7 ways to get honest feedback from employee surveys

Checking the pulse of your employees? If you haven't built a culture of trust, you're wasting your time. Here's how to do that—and reap the benefits.

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Introduction

When it comes to surveys, it's often the major conclusions that organizations spend the most time thinking about.

But don't underestimate the impact of seemingly smaller feedback to drive change and build trust in the workplace—such as getting rid of ice cubes in the lunchroom.

Based on survey feedback, CHG Healthcare—a Utah staffing company providing doctors, nurses and specialists to hospitals and clinics nationwide—has initiated serious changes, but one of the more memorable results was changing the refrigerators in the kitchen areas to provide pebbled ice instead of ice cubes.

"Hugely, hugely valued," says Michael Waterman, vice president of communications for the Utah-based company with 3,000 employees. "That's a small thing, but people love that."

When polling the workforce—both in pulse surveys and major annual questionnaires—one of the greatest challenges is getting employees to answer candidly. Sometimes it's the little trust-building acts that get you there.

"When a company comes up to an employee and asks them how they feel about the company, there's going to be limitations on what this person tells you," says Kyum Kim, co-founder and head of U.S. operations at the professional networking platform Blind. (Blind frequently surveys its members about workplace issues.). "But if you go to a bar and listen in to a conversation between the employees, that's where the honest sentiment is."

Nearly a quarter of employees aren't fully honest in pulse surveys, which means their organization doesn't have an accurate picture of how the staff really feels, Kim says.

If you want the unvarnished truth, you must liberate employees to give it to you straight—in pulse surveys and across your workplace culture. Here's how to get started:
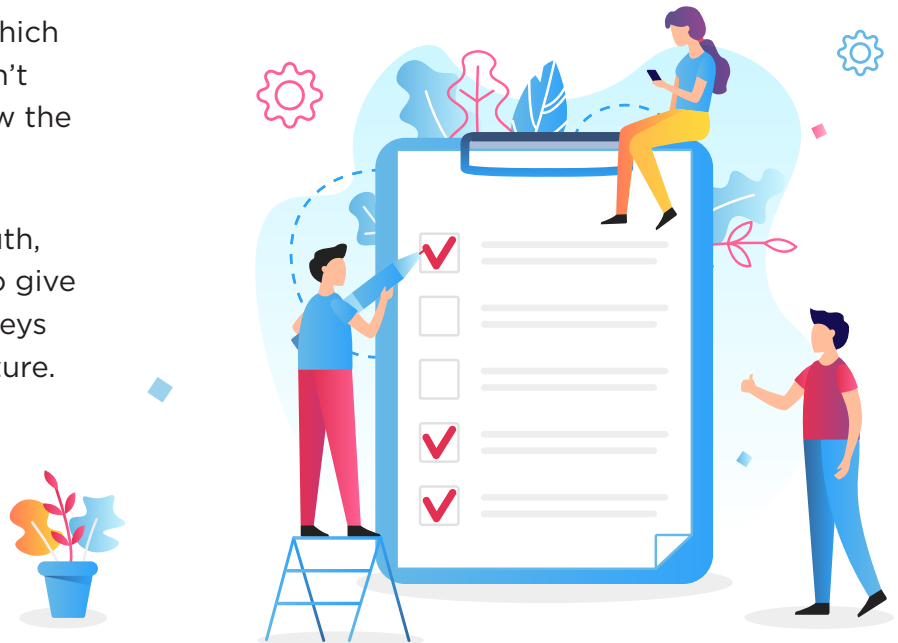
1. Poll anonymously.

One of the greatest hurdles to honest data collecting is the fear that the boss is looking over the respondent's shoulder. Make it anonymous, and you'll get better results.

Kim has seen many comments on Blind from professionals worrying that their comments in company surveys are never anonymous, no matter what the CEO says. This is a major reason people shade their feedback to suit what the boss wants to hear, rather than expressing how they really feel.

"You've got to really make people feel safe about answering these questions honestly," Kim says.

Office furniture manufacturer Exemplis does just that, surveying its staff anonymously through ContactMonkey, says Corey Kachigan, engagement and communications lead. ContactMonkey, an internal email tracking solution helps communicators create, send and measure employee engagement and feedback right from within Outlook or Gmail.

One employee of a major tech company posted on Blind to complain that his company misrepresents a regular survey as anonymous, Kim says. This employee stated, "I hear lots of stories about people being managed out when their manager finds out they submit negative answers," the commenter said.

Good luck getting people to participate—and answer candidly—next time around.

2. Reveal your results.

CHG receives more than 4,000 comments on its annual experience survey, says Waterman. It's not just comms or HR that deal with the data. Several executives read the entire 300-page final report, and the company publishes it on its intranet.

"Our CEO reads every comment each year and writes about areas where we're doing well and areas where we can improve," Waterman says. "That transparency creates trust."

The CEO blogs about it, talking about trends that have emerged, what's going well and what the company must work on.

"Most employees never read the whole thing, but it's there if they want to look at it," Waterman says. "Every year we have hundreds of employees who read that survey or dig through it and look for themes and just make sure that we're listening and hold us accountable to what we say we will do."

3. Act on what you learn.

As in the case of CHG and the ice cubes, companies build trust when they act on survey results. Eighty-four percent of professionals who have seen workplace improvements due to employee pulse surveys provide honest feedback, versus 67% of the professionals who have not seen such changes, Kim says.

"You can either make changes or not, but you've got to at least follow up on what you did based on those kinds of feedback, and show them their survey results as well," he says.

Exemplis is clear about what it will change based on polling, says Kachigan. Surveys go beyond mere information gathering. The company lets employees know the results, warts and all. Exemplis also explains what changes it plans to make based on the information gathered from using ContactMonkey within Outlook.

"The important thing for us is that we act on [the results]," Kachigan says. "And if we're not going to take action on it, we tell the employees or the team members why."

For CHG Healthcare, the changes aren't limited to the fridge. It has also initiated significant new opportunities, such as permitting flextime or allowing employees to donate paid time off to colleagues with major illnesses such as cancer, Waterman says.

"It's influenced us to become a much more flexible workforce and be more open to the different types of flexible schedules that millennials want and expect in their job," Waterman says.

In a Blind survey of its 3 million members, an automobile company employee offered this tip: "At the beginning of each new survey, maybe include a retrospective of the last survey and actions that were taken as a result. If you're dealing with a bunch of engineers, they'll expect you to close the loop each time, or [they] won't take you seriously the next time."

4. Take frequent pulse surveys on smaller issues.

Exemplis seeks feedback from its employees through weekly pulse surveys, Kachigan says. Often the comms team wants to know about what content most interests staffers, but they also ask about everyday work life and culture.

When the company put in new coffee machines, a survey asked a yes/no question: "Do you like them better or worse than the previous ones?" People could make comments, such as, "I hate that; it slows me down." The next week Kachigan acknowledged that 70% of the

people hated the coffee machine—and detailed what they would do about it.

Such pulse surveys reveal employee sentiment on smaller, quality-of-life issues. Yet the polls have a greater purpose: Staffers get used to participating, and the changes that follow prove that their opinions matter.

 "And then when the monthly [survey] comes," Kachigan says, "it's like, 'How aligned do you feel with Exemplis strategy? Do you feel like you have the resources, tools, and processes to do your job to the best of your ability? Do you feel like your manager motivates you to do your best work?'"

They are far more comfortable answering the deeper, more philosophical questions, because every week they are responding to polls. "It just feels super normal to the behaviors of our organization," Kachigan says.

5. Seek feedback on managers and leaders.

A year ago, Exemplis replaced annual reviews with quarterly reviews. With that came the concept of "upward feedback surveys," Kachigan says. Now, not only do managers rate the employee; the staffer also offers feedback on how they think their manager is doing.

The feedback is both anonymous and individual, meaning that if somebody from customer experience gripes about his or her boss, the company knows the department but not the individual.

"If we just gathered feedback and they never heard if their manager heard about it, that wouldn't be advantageous," Kachigan says. "So we actually send each department their upward feedback. It goes to the top leader and it also goes to the managers. And then we circle back, and we let our employees know the general themes that came out of the upward feedback survey."

The CEO relays that information to managers in their monthly meeting, as well as more broadly in company-wide town halls. The company gathers information from the top and the bottom, with full transparency as the goal, Kachigan says.

CHG has a similar philosophy. If polling revealed a trend of employees who say, for example, "Hey, I don't think you're living our core values as well as you could," the company would address the matter, Waterman says.

"We'd say, 'OK, let's talk about that as a leadership team. Let's talk about that broadly among leaders so that they know that this is an emphasis.'"

Leaders would publicly announce that they plan to work on more effectively living the value of continuous improvement, Waterman says. "And that means we're going to be open to more ideas and we're going to listen better and we're going to take specific steps."

Ultimately, that makes the company better.

6. Never blame or retaliate.

Want to shut the door on honest feedback forever? Find ways to retaliate for negative survey results.

Blind's data reveal that, of professionals concerned about negative consequences, only 65% provide honest feedback, Kim says. By contrast, 85% of the professionals who aren't concerned about this are fully honest—a 20-point difference.

The same goes for laying a guilt trip on your employees, or turning things around to hold them responsible for negative results such as poor morale.

Better to say, "We hear you, and we own it at every level," Kachigan says. "Here's how we're going to change. And we would love your support along the way."

In the past, she has worked for organizations where managers pleaded for candid responses on surveys, only to turn around and fault employees for anything bad that emerged. When that happens, employees clam up, thinking, "OK, I'm not giving that feedback out anymore," Kachigan says.

7. Make honest feedback an organizational value.

From an employee's first day, Exemplis emphasizes the need for feedback. During a weeklong onboarding process, employees learn about company values, and leaders "give them full permission to call us out on our BS," Kachigan says.

The company has also rolled out a new, eight-week training for managers. It doesn't simply offer details, such as how to submit expense reports, but also emphasizes "the human side," including learning to invite feedback and act on it.

Conclusion

A theme runs through organizations that make successful use of pulse polls and other means of taking the internal temperature: They are transparent. They cultivate honesty. They seek constructive feedback, because it's the only way the folks at the top can know what's happening on the assembly line or in the cubicle farm.

Whether it's polling anonymously with software like ContactMonkey built into Outlook and Gmail, revealing your results or acting on what you learn, show your workforce you mean business. Tactical matters, such as the frequency of pulse polls, also can build trust.

By accepting feedback without blame or retaliation, you help make frankness an organizational value. In doing so, you will reap rewards as an organization.

"We get feedback constantly, because we've built that into our company's culture," Kachigan says. "So now people are really willing in the hallway to give feedback to me, because they know it's a safe space where I'm going to turn it around, and I'm going to make it productive for them. The benefit of opening that conversation up that way is that it evolves how people give feedback."

And it might get the kitchen a new ice machine.

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"Email tracking for us feels like a necessity. I should know how many people are opening, clicking and reacting to my emails. It ultimately ends up informing long-term planning."

METTLER TOLEDO

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Exemplis

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