

Making it easy for employees to share their feedback is the first step. Being willing to respond quickly to their input builds commitment.

# If You Give Your Employees a Voice, Do You Listen?

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What do the majority of organizations do to demonstrate to their employees that they have a voice? Most organizations still cling to such traditional communication tools as intranets, telephone hotlines, open-door policies, and employee satisfaction surveys. Whether or not they use these often-ineffective mechanisms, do they ever let their employees know management is listening? Do they provide positive feedback by making and publicizing changes in response to employee input?

The sad truth is that too many organizations think they're doing a good job of giving employees a voice, but they aren't. Almost universally, employees indicate on satisfaction surveys that poor communication is at or near the top of their list of criticisms. Management ponders the data

and responds by creating a task force to study the issue or by bringing in consultants. When the next employee survey is conducted a year or two later, poor communication remains high on the list of complaints.

If that describes what happens in your organization, there is an innovative and proven new solution for improving communication up and down the line. Some refer to it as the electronic suggestion box because in many respects it is the modern-day version of the old-time wooden variety. This updated version is a telephone-centered, outsourced forum designed to capture feedback in real time. Employees can use this forum confidentially and anonymously and their feedback and input can be turned around in a business day or less.

### It's a Matter of Time and Trust

The conventional tools that organizations use to collect feedback tend to be flawed for two reasons. Most significantly, employees simply don't trust them. Despite reassurances that their opinions are valued, employees are exposed constantly to stories about what happens to the bearers of bad news. Well-intentioned individuals, who enter what they thought was an open door, often discover it's a revolving door. Employees also distrust the company's intranet because they know everything placed on such a system can be backed up and easily retrieved.

In the case of structured surveys, by and large employees do trust them; however, they become frustrated by the slow turnaround of data, by the inevitable conferencing, and ultimately the inaction that often follows.

Picture this scenario. A conscientious employee makes the effort to participate in a survey. Six months lapse, and there hasn't been a word about what, if anything, is being done. In many cases, the employee hasn't even been informed about the results of the survey, leaving him or her to wonder if management is afraid to face reality.

Nonetheless, most mid- to large-size corporations—those with roughly 1,000 employees or more—remain positively inclined toward annual or bi-annual surveys. The feeling is that there's a need to quantitatively gauge the tenor of the organization and that it's useful to monitor how the data might be changing over a period of time.

The one element that remains critical, however, is the speed with which a company reacts to the information it receives. Corporations can gain victories quickly by fixing small complaints and building credibility.

In addition, formal survey data allow for industry and best practices comparisons. To become an employer of choice, it's helpful to know how those who are held

out as models are doing on the same performance measurements. However, what traditional survey methods most often fail to do is open the lines of communication between employer and employee. It's one thing to gather data; it's another thing to interpret and act upon the data.



The number one reason people leave an organization isn't money or benefits. It's because they don't feel they know where the company is headed, or they feel management doesn't care about them. By using an externally administered communication system, a corporation can quickly indicate that employees' opinions are valued.

### Front-Line Communication

What an outsourced communication system can do is provide a communication channel that is appealing to employees and management. Such a system is effective in breaking down the inhibitions that employees have about using traditional internal mechanisms because it is constructed in such a way that no one inside the organization will hear their voices, be able to identify an e-mail address or phone number, or recognize handwriting. The elimination

of these anxieties ultimately results in more timely and candid feedback.

Suddenly, a supervisor who isn't proactive in responding to questions and concerns can be bypassed. As a result, the manager who values his or her job is likely to become more conscientious about seeking input on a personal level.

Even large survey companies such as The Gallup Organization are recognizing the value of supplementing employee survey data provided over the Internet with voice responses. Larry Emond, Gallup's chief marketing director, says, "It's become apparent during the last few years of full employment that talented people leave an organization not for more money or better benefits but because of frustration with management."

"In today's tight labor markets, companies compete to find and keep the best employees, using pay, benefits, promotions, and training, but these well-intentioned efforts miss the mark. The front-line manager is the key to attracting and retaining talented employees. No matter how generous its pay or renowned its training, the company that lacks great front-line managers will bleed talent."

According to Emond, Gallup now has an interactive voice response system in which employees can complete surveys by telephone from anywhere in the world, using a keypad to enter responses, in just two to three minutes.

A drawback of paper-based surveys is they tend to be macro in focus. By adding the convenience and comfort of phone-based feedback, the scope of the survey can be dramatically expanded. The micro issues that get reported are frequently ones that can quickly and inexpensively be addressed. These messages include such comments as, "The office is too hot." "We can't get timely response from the computer help desk." "An out-dated policy is interfering with getting a job done in a timely manner." or "The turnaround time is too long for expense reports."

### Easy to Administer and Cost-Effective

To send a message to management via an externally based communication system, all an employee needs do is dial an easy-to-remember, toll-free number and record insights, suggestions, questions, or concerns.

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The one element that remains critical, however, is the speed with which a company reacts to the information it receives. Corporations can gain victories quickly by fixing small complaints and building credibility. Then, employees will start buying into the bigger picture because they see the corporation cares about their opinions. In other words, if an organization solicits input from employees, their responses should be heard and responsive actions made quickly. It's not only giving employees a voice that's important, but also assuring them feedback begets feedback.

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