

## CEP Magazine – September 2019

### Employee surveys on sensitive topics

---

Gregory Mitchell, PhD, JD

**Gregory Mitchell** ([greg.mitchell@law.virginia.edu](mailto:greg.mitchell@law.virginia.edu)) is the Joseph Weintraub–Bank of America Distinguished Professor of Law at University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Virginia, USA.

Employee surveys play an important role in organizational compliance efforts. A good employee survey sheds light on the organization's ethical climate and identifies areas where employees may not understand their ethical or legal obligations. But how reliable is the information generated by employee surveys, especially when the survey asks about sensitive topics such as whether misconduct has been observed or whether senior management acts in ways contrary to the code of conduct?

The chief compliance officer faces the same dilemma faced by the public health researcher studying illegal drug use or the psychologist studying risky behaviors among teens: how to promote honesty by survey respondents when the answers they give could be embarrassing or perhaps even incriminating. Fortunately, given many years of experience asking questions on sensitive topics, survey researchers have developed methods for dealing with this dilemma. Before administering your next employee survey, consider the following recommendations aimed at increasing the integrity of the survey data.

### Survey administration

Three simple steps can produce higher rates of sincere responding on your next employee survey: administer the survey via the internet, allow responses to be given over a several-day window, and permit anonymous responses. Allowing employees to complete a survey online over several days permits employees to take the survey in a private setting, without feeling rushed, and anonymity reduces fears about embarrassment or negative repercussions. (Providing a paper survey option may increase the response rate, but it will also increase the administrative burden.) Online survey vendors permit anonymous responding to surveys and provide the option of allowing respondents to complete a survey over several days and across different devices. Whether anonymous responding is allowed or not, permitting online responses over several days should increase the response rate.

Permitting anonymous responding can greatly increase candor on a survey, but the promise of anonymity is not a panacea. Employees who distrust technology may never believe the promise of anonymity, and other employees may legitimately question whether their answers to questions about demographics or their location within an organization can be used to reveal their identities. (This concern is particularly acute for members of demographic groups with low representation levels within particular organizational units.) Open-ended questions or incident-specific questions also pose the potential for revelation of identifying information. Even when anonymity is promised and the promise is believed, some employees will be hesitant to portray the organization or their colleagues in a negative light.

Wise survey designers therefore do not assume that promising anonymity will be sufficient to promote accurate reporting on sensitive topics. Instead, designers take into account the psychology of the respondent to design questions in ways that will elicit more truthful responses.

This document is only available to members. Please log in or become a member.

[Become a Member](#) [Login](#)