

worktango

A GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE EMPLOYEE SURVEY COMMUNICATION



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PART ONE

Overview

1.1

SURVEYS, CENSUS AND VOTING: DIFFERENT BUT SIMILAR

Getting people to respond to employee surveys is a lot like getting people to fill out their national census or to exercise their right to vote.

In 2010, 74 percent of households in the United States mailed back their completed Census questionnaire, the same as it was in 2000. That's pretty good, although those reasonable participation rates are probably connected to the fact that the Census is mandatory. Responses are required by law. But what about voluntarily giving input, like voting? An astounding "record high" of 49 percent of eligible voters cast a ballot in the 2018 U.S. midterm elections. That means the majority didn't bother. American social scientists are asking why hundreds of millions of people who can vote, don't.



"I feel like my voice doesn't matter."

"The time and effort takes away from other priorities."

"What good does it do when promises are rarely if ever followed through?"

"I'm not really familiar with the people or issues, so I can't judge one way or another."

Touché.

Are these sentiments familiar (or suspected) when it's employee survey time? You're not alone. This paper digs into the reasons behind strong and weak response rates, and offers pointers for making sure participation becomes everyone's priority

1.2 COMMUNICATION IS YOUR MANTRA

During elections we get flooded with messages from competing parties prompting us to vote. Take traditional and digital media outreach, town hall meetings, door to door solicitation, and signage planted on front lawns. It's all about revving up the engines to get us thinking about exercising our right. The same goes for employee surveys. To get the conversation going internally we've got to talk it up, communicate, and then COMMUNICATE more. The first place to get that conversation going is at the top.



“Ensuring senior management buy-in and full commitment in the company's survey initiative is the single most important aspect of ensuring high levels of employee participation. Senior managers must believe in the importance of the upcoming survey and publicly announce their support at every given opportunity to promote the initiative. They must also emphasize the significance of the survey to those managers who directly report to them.”

– **DR. GONZALO SHOBRIDGE**, HR Consultant, UK

When every leader (and that includes front line supervisors through to the CEO) **understand the “why”** behind employee surveys; when they **know they'll see data relevant to them** and; when they realize they're meant to take action in response, chances are you'll see more participation from their teams. In most cases, survey response rates are a reflection of overall employee engagement (or lack thereof). Participation is a relevant measure of how much people believe in their leaders and trust their voice is being heard.

You can't put out a survey, collect the insights, and then call it a wrap. Communication is a two way street. A pulse questionnaire or full-on engagement survey is the springboard to ongoing conversation. **It means giving your people permission to share their thoughts – openly and honestly; actively listening – openly and honestly, responding – openly and honestly, and then returning to the well for more feedback.**

Full scale and smaller pulse surveys both need to be thoroughly planned and communicated. In larger organizations it's especially important to make sure all the straight up facts are conveyed reliably across management lines.

What that communication looks like is largely up to you. Suggested templates, timelines and innovative ideas to help steer your efforts are addressed in section 2.3.

Ultimately if you're looking to increase and maintain response rates then you need to make communication your mantra pre, during, and post survey.

“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

– **George Bernard Shaw**, Playwright

1.3 ANSWER THE FIVE Ws

Incredibly the “Five Ws” date back to ancient Greek philosophers among them, Aristotle. But it was Rudyard Kipling in his 1902 tale “The Elephant’s Child” who memorialized the W5 Ws (and one H) in a poem that opens:

- I keep six honest serving-men
- (They taught me all I knew);
- Their names are What and Why and When
- And How and Where and Who.

The Five Ws are the underpinning of journalism reporting, and by extension, effective survey communication and strong participation rates. Answering the 5 Ws is the easiest way to tell the story around an upcoming survey and everybody’s part in its success.

WHO - has a role to play? Everyone. Ideally your organization’s leader is the messenger, stressing their personal commitment to the initiative and the necessity for everybody’s input. This is a good time and place for your CEO to promise confidentiality too.

WHAT - is this survey all about? Explain the intention (i.e. to check on employee engagement, identify common themes, get feedback on actions as a result of the last survey...).

WHEN - is the survey rolling out and for how long? Highlight release and closing dates as well as when survey results will be shared. If real-time access is available – BONUS. Shout it to the rafters. By nature we’re inquisitive beings. People want to know what’s being said. Give details.

WHERE - can the survey be filled out? Describe the different access points (i.e. laptop, mobile device, centralized kiosks, paper survey drop-boxes...). Have you made any arrangements to make it easier for people to take the survey during work hours? Say so.

WHY - is “my” participation important? Point to actions or outcomes that have come from past employee surveys. Explain how the voice of employees guides strategies and policies, plans and budgets.



“I like to think that a lot of managers and executives trying to solve problems miss the forest for the trees by forgetting to look at their people -- not at how much more they can get from their people or how they can more effectively manage their people. I think they need to look a little more closely at what it’s like for their people to come to work there every day.”

- **GORDON BETHUNE**, Former CEO of Continental Airlines

PART TWO

Recommendations & Steps

2.1 STRATEGIES & PLANS

Successful response rate benchmarks vary depending on who you consult. The prevailing school of thought is that high participation rates are indicative of an engaged workforce.

Internal research at Facebook found differential participation rates highlight what issues matter most to their people: 95 percent complete the engagement survey, more than two-thirds fill out their annual diversity survey, more than half do their benefits survey and on average 61 percent of respondents submit their own feedback and suggestions. As a fun way to reward participation, the sources fess up, “Some of our leaders have come to work dressed in a costume of their teams’ choice when they reached a 100 percent response rate.”

Contrarians argue that exceptionally high rates nudging over 85 to 90 percent suggest participants have been overly encouraged or incentivized to complete the survey. Results, they say, may be skewed.

Generally speaking:

- More than 70 percent is very good
- Anything between 60 percent and 70 percent is good
- Rates between 50 percent and 60 percent are acceptable
- Anything below 50 percent is poor

Bottom line:

To achieve statistically representative and reliable response rates, you have to start with a solid strategic communications approach.

PART TWO**Recommendations & Steps**

- 1.** Clearly state the purpose of your communication (i.e. to achieve a participation rate of X or increase response rates by Y; to help leaders, managers and employees understand and appreciate their role; to gather feedback on initiative Z...).
- 2.** Identify your intended audience and tailor messages accordingly. Different levels of management and different roles across the company have different communication needs. Senior leaders want to know how a survey ties to bottom line results. Mid and front-line managers are interested in how insights can improve team cohesion and performance. Sales, finance, operations, administrative personnel, field staff, and plant employees often have their own unique set of needs.
- 3.** Set aside budget for costs such as translation, poster printing, and promotional activities or incentives.

2.2 INCLUSIVENESS IS KEY: DESIGN WITH RESPONDENTS IN MIND

Employee surveys are a crucial exercise given that the feedback plays a key role in guiding future actions and organizational spending. To increase participation rates we would all do well to take a page from recommendations made to state and local governments preparing for the next U.S. Census: set aside computers in public facilities for completing the Census and emphasize participation using social media, email and text messaging.

Not everyone in your organization sits in front of a computer for a good part of the day. Field technicians, sales people, operations staff, doctors and nurses and other health care professionals need different lines of communication and other concessions that build in the time and place to fill out their survey. When planning your survey outreach, plan on setting up computers in staff rooms, other accessible facilities and kiosks. Emphasize participation by designing your survey for all mobile devices.

The City of Toronto, for example, has a highly diverse workforce. Those working at City Hall see survey reminders come across their desks. But another large population works remotely. It's harder to reach field-based team members. That's where posters, videos, and proper communication at meetings are crucial outreach tools. Equally important is taking into account accessibility for those with disability, language, education and literacy needs and making sure communications issued and the survey questions asked, are phrased clearly and simply (and are applicable to those meant to respond).

Keep the survey short and sweet. Time is precious. Deadlines loom. Meetings must be facilitated or attended. Targets have to be met. **“And then there's that survey that needs to be completed.”**

Plan sessions for those that need to fill out the survey on paper. Schedule a time for shift employees to take the survey while on duty. **Make participation easy for everybody.**

Traditionally employee engagement surveys would have upwards of 60 questions and take anywhere from **20 to 30 minutes** or more to complete. WorkTango has seen several organizations obtain key insights from employee engagement surveys with a baseline of just 15 questions that take less than five minutes to fill out. If you need more detail, pulse surveys can dig deeper with just four or five questions that can be answered quickly. WorkTango's Surveys & Insights has templates ready.

And always tell people up front how long it will take them to complete the survey. Generally surveys that take longer than 15 minutes are considered too long.

2.2.1 CONFIDENTIALITY

Consequences are scary. It's no wonder employees are reluctant to answer any survey with frankness let alone at all if there's even a hint of potential reprisal. If your survey response rates are low it is possible people don't know or understand how their identities are protected. Participants are reassured that their responses are kept confidential if they can see that the survey is being handled by a reputable third-party research organization, or, through a tool designed to maintain confidentiality when deployed by internal personnel.

Emphasize confidentiality plainly, transparently and frequently.

At WorkTango we work with organizations that take the pulse of employees quarterly, monthly, even bi-weekly. Their participation rates and feedback quality are consistently high because they:

- Spell out why and how the technology algorithms of the survey platform they use hides employee identities
- Explain how the data for departments or various attributes that have responses fewer than a minimum threshold are automatically masked

As a result, people can (and do) express themselves openly and honestly.

2.2.2 MANDATORY OR VOLUNTARY?

...that's a good question. WorkTango has seen an organization with some 5,000 people hit response rates of at least 93 percent every single time they issue an employee survey. That's because they say: "You're expected to give us feedback. We WANT to hear from you!" They use different incentives. They listen to what their people are saying. And they take action. A whole list of workplaces policies, procedures and processes have changed because of that feedback.

Depending on the size of an organization, the frequency of surveys (weekly /monthly/quarterly), and a number of other variables, WorkTango finds that for enterprises with 2,000 or more people an average monthly pulse survey response rate is in the low 70 percent range while mid-size and smaller companies average high 80 to 90 percent response rates.

These kinds of averages are achievable with aggressive communications that are complemented by other strategies.

2.2.3 MAKE IT SIMPLE & MAYBE EVEN FUN

A nice combination and variety of strategies like educating people well in advance, providing explanations about what's going to happen because of the survey, and sharing real-time response rates with leaders of divisions, departments, teams, and other influencers will trigger more people to participate.



“Fortunately the research tools and technology available today have turned onerous survey exercises into simple, fulfilling employee experiences.”

Icons can be customized for a fun spin. Take the Toronto Zoo. They use pandas and hippos. Pizza Pizza uses pie slices. These images resonate with their employees. It's less about checking boxes and more about providing an experience that's relevant and familiar to survey takers.

WorkTango has seen businesses introduce innovative incentives and other competitive features that net great response rates. Some examples:

- Award departments that achieve a X percent response rate the opportunity to leave early on Friday, come in late Monday, or enjoy a complimentary lunch at a restaurant of their choice.
- Offer a celebratory lunch with the CEO to the department with the highest percentage of responses at the end of the first week.
- Host survey parties complete with muffins, donuts, coffee and laptops set out for people to complete their survey on the spot.
- Announce or promote the initiative at the next town hall/all hands meeting or social event.
- Hold gatherings on specific days in different departments with technology set out for people to fill out the survey right then and there.
- Run random draws for gift cards or other prizes for early bird survey respondents (yes, there's a way to track who has completed their survey while maintaining response confidentiality).
- Organize a contest where everyone's name will be entered to win a (insert prize)– but ONLY IF a response rate of XX percent is reached.
- Post greeters at all entranceways on survey launch day to welcome people as they arrive for work with a token giveaway and friendly survey reminder (this approach contributed to a remarkable 96 percent participation rate).
- Create posters for display throughout the organization.
- Brand the initiative to match company values: give it a name and a slogan.
- Share communications internally on staff room messenger boards and the organization's intranet.

Use the WorkTango Recognition & Rewards solution to set up an Incentive—it's a light form of gamification that allows individuals to complete a certain activity (say, taking a survey) in exchange for reward points. People then use their points to choose an item or experience from the rewards catalog.

Your objective should be to get the highest response right out of the gate. A good response rate after day one is 20 to 25 percent.

2.2.4 BRAND IT

Another effective communications approach is to create branding around your employee feedback initiatives that link to broader organizational strategies.

Pizza Pizza has an internal communications strategy with the moniker PIE (Product, Innovation & Experience[P1]). Employee survey programs are branded under the PIE umbrella, so when employees receive a survey email from PIE Talk ([the employee newsletter/intranet resource](#)) – it provides cultural context. Employees know it's their time to talk. And because they understand the significance of the initiative and their role in its success, they participate. Pie slice icons used in the survey itself reinforce the branding message.

Similarly, an investment regulating body has branded their employee survey initiative by calling it “Vested Interest.” Nice play on words.

2.2.5 FIND AMBASSADORS

Ambassadors aren't limited to embassies around the world. They're a great asset in the business world too, especially for larger organizations. Ambassador volunteers can help with an annual or biannual survey by promoting the vision and goal of why it's being done and why it matters. Storytelling about their first hand experiences and what they've seen as a result of employee input can influence skeptics to voice their opinions.

[\(How do you know who the potential ambassadors are, by the way? Let the data in your Recognition & Rewards solution tell you. The people who're recognized most often are typically the same people others look to for grass-roots leadership.\)](#)

Ambassadors can be invited, appointed or voluntarily voice their willingness to help. By appealing to these influential individuals and training them on how to deliver the survey's value proposition there's a strong likelihood **workplace colleagues will follow suit.**

2.3 TIMELINES & TEMPLATES

No one wants to see their project fall off schedule. To keep a major survey on track start with your targeted launch and closing dates and then work back to create communications timelines. Two weeks is considered best practice to keep an engagement survey open. Larger companies may extend that window to three weeks if response rates are lagging, while smaller organizations may require only one.



“Fortunately the research tools and technology available today have turned onerous survey exercises into simple, fulfilling employee experiences.”

There are communication similarities for pulse surveys although there’s less work-back scheduling. But with frequency comes the necessity to link deployment and communication of results into rituals. For example, if you run a weekly or bi-weekly sprint, you can include pre-survey communication into sprint planning, and report post-survey results and next steps in your retrospective – we do this at WorkTango. In addition to questions measuring engagement, we also loop in questions about our processes and initiatives. You can also use daily stand-ups to talk about upcoming surveys or recent findings.

The suggested timelines and communication templates that follow help to set up expectations and socialization for leaders and employees. Use any of this material in whole or in part although we recommend you customize using the verbiage and tone typical of your organization.

RECOMMENDED TIMELINES

Initial communication to all leaders: 3-4 weeks prior to launch

Communication to entire organization: 2-3 weeks prior to launch

Second email to leaders informing them they’ll receive their data: 1-2 weeks prior to launch

Copy that goes out with survey link: Launch date

First reminder email to those who have not completed the survey: Mid-way point

Last chance reminder: Final Day(s) to close

Thank you and acknowledgement for employee participation: 1-3 days post-survey

To all leaders gaining access to platform advising of training date and time: 5 days post-survey



“If response rates miss the mark, consider your timing. When scheduling the launch of your survey, avoid traditionally busy times such as back to class week for educational institutions, fiscal year ends, budget forecasting periods or statutory holidays/long weekends.”

SAMPLE TEMPLATES

T minus 3 to 4 WEEKS: TO ALL LEADERS IN THE ORGANIZATION

Communication goes out to leaders in organization to fully prepare them for the survey experience and to be able to address questions from their teams and encourage participation.

Team,

As part of an effort to continuously improve the employee experience at (organization name), we're introducing a survey to ensure the voice of our people is being heard. We are partnering with a third-party, WorkTango, to ensure that your responses remain anonymous and that we collect authentic feedback. Confidentiality is a major consideration for us on this initiative and our executives and leaders will not have the ability to see individual responses.

On (date) you will receive an email with more instructions to offer your feedback, so please take the opportunity to participate. We are hoping for full participation and asking for your support in encouraging your teams to provide their feedback. Thank you very much in advance for taking a few minutes to help make an even better place to work.

Thanks,

T minus 2 to 3 WEEKS – EMAIL TO ENTIRE COMPANY

Communication to let employees know what is coming and what to expect.

Team,

As part of an effort to continuously improve the employee experience at (organization name), we're introducing a survey to ensure the voice of our people is being heard. We are partnering with a third-party, WorkTango, to ensure that your responses remain anonymous and that we collect authentic feedback.

Confidentiality is a major consideration for us on this initiative and our executives and leaders will not have the ability to see individual responses.

On (date) you will receive an email with more instructions to offer your feedback, so please take the opportunity to participate. We are hoping for full-participation so we can truly understand how engaged our employees are.

Thank you very much,

SAMPLE TEMPLATES

T minus 1 to 2 WEEKS – EMAIL TO LEADERS

To all leaders to let them know they will have access to their data and that there will be training scheduled following the close of the survey.

Leaders,

As you know, we are kicking off an initiative to help us listen to the voice of employees and use data to improve the engagement of employees. Our goal with the initiative is to empower you with data so that you have consistent visibility on the pulse of your people and insight on what's going well and what the challenges are.

The HR team at (organization name) is here to support you every step of the way when it comes to understanding the data and navigating the challenges, so feel free to reach out. Keep a look out for an email scheduling training for the tool we will be using for this initiative. We are looking for your support and hope that you find value in the insights.

Thanks,

LAUNCH – EMAIL COPY WITH SURVEY

This copy goes out with the survey link to all people being surveyed. Suggested components cover the context behind why the survey matters, confidentiality and the assurances of a third-party, expiry date, what happens next.

Sender Name: TBD

Subject: TBD Your opinion matters

We strongly believe that our people make this company unique. As we continue to grow, your engagement is critical to our future success. To achieve this, we must commit to a culture where we invest in constant process review and incorporate your feedback. We need your help to complete our survey by (date). It will take 5 minutes. It is performed by WorkTango, an independent employee experience specialist. Your responses are anonymous and confidential. Our goal is to take the consolidated feedback and comments to better understand how we lead this company moving forward.

Thank you,

SAMPLE TEMPLATES

REMINDER 1 – EMAIL COPY WITH SURVEY

This is the first reminder to go out to those people who have not yet completed the survey.

Subject: Reminder: We want to hear from you

Your opinion matters. Please take a quick moment to complete this survey and offer your feedback. It is performed by WorkTango, an independent employee experience specialist, which ensures your responses are anonymous and confidential. Our goal is to take the consolidated feedback and comments to better understand how we lead this organization moving forward.

Thank you,

FINAL REMINDER – EMAIL COPY WITH SURVEY LINK

This copy goes out with the survey link to all people being surveyed. Suggested components cover the context behind why the survey matters, confidentiality and the assurances of a third-party, expiry date, what happens next.

Subject: Last Chance to Provide your Feedback

Your opinion matters. Only one day left to take a quick moment to complete this survey and offer your feedback. It is performed by WorkTango, an independent employee experience specialist, which ensures your responses are anonymous and confidential. Our goal is to have full participation and take the consolidated feedback and comments to better understand how we lead this company moving forward.

Thank you,

SAMPLE TEMPLATES

1-3 DAYS POST SURVEY

Thank you and acknowledgement for participation.

Thank you for taking the time to offer your feedback. We are committed to sharing key insights and communicating what we are able to take action on. Following the review process, we will send out further communications about what you can expect moving forward. Please remember that your voice is not limited to these pulse surveys and we invite you to share your feedback directly with leaders at any time.

Thanks,

5 DAYS POST SURVEY TO LEADERS

Communication to leaders explaining they will receive access to their data and scheduling training.

Leaders,

As you know, we have kicked off an initiative to help us listen to the voice of employees and use data to improve the engagement of employees. Our goal with the initiative is to empower you, our People Leaders, with data so that you have consistent visibility on the pulse of your people and insight on what's going well and what the challenges are. You'll have access to the platform and your data as well as training on (DATE AND TIME of training), facilitated by WorkTango. You will receive a meeting invite to this training shortly. It will be recorded in case you are unable to attend. The HR team at (organization name) is here to support you every step of the way when it comes to understanding the data and navigating the challenges, so feel free to reach out.

Best,

2.4 REAL-TIME ACCESS

Within finessed survey tool platforms you can log in and monitor response rates in real-time, in any way you wish to slice the data (i.e. by department, division, geographic location...). This information makes it easier to keep on top of your participation goal by sending targeted internal communication to leaders of teams with lower participation rates saying: **“Hey, make sure you get your team doesn’t miss out.”**

If you really want to hit the ball out of the park, other robust features give employees who have completed the survey the real-time ability to see the averages from everyone that’s responded to the survey already. People are really interested to know what their peers are saying right off the bat rather than waiting six months to finally hear filtered results.

Platforms that give real-time access to insights also help to align leaders with their team. Advances in HR technology include self-serve snapshot analytics that can be segmented by management level, manager results, question type, positive/negative/neutral responses and relative trending insights. These kinds of people analytics give senior leaders and people managers the ability to track the pulse of their teams and the impact of their actions.

Anonymous conversations are a dynamic real-time communications tool that more and more companies are using. Leaders can read, acknowledge and respond to a respondent’s comments – while the platform’s algorithms continue to protect the identity of the employee.

When people are acknowledged and get to participate in change, invariably future surveys have **higher response rates**.

2.5 POST-SURVEY FEEDBACK

Have you ever put off exercising in favor of doing something else? You know it's good for you. There are benefits. But you haven't seen any so far, so what's the point? That's pretty much what's behind low survey response rates whether they're an annual or biannual engagement survey, or more frequent pulse surveys. If insights aren't shared—or worse still, are shared without any kind of follow up or change—know that those future lower response rates aren't because people have survey fatigue. It's **lack-of-action fatigue**.



“Employees will only complain or make suggestions three times on the average without a response. After that they conclude that if they don't keep quiet they will be thought to be troublemakers or that management doesn't care.”

– **PETER DRUCKER**, Business Guru, Author, Professor of Business

The importance of post-survey communication is huge. An organization's willingness to communicate back reinforces a culture of participation. Whether data is presented to individual contributors through real-time survey previews or in group presentations, genuine success comes through transparency.

Provide explicit feedback. If a theme points to something that's not feasible, say so.

“We heard people want new chairs. We won't have a budget for that until the next fiscal year. But if you want to reach out on an individual basis...”

Employees need to know how important their feedback is for the success of the organization, how it builds a better workplace and work experience.

PART THREE

Conclusion

Response rates and two-way communication are joined at the hip. But what matters most is that you **ACT**. That you make sure everyone knows what's being done to make improvements. And to continuously remind people that their voices – suggestions, criticisms, opinions – are affecting real change.

That's how you get true employee buy-in.



“To win in the marketplace you must first win in the workplace.”

– DOUGLAS CONANT, Former President & CEO of the Campbell Soup Company

At WorkTango, we're revolutionizing how the world's most forward-thinking companies engage and inspire their people. We offer the only Employee Experience Platform that enables meaningful recognition and rewards, offers actionable insights through employee surveys, and supports alignment through goal setting and feedback.

WorkTango is built for the workplace we all want to be a part of – where priorities become clear, achievements are celebrated, and employees have a voice. So if you're ready to make work lives better, schedule a demo today.

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