15 Biggest Employee Survey Pitfalls
Engaged employees are more productive, take less time off and make customers happier. Measuring engagement can’t be an afterthought anymore. It needs to occur much more frequently, and everyone needs to be on board with the process.

Employee engagement surveys are great, but they’re rarely done often enough. They should be done more frequently because they help you understand what’s really going on within the company.

The same way that frequent feedback is important for an employee’s growth, an employee engagement survey is important for the organization’s growth.

These are the mistakes that you need to avoid when conducting employee engagement surveys.

Enjoy!

And best of luck in your employee engagement efforts.
PITFALL 1

EMPLOYEES DON’T RECEIVE ANY FEEDBACK
You can’t expect employees to be engaged in the process if you keep them in the dark.

Too many companies conduct employee surveys to make their own numbers go up, without thinking about the role employees play.

As a result, employees don’t take the process seriously, and either don’t respond honestly or don’t respond at all. Trust has to be earned, and if you want employees to take surveys seriously, you need to give them feedback when it’s over.

Employees need to know the purpose and importance of a survey, otherwise they just won’t complete it, or worse, they’ll complete it with quick answer-clicks without really reading or thinking about the questions.

Kevin Kruse,
NY Times bestselling author
PITFALL 2

EMPLOYEES SEE THEM AS A WASTE OF TIME
Employees often see this as a forced process with no real benefit to them and this is because no one communicates with the employees prior to the survey. No one tells them the *why*. What you need to do is explain the purpose and benefits of the survey; that you’re trying to improve their lives at work, and it’s in their best interest to participate and be honest.

Explain to them that the initiative is being supported by senior management, and that you’re trying to actively improve the way work is done to ensure a healthier and happier workplace environment for everyone.

Employees must know that surveys are meaningful and will be used to make things better. Continuous feedback should be a welcome part of every company’s culture.

Ben Peterson,
CEO, *BambooHR*
PITFALL 3

ASKING TOO MANY DIFFERENT QUESTIONS
It’s important to keep your surveys short and sweet, because of survey fatigue. Employees get tired really easily when there are so many questions.

It’s also important to keep the survey focused. Employees (and managers) need to have a clear understanding of what you’re trying to measure and accomplish with this survey.

Keep it focused and keep it simple, and you’ll have a much higher quality of data to work with. It will also make action planning much easier, because you can focus on one single initiative.

The vast majority of information gained from employee assessments is wasted. More questions doesn’t necessarily correlate to more effective action and results.

Tim Kuppler, Director of Culture, Human Synergistics
PITFALL 4

PUTTING THE FOCUS ON MANAGERS
PITFALL 4: THE SURVEY IS DONE INTERNALLY

I feel bad for mid-level managers. So much responsibility is placed on them to fix things when it doesn't have to be that way. It’s often too much for them to handle.

A much smarter idea is to be transparent throughout the whole process, from beginning to end, to ensure that everyone has a say in how to fix things.

Front-line employees usually have the best ideas on what to do, and if you include them, it shows that you respect their opinions, which will engage them even more.
PITFALL

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BEING TOO INVESTED IN BENCHMARKS
PITFALL 5: BEING TOO INVESTED IN BENCHMARKS

Many people want to benchmark against industry data and look at different things like companies of a similar size, in a similar industry in order to try and compare themselves against the competition.

The easiest way I can explain this, is that your company culture is unique to you. Even if you’re in the same industry, you and a competitor do things differently, have different goals, different people, etc.

Don’t get distracted by benchmarking data, and instead, focus on improving yourself.
PITFALL

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DOING A SURVEY ONLY ONCE
Often, employee engagement surveys are done as a reaction to something negative, and are done one time. This is a huge mistake, as it’s important to see how the data has changed since the last survey was done.

Engagement surveys should be an ongoing thing, and should be short, pulse surveys to compensate for the fact that they’re so frequent.

You can take a 100-question survey and spread it out over time to make it easier for the employees.

Doing an employee engagement survey once a year won’t give you an accurate picture of engagement, because it’s a snapshot in time. You need a more consistent measuring process.

Benjamin Niaulin, Microsoft MVP
LEADERSHIP SCARED TO SHARE THE RESULTS
It’s important for leaders to be honest and transparent, especially when dealing with bad news.

There is a natural tendency for leaders to try and cover up bad news, but this is a huge mistake. Employees want to feel like they’re part of the company, and including them shows that you respect them enough to share the bad news with them.

What you want to do is include everyone in the results, and work together to come up with ways to improve. Excluding employees from that process only makes your job harder.

Feedback, even in the form of bad news, is a gift. Nothing can change if no one shares the need for change in the first place. You have good people; trust them to be resilient! Give everyone the opportunity to take action, to change course, to innovate through an obstacle.

Annette Promes,
Chief Marketing Officer, Moz
PITFALL 8

NO ACTION TAKEN
PITFALL 8: NO ACTION TAKEN

Actions speak louder than words, and employees want to know that their suggestions matter.

A very easy way to disengage an employee is to ask them for an opinion about something, and then do nothing with their suggestion.

Alternatively, a very easy way to engage an employee is to prove to them that you’re really listening and care about what they have to say.

Spend more time on the action planning, and less time designing the survey itself.

Doing a survey and not following up on it is worse than never doing a survey at all. Why ask questions if nobody is going to do anything with the answers? At the very least, share out the overall results so employees know that it wasn’t a waste of their time.

Kevin Kruse,
NY Times bestselling author
MANAGERS NOT KNOWING HOW TO ACT
PITFALL 9: MANAGERS NOT KNOWING HOW TO ACT

So you run an employee engagement survey, and discover there are a few major problems that need addressing. What do you do? How do you make sure that the staff stay engaged throughout the year?

Engagement is a long term process, and surveys are a very small part of that process. There needs to be frequent feedback sessions, opportunities for personal growth, an understanding of how recognition motivates workers, etc.

Managers need to be trained, and there needs to be continuous learning around these engagement activities.

Managers who fail to inspire the people with whom they work are the single biggest source of employee disengagement worldwide. The good news is that the skill and knowledge to inspire others can be learned through effective education.

Doug Kirkpatrick, Author of *Beyond Empowerment*
PITFALL 10

THE SURVEY IS DONE INTERNALLY
PITFALL 10: THE SURVEY IS DONE INTERNALLY

Employees are, for the most part, very skeptical when it comes to engagement surveys. They’re scared that the data in the surveys will be used against them, and that they can’t be honest.

This is why most surveys are anonymous, companies do this in order to try and ensure that people answer as honestly as possible.

The smartest thing to do is to use a third-party vendor to act as a middleman to ensure that it’s truly anonymous, and not even managers can see the data.

Fear is the ultimate culture killer so open and honest feedback is critical. Utilize a third party to administer surveys so there is complete anonymity and no perceived barrier to open and honest feedback.

Tim Kuppler,
Director of Culture, Human Synergistics
PITFALL 11

ASKING IRRELEVANT QUESTIONS
Survey design is one of the hardest things to get right, which is often why a third-party vendor is brought in.

If the questions are irrelevant to the employees, they’ll become disengaged and stop answering the survey. Also, if the questions are worded too negatively, or too positively, they can backfire and make employees disengaged from the process.

It’s important to ask questions that are relevant, clear, and actionable, so that employees are confident that what they’re answering is worthwhile.
PITFALL

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DOING A SURVEY AS A REACTION
Remember, employee engagement is a long term thing.

In 2012, Dish Networks was branded as the worst company to work for in America by Glassdoor.com.

After receiving that label, they finally decided, for the first time ever, to do an employee survey to see what was wrong.

**Their mistake, obviously, was that they waited too long, and were in reaction mode.**

If they were smart, they could have been proactive about it, and fixed issues before they received such an embarrassing label.

Reactive surveys can limit your thinking to things that have happened already, and slow down your time to market by looping you in "build-launch-ask-later" cycles. Get to innovation faster; talk with your employees early and often.

Annette Promes, Chief Marketing Officer, Moz
LACK OF CLARITY ON SURVEY GOALS
If there is lack of clarity of what you’re trying to achieve with the survey from the beginning, you’re setting yourself up for a broken process.

When you start designing the survey questions, that lack of clarity will become obvious, and the questions will start to become confusing.

It also becomes much more difficult in terms of action planning. If you can keep your survey focused, your action planning becomes so much easier.

Constructing a survey without clear goals is like hunting with a blindfold over one’s eyes. Without a clear vision of a desired future state, it is nearly impossible for a survey creator to draft items that will illuminate that future state.

Doug Kirkpatrick,
Author of *Beyond Empowerment*
PITFALL
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PARTICIPATING FOR THE WRONG REASONS
Often, to incentivize employees to participate in the surveys, companies will offer up participation prizes.

This can backfire though, because instead of genuinely wanting to improve the culture and their own well-being, employees are responding simply to get that prize.

What you should do instead, is remind employees that the purpose of these surveys is to improve their lives at work.

Incentives can either positively or negatively manipulate the data and result in actions based on inaccurate or skewed information. Be careful!

Ben Peterson, CEO, BambooHR
PITFALL

EMPLOYEES NOT AWARE OF RESULTS
Employees want to be included in the conversation, and want to be made to feel like they matter.

It’s important that you include them in the action-planning process. That alone will make them more engaged.

It’s also an opportunity to follow up on some of the global problems that were found in the survey.

Make employees feel comfortable, and remove any of the fear from the survey process.

Employees want to know “what’s in it for me?”.
If you share the results with them, they’ll feel that you trust and respect them, which is so important for engagement

Benjamin Niaulin,
Microsoft MVP
CONCLUSION
These pitfalls are far too common, but are so easy to avoid. Managers should be doing everything they can to avoid these pitfalls, because employee surveys matter.

It’s important to have the right mindset going into the employee survey process. If you genuinely want to find out what employees are thinking so that you can improve things, then you’re doing it properly.

However, if you’re simply doing an employee engagement survey because someone in HR told you to do it, you’re setting yourself up for failure. Employees will disengage from the process, and won’t take any future initiative seriously.

You should be measuring and improving employee engagement all the time, because it will have huge effects on your business.
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A real-time report on the state of 10 metrics of employee engagement, including recognition.

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