

# the Journal

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# ARE EMPLOYEE SURVEYS **EVIL?**

Employee researcher Theresa Welbourne has concluded that those annual employee surveys you conduct are unpleasant, harmful and morally wrong. She has a better idea.

**T**he word evil is not one that I chose to use lightly, particularly given our current political environment where the word seems to be tossed around more than I personally appreciate. However, after many attempts and an exhaustive word search, I frankly could not find a term that carried quite the same meaning. In case you are wondering what exactly the true definition of evil may be, below is what I used in a leadership study that I am conducting.

Definition for “something evil”: a situation that is very unpleasant, harmful or morally wrong.

Now you are wondering, why I would even suggest that something as innocent as a survey could be unpleasant, harmful or morally wrong. Let me tell you a story about an experience that led me down the path of this thinking.

Five years ago I moved my company, eePulse, from Ithaca, New York (where I was a full-time professor at Cornell University), to Ann Arbor, Michigan (where I joined the faculty at the University of Michigan). During our first month in Ann Arbor, a “delegation” of senior executives from a very large company in Michigan came to visit our office. It seems they had heard about some

“anti-survey” work we were doing, and they all wanted to learn more. The delegation was composed of senior executives from quality, human resource management, manufacturing and communications. They were united in their quest to stop their company’s every-other-year employee survey. The team of senior managers was passionate in their belief that the employee annual survey was indeed evil. Below are a few of their arguments:

- Managers are held accountable to the employee survey scores, but they have absolutely no input into the questions asked.
- The scores are given to us six months after the survey is delivered. With the data coming back so late, how can we truly be expected to respond?
- The issues are old, the people are completely different and it’s a waste of our time to do anything.
- Of course, not doing anything with irrelevant data still makes us look bad to our employees.
- Our employees hate the annual employee survey because they never hear anything back.
- The questions asked are about things of which we have no control.
- We can’t believe how much money they (super HR) waste on this endeavor.
- No one will listen to us; we want change, and we want it now.

So, are surveys evil? Let’s use the definition to answer the question.

### Point #1: Are surveys unpleasant?

Traditional annual surveys and long customer surveys are indeed “unpleasant.” These surveys are either too long, or they ask questions of virtually no interest to the person taking the survey. Some quotes from

a sample of leaders:

“The biggest problem, which I find in many surveys, is questions which are unclear or unanswerable.”

“Customer surveys are too long and not taken seriously by the customer.”

“They are somewhat of a pain.”

“Feels like a lot of effort on my part, with no results. That about sums it up.”

### Point #2: Are surveys harmful?

Here we must ask: to whom may they be harmful? Is an employee survey harmful to *an employee*? If an employee truly believes that something will come of the survey, and indeed nothing happens, then it may be harmful in that it can demotivate the employee.

Is an employee survey harmful to *a manager*? Surveys are often used for balanced score cards and other measures of manager performance. However, if those survey

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scores are not accurate indicators of manager performance, then the manager is harmed. For example, a manager who is pushing employees to change and perhaps firing poor performers may obtain lower scores on a standard employee survey because the atmosphere may be “painful” in the short term. Also, consider the story I started with about the delegation of managers who came to my office; they certainly thought surveys were harming them.

Is an employee survey harmful to *senior leadership*? Surveys can be harmful if the senior leadership team is perceived as doing nothing with the data. They have then breached an understood deal that if the employee shares information, the management team will respond. Lack of response can harm the reputation of the executives. Also, executives can make poor decisions based on ambiguous questions or old data.

Can a customer survey be harmful to *a customer*? If a customer is irritated by a phone call, if a customer is lied to by the survey administrator or if the survey takes time that could be put to better use, then the survey can be harmful to a customer. Customers can become so irritated with the process that they do not answer any surveys, resulting in lower quality products because their feedback is not heard. This then hurts the larger sample of all customers.

### Point #3: Are surveys morally wrong?

This is a difficult question. Are surveys dishonest or morally wrong? There are many instances when indeed surveys are morally wrong. It is dishonest to ask people to share information with you in order to simply chalk up a score only. But let’s review a few more comments from the leaders who talked about their survey experiences:

“Telephone survey takers >

seldom will give an honest answer when asked ‘how long?’

“I run many customer service and product surveys using zoomerang and have learned that respondents will make up answers to complete the survey and get their completion reward.”

“They are usually too long and ask questions that are never acted upon. They are usually geared toward process improvement (Six Sigma) and have little to do with actually identifying consumers’ needs. Six Sigma and Usability have helped to make surveys even more evil and more useless.”

“Some surveys desire to ply company internal or personal confi-

dential information. Those are offensive.”

### Good or evil: How would you know?

To decide whether your organization’s survey process is doing more harm or more good, you need only answer one question:

Does our survey you are doing hurt or improve the relationship you have with the stakeholder group (employees or customers)?

This is a key question because the number one asset any firm has is its *relationship with people*. If you use the process to harm the relationship (intentionally or unintentionally),

then it is evil because this has a negative effect on employees, shareholders, customers and the company reputation overall. If the survey improves the relationship with your stakeholders because you listen, you respond, you help managers improve their own skills, you get productivity barriers out of the way, you share the learning, and your stakeholders find the experience painless, pleasant and harmless, then your process is good. ■

## A DOZEN TIPS TO CONVERT YOUR SURVEY FROM EVIL TO GOOD

- 1 Keep it simple. On average, try to include five questions.
- 2 Use open-ended comment questions; don’t assume you know what the key issues are for employees, customers, suppliers, investors or any stakeholders.
- 3 Use validated questions; your questions are predictive (I use questions that are known to predict real performance outcomes). This gives you credibility and knowledge in interpreting your data and taking action.
- 4 Don’t hoard the data. Give the results to managers immediately (yes, the everyday manager) so they can do something with it.
- 5 Ask questions with timelines (e.g., what can we do within the next five days to, etc.). This gives managers an opportunity to be successful in taking actions.
- 6 Train managers who get the data so they know how to engage in effective dialogues.
- 7 Coach managers and help them so they are not defensive.
- 8 Train employees so they don’t write offensive comments.
- 9 Give back to your customers. Ask questions that can result in a learning experience versus score taking.
- 10 Don’t believe the urban myth that if you can’t fix it then don’t ask about it. Open up the dialogue, and at least talk about what’s on their minds (versus on your mind).
- 11 Build a data and dialogue process into the way you do business already. That means add people data (e.g., customer, employee, partner) to your weekly meetings, town hall sessions and more.
- 12 Write questions that influence your stakeholder groups; remind them of something important (e.g., remind employees about your yearly goals, customer service needs, etc.).