

The Business Case for Employee Opinion Surveys: An Example with Orient-Express - By Eddy M. Elmer and Jim Houran

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The Situation...

Orient-Express Hotels, Trains & Cruises is a leading brand in the service-hospitality industry - a name associated with worldwide luxury travel. The company's Central Reservations Office (CRO) recently underwent restructuring that potentially could have significantly dampened the department's morale, productivity and revenue. The CRO expanded to include three distinct business teams, each business team was assigned its own supervisor to expedite daily responsibilities and the entire CRO employee base was growing.

Such changes reflect positive growth, but they also can introduce the possibility of instability, the development of employee cliques and poor communication and execution within the department. Investing in organizational development seems like a luxury - or even a burden - during chaotic times like these. But that is exactly what Orient-Express did as a forward-thinking company. The CRO collaborated with 20|20(TM) on a special Employee Opinion Survey in order to identify what the department was doing well and not so well. In other words, the CRO General Manager wanted to leverage the department's strengths and improve upon its blind-spots in order to assist with the transitions and empower the employees.

A Practical Solution...

The most productive and successful organizations like Orient-Express maintain strong internal Operations and strong internal and external Relationships with all touch points of the business. Most organizations have never had the opportunity to evaluate themselves impartially and professionally on these two key outcomes. Rather, organizations often attempt to improve their businesses either through haphazard 'trial and error' or by using costly outcome surveys that neither meet professional testing standards nor deliver actionable information based on the latest research and best practices. When implemented well, Employee Opinion or Organizational Climate Surveys are wise, strategic business tools that contribute to your bottom line. They facilitate retention of your top talent and identify hidden pitfalls in your business strategies.

Short-term and Long-term Benefits...

For Orient-Express, positive outcomes appeared as soon as the CRO started the survey process. There was enthusiasm among employees that management would listen to their insights and use them constructively. Department members agreed that the survey provided a 'safe' and effective method for capturing employees' feelings and observations and for identifying challenges and concerns. Subsequently, the entire CRO started to improve its communication and coordination. One of the first outcomes after workers were debriefed on the survey results was heightened respect among employees. The survey provided the forum to remind everybody that although many of the employees contributed in different areas, they all were 'branded' as CRO staff and they all contributed to the bottom-line success of the department. To reinforce this idea, the CRO has started to 'cross-pollinate' the three departmental meetings with a guest from another group and all have seemed to enjoy learning more about others' specific jobs. The results from the Employee Opinion Survey also helped structure and guide this initiative.

The Employee Opinion Survey also laid the foundation for long-term benefits. For example, the process helped to emphasize the increasing need for greater accessibility and approachability of CRO management. It also sent a clear message of employee inclusion, rather than exclusion, in decisions that affect the department. Finally, it gave the department an empirical benchmark of workplace quality to exceed survey after survey. It is also important to note that the survey helped CRO employees to understand that things will never be perfect and, most importantly, to accept this fact. Now, the department is properly and productively focused on the changes that are under the employees' control. To be sure, the Employee Opinion Survey strongly reinforced the department's collective responsibility to maintain a positive workplace culture.

Launching an Employee Opinion Survey: Important Points...

Organizational development experts and experienced Human Resources professionals alike will tell you - talent is arguably the most important asset of any organization, yet it is among the most under nurtured resources. Investments in tools to enhance organizational culture and functioning seem unnecessary when business is good, and they hardly seem prudent when business is slow. Unfortunately, these mindsets are fatal impediments to enduring business success.

Whatever the size or nature of your organization, the ideal is to move your business from one of 'excellence to significance.' Reaching this goal involves understanding and enacting three key insights about your employees, namely: Employees are also customers served by your organization, Employees have a valuable vantage point on the business and workplace culture that management lacks and Employees have valuable and unique insights into what works and what does not.

Simply stated, talent is the foundation of business success in the service-hospitality industry. The example of Orient-Express demonstrates that well-conducted Employee Opinion Surveys imbue employees with a sense of recognition, value and company 'ownership.' And survey results can guide revisions to business practices so as to enhance efficiency and profitability. To that end, below we give helpful guidelines to maximize the effectiveness of your Employee Opinion Survey initiative:

Use a third party to administer and analyze the survey to ensure objectivity and to encourage candid feedback from respondents. Employee Opinion Surveys that are perceived as being credible by employees typically do not require additional incentives for participation.

Select only providers whose surveys are well-validated and conform to the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing. In this way organizations can trust that the survey content is relevant and unbiased with respect to different levels of employment.

Employee Opinion Surveys should measure more than subjective employee satisfaction. The most useful surveys measure aspects of an organization's business practices (Operations) and manner in which an organization deals with people (Social Maintenance).

Use an online survey format to maximize confidentiality, response rate, efficiency and accuracy of the data collection. Plus, online surveys are eco-friendly compared to traditional pencil-and-paper formats and often the results are delivered faster.

When sample size permits, have separate reports for different departments, divisions or properties. Analyses that only aggregate results across the entire organization often hide more than they reveal. There might be an overarching company culture, but divisions or departments can have small but significant deviations from the umbrella culture that can impact survey responses.

Research shows that Employee Opinion Surveys add at least 0.70% to the balance sheet when organizations act on the results. Other benefits include increased employee retention, satisfaction and productivity. Therefore, present survey feedback to staff within 30 days of survey completion and develop action plans to address areas of concern within 60 days of survey completion.

It is important to know that Operations and Social Maintenance issues are all interrelated. This is a strategic advantage, because it means that organizations can make substantial and positive impacts in the workplace without necessarily having to make wide, sweeping changes. From among the survey results, decide on an action plan that best suits your needs, even if it is based on just a few employee issues.

Successful organizations are constantly aware of what they need to know, address and overcome. A meaningful Employee Opinion Survey is one of the most efficient, reliable and effective ways to do this. The case of Orient-Express demonstrates that this approach also acknowledges and empowers employees by relying on them to help identify and prioritize present and future challenges.

The CRO is one of Orient-Express' departments with the greatest time limitations for any activities or initiatives not tied directly to its daily business responsibilities. Yet, the department conducted, action planned and benefitted from an Employee Opinion Survey during one of its busiest periods of the year. With commitment, planning and drive, any organization can do the same and reap the same benefits.

For more information on the best practice 20|20 Employee Opinion Survey(TM) or a free consultation on organizational issues, contact:

James Houran, Ph.D. 20|20 Skills(TM) Assessment

jhouran@2020skills.com

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