

Assessing Employee Satisfaction – One Person at a Time

An Interpersonal Approach to Winning the Talent War

By Howard Seidel

INTRODUCTION: THE IMPORTANCE OF TALENT

If the quality of an organization is reflective of the quality of its people, it follows that organizations compete for customers and employees. Currently, there is renewed interest in talent acquisition and retention, also known as the “talent war.” At the core of the issue is the question: How do I know what employees want, especially the ones I want to attract and retain?

While many organizations spend a lot of energy answering that question, many are missing an important component of a comprehensive strategy for getting it right. What this article will describe is an “interpersonal,” or one-on-one, approach to learning what attracts top employees and how to keep them.

FIGURING OUT WHAT EMPLOYEES WANT: SPOTTING TRENDS

One mechanism for identifying what employees want is in spotting and identifying relevant trends. These are studies or observations that typically take place outside an organization, done by researchers or journalists examining the motivational patterns of certain like classes of people. For example, some articles separate people based on their



generation (e.g. “Gen Xers,” “Gen Yers,” “Baby Boomers”) and generalize as to the personal needs and motivations of each of these classes of people. Spotting trends can be helpful in forming broad strategies for one’s workforce based on its demographics.

Trends, however, change over time and there is usually a lag between when a trend has changed and when that change is recognized. HR people who want to stay ahead of the curve need to supplement the tracking of trends with more current and specific data, which refer to their own organizational populations. Moreover, the kinds of trends that are analyzed depend on the interests of the researchers exploring them—unless a study is commissioned

specifically by your own organization, it may not address the central questions you want to know about your company.

But the bigger issue with the “trend spotting” approach is the problem with any generalizing principle—what is true for the group as a whole may not be true for selected individuals or sub classes within that group. Do 49-year-old men want the same things as 49-year-old women? Do 49-year-old senior executives want the same things as 49-year-old middle managers? Does Jack, who is 49 and a father of three, want the same thing as Andy, who is 49 with no children? While some research studies analyze subclasses more comprehensively than others do, it is still precarious to assume a given trend really

applies to every person within a given demographic category.

INTERNAL SURVEYS

The most systematic way institutions generally look to understand employee satisfaction and dissatisfaction is through employee surveys. Like external studies, surveys can shed light on organization trends with the added advantage that they can be tailored to an institution's specific needs.

Whether employees number 15 or 15,000, organizations can employ surveys to uncover expansively organizational views in a relatively efficient manner. Offering quantitative results, employers can quickly see where numbers for employee satisfaction fall on a scale and how that compares with where they were in the past and where they want to be. The results then can be transferred into changes either directly, or through additional work, which may fall out of a survey. For example, a finding that conveys employee dissatisfaction with current organizational diversity programs can be followed up through committees or more in-depth focus groups to try to create solutions for the perceived problems.

Surveys are also generally anonymous, thereby optimizing the chances that employees will offer their opinions freely and honestly.

But, while organizational surveys are tremendous tools, they are not without their limitations. One of the restrictions is with the interpretation of the results. Amy and Scott may each give their company an average rating on work/life balance, but mean different things by it. Amy wants less travel; Scott wants more flexibility in his schedule. Sophisticated survey construction can improve on such gaps—perhaps flexibility and travel are broken out in the survey—but the survey constructor would need to determine exactly what he or she is looking for before the survey is administered. Even then it is hard to eliminate gaps entirely, due to the elusiveness of a word's meaning in the absence of a specific context with which to understand it.

The biggest limitation on surveys emanates from the very confidentiality they are intended to provide. Surveys

are meant to quickly gather generalized information on company attitudes. But the veil of secrecy that protects Amy and Scott also puts limitations on ability to address each person's specific concern. Amy wants to reduce her travel considerably; Scott wants to be able to leave Monday mornings rather than Sunday nights. But, paradoxically, the same mechanism that protects their anonymity, makes it more difficult for managers and HR professionals to understand the unique concerns of any individual employee.

ASSESSING SATISFACTION ONE EMPLOYEE AT A TIME

So, if we want to know how satisfied our employees are, why don't we ask them individually?

One person who clearly believes we should is Michael Armano, who heads Human Resources for Palladium, a consulting organization in Lincoln, Mass. Armano has held senior HR roles for some of the world's best-known companies, including IBM, Boston Consulting Group and Fidelity Investments, in addition consulting to other organizations on HR issues. Having served in industries where the battle for talent is fierce, Armano has developed a keen interest in what organizations need to do to retain their top talent. Recognizing early in his career that a one-size-fits-all solution to retention didn't work, he subscribes to the theory that a one-to-one approach to assessing employee satisfaction needs to be an important component of an organization's strategy for keeping its best people. "We were having a major problem with retention, trying to make changes based on what we believed our people collectively wanted. But, it turned

out they each wanted different things... we only learned of the specifics when we started having individual sit-downs with each person."

Armano breaks down the process of creating a retention-friendly program into several components. First he works with line managers and staff to create an employee value proposition. For him, that proposition is the heart of the process of retaining employees because it is the articulation from the company of what it intends to offer employees in exchange for their work. A well-constructed value proposition is expansive and covers a variety of employee-related topics (e.g. money, nature of work, professional growth, lifestyle, etc...). Not only is the value proposition a help in retention, it also represents a promise made to prospective talent on what they can expect from the organization.

A next step is to engage people in one-on-one conversations about their satisfaction with the organization. While, optimally, this should be done by all managers in an organization, Armano offers HR support to managers in doing this, especially when first trying to embed the practice into an organization. Armano likes to ask the highest-performing people in an organization, "What's not working for you?" By asking the question intentionally in the negative, Armano invites people to honestly discuss the things that concern them. His intention is for managers or HR to directly signal to employees that they are genuinely interested in their feedback and not just engaging in perfunctory dialogue. Nothing is off the table in these discussions, nor does Armano necessarily make promises that an area of concern can be fixed.

Armano puts concerns in three categories – quick fixes, impossible fixes and everything in between. The quick fixes are those things that can easily be worked out between an employee and a manager. He cites an example of an employee who needed to leave work a little early every Thursday to pick up her daughter, but who had been feeling like she shouldn't bring up the issue. The impossible fixes are the things that are just not realistic in the context of that organization (e.g. a consultant



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who no longer wants to travel). All in-between issues go to focus groups that Armano sets up to try to figure out how to address a given employee's concern in a way that works for the organization and the individual. In many cases, focus groups were able to see patterns of like concerns among employees that ended up resulting in policy changes within the organization to systematically address that class of concerns.

Making these changes isn't easy, especially creating a culture where managers have these kinds of conversations with their employees on a regular basis. Says Armano, "They don't always want to take the time required to do this effectively, and organizations don't generally provide the incentives for managers to make it a priority." Additionally, while, for some managers, asking employees what's not going well smacks of common sense, many managers neither have the skill, demeanor nor interest to make that a regular part of their interactions with people. Consequently, organizations that adopt this approach need to build it within its managerial culture, a commitment to the training and development of its managers in a way consistent with the approach.

CONCLUSION: SO, IS ALL THIS EFFORT WORTH IT?

Armano's reputation is not just that of an HR guy concerned about people, but as a hard-nosed businessman who has partnered with the executive management team at most of the places he has worked. He is convinced of the bottom-line benefit to organizations that apply this tact, emphasizing the measurable results that come from a dialogue with top people. "When you set up the right metrics, the organization is really able to see the differences in retention...we clearly saw huge differences between the divisions that did and did not take this approach." Moreover, even when you cannot meet an employee's needs to save the person from leaving, Armano notes that the dialogue often gives managers and HR enough time to plan for the eventuality of the employee leaving. Moreover, in terms of acquiring the best talent,

what better way to impress prospective employees than to stress to them through word and, potentially, reputation, that yours is a culture committed to an ongoing conversation about their future needs and goals.

Clearly, spotting trends and internal surveys can be valuable tools for retention as well, but it takes more. It takes a culture committed to learning through one-on-one dialogues with employees as to what is and isn't working for them in the organization. Even apart from

issues of retention, the development of better dialogues between managers and employees represent an opportunity for enhanced overall organizational learning, reducing what Chris Argyris of the Harvard Business School has called organizational—"undiscussables"—taboo topics that often underlie intractable institutional problems. ■

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