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Measurement that means something

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Theresa Wellbourne thinks annual employee surveys are worthless. She says you ought to take employees' pulse every week

Most companies think doing an employee attitude survey every year is something to boast about.

Theresa Wellbourne thinks it's something to be ashamed of.



“It’s ridiculous,” says the human resources academic, writer and entrepreneur. Her description of the typical employee survey: By the time the data comes back, it’s months old, leaving managers in legitimate denial about its relevance. Furthermore, the questions on an annual survey have little to do with managers’ day-to-day work. Consequently, despite the great expenditure and the colossal inconvenience of the big survey, nobody ever acts on its results. The net effect: An increase in employees’ cynicism and a decrease in their energy.

What’s Wellbourne’s suggested alternative to the annual survey that tries to measure 200 aspects of employee attitudes? Weekly surveys that focus on one.

How and why to keep of the work force’s ‘energy’

Wellbourne’s point of view is self-serving—she’s CEO of eepulse, a company that helps companies do the kind of [regular surveying](#) that she recommends—but she says she came by it honestly.

In the early 1990s, after working for a decade in corporate HR, she went to get her Ph.D. at Cornell University. Along the way, she wanted to “do research that showed the value of people to the bottom line.”

Her rigorous research proved what it sought to prove: that long-term corporate survival depended in large part on the degree to which companies valued their people.

More interesting was her follow-up research, which showed that good people practices pay off only for companies that are undergoing significant change. Conversely, she found that offering great benefits and generous HR practices during stable periods “was actually bad for the company.” Why? “It created an environment that rewarded the status quo,” Wellbourne says.

That insight led Wellbourne to bigger ideas: namely that “job satisfaction” isn’t a worthy goal. (“If they’re satisfied, they don’t want to change,” she says.) And employee engagement? That term sounds good, but Wellbourne asks, “Engaged in what?”

Her growing understanding of this relationship between employee attitudes and company tumult led to “one question to measure employee energy every week.”

“Using the 0 to 10 scale below,” Wellbourne began asking employees, “rate the degree to which you feel energized by your work. Think of energy as the degree of motivation or internal drive you are experiencing at work.”

Asking the question every week—and soliciting their opinions and ideas for ways their energy level could be made more optimal—Wellbourne found that her scores correlated strongly to sales results, employee turnover rates, 360-degree manager feedback scores and even the percentage of salary that employees put into the company’s stock purchase plan.

How much ‘energy’ is too much ‘energy’?

When Wellbourne started focusing on employee energy, the first thing she found was that it was as possible (and as harmful) for employees to have too much as too little. On her scale from one to 10, Wellbourne learned, “People don’t stay long at 10.”

Typically, employees would report 10 one week, 10 the next, and 10 the week after that. And then, a burnout period—three straight twos. By then, they’d gotten so far behind, they’d record another three straight 10s. “And then I’d get an e-email, ‘It’s been nice to know you, now I have another job,’” Wellbourne chuckles.

She began to understand that people work optimally somewhere between the extremes—and in different areas of the spectrum depending on the work they do. For instance, computer programmers work best at a five, Wellbourne says; whereas salespeople operate best at eight. Communicators and HR types? Seven or eight. “For as much as they complain about it, they’re most effective when they’re multitasking,” Wellbourne says.

Senior management, she adds significantly, works best at an eight or nine, but a lot of them are operating far below their optimal energy level. Why? Wellbourne ripped off some of the qualitative comments she’s received from C-level execs: “Burnt out, tired, I don’t know the right answers anymore, why are my competitors doing better?”

Yes, Wellbourne finds those answers worrisome. But she focuses on the energy levels of employees—and how to bring their energy level into optimal ranges.

What do you do if your employees’ energy is too high or too low?

Wellbourne has turned her research into a practice that helps companies gauge the energy of employees on a weekly, twice-monthly or monthly basis. Normally, she doesn’t work with a whole work force—though she’d like to have an all-company client—but rather a department, a location or a division.

Why has her reach so far been limited? Partly because “this freaks people out,” she says. It’s not the measurement and analysis, which is low-maintenance for the client. “We do most of the junk work,” Wellbourne says.

What scares clients is the need to regularly act on the results, helping stressed-out employees prioritize their work, figuring out how to add a sense of urgency to employees who are low on the energy scale.

“I tell them, you have to do *three things* when you get the data,” Wellbourne says. Often, those things aren’t hard to implement—“cleaning the bathrooms,” Wellbourne offers by way of a real example—and they can make a big difference, along with the positive difference automatically made by the symbolism of the regular surveying itself.

(Which is where communicators come in, according to Wellbourne; she says HR departments do a terrible job of communicating the changes that are made as a result of the surveys. Regular surveys demand regular communication.)

Do you know how your work force is doing?

Employee energy “is not something you can measure once a year, and it’s not something you can know intuitively,” Wellbourne says.

She tells the story of once walking around an automotive plant with a senior manager. She says he was thinking out loud. He said he knew exactly what was going on with the workforce, because he talked all the time to this guy, that guy, that guy and this guy. And then he realized as he said it, that he only knew the morale of *those four guys*, and he exclaimed, “I don’t know what anybody else thinks!”

To the skeptic who wonders where an organization will find the time to conduct and act on such regular employee research, she replies two ways:

First, she recommends that companies build survey reporting into pre-existing reporting processes.

Second, she defends regular employee pulse-checks with a near shout: “How can you live without it?”

Readers may learn more about Wellbourne’s ideas and techniques at two Web sites: <http://www.eepulse.com> and <http://eedemo.eepulse.com>. —ed.