Employee surveys on sensitive topics

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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.

Question design

People commonly view themselves as ethical actors despite the occasional ethical lapse, and those aware of their...
ethical shortcomings may rationally fear admitting those shortcomings to others, especially a boss or the head of compliance. Unrealistic self-perceptions and rational fears about reporting misconduct combine to create a high risk that employee surveys will under-report the level of problematic behaviors and over-report the level of ethical behaviors within an organization.

The simplest way to overcome the biasing effects of self-perceptions and fear of detection is to use questions that depersonalize ethical inquiries. Rather than asking employees to disclose personal conduct violations, ask them about patterns of conduct they have observed. For example, instead of asking employees to disclose whether they violated company policy on inappropriate gifting, ask them to estimate the percentage of employees who violated the company’s rules on gift-giving during the past month or year. Although people are reluctant to report their own improper behaviors, they will use their own behaviors and their observations of others’ behavior to estimate how frequent improper behaviors are. Accordingly, people who have engaged in, or observed others engage in, questionable behaviors should estimate higher levels of prevalence for these behaviors than those who have not. When particular areas of inquiry yield elevated estimates of misconduct, then the compliance department should investigate to determine the sources. These elevated estimates may reflect reality for some employee groups, or they may reflect a perception among these groups of an organization permissive of unethical behavior. Either possibility should be concerning to the compliance department and should prompt scrutiny.

Another way to promote candor involves what survey researchers call the “list experiment” technique. This technique involves three steps. In the first step, one group of randomly chosen survey respondents receives a question asking each respondent to examine a list of possible behaviors and then disclose whether he or she has engaged in or observed any of these behaviors. Crucially, the question does not ask the respondent to disclose which particular behaviors were performed or observed, and included in this list should be behaviors that do not pose any real risk to the employee’s status within the organization if they occurred, along with the more serious behavior that is the primary focus of the inquiry. When designed this way, the survey researcher cannot infer from an affirmative response which behaviors the respondent engaged in or observed. In the second step, a different group of randomly chosen respondents receives the same question but without the target behavior included in the list of possible behaviors performed or observed. In the third step, the number of affirmative responses given to the question by the first group is compared to the number of affirmative responses by the second group. If the number of affirmative responses given by the first group exceeds the number given by the second group, then we may infer that this difference reflects performance or observation of the target behavior. (Randomly assigning respondents to the different versions of the question makes it unlikely that something other than the omission of the target behavior accounts for the disparity.) The larger the disparity, the more widespread and serious the problem behavior is likely to be.

**Data analysis: Benchmarking and looking for nonresponse bias**

Even if you have not administered an anonymous survey using questions designed to promote candor, your employee survey can still provide helpful information about the organization’s ethical climate. First, the survey can serve as a benchmark to monitor for the effects of organizational training or changes in policy. Asking the same questions year to year serves as a useful metric for how the ethical climate changes as the organization and its compliance efforts change. Indeed, benchmarking can be so useful that you may want to retain legacy versions of survey questions and merely supplement your employee survey with questions aimed at promoting greater candor through depersonalization or list experiments.

Second, nonresponses to the survey or to particular items on the survey can be informative. Sometimes failures to respond are randomly distributed across the sample and across survey questions, in which case it is unlikely that worries about participating or answering particular questions motivated the lack of response. But sometimes failures to respond reflect a reluctance to answer certain questions or to participate at all in a survey, because participation has been discouraged by coworkers or superiors, or because the employee fears repercussions if honest answers are given. By examining whether nonresponses are more common for certain questions or for employees from certain units, much can be learned about which topics or organizational units deserve greater attention from the compliance department.
Increasing the value of employee surveys

Employees serve as a primary source of information for compliance purposes, and employee surveys are one of the most efficient means of gathering employee information relevant to compliance efforts. But even a short employee survey can consume many work hours across the organization, and a survey that yields misleading data may be worse than no survey at all. An employee survey reporting high levels of compliance and portraying the organization as having a strong ethical climate may be comforting and true, or it may only be comforting. Steps can be taken to increase the likelihood that employees will respond candidly on compliance surveys, even when questions address sensitive topics. Taking these steps can greatly increase the integrity of survey data and the value of the employee survey in compliance efforts.

Takeaways

- If possible, administer employee surveys via the internet, allowing at least a week for completion, and allow anonymous responses.
- Depersonalize responses. Ask for estimates of good and bad behaviors over a specified time period rather than personal disclosure of good and bad behaviors.
- Use the “list experiment” technique to gather information about sensitive behaviors.
- Establish benchmarks for future surveys by repeating questions across surveys, and examine the impact of organizational changes by examining responses by unit or employee position.
- Examine survey nonresponses for evidence that particular topics raised special concerns or evidence that certain groups of employees were discouraged from responding.