

# LINKING COMMUNICATION TO ENGAGEMENT

Communicators who stay on the sidelines of their organizations' employee engagement research may be missing an opportunity to connect their work with ideal bottom-line outcomes.

Angela Sinickas' *Research, Measurement, Evaluation* column in SCM has won an award for Excellence in the IABC Gold Quill Awards 2005. This is the third time the column has been recognized in the Gold Quill Awards.

What differentiates an engagement survey from an attitude survey is that it asks "outcome" questions about ideal employee behaviors, which could be achieved more easily with "engaged" employees. Then other "satisfaction" factors on the survey are analyzed to identify which ones best predict the desired behavioral outcomes. A typical desirable behavior would be remaining with the organization. Other outcomes may be more attitudinal, such as feeling committed to helping the organization succeed.

## The impact of communication

The easiest and least expensive way to see the difference communication makes in employees' engagement levels is to use the outcome questions on an engagement survey as a demographic criterion for all the other questions, just as you would for variations by business unit or job level.

For example, let's say your outcome question is: "If it were up to you, would you want to be working here two years from now?" You would aggregate those who answered either "definitely yes" or "probably yes" as your net favorable subgroup, and those who answered "definitely no" or "probably no" as your net unfavorable subgroup. For this analysis, you would ignore those who had no opinion or were unsure.

Next, you would look at how

these two subgroups answered all the other questions on the survey and find which items had the biggest difference in how the favorable group answered versus the unfavorable group. This would indicate which factors about working at the organization are perceived most differently by your engaged employees.

## Regression analysis

If you have more time and money, you can conduct a regression analysis of your data. This is a process that does the same thing described above, but to a higher degree of statistical certainty, by looking at individuals' responses rather than subgroups' responses.

Regression will identify how much weight various groups of questions (like communication) have in predicting an outcome question. Then it will show the exact level of correlation every other survey question has with the outcome question. A one-to-one correlation (1.0) would mean that each individual reporting a highly positive score on the outcome question also rated that particular other question highly. Typically, any item rated with at least a 0.6 correlation is considered a strong correlation.

Many companies conducting regression analysis to find the drivers of desired behavioral outcomes – like retention and productivity – have found that the single largest driver is the strength of the communication link between employees and supervisors. That puts communicators in a critical role to help drive the bottom line, which is reduced by turnover and other undesirable behaviors.

## Action steps for communicators


Unfortunately, we can't prove the role communication plays in

engagement if a survey instrument doesn't include enough – or the right kinds of – questions about communication. Communicators have two options. Option one is to convince HR to include some of the communication questions listed below in broad HR surveys, so they can be examined for their impact on engagement outcomes:

- Extent to which supervisors display various communication behaviors (keeping employees informed of news that affects them, explaining how their jobs contribute to reaching goals, listening, providing performance feedback, running effective meetings, etc.).
- Extent to which senior management displays somewhat different communication behaviors appropriate to the amount of contact they have with employees (communicating the company direction, explaining reasons behind decisions, being credible, etc.).
- How well informed employees feel on key topics, such as goals or financial results.

Option two is to include some outcome questions on your own communication surveys so you can conduct your own correlations. The types of outcome topics to consider:

- Commitment to remaining at the company.
- Being proud to work at the company.
- Being committed to helping make the company successful.
- Being as productive as possible.
- Being committed to product quality or customer satisfaction.

Communicators can't afford to sit on the sidelines of the engagement discussion. There's too much to be gained from joining the game. 



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