A Dozen Deadly Sins of Conducting Employee Surveys

By Leigh Branham

(Adapted from a guest column that appeared originally in THE KANSAS CITY STAR.)

If you work long enough for one organization or another, eventually you have a story to tell about an employee survey that went wrong.

Still, 70 percent of all employers conduct surveys. Why? The most compelling reason is that if employers hope to engage and retain good workers, they need to know what those workers are thinking and what they want from their "employer of choice."

If your organization conducts employee surveys, or plans to do so in the future, consider the following checklist of common survey mistakes:

1. **Surveying too small a sample.** The leaders of one company actually handpicked a small group of employees to survey because they thought they would provide more positive feedback. If you want the whole truth, this is not the way to get it.

2. Failure to get employee input and buy-in. Employees are more likely to trust survey results when the organization asks them to help build the survey. A focus group of representative employees usually serves the purpose.

3. Focusing more on external benchmarking than on internal progress. Many senior leaders want to survey their employees just to see "how we stack up" against other employers. The problem is, too many companies take comfort in learning they are "about average," instead of striving to achieve excellent results. Instead of comparing their results with external benchmarks or norms, most companies would be far better off establishing an internal baseline of survey results, working continuously to improve, and resurveying on a regular basis.

4. Surveying without score-carding. Surveys are only one measure of progress in becoming an employer of choice. If you are serious about tracking improvements, you will also monitor hard measures, such as first-year voluntary turnover, absenteeism, quit rate, and dozens of other "dashboard" indicators.

5. Poor survey design. Common mistakes include having too many questions, asking about two different things in the same question, and not providing a "neutral" response option.

6. Thinking cheaper is better. Low-cost survey providers often lack technical expertise and fail to provide communication and follow-up assistance.

7. Surveys shouldn't "just show up." Let employees know they are coming and what the organization hopes to do with the findings.

8. Not linking questions and results to business drivers. Many organizations focus only on the least favorable results, regardless of their relevance to business drivers. Others fail to customize the survey to include questions that could affect key business decisions.

9. Failure to maintain confidentiality. It only takes one incident to lose credibility. Without confidence that responses are anonymous, your future survey efforts will be doomed.

10. Lack of commitment to take action. When companies survey employees, then fail to follow through, employees grow cynical. If senior leaders don't intend to act on survey findings, they shouldn't survey at all.

11. Delaying action. Because changes happen so fast, delaying action may lead to the loss of momentum and off-target remedies. Remember, each survey is like a snapshot of employee attitudes, and the "shelf life" of survey findings is short.

12. Lack of commitment to regular surveying. To gain maximum value from surveying, consider conducting a comprehensive yearly survey along with quarterly "pulse surveys" to track incremental progress.

Don't let the fear of making these mistakes stop you. Not surveying your employees at all could be just as bad a mistake as any of these deadly dozen.

<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<<>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>

***Leigh Branham is CEO and Founder of Keeping the People, Inc.**, the author of three influential business books, and a prominent business educator who travels and speaks internationally. Through presentations, training workshops, employee engagement surveying, and exit interviewing, Leigh helps employers achieve better business outcomes by increasing employee engagement and building healthier and more attractive workplace cultures.*

E-mail Leigh Branham at LB@keepingthepeople.com or visit www.keepingthepeople.com.