
How useful is the Climate survey?

A comment by Brian Clarke¹

Climate and various staff surveys are familiar tools. Some are in-house and some are commercially available at significant cost; annual repeat surveys add to the cost of both types.

Perhaps the drive to be 'benchmarked' may veil our eyes to the value of the tool, as organisations fail to ask some key questions:

- Why is climate important?
- What is the climate survey measuring?
- What value do we get from the survey data?

Why is climate important?

The climate in any component team, department or organisation as a whole attempts to measure "What's it like to work here?". Anecdotal information suggests that climate is important in two directions:

- *Output* - a positive climate impacts positively on the performance and productivity of teams. That is, if people enjoy their workplace, they are more likely to be productive.
- *Input* - climate is created by leadership, so is an indicator of leadership effectiveness.

So if climate, by any measure, is assessed as less than ideal, productivity is likely to be retarded as people are preoccupied by the sources of their discontent. At the same time, it would seem that the leaders in that situation have much to learn about how to lead.

What is the climate survey measuring?

It is useful to consider the traps in any survey - the Eight Hallmarks on which Paul Whitelaw commented in MLQ's "360 Feedback", November 2001, are a good guide.

Many internal staff surveys viewed by this author in a consulting role suffer the biases of non-Replicability. For example, recent experience may unduly influence ratings on statements such as "I get no recognition for the work I do well". This provides one sound argument for repeat surveys.

Also, commercial surveys do not always pursue Objectivity and Precision. One well-known brand reports current (what it is now) and ideal (what I'd like it to be) ratings in percentiles. For example, your organisation may have average ratings, out of 100, of 42 for say, "Current Recognition", and 75 for "Ideal Recognition" across all respondents. This seems to indicate a low level of satisfaction with recognition currently (42%), compared to the perceived ideal level (75%).

What it actually is reporting is the percentile rank of your organisation compared with all other organisations being surveyed – only 42% of surveyed organisations have a lower score than does yours on “Current Recognition”, and 75% have a lower “Ideal Recognition” rating. The implication is that there is a large gap to be closed, possibly with the help of consulting support.

But in the absence of raw score means and standard deviations, don’t jump to conclusions. Suppose that there were 1,000 organisations in the comparative results used to generate the percentile rank. Suppose also that all organisations rated “Current Recognition” between 3 and 4 on a 4-point scale, but that of these, 419 means were less than your organisation’s, and 580 were more. Percentiles are rank orders, so your organisation would end up at the 42% percentile rank – a result that seems to need urgent corrective action. But would you reach the same conclusion if you saw the score data, and considered being above 3 on a 4-point scale to be OK anyway?

Always ask for the score data. Many organisations have seen percentile reports and been alarmed into action, only to have their scores *decline* the following year – because while they may have improved their scores, if every other organisation improves a little more, our organisation actually slips a little on percentile rank. It can be relatively easy to improve a poor mean score, but less easy to improve rank order – and how relevant is such a benchmark anyway? Who are these other organisations?

What value do we get from the survey data?

Beware of the “Gee Whiz” survey, as in “Gee whiz, is that where we are?”. This may seem like a result, but unless it pinpoints useful action, the survey will remain the end in itself. The value this delivers may be minimal, or even detrimental.

It can be challenging to work out the action to take from a staff or climate survey. But unless the survey does lead to obvious action, staff may be de-motivated (and climate slip further) as their aroused expectations of change are come to nothing.

ODQ offers solutions to all of these issues. It’s origins in leadership research and its action-plan outcomes may be an ideal alternative for organisations seeking to address staff dissatisfaction, or focus on ways to improve climate at all levels.

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