

CHAPTER 1

Moving the Needle

Getting Action After a Survey

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I have been doing organizational surveys for forty years, and a major concern during all that time has been how to get action after a survey has been completed. In fact, one of my first published articles was titled, “Opinion Surveys: Turning Results into Action” (Kraut, 1966). In this chapter, I push that interest further, reflect on what we have learned over the years, note some major changes in recent years, and consider how we can do better in the future.

Not long ago, while on a vacation safari in Africa, my interest in getting action from organizational surveys drifted into my mind as our guide described the behaviors of various jungle animals. I mused that efforts to produce action after a survey seemed very similar in some ways to what he said about the mating behavior of elephants. If asked, “In what ways?” a sardonic answer might be: “It seems that everything important takes place at a high level, it is accompanied by a great deal of sound and fury, and it takes at least eighteen months before you see any real results.”

The frequent lack of action from surveys seems to fuel a streak of cynicism in many organizational cultures. This distrust pops up in an occasional “Dilbert” cartoon strip by Scott Adams, who can be seen as a contemporary commentator and philosopher. In one poignant drawing, the inept manager complains that the company survey says morale is low for the tenth year in a row, and this will have an impact on his bonus. In the next-to-last panel, he promises,

“You can be sure we’ll make big changes . . .”. In the last panel he adds, “. . . to the survey.”

In this chapter, we review some of the major shifts in organizational survey practice in recent years and their implications for action. These include shifts in how we do surveys and their use to aid bottom-line organizational performance. We also examine specific organizational development practices, the relevant mind-sets, and behaviors that produce results. Overall, our aim is to see how we can best move the needle that registers important outcomes—how we can get meaningful action from the organizational survey.

Popularity of Surveys

Surveys of employees seem widespread, if not universal. No one seems to know just how many organizations do surveys, but a recent telephone poll of leading survey firms gives some idea (Kraut Associates, 2003). Their estimates vary but indicate that about three of four larger firms survey their employees—for example:

- Mercer Human Resource Consulting polled twenty-six hundred respondents in the U.S. workforce. Sixty-four percent said their firms did employee opinion surveys.
- In Watson Wyatt’s 2002 survey of thirteen thousand employees in the U.S. workforce, 53 percent said their companies had conducted an employee survey in the past three years.
- Mercer Human Resource Consulting surveyed human resource (HR) leaders at three hundred U.S.-based organizations. Employee attitudes measures were used by more than three-quarters (78 percent).
- Watson Wyatt’s 2001 Human Capital Index Survey of HR practices in five hundred publicly traded companies showed that 79 percent surveyed employees regularly.

Note that HR executives report a higher frequency of survey use than do samples of the national workforce. This suggests that survey use is higher among Fortune 1000 companies, as these larger firms are the most likely to be polled by consulting firms. It should be noted that these estimates of survey popularity tell us little about the frequency, regularity, or survival of surveys, or their quality or impact afterward.

Utility of Surveys

One way to assess the utility of surveys is to ask practitioners how they view the value and failings of the survey process. Although these professionals are hardly neutral, they are well informed and thus can offer useful insights. An opportunity to get practitioner views came a few years ago during a workshop with thirty survey researchers who worked for fifteen large high-technology firms. They were asked, “What do you see as the greatest *values* of doing organizational surveys?” Ninety-three comments were received and content analyzed. As shown in Table 1.1, the major themes describe various ways that surveys can “Improve Organizational Functioning,” cited by 57 percent, and “Improve Communications,” cited by 43 percent.

Table 1.1. Practitioner Views on Organizational Surveys

Greatest values of organizational surveys^a	
Improve organizational functioning	57%
Direct action toward improvement	21%
Facilitate assessment of current organizational programs/initiatives	12%
Aid in the development of strategy	11%
Help to identify organizational problems	9%
Efficient, systematic method to obtain large amounts of data	5%
Improve communication	43%
Facilitate information flow up: subordinates to managers	22%
Facilitate communication (general)	11%
Communicate values/concerns of management down to subordinates	10%
Greatest failings of organizational surveys^b	
No action taken on surveys' findings	42%
Questionable relevance—Surveys don't tap critical issues/concerns	19%
Survey process is too difficult	15%

(Continued)

Table 1.1. Practitioner Views on Organizational Surveys, Cont'd

Managerial disinterest/lack of concern about survey and findings	13%
Superficiality—Inability of survey to capture complexities	8%
Negative attitude among employees toward survey	3%

^aA summary of ninety-three comments on the question, “What are the greatest values of organizational surveys?”

^bA summary of eighty-nine comments on the question, “What are the greatest failings of organizational surveys?”

Source: Thirty survey researchers from fifteen high-technology firms.

The survey practitioners were also asked, “What are the greatest *failings* of organizational surveys?” Their eighty-nine comments were also content analyzed, and the resulting themes are shown in Table 1.1. Leading the list is “No action taken on survey findings,” cited in 42 percent of the comments. Another 13 percent mention management’s disinterest in or lack of concern about the survey findings. If there is any doubt that a lack of action is the Achilles heel of the survey process, this extraordinary indictment by survey practitioners themselves should convince us.

Major Changes in Survey Practice

Over the past decade or two, several major changes have taken place in the practice of doing and thinking about surveys in organizations (Kraut & Saari, 1999). These continuing changes have been caused by several forces, including computer technology, globalization, increased competition, and management understanding about the impact of employee behaviors on organizational performance. As we shall see, some of these changes overlap and intersect in fascinating ways. The observations made here are based primarily on my experiences in the field, interactions with other survey practitioners, published reports, and occasional benchmark studies. All the changes I describe have significantly enhanced the possibilities for, and desirability of, action to follow surveys. We now turn our attention to these changes in the purpose of surveys, conceptual models, Web technologies, and a

deeper understanding of action planning used with organizational surveys. But first we examine changes in what management wants to know from surveys.

Focus of Surveys

Higgs and Ashworth (1996) were among the first to point out how the focus of surveys has changed, from individual workers in the 1930s to teams and business units in the 1990s. As they predicted, since the 1990s we have seen a further evolution as surveys look at broad organizational functioning and even how customers feel and think about the organization. As focus changed, so did the content of surveys. They have moved from preoccupation with morale and worker satisfaction to using respondents to report what they understand are the organization's goals and functioning, as well as to describe their own behavior and intentions.

The underlying role of surveys has shifted to reflect changes in survey practitioner and management concerns and perspectives; from concerns about morale and attitudes that might predict unionization to later concerns with turnover, absenteeism, stress, and implied links of satisfaction to productivity. More recently, we see greater interest in employees' views of their companies' strategies, such as those stressing customer satisfaction and product and service quality. In addition, there is greater emphasis on awareness of company mission and readiness for change. Finally, there is a growing trend for these perceptions to be linked, in one fashion or another, to bottom-line performance.

Performance, Not Just Satisfaction

Over time, environmental forces facing companies (Kraut & Korman, 1999) have fostered many changes. Shifting demographics and legislative changes have focused concerns about satisfaction onto issues like work/family life and equal opportunity. The drastically reduced rate (and fear) of unionization puts less of a premium on management concern with employee morale. Globalization and the increased competitive environment most firms face put an emphasis on organizational performance generally and on product quality and customer satisfaction specifically.

The emphasis on performance and not just satisfaction is obvious in the content of the questions themselves. Surveys are much less likely to ask about satisfaction with the cafeteria and parking lot, items that were staples of the past. Current surveys are even likely to omit items that ask about satisfaction with salary and benefits and instead add items about customer service. Companies reason that external compensation surveys can give them the objective data about their standing on pay and benefits, but employee surveys about customer service yield unique data from people who are close to the customer every day.

Subtler and more interesting to me are some of the changes in the way questions are asked in current surveys as compared to the past. Consider two questions asked by the Mayflower Group companies, a consortium of forty-one blue-chip companies that all use a core set of survey items (www.mayflowergroup.org). Both items ask employees about their training:

- 1970s item: “How satisfied are you with the training you received for your present job?” (Very Satisfied to Very Dissatisfied).
- 1990s item: “I have received the training I need to do a quality job” (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree).

The second question has substituted for the first by most of these companies. Consider the implications of this change. The concept of satisfaction has disappeared. The issue of training is reframed in terms of its impact on performance. So too a different message is being sent to people reading the questionnaire—one emphasizing performance rather than satisfaction.

There are also implications for the managers getting their unit’s results to such items. In the first case, managers may throw up their hands and wonder what they should do to increase “satisfaction.” In the second case, it is much harder to ignore employees who say they do not have the training they need to do a good job. Such replies compel the manager to find out what kind of training is needed to perform well. I believe we are seeing more of an effort to ask actionable questions. Practitioners are trying harder than ever before to reduce the chance for managers to be puzzled, or to evade action, due to poorly worded questions.

More Normative Data

The “granddaddy” of all survey consortiums, the Mayflower Group, continues to be alive and well. It remains at forty-one firms today, about the same as a decade ago (R. Johnson, 1996). However, it has undergone dynamic change in membership. About fifteen firms are no longer members, including those whose fortunes have declined, such as Honeywell and Unisys, and those that have continued to prosper, such as GE and J&J. An equal number have been added to the membership, including large retailers such as Home Depot and Target and high-tech firms like Sun Microsystems and Siemens. (Mergers and name changes also affect the lists.)

The group’s Web site says, “Normative data is available for the exclusive use of member companies on topics including general satisfaction, quality, training, and involvement, with new items on diversity and empowerment.” It also notes that the group “provides a forum for the sharing of innovative best practices or benchmarking studies among member companies.”

Other consortiums have been created to get the advantages of sharing best survey practices and comparative data norms. These include the Information Technology Survey Group (www.itsg.org), made up of eighteen firms in the high-tech arena, including five that are also members of the Mayflower group. Another group, founded in about the year 2000, is made up of a dozen firms in the financial services industry and calls itself the MIDAS Group. It has the same purposes of sharing data norms and best practices. These groups reportedly have been less strict than the Mayflower Group in insisting on identically worded survey items for comparison.

The desire for normative data has also led several large survey vendors to develop their own proprietary survey data norms, which they offer to clients. Some data norms are based on the results of their clients, usually but not necessarily a broad set of companies. Others have tried to develop norms from national samples of employees and screened out respondents from small firms or nonrepresentative groups.

Top executives often desire a comparison of their results to norm data from other firms, although this is arguably a distraction

from one's own results. Over time, most firms that actively pursue improvement seem to be guided more by comparison to their own historic results than to outside norm data.

Use of Models: A Conceptual Shift

An extraordinary shift over the past decade is the greater use of models linking employee attitudes and perceptions to an organization's bottom-line results. Of course, survey practitioners have had access to various models for some time. These include Nadler's organizational congruence model, based on open systems theory, which presents an organization as transforming various inputs to outputs (Nadler, 1977). Other models, such as the Burke-Litwin model (Burke & Litwin, 1992), have also been available.

A qualitative difference in models can be seen with the introduction of the Service-Profit-Chain model by Heskett and associates in an influential *Harvard Business Review* article (1994), which was later expanded to a book (Heskett, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 1997). In their view, a case can be made for understanding an organization's success, in profit, market share, and growth, as the outcome of customer behaviors such as purchases, repeat buying, and recommendations. These behaviors in turn are the product of the customers' interactions with a firm's employees.

Finally, the influence of employees on customers is based on a set of factors easily measurable by organizational surveys: employee skills, training, available resources, supervision, recognition and reward systems, and attitudes toward customers. These factors are all links in a chain going from employee beliefs and experiences to their interaction with customers, and then through customers' resultant behaviors to the firm's bottom line.

The importance of this model was furthered by a Sears Roebuck study published in the *Harvard Business Review* a few years later by Rucci and associates (Rucci, Kirn, & Quinn, 1998). Their research showed that improvements in employee attitudes of 5 points improved same-store customer attitudes by 1.3 points in the following quarter. Store revenues grew by 0.5 point in the quarter after that, leading to millions of dollars in profits. This study underlined the importance of measuring outcomes over time if we really want to think about cause and effect. It is not sufficient sim-

ply to correlate employee perceptions and unit performance at the same point in time. The direction of causation and consideration of the time between measures is critical to good research and proper understanding.

This way of thinking was furthered by the work described in Schneider and White (2004) on service quality and the linking research model of Wiley and Brooks (2000). In his writing, Wiley (1996) points out advantages of such models to the survey researcher, explaining that they make it easier to explain to managers the rationale for measuring employee views. The model also serves the researcher as a checklist of what concepts to measure. Survey items that do not measure a concept in the model must be challenged, or the model must be amended.

At the same time, measures of employee perceptions have joined the pantheon of other key issues, like customer satisfaction and financial results, on management's measurement "dashboards." These simultaneous postings have been furthered by the concept of a balanced scorecard, as popularized by Kaplan and Norton (1992), urging management to look at an organization's long-term effectiveness by going beyond financial measures.

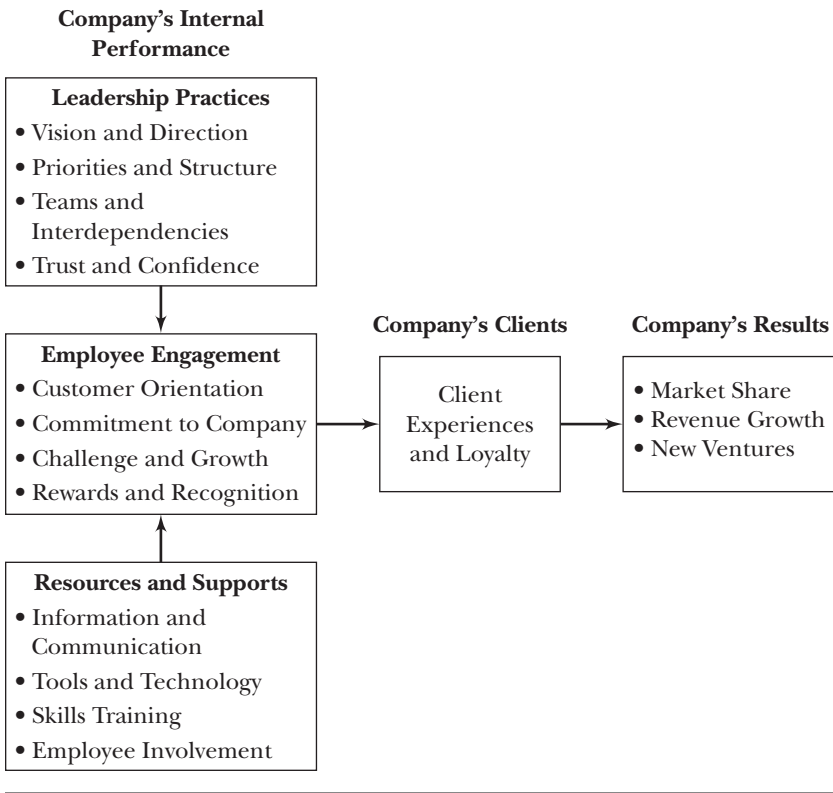
Customized Models

Naturally, our understanding of organizational performance can be aided by systematic exploration and testing of the models that are proposed. Many of the authors noted above have already been doing that. Inspired by such models in the literature, some companies have been working with variants of their own making.

In my own experience, even "homemade" models can be remarkably useful in dealing with a firm's management. While they may not be systematically tested and scientifically validated, such a model can convey a way of thinking about what gets measured and why. As an example, Figure 1.1 shows a model created using concepts that were emerging from the literature a few years ago. It was used in a five-thousand-employee firm that sells information services.

The model proposes that a firm's performance, or results, such as market share, revenue growth, and success in new ventures, depends largely on client behavior, more specifically, clients'

Figure 1.1. The Survey Model



experiences and loyalty. Client behavior is greatly influenced by capable and enthusiastic employees. In this model, the umbrella term *employee engagement* was used to capture the underlying concepts of customer orientation, commitment to the company, feelings of challenge and growth, and a sense of rewards and recognition. (*Engagement* is a term that has been used, more or less similarly, by different writers, and seems quite popular now. As an example, one of the more fashionable works on the topic [Loehr & Schwartz, 2003] uses 108 words trying to define the concept. They convey the idea of an energetic, enthusiastic, focused employee, enjoying and dedicated to doing a good job. This reminds one greatly of what in the past would have been called a highly motivated employee.)

In our homemade model, the employee level of engagement is largely influenced by two major sets of forces, labeled *Leadership Practices* and *Resources and Supports*. Leadership Practices include the four subcategories of Vision and Direction, Priorities and Structure, Teams and Interdependencies, and Trust and Confidence. In the second umbrella term, Resources and Support, we cover the four subcategories of Information and Communication, Tools and Technology, Skills Training, and Employee Involvement.

The concepts of the model formed the basis for selecting items to be included in the survey and were a useful way of explaining why we used those survey items. Although not the basis for a scientific test, it did serve as a guide for testing relationships and was a useful practical tool for explaining results to managers. (The use of factor analysis with the collected survey data, to see how all the items actually hung together, led to some slight restructuring of the survey model.)

Technological Shift: Web Surveys

Over the past decade, we have seen an astonishing change in the number of surveys done using the Web. The great availability of personal computers makes it far easier to collect survey data by using the Internet or an organization's intranet. A review of several studies comparing Web-based studies to paper-and-pencil surveys shows virtually no difference in the response patterns to the two forms of surveys (Kraut, 2001). Respondents are just as favorable or unfavorable, make just about the same number of omissions, and researchers find measurement equivalence. The only difference is that Web surveys get at least 50 percent longer write-in comments. To the Web's credit, these comments are already in a computer-readable form and are much easier to process using text-handling programs.

Speed and Flexibility

One of the most obvious effects of Web-based surveys is the incredible speed with which data are processed and results are made available. Avoiding the need for printing and mailing survey forms and physically processing questionnaires has cut down on much effort

and time. Only a decade ago, taking two or three weeks to process a survey and report the results would be considered fast. Now that time has shrunk to a period of just a few days or even hours.

While a survey researcher may see that as a fearsome expectation by a client, it is great for stimulating action. The data are clearly fresh, and there will have been little change in people or organizational structure. The shorter the time is for processing and reporting, the more the survey data will be seen as relevant and applicable.

Web-based surveys can also be more flexible. Questions can be changed, dropped, or added at the last minute. More important for the purpose of getting data on which to base action, branching can be used. Thus, if a question is answered unfavorably, the survey can branch to items that explore reasons for the negative response. Similarly, different and unique question sets can be introduced for people in selected functions or units. Questions tailored to the needs of different groups allow local rather than general topics to be measured. Such data will more likely be seen as relevant and spark action.

Reporting and Action Plan Management

In addition to collecting the data, Web-based survey systems are used to report data to relevant managers. Designated managers can get their data reports online, often in a choice of formats. Sometimes the managers can choose which comparison data they want, such as a prior year's results or data of higher-level units. The electronic data can be used for printed reports or presentations or converted into PowerPoint slides.

The development of action plans and the management of their execution are also being done online. Online systems are providing uniform formats for creating action plans and automatically reporting them to higher-level management and to HR staff. These plans include dates for completion and facilitate monitoring and follow-up. Such online action planning systems have tremendous potential for putting all managers "on the same page," helping to share good practices across an organization and making it easy for top management to follow action-taking steps.

More Frequent, Less Professional Surveys

Despite the advantages of Web-based surveys, we must recognize they have several dark sides. Ironically, one of these is the apparent ease of asking questions and collecting data. Web-based surveys look easy to do, but are often much more complex than they appear. Talking to survey vendors who offer Web-based surveys can reveal the complexities of the underlying processes. (See Chapter Eight, this volume, for more detail on that issue.) In addition, many do-it-yourself Web programs are available. With intriguing names like SurveyMonkey and Zoomerang, they make Web-based surveys seem easy. As a result, tales abound of poorly qualified people writing bad questionnaires and freely conducting surveys of dubious quality.

The apparent ease of administering surveys has also led to more frequent surveys. Many of these, sometimes called *pulse surveys*, are sample surveys. They can be done quarterly or as often as monthly. Often they are focused on a special topic or two.

Whether pulse surveys lead to action more than do general surveys is an open question. One suspects that when management gets and receives data back quickly on a topic of current interest, they are indeed more likely to act on the information. But when results on a general set of topics come in at frequent intervals, it may simply lull management into a “that’s-nice-to-know” mind frame. Moreover, too frequent surveys may leave managers little time to act between administrations and leave survey staff racing from survey to survey. One already recognized cost of pulse or sample surveys is a reduction in response rates (Youseffnia & Berwald, 2004). It is not clear if this is due to reductions of the publicity and hoopla done for most census surveys or due to the lowered expectations that action will take place with pulse surveys, or to both.

Precoding

The so-called precoding done with Web surveys is both a great boon and a potentially great risk. The term *precoding* refers to using a respondent’s electronic link (or URL, or pass code) to identify that person and tie his or her survey responses to company databases

containing information on age, gender, promotability ratings, and performance appraisals, for example. Precoding does away with the need for asking demographic items and generally increases the accuracy of such data. It also allows wonderful opportunities for doing meaningful research, such as tying individual attitudes to later turnover.

Yet there appears to be a real danger of invading employees' presumed rights of privacy. In fact, precoding is prohibited in most of Europe because of privacy laws. Many employees would be shocked to find out that their responses will be connected to data in their personnel files. Where precoding is done, it is explained only in general terms. Employees are usually told that they are being identified and this is done for "research" purposes, but that they will remain completely anonymous, with the data being safeguarded outside the company by a vendor. So far, I am unaware of this practice leading to any real problems; however, the ethical issues of precoding have yet to be fully explored.

From a practical stance, we might wonder if knowing one is being identified will have bearing on a person's responses. Ample data exist to show that more personal survey methods, such as face-to-face and telephone interviews, lead to more socially desirable responses on sensitive topics (Groves & Associates, 2004). It is reasonable to expect that employee awareness of precoding leads to more socially desirable responses on a close-to-home topic like "rate your manager" than it might on a general topic like "rate your overall satisfaction." Definitive research on this issue remains to be done.

Sophisticated Statistical Methods

Advances in computing have also encouraged some powerful new statistical advances. Many of these are far too technical to deal with here, other than to note their potential. Structural equation modeling and item response theory are among the techniques that are used to try to exploit survey data. They are rather complex and not to be used lightly or without a deep understanding. Moreover, management does not easily comprehend them. Another method, relative weight analysis, is an appealing and helpful method in looking at the drivers of key criteria. (See Chapter Fourteen, this volume, for more on this topic.)

Process That Gets Action

Most survey researchers are familiar with and have had training with many of the practices discussed so far. Survey technology, data processing, and statistical analysis are part of that kit of tools. These are necessary but not sufficient, in my judgment, to produce meaningful action from organizational surveys. Another set of tools is required. In a general sense, these can be described as organizational development tools. These are the concepts and practices by which we understand and are able to move an organization to make the most of its survey processes and results.

Doing a survey well is more complex than it seems. It can be compared to a well-played tennis game, where the winner has to be good at serving, forehand and backhand strokes, and offensive and defensive strategies. Winners have to do many things well to win, but failure may come from doing any one thing badly. The same may be said about surveys, successful and not. Surveys that succeed in their goals are all similar in that they do many things well. Unsuccessful surveys may fail for any one of dozens of reasons. But what are the right things done in the surveys that succeed? My answer comes more from long-time experience and countless discussions with other practitioners than from scientific studies. From these observations and conversations, a few practices stand out.

Begin with the End in Mind

This point is often associated with Covey (1989), who urges us, if we are to be successful, to “start with a clear understanding of your destination” (p. 98). Survey practitioners and management must foresee the end state of the survey. After the survey items are asked, the data collected and analyzed, and the results reported, then what? At that point, what will various people and groups in the organization do differently or better? What is the desired intent of the survey? How will we judge its success? Only when we have the end in mind can we start to guide the survey to achieving that purpose.

A key part of any survey’s success is linking it to the organization’s purpose. It is best if there is a clear and compelling need to do a survey. Both management and survey professionals must be

clear on how the survey can help the business. Sometimes the catalyst is a current issue, such as key losses in staff, or the failure in a client project, or a poor product rollout. At other times, the need is created by organizational changes and restructuring, or by a merger or acquisition. Keeping the survey's purpose in mind helps one greatly to make the right decisions at several points during the survey process.

Purpose: Assessment *and* Change?

Surveys can serve many purposes, ranging from assessment to driving organizational change (Kraut, 1996). Knowing what one is trying to accomplish can make a huge difference in what and how surveys are done. An important basis for getting action after a survey is to be clear from the start on why it is being done. While some surveys try to accomplish several purposes, most tend to have only one or a few. The following typology is one way to think about survey goals:

- *To pinpoint areas of concern.* This is similar to an annual health checkup—a broad attempt to find out how things are going.
- *To observe long-term trends.* This is a follow-up to see if any changes have occurred since the previous survey. This can evolve into a way of life to continually seek organizational improvement.
- *To monitor program impact.* Here there is an attempt to see if attitudes changed in response to organizational changes, for example, in compensation, staffing workload, or training.
- *To gain input to future decisions.* Surveys can be used to make decisions by getting employee preferences on topics like training programs, flextime schedules, computer help systems, and other aspects of organizational life.
- *To add a communication channel.* We see surveys being used, especially in big firms, as a broad, disciplined, and periodic tool to aid in upward communications from employees. The types of questions asked in a survey also send a powerful message downward about management's concerns.

- *To conduct organizational behavior research.* Surveys aid our understanding of factors that have an impact on issues like employee turnover, commitment to good customer service, and achievement of service quality.
- *To drive and measure organizational change.* Surveys provide useful measures of success that can guide changes, such as work/family or quality initiatives, customer satisfaction emphasis, and mergers and acquisitions. Merely asking about certain concepts heightens their visibility and importance. The resulting survey data can assess progress and provide further leverage.

What Decisions Will Be Made?

One should always ask why the survey data are needed. Specifically, what decisions will be made based on the data obtained? Being aware of the potential issues makes it more likely that the right data will be collected. Of course, one should also ask if the survey is the only way, or even the best way, to collect such data. A related issue is to ask if the decision that might be made has been faced before, and if nothing happened before, what will be different now.

As part of the survey process, the practitioner has to build a readiness for management to make critical decisions. Selecting or creating compelling measures can do this. I have found that certain kinds of questions get much more attention than others. Some eye-openers include items like, “I [don’t] have confidence in our top management to lead us,” and, “If I have my way, I’ll leave this company during the next year.”

When the responses to key items are reported, appropriate benchmarks can be influential guides. Outside norm data are sometimes helpful, as in showing that items on pay and opportunity are almost always rated lower than feelings about one’s job or manager. But previous internal data are often more powerful, as are comparisons among units or various employee sets, to show if a group is really high or low. Even rule-of-thumb guidelines are helpful, as when one points out that a result of less than 40 percent favorable on any item is usually disastrous.

Of course, it is helpful to check in advance, even before survey results are reported, what management believes or already knows. Asking executives at the start of a presentation to guess the identity of the high- and low-rated units on a chart is sometimes used to demonstrate to them what new information is coming out of the survey.

Ties to Organizational Goals

It should be clear that the survey purpose must be tied to organizational outcomes, either short term or long term. The survey content and process must be aligned with the organization's strategy and goals. The survey should also support the interests of its stakeholders, whether employees, customers, or stockholders. When a firm is undergoing or facing change, the survey should be tied to some vision of the future.

For example, a chemical company had recently developed a new statement of its vision and values. Soon after, it fielded a new survey asking questions only about its seven newly enunciated values, thereby putting those values into practical, operational terms and also measuring how well employees felt these seven values were being carried out. The values covered included topics like customer satisfaction, safety, and community citizenship, and the data provided useful feedback to management on how its new initiatives were going.

In order for management to take meaningful action, data must be seen as practical and useful. Therefore, the questions asked must be seen as actionable, not abstract. The item wording must be clear, not confusing. The respondents have to represent a large share of the employees who are invited to take part. The analysis and presentation must be crisp and cogent. Obviously a lot of things have to be done well.

One of these is to make sure that issues of interest to management are part of the survey content. The easiest way to accomplish this is simply to ask top management what they want to get out of the survey. What do they want to learn? What data will help them run the business better? If they cannot say, the survey practitioner can offer a menu of choices. Having such conversations with management is guaranteed to develop their interest in the outcomes

and shape the survey content in useful directions. When such conversations do not happen or cannot be arranged, the survey practitioner should recognize the situation as raising a red danger flag.

Plan for the Entire Process

Many people see an organizational survey as an event, taking place at a certain point. It is more accurate and useful to see the survey as a longer-term process, from the early planning to follow-up action. When viewing it as a process, not an event, we recognize several critical steps that the survey practitioner must take to ensure that action will follow.

It may go without saying that action is unlikely to take place without a supportive top management. But even a willing executive team may need instruction and support to make things happen. One of the survey professional's main activities is to educate executives on their role in the survey process. Executives must be prepared to frame the survey as a positive act, not taken out of undue concern but rather as a sign of strength and intent to improve. It has to be portrayed as an earnest step in getting and using feedback. The executive's staffs have to understand that view and communicate it themselves.

The executive must also be prepared to talk up the survey and encourage his or her staff and organization to participate and actively use the data. Survey professionals have to share with top executives the survey timetable. Executives should be asked to sign and send relevant letters, use videotapes to encourage the survey at remote locations, and generally show their support and ownership of the survey. The effective practitioner will need to ghost-write letters for management, provide them with updates on survey activities (such as informing them of pretests and survey launch schedules), keep executives informed on survey participation rates, and ask for time to be set aside for reviews of survey results and action planning.

When the data are being reported, practitioners may also have to help executives work through their emotional reactions to the data. Being able to do some hand-holding to help management accept and deal with the data is an important part of getting action after a survey (Nadler, 1996).

Develop a Commitment to Act

Many of the things suggested so far will build a commitment to act once the data are collected. Good practice always includes tapping issues of importance to the organization and its management. In some cases, forming a steering committee or advisory group will cement such commitment (Kraut, 1992). Members of such groups can represent different organizational units and interests, act as a liaison to different constituencies, anticipate reactions from different parts of the organization, and act as emissaries on behalf of the survey. Steering groups are especially helpful when a survey is being done for the first time, or in a complex organization, or to promote a particular firmwide initiative such as work/family life.

Several other reward activities also seem to work:

- Using incentives to act on the findings plays a powerful role. Recognition for getting good results or making improvements over prior years' results is an effective method. Even a simple "atta-boy" or "atta-girl" letter is useful reinforcement.
- Some firms give high-performing leaders recognition through a chance to talk about their actions in "internal best practices" sharing sessions.
- Financial incentives seem to be used by more and more firms to encourage improvement. To avoid crude gaming of the system by explicit scores, many firms use the results in a softer, indirect way regarding an executive's performance appraisal.

Have a Credible Survey

Simple as it sounds, the survey must seem credible to everyone in the organization. That means that the questions must be seen as clear, actionable, and organized into topic categories. These topics must be relevant to the business purpose. Communications leading up to the survey must paint the survey as an appealing opportunity for participants. An attractive image of the survey is needed to get high participation. The higher the response rates are, the more credible will be the results. Of course, the survey must be convenient and easy to complete, and the timing should not conflict with peak business periods.

The results and reports need to be processed quickly so data are seen as current. Presentations to management should be tied back to the reasons for the survey. The use of models during data feedback often reminds management of why the data are relevant to the firm's success. The analysis and presentation of results to management can be held up as a mirror, to show how key groups in the firm view their bosses. All of these considerations are needed to engage executive audiences and compel them to take meaningful action.

More Conversation, Better Diagnosis

A noticeable trend over the past two decades has been the use of shorter surveys. It is common to see many surveys of only fifty to seventy-five items in length, as opposed to far longer ones in years gone by. (Surveys are also done more frequently and often cover only selected issues.) In many ways, this is a welcome trend and reflects the concern to focus on performance-related issues rather than indulging in large fishing expeditions.

However, survey practitioners often run into managers who complain that the survey findings do not tell them enough, and they want to see more analysis or they lament that more questions were not asked. This complaint sometimes reflects a wrong-headed view of the survey as a device that will tell management all they need to know without having to talk to the people whose thoughts are being surveyed. In fact, perhaps the best view of a survey is that it should be used mainly as a platform for a meaningful dialogue between managers and other staff members. The most valid and valuable philosophy a manager can have about the organizational survey is to see it as a basis on which to have conversations about organizational performance. If managers do not already have such conversations, an organizational survey can jump-start a new and more productive way to interact on an ongoing basis.

SMART Action Plans

Action planning is sometimes rightly faulted for being poor, even when actions appear to be planned. For example, managers with evident problems of communication within their units sometimes

create a simple action plan that says, “Improve communications.” This reminds us of ineffective, if well-meaning, New Year’s Eve resolutions. Fortunately, there are far better methods available to use. Perhaps the best is the so-called SMART approach to action planning (Locke & Latham, 1990). This is an acronym that stands for:

Specific—are identifiable, behavioral, and observable goals

Measurable—have outcome criteria and can be assessed objectively

Aligned—are congruent with the purpose and vision of the organization

Reachable—are realistic and can be attained

Time-Bound—have a clear timetable and deadline for achievement.

Using a SMART approach, our manager might formulate an action plan that meets all the criteria, by saying, “We will improve communications by having a weekly one-hour meeting of all department staff in the conference room on Monday morning, starting next month. The meetings will be run by me, on current topics, with time for questions and answers.”

Good action plans assign accountability. The ownership for acting on different items will depend on the topic. For items under the local manager’s control, such as his or her direct interaction with subordinates, the manager is obviously responsible. For topics like a firm’s benefit plans, accountability may go up to a corporate level. Issues that require cooperation among groups might go to a higher-level manager or to a task force created to work out the various groups’ interactions. Effective survey practitioners will push to have these accountabilities as clear-cut as possible. They will also play a supportive role in data interpretation, feedback of data, and facilitation of problem solving. They will prepare materials to guide managers in interpreting survey data and conducting meetings for feedback and action planning.

Survey professionals will best serve management if they urge them to limit the number of issues to take action on. Many firms find it best to have managers work on just one or two high-priority issues. This is much better than spreading oneself too thin and

being overwhelmed by too many initiatives. I have always believed that managers benefit from a spillover effect—that is, an improvement in one area often spills over into improvements in other areas. Involving employees in planning and taking action can be a stylistic change that pays dividends later.

Emphasis on Action, Not Just Feedback

Over the past decade, there has been a decided shift to focusing on action after a survey, not simply providing feedback of survey results. Church and Oliver (2002) were among the first to point out how these two facets of the survey process, feedback and action, have different impacts on employee views of management responsiveness and employee satisfaction. In a nutshell, action is much more important than feedback. It also has a more positive impact on hard criteria, such as employee turnover, accidents, and missed workdays. (See Chapter Five for more details.)

In previous years, much attention was given to feedback techniques. Hinrichs (1996) provides a useful account of the early efforts of scholars at the University of Michigan to highlight survey feedback as critical. Beginning with Mann (1957), feedback was assumed to be a necessary, and presumably inevitable, precursor to action. Nadler (1977) took a similar stance, but distinguished the cascading “waterfall” model of data feedback, in which top management saw firmwide data first and became a role model for feedback meetings at lower levels, from the “bubble-up” methods, where lower-level units saw their data first and reported up on the actions they would take.

In one early study published in a serious journal, the focus was whether feedback was better when done by HR professionals or different levels of management, and if done in small or large groups (Klein, Kraut, & Wolfson, 1971). I read that piece now in wonder, realizing that “better” meant that employees liked it more or thought that action would be taken, without ever measuring if any action had actually been taken. The early emphasis on feedback methods has distracted many survey practitioners from the harder end result of actually getting action.

The importance of action, compared to feedback, can be seen in Table 1.2, drawn from my own research. In a large division of

one company, employees were asked whether they “believe management will act on problems identified by this survey.” The results were shown for four groups, sorted by whether they had gotten feedback or seen action taken in the previous year’s survey. The proportion who thought management would now take action was highest (81 percent favorable) for those respondents who had gotten feedback *and* seen action from the previous survey. It was lower, as might be expected, for those who did not get feedback or see action (40 percent favorable). But the belief that management would act was the lowest of all for employees who said they had gotten feedback but did *not* see action taken (27 percent favorable)! (Similar relationships were found between the previous year’s feedback and action and the next year’s overall satisfaction levels.)

Table 1.2. Employees’ Beliefs on Whether Management Will Act on Survey Results

		Saw Action Taken in Last Survey?	
		Yes	No
Got Feedback from Last Survey?	Yes	81% (N = 666)	27% (N = 246)
	No	48% (N = 27)	40% (N = 205)

Note: Percentage agreeing: “I believe management in my organization will act on problems identified by this survey.”

Inevitably, surveys raise employees’ expectations that responsible action will be taken. Viteles (1953) wisely quoted a company executive as saying, “An attitude survey is like a hand grenade—once you pull the pin you have to do something with it. Otherwise it may hurt you rather than help you” (p. 394). Of course, management may take actions and fail to credit the survey as stimulus. Actions taken must be effectively communicated to employees, or disappointment will result.

A Caution: Methodology Matters

While much of the discussion has dealt with organization development concepts, survey methodology itself matters in doing meaningful surveys. There are signs that more and more people coming into organizational survey work are not professionally trained in such methods. For example, Johnson and Paul (2005) report that the share of Mayflower Group members with master's or doctoral degrees in industrial/organizational psychology declined from 77 percent in 1992 to 52 percent in 2005. This may increase the risk that errors will be made due to lack of sophistication about surveys, and some of this is already apparent. A few examples will give an appropriate caution.

Without a doubt, question wording is important, and even highly similarly worded items can get vastly different responses. Sudman and Bradburn (1982, p. 137) report an interesting example of seemingly contrary wording giving surprising results. Matched samples were asked to agree or disagree with the following questions:

- “Do you think the United States should allow public speeches against democracy?” Twenty-one percent said yes.
- “Do you think the United States should forbid public speeches against democracy?” Thirty-nine percent said no.

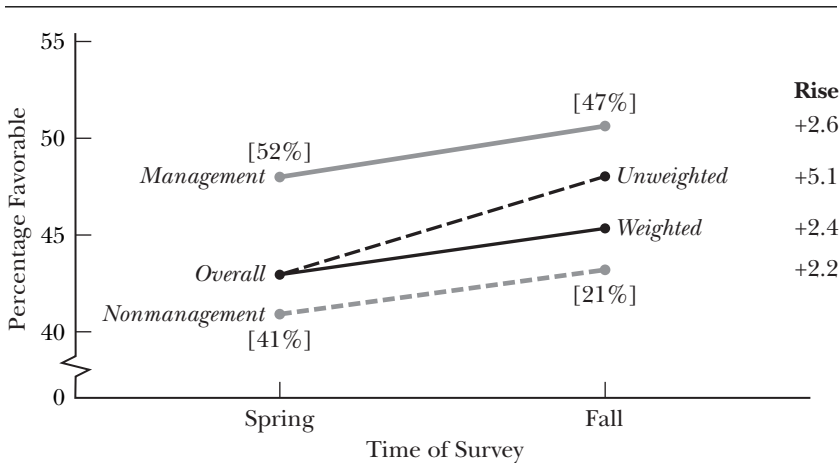
When a firm tries to compare its findings to data from other organizations that ask almost the same question, it does so at its own risk, and with little clue as to whether to expect more or less favorable results.

Even the position of an item in a questionnaire can introduce order effects. Such effects can make comparisons of responses to the identical items over time somewhat chancy. Unexpected effects can come about from the content of intervening items affecting a respondent's answers to a later item. Or the effects can come from survey fatigue in a long questionnaire. One study of two equivalent groups found a question late in the survey could be five or more percentage points less favorable than the same item given early in the survey (Kraut, Wolfson, & Rothenberg, 1975). Making trend

comparisons of items in varying placements across surveys can be hazardous, with mere artifact being the real cause of differences.

The increased use of sampling raises the importance of weighting respondents correctly. If different sampling fractions are used for different groups or if participation rates vary markedly, weighting must be used to avoid incorrect data when different subgroups are combined. (Many conversations lead me to believe weighting is often neglected.) An example from an actual case is shown in Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2. Change in Attitudes for Weighted and Unweighted Responses



Note: Average of twenty-two items. Percentages in parentheses are response rates.

A client firm had asked me to analyze their data more fully. The staff told me that the overall results across two surveys had improved by 5.1 percentage points. But when I broke down the total into the two major groups (management and nonmanagement), they each had improved only by half that amount, a statistical impossibility. It turned out that a labor relations dispute had cut the nonmanagement response rates in half (from 41 percent to 21 percent). By simply adding all the respondents to tally the total, the now smaller number of less favorable nonmanagers had much less

of a pull on the total, and the results showed a false improvement. Other firms that do not properly weight respondents for sampling and participation differences will expose themselves to similar distortions of their true results.

The term *drivers* takes us through another methodological swamp. It is typically used to refer to a cause-and-effect relationship, which would be appropriate. However, if the two variables being related actually occur at the same point in time, it is hard to reason that one causes the other. There we can merely say that the two are correlated. Only if we can believe that one measure occurs before the other, and influences it, can we use the term *driver*. If we can reasonably argue that attitudes toward one's pay or one's manager would predict an employee's intent to quit (and not vice versa), we can then talk about and assess those attitudes as drivers of the intent to quit. (The Sears Roebuck study by Rucci and associates discussed earlier is a good example of how to study drivers.)

Conclusion

Organizational surveys have become more a part of organizational functioning than ever before. In part, this is due to advances in computer technology, which make them easier to do. It is also due to the increased emphasis on performance rather than satisfaction and the recognition that employee perceptions can offer the key to better delivery of products and services and financial success. The increasing use of conceptual models that demonstrate these relationships is encouraged by growing global competition and a growing belief in their usefulness.

Someday we may see most organizations doing surveys on a regular annual basis, just as they now do performance evaluations and budget planning annually. (Special topic surveys will remain an exception.) None of these processes are done because they are fun, but because they are useful tools for enhancing effectiveness. But the frequency of a large organizational survey involves a paradox. Many firms prefer to do them every two years or so because, they say, "surveys are so much work" and it takes time to put actions in place. In fact, regular annual surveys may be relatively less work than biennial surveys, because greater organizational learning takes place. Management becomes more familiar with the ins and outs

of the survey, and the lessons learned can be used while they are fresh in mind. The entire organization's survey maturity can be raised considerably, making each succeeding survey less arduous.

It is heartening to see that the pace of survey feedback and action taking has increased along with speedier Web-enabled surveys. The expectations for meaningful action following organizational surveys also seem higher. Survey practitioners should continue to encourage managers and executives to actively use the survey data from their employees and avoid the dangers of inaction. To be effective, survey practitioners must ensure that both they and management begin with the end in mind, are clear about the purposes and processes of the effective survey, and develop both the commitment and procedures that lead to responsive action taking. A clear understanding of the organizational development concepts, tools, and techniques that lead to action, and skill in applying this knowledge and skills, will ensure that surveys continue to be a meaningful device for organizational effectiveness in the future.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to Angelique Shaydulova and Corinne Donovan for their extremely helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

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