Commentary

Organizational Surveys: A System for Employee Voice

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Although surveys are often used to assess and track employee attitudes and opinions over time and are used quite frequently by applied communication researchers, the use of surveys as a channel to voice employee attitudes and opinions has not been fully explored in the employee voice or basic organizational communication literature. With the increased call for accountability, effective applied communication researchers can play an important role in ensuring that organizations engage in the survey process in a manner that is “safe” for employees, and ethical and practical for the organization. Because the question of how to accomplish this task is complex and cannot be fully addressed within the constraints of a commentary, I offer three general principles to guide future researchers in helping overcome organizational communication problems:

1. Build trust in the organizational survey process, the researcher(s), and the organization.
2. Eliminate the adversarial relationship that often exists between management and employees who speak up.
3. Provide evidence that the organization does more than purport to value the things that it says it values.

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Corporate scandals at companies like Enron, Tyco International, and HealthSouth resulted in legislative changes which should encourage organizations to introduce
formal policies and programs to drive unethical behavior to the surface. According to Gayeski (1993), communication can be a professional practice where appropriate rules and tools enhance the utility of information.

Although surveys are often used to assess and track employee attitudes and opinions over time (Church, 2001) and are used quite frequently by applied communication researchers, the use of surveys as a channel to voice employee attitudes and opinions has not been fully explored in the employee voice or basic organizational communication literature. To paraphrase Kassing (1997, 1998, 2002), voice is the expression of opinions and concerns about organizational phenomena. Expressions may reveal content (agreement, suggestions, argument, and support) or discontent (disagreement, contradictory opinions, and/or divergent view). Expressions can be voiced between and among people internal and/or external to the organization. To be effectual, expressions must be voiced to people who are able to address the dissent concern directly. Organizations benefit when they can effectively incorporate employee feedback, particularly feedback that challenges accepted practices or policies.

In organizational settings, voice systems represent sanctioned channels for employees to express their content or discontent (Harlos, 2001). Most voice systems identified in the literature are open systems that identify the employee (e.g., face-to-face communications, email, unions, open-door policies, peer review panels/internal corporate tribunals, arbitration systems, ombudsmen, and performance appraisals). Additionally, although not often “formally sanctioned” in the workplace, failure to voice attitudes and opinions, and whistle-blowing, have been identified as forms of expressing dissent (Kassing, 1998; Westin, Kurtz, & Robbins, 1981).

Fearing retaliation, employees often will not voice discontent to leaders (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Nemeth, 1985; Swing, 1977). Although leaders are obligated to be open to bad news, dissent, warnings, and problem signs (Kassing, 1997; Redding, 1985; Seeger & Ulmer, 2003), studies show that employees are often reluctant to voice dissent about problems in the workplace (Moskal, 1991; Ryan & Oestreich, 1991), and feel that voicing their discontent is useless and even dangerous (Argyris, 1977; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Redding, 1985). However, employees often express their concerns to people who cannot effect the necessary change (Kassing, 1997).

This kind of ineffectual communication leaves those who need to know blindsided (Lewis, 2000) and can also bring about organizational rumbling (i.e., splinter groups; Edmondson & Munchus, 2005). Therefore, the identification and sanctioning of a channel that encourages all employees to voice dissent to effectual audiences without certain identification (thus reducing the threat of retaliation and rumbling) should be welcomed.

Moreover, Kraut (1996) argued that surveys can be used as “strategic tools” not only to measure but also to drive organizational change. Whether conducted by the organization or by an academic researcher who communicates results to management, organizational surveys allow employees to express their concerns with some degree of confidentiality and anonymity. In order to be effective, employees must have regular access to surveys (which can be achieved via the Internet/Intranet); those
conducting the research must be viewed as effectual audiences who can influence managers to address employees’ concerns; and leaders must respond with survey-based interventions.

With the increased call for accountability, effective applied communication researchers can play an important role in ensuring that organizations engage in the survey process in a manner that is “safe” for employees, and ethical and practical for the organization. Because the question of how to accomplish this task is complex and cannot be fully addressed within the constraints of a commentary, I offer three general principles to guide future researchers in helping overcome organizational communication problems:

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At a minimum, researchers must address these questions because no communication tool will be effective if the relationship between the organization and its employees is not addressed.

References


