

Employee Feedback: If Not You're Not Asking For It...You're Asking For It

By David Lee

Reprinted from Employment Times, April 30, 2007

Do you know what you're doing right, when it comes to your – and your company's – ability to create a high morale, high performance workplace? Do you know what you're doing wrong?

Have you asked lately?

Just recently, the importance of getting feedback from employees was once again impressed upon. I was interviewing a group of engineers who represent the kind of employee a client wants to attract and retain.

In our interviews, I found myself continually impressed with the insights these individuals shared about what matters to them, about what their bosses do that make them want to stay, and what the company could do to make it even harder to leave (and no... they didn't say "Pay me a lot more.")

An Information Goldmine

They – just like your employees – possess a goldmine of information about what you can do to bring out the best in them and what you can do to attract and retain talent.

But, you gotta' ask!

It's just like in customer service. Companies known for great service got that way in part through engaging their customers in an ongoing conversation about what they're doing well and how they can improve. Great employers do the same.

Never Mind the Information You Get...Just Doing This Makes a Difference (If...)

Although asking for feedback and input is the only way you'll truly find out whether you're delivering a work experience that optimizes employee performance and engagement, there's another reason for doing so.

Just the fact that you're asking for the input on how you can be an even better place to work sends a powerful message. It says:

"We care about you and therefore we care about how we affect you" and "You're important enough to us to want to make this a good place to work."

If you think that's not important, remember Gallup's landmark research on the drivers of organizational success. Two of the twelve most powerful drivers were:

- 1) My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person.
- 2) At work, my opinions seem to count.

In his book "The One Thing You Need to Know: ... About Great Managing, Great Leading, and Sustained Individual Success", Marcus Buckingham, who co-lead the Gallup project, wryly notes that he wishes he didn't have to report that "feeling cared for" was such a powerful driver:

I'd like to replace this (managerial) skill with one that is more hard-edged, more tangible, but there's no getting around the

data. A multiple of research studies confirm that employees are more productive when they feel that someone at work cares about them.

He goes on to discuss why he is "forced" to admit this:

A multitude of research studies confirm that employees are more productive when they feel that someone at work cares about them. Employee who feel cared about are less likely to miss work, less likely to have accidents, less likely to file workers compensation claims, less likely to steal, less likely to quit, more likely to recommend the company to friends and family.

Thus, sincerely caring about what your employees have to say has a huge bottom line impact.

Now, for the IF... Asking for input communicates you care IF... you do it right and IF you do something with the input. Chances are good this has not been the case in the past.

You Might Have Some Explaining to Do

If you've asked employees to fill out a survey in the past and the results ended up in the big Corporate Employee Survey Black Hole where most go, never to be heard from again... and IF their feedback resulted in zero change...

.... You've got some explaining to do.

You will need to acknowledge that you – or your company – blew it.

You'll need to tell them what you will do differently this time. Acknowledge that you will need to demonstrate through action that this time is different.

Some Commonsense guidelines to make this all work...

Now the following suggestions may sound like common sense, but I can't tell you how many times I've heard employees talk about these basics not happening. Here they are:

1. **Set clear expectations.** Let employees know ahead of time that not every recommendation will be feasible. I always encourage managers to be clear when it's a "majority rules" situation or simple a "fact finding mission". I use the customer survey analogy. No company implements every idea every customer has, but they do want to hear from their customers so they can make intelligent decisions.
2. **Ask for specifics.** If someone says "I don't think we're being treated like adults, here" ask them what they mean; ask them for examples. Abstract terms can mean any number of things to different people. Because they can mean anything, they mean nothing – unless you add concrete examples.
3. **Don't overreact to one-off comments.** If one person makes a comment or says something needs to change, it doesn't mean you should then do it. Feedback and suggestions are always a comment both about the target of the feedback and the sender. So, just because one person says that they feel like "people here aren't treated like adults" doesn't make it a fact. That's why you need to get specifics and you need to consider the source.
4. **If it's a reoccurring theme that you disagree with, watch out.** A more likely risk to watch out for is dismissing feedback themes you don't agree with. This is especially true if you have a strong personality and strong opinions. If you have multiple sources saying the same thing, it's time to pay attention.

Don't be like the senior management team who disagreed with the employee survey results they got and threw out the whole thing. (Yes, that really happened). As the saying goes "If someone calls you a horse, you can assume that person is deranged. If two people call you a horse, you might want to pay attention. If three people call you a horse,...it's time to buy a saddle."

5. **Give clear time frames for when you will be reviewing the input and reporting findings.** Keep to those. If you get behind, still report back when you said you would and let them know your current status and an updated timeline.
6. **Report back.** Tell you employees what the survey revealed, what you or the company will be doing, what suggestions weren't implemented and why. For those you still aren't sure about ("What ARE they talking about?") ask for more clarification.
7. **Keep your mind open.** If you aren't convinced that certain feedback is accurate or recommended changes are a good idea, try to keep an open mind. This is especially important for those items that employees feel strongly about. Let your employees know that you "get it" that these issues are important to them and that you're willing to reconsider if they can provide a more compelling case.
8. **Stay tuned.** After some months have passed, revisit both the things that you addressed and those you didn't. Have the changes worked? How about

those things you didn't act on... would it be a good idea to do so now?

In Conclusion

Much of what you need to know to increase employee engagement and become more of a talent magnet resides in your workers. So ask.

Note: To reprint this in an association or corporate newsletter, please contact the author first at:

David@HumanNatureAtWork.com

About the Author: David Lee is the founder of HumanNature@Work. He is an internationally recognized authority on organizational and managerial practices that optimize employee performance, morale, and engagement. Mr. Lee is the author of *Managing Employee Stress and Safety*, as well as several dozen articles on organizational and individual performance that have been published in a number of trade journals in North America, Europe, India, Australia, and Asia. For information on bringing his services to your organization, email David@HumanNatureAtWork.com

Comments About David Lee's Work:

"David Lee helped us to build the necessary people skills on our management team...He empowered us to move our organization from a bureaucratic governmental agency to a progressive, customer-focused, financial institution."

Eric Henry, Executive Director, New Hampshire Retirement System, NH

"I found your presentation on personality styles very enlightening. My team has referred to the content enthusiastically several times since we met. We're using it to understand and communicate with each other more effectively. Nicely done!"

Daniel J. Flaherty, President, Olympia Hotel Management. ME

"Having seen a lot of speakers, I can't tell you just how impressed I was by David. I even waited in line to talk with him... I learned a great deal and laughed my butt off in the process... When we have someone who is so genuine and so well prepared, we owe it to each other to spread the word.... I take it very seriously when I recommend someone else's work and... he's great!"

Naomi Judd

"I just wanted to thank you again for a magnificent presentation. I have been to many seminars, and this far exceeded any past experience. I walked away feeling energized, enthusiastic and empowered. I can hardly wait to apply the principles that we discussed today at work and beyond."

Sybil L. Morin, Director of Administration, LifeShare, Inc., NH

"Thank you for doing such an outstanding job keynoting our conference. As you could tell by the response, participants loved both the content and the delivery of your presentation."

Dr. Ian Gawler, Director, The Gawler Foundation, Victoria, Australia

"Listening to David Lee was a wake up call! The younger generation of workers who are entering our workforce today are unlike any other that we have seen before. Employers and supervisors everywhere should be prepared for this distinctively different group of employees. What looks different from a supervisor's perspective?: Just about every aspect of providing feedback and support. I loved this class...very interesting and informative!"

Sheryl Jacobs, LL Bean, ME

David, I wanted to thank you for being part our show in Las Vegas. The feedback I have received about your sessions was fantastic!!!!!! Three cheers to you.

Julie McNeney, COO, International Council on Active Aging, Vancouver, BC

"I learned more in this seminar than in four others I took from (a well known national seminar company)."

Jennifer Sgroi, Stonyfield Farm Yogurt, NH

I want to say a big thank you for the wonderful job you did in your presentations during our Quality Leadership Conference. You are a talented individual; thank you for sharing your gifts with Fairview. You have touched our soul.

Tom Hanson, Fairview Healthcare System, MN

"David's presentation style is unparalleled! The substantive and timely content of his subject materials is immediately adaptable to the workplace making his seminars an invaluable aid to an employer seeking to be an "Employer of Choice."

Lynn M. Lombard, VP, MMG Insurance Company, ME