global businesses and engage employees in meaningful conversations. Technology plus traditional teaching, training, and coaching in the art of conversation can revolutionize business and engage people in dialogue about improving the organization, its people, the customer experience, and more.

Merging data collection tools (survey technology) with rigorous online dialogue tools can be the next frontier for doing research, knowledge management, and creating and sustaining high involvement or high-performance organizations.

SO, ARE SURVEYS EVIL DISENGAGEMENT TOOLS?

Surveys are evil when they are part of an untruth communicated to employees. They also may be evil if the employer does not communicate what will be done with the survey data, and respondents have their decision to participate on an implied expectation that a change for the better will result. Also, as the leadership pulse respondents noted, surveys are evil if confidentiality is compromised in any way. Basically, surveys are evil when the process used violates the real or perceived relational contract we have with all stakeholders (employees, customers, vendors, partners, etc.).

The key to avoiding disengagement surveys is full disclosure. Be honest with employees and customers. If your organization only wants a score, then do not promise more than a data point. Most employees will complete a survey for a score and be happy in doing so if you clearly state the exercise is for the score only.

The reality is that employees do want more from their employers. It is the need to be able to safely express an opinion and to have someone actually listen and then perhaps see something change for the better that drives the continued participation in surveys. The smartest leaders listen. They take advantage of employee knowledge because their people are close to the customer, know the internal process better than any manager, and have information that the leaders and managers do not have.

We know from years of economic history, management knowledge, case studies, and now research on employee engagement that when employees speak up and share information with leaders, the top management of the organization has better data for decision making. Thus, using employee surveys for more than score-keeping is an engagement strategy that can work for any organization.

Data and dialogue tools hold great promise in being able to deliver on improving the number one asset any company has—its relationships with employees. Below is a quote from a senior executive who was writing to a colleague about his experience in moving from surveys to data and dialogue tools:

The results were outstanding, the morale, the employee participation in the company and the energy level all were noticeably better, but more importantly our customer metrics improved.
new processes were introduced, problem areas addressed, and we saved $8 million on employee ideas. Tools are just that, tools, in and of themselves they do nothing, but used within a management process that knows how to use the tool and is committed to it, they become powerful enablers.

The problem with surveys is not a new one. We have known for years that surveys can disengage employees and have negative effects on organizations. An article by Jean Hartley cites a comment made by Viteles in 1953: "An employee survey is like a hand grenade. Once you pull the pin out you have to do something with it. Otherwise, it may harm you rather than help you."

Any reason for inaction needs to be very clearly articulated in order to remove the denial barriers. If we can create a situation where they are not only accepting their data but using the data to create dialogue, action can occur immediately.

The move to data and dialogue tools can be a tremendously powerful engagement strategy for any organization. It means employees and managers are equally engaged in more meaningful dialogue, and at the same time, employee data are as useful and important as other types of business data. However, in order to evolve the survey process, the pitfalls of what has been done in the past have to be recognized and changed. Like any change effort, it takes time. Start removing one deadly denial barrier at a time. The move up the continuum can be slow. But as long as the changes are leading your organization in the right direction, the effort is well worth it.

NOTES


2. The Leadership Pulse sample consists of leaders who have opted into the study. About 40 percent of the sample are C-level executives, and about 75 percent director level and above. About 4,000 individuals are part of the core group.


4. Data and dialogue driven leadership and variants of that are trademarks of ePulse, Inc.
