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Focus groups can provide a precise “hit list” of issues that need addressing

HOW FOCUS GROUPS CAN DELIVER WHAT SURVEYS CAN'T

Surveys may be the favorite method of measuring engagement, but focus groups can be an equally powerful tool for identifying and fixing barriers to employee commitment. Angela Sinickas describes how at one company, focus groups revealed many highly actionable, serious items that wouldn't have come across in a survey.

Many companies have used statistical analysis of engagement survey results to identify which company programs, policies or initiatives should be changed in order to increase retention and productivity. However, the results are only as good as the questions on the survey. If a potential problem area isn't represented by a survey question, data analysis can't possibly identify it as an action item.

Surgically precise focus groups

Well designed focus groups can provide an even more precise “hit list” of things to change, the type of deeply ingrained, day-to-day frustrations that eventually grind employees down. And corrective actions can be taken much faster.

One of my clients recently commissioned focus groups because corporate senior management observed an engagement problem first-hand at a January strategy kick-off meeting in one of their locations – over half the managers had slipped away before the meeting was finished.

Here's a sample of some of the highly actionable items that came up in those focus groups that would have been captured on a survey rather generically as work/life balance issues, not being respected by managers, and dissatisfaction with the physical work environment.

Threats of job loss

Employees and supervisors who made suggestions for changes, or who resisted doing things they believed to be unethical, were being threatened with job loss. One first-line supervisor's comment was chilling: “The daily stress level is worse than when I was in Iraq.”

Working on vacation

First-level supervisors were expected to keep doing payroll reports while they were on vacation. Holiday vacations in one department were cancelled at 5 pm on the Friday of Labor Day weekend. Mid-level IT managers were expected to participate in regularly scheduled weekend conference calls. Compensatory time off was not given to people who legally were entitled to it.

Poor general maintenance

Physical facilities weren't being maintained, including many broken toilets: “One of our guys had to call the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), before the company finally got the toilet fixed.”

Cost saving over quality

Production equipment was falling apart

and shoddy replacement parts were being used as a cost-saving measure. “Those parts may be cheap, but only one out of three actually works, so it's not saving any money.”

Lack of focus on big picture

A successful initiative for greater accountability was leading to less cooperation between departments to resolve customer problems, and had directors spending more time on micromanaging people three levels below them than focusing on the big picture.

Taking visible action

Two days after the last focus group, we gave the company president a 16-page document highlighting the findings that had the most significant potential impact on the bottom line, by department and job level. The focus groups had identified hundreds of highly specific action items that could easily and visibly be acted on, and often at no significant cost.

After we presented the final report to the entire leadership team, the president asked his direct reports to describe the actions they had already taken to address items on the “quick-fix” list. Each had jumped whole-heartedly into fixing the problems.

Just one example was the VP of operations, who had visited every field office to flush every toilet. He was appalled at how bad some of the sites were, even recommending that one office actually be replaced because it was beyond repair.

Seeing management take the focus groups results so seriously, and so quickly, got employees' attention. Like all other human relationships, people are far more likely to give when they feel that they'll receive something valuable as well.

The next steps include a short survey this Autumn to measure to what extent employees have seen improvements in specific problems identified in the focus groups, and more focus groups early next year to see if the list of problems has shortened. And, of course, we'll be looking for improvements in related questions when the companywide engagement survey is repeated.



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