Maximizing Participation In A Workplace Assessment



Recently, while discussing investigations with my partner Christine Thomlinson for a future instalment of the **Investigator Chronicles**, she asked me about the most difficult investigation I had ever conducted. You'll be able to hear my response when we release the interview on YouTube later this week. But her question also got me thinking about the most difficult workplace *assessment* that I have ever conducted.

Given that workplace assessments are often proactive, forward looking, and not triggered by a specific complaint or conflict, you might think that they typically go off with no significant challenges. Sometimes, that is true. Other times, there are significant challenges within an assessment that, if not adequately addressed, can negatively impact buy-in, participation levels, quality of information received and/or the effectiveness of any recommendations that can flow from the assessment report.

One time I was asked to do an assessment within an organization where there were a number of factors that made the assessment difficult:

- High level of distrust between management and the union
- High-profile, public complaints from employees about the workplace culture
- Highly surveyed employee group (ie, "survey fatigue")

- Recent assessment-type process that went nowhere (ie, “process skepticism”)

Given that participation in an assessment is typically voluntary and often cannot be tracked (eg, when anonymous surveys are used), it was important to address these challenges head-on to maximize participation.

So…what did we do?

1. Utilized a highly collaborative process: At the earliest stages, we consulted transparently with union leadership and the individuals who had made public complaints to ensure that our process was responsive to their concerns.
2. Kept it open and avoided framing the issues: In both our launch communications to employees and in the manner we drafted the survey questions, we tried not to frame the issues or limit the things about which people felt they could speak. We used a small number of open-ended questions, rather than a longer list of more quantitative questions using likert scales.
3. Made (and kept!) commitments to participants: Before asking anyone to share information with us, we worked with our client to develop a series of commitments that could be made to employees that would assure them that they would be treated fairly in the process and get something out of participating. These commitments related to timeline, confidentiality, meaningful reporting, and ongoing processes to continue seeking employee input post-assessment.

In the end, the assessment had an extraordinarily high level of participation and employees took the time to provide meaningful examples within their feedback. By spending time and energy on process communication and buy-in at the start, we were able to provide a report that created a roadmap for change and improvement within the organization.

The content of this article is intended to provide a general guide to the subject matter. Specialist advice should be sought about your specific circumstances.

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