



Avoiding the Engagement Survey Trap

by Steve Van Valin, CEO

Part I

It's a big moment when the employee engagement survey scores finally arrive. There are often jittery nerves upon opening the report to see what the numbers reveal this year. Then, with a big sigh, we start the process of trying to figure it all out. We know that following through on the survey results is critical to building an engaged culture.

What seems to be the most obvious and logical next step in the process is to assemble a "focus group" to review the scores and discuss *why* people may have answered a certain way. **However, conducting these sessions is often a huge mistake that does more harm than good.**

Here's what I've observed over the years regarding what I call the "engagement survey trap":

- 1. Trust breaker.** People are never quite sure how honest they can be in focus groups. There is always the fear that their opinion will be held against them. They also don't want to give up their own confidentiality by confessing that they gave a low score to a particular question. If there is any perception at all that their opinion will re-appear in some form in the future (in a performance review, for example), you will have lost their trust forever.
- 2. Focus on the negative.** Our natural inclination is to focus exclusively on the questions that have poor scores. The focus group participants, after years of conditioning, may automatically assume you want to go there. As a result, the session may not be seen as a positive experience but rather a demoralizing one. Only brave souls may attend if asked to volunteer next time. Ironically, it's usually the most engaged team members who volunteer to attend such focus groups, only to emerge feeling beaten down and dragged through the mud. It's a true buzz kill for the culture.
- 3. Past tense.** When we ask the WHY question, it almost always focuses on the past. Let's face it, the past is very murky and impossible to rectify. I've seen people discount a low score on a significant question simply because they assumed the team was in a bad mood on the day of the survey. Focus groups waste tons of time trying to reconcile the nebulous events of the past with the scores. Think about your last argument with a significant other about an issue that occurred in the past. How well did it go?
- 4. Ownership roulette.** When people tell you what's wrong about a situation, they naturally expect you to take their information and fix it. That's a big problem for the leader of a focus group because the ball (and it's often a big, ugly hairball) is now tossed into your court. The burden can be overwhelming if people are forthcoming and truly purge their concerns. Unless you facilitate potential solutions with them immediately, you are on the hook to solve their problems later. That's a lot to live up to and a recipe for further disappointment from the team. Participants will leave the meeting with an attitude of "We told them. Now we'll see if they do anything about it." As a result, the group owns nothing but expects a lot.

5. Sand bagging. If you see this happening, you know there is something rotten at the core of the team culture. I've seen groups focus on an insignificant, low-hanging fruit issue to avoid addressing a *real* issue that has emotional baggage or dangerous connotations. In fact, you may see teams discount an issue altogether so they are not held accountable to fix it in the future. This type of "all is well" sand bagging is a red flag indicating underlying problems of fear and/or lack of accountability within the team.

6. Survey sabotage. In this worst case scenario, I've had people confess to me that their team actually colluded to answer a question in the neutral category so they wouldn't have to be asked WHY again in the focus group! Their supervisor had made the survey experience so painful over the years, they admitted, that it wasn't worth being honest on the survey. This is a cultural train wreck. Obviously, nothing had ever been done about the issues uncovered by past surveys and the finger of blame had been pointed squarely back at the team. Perhaps some form of retribution also took place. Whatever the case, what is clear is that this team's entire investment of time, energy and money was worthless. Worse yet, the toxic supervisor received falsely inflated scores from the team, perpetuating a cycle of dysfunction.

For some reason, well-intended leaders and HR partners seem to go on autopilot and automatically conduct focus group sessions without thinking through a more effective alternative. Fortunately, there is a superior tactic to advance engagement and build the culture. Here's a hint: it's a vastly different experience that focuses on the future rather than the past.

Part II

The pitfalls of conducting a typical focus group session following the engagement survey results are many. Investigating the WHY behind the scores is rarely productive and can, paradoxically, have the opposite effect of your intentions. Unfortunately, conducting focus groups seems to be the knee-jerk reaction of many organizations, something that is automatically planned without thinking through a more creative and effective approach.

Obviously you want things to improve, not regress. So let's examine ways to avoid the common trap of post-survey focus groups and still make progress on engagement. We'll begin with a simple question: what is the most effective way to follow up with your team after the engagement scores are revealed?

The most important paradigm switch involves fundamentally changing the way you address the survey results with your team. Instead of looking in the rearview mirror to review the WHY of the results, *focus on the future* to define WHAT success looks like. The difference in the way your team will respond can be profound and serve as an "ah-ha" moment that itself elevates engagement. It's the difference between dwelling on a past that can't be changed versus envisioning a positive future. *You have the opportunity as a leader to create the conditions for success by inviting an open, healthy, constructive dialogue with your team.* Here's how you lead a process that has that positive future focus.

New focus, new name

First, rebrand the name of your post-survey meeting (hint: don't call it a focus group!). Leave any bad connotations and anxiety from the past behind and create a new name for a format that people can look forward to. The idea is to convey a feeling of creative brainstorming and a sense of optimism for solving problems. If you don't know what to call it, let the team tackle that challenge as the first item on the meeting agenda. And be sure to let them know definitively how the new approach is going to be different when you kick the meeting off.

Future-focused

Crafting questions that invite creative answers is a true art. This is the key to changing the feel of the meeting. Be certain that questions related to the survey focus on WHAT or HOW instead of WHY. WHAT and HOW point to the future and leave room for powerful, creative discussions about possibilities. Here's an example related to a challenging subject that is always an element in the survey:

GOOD: "What might increase the level of respect we have for each other on this team?"

Versus

BAD: "Why is the level of respect low within our team?"

The WHAT question gives people a chance to speak candidly about the future. In brainstorming, every answer is considered while judgment is suspended. The perceived danger of asking WHY is eliminated. Teammates are invited to paint a picture of what respect looks like in the future. As a result, you (the leader) and the entire team have a relevant goal to target and can determine action items to get there. By the way, if you listen keenly, you'll get the answer to the WHY question by default in a way that is completely honest. The psychological safety of generating ideas together will allow the truth to be presented in a constructive way.

Here are additional examples of future-focused questions on typical engagement survey "hot" topics:

Do ask: "How might we increase our response time to each other to overcome bureaucracy?"

Don't ask: "Why do we have an excessive amount of bureaucracy on our team?"

Do ask: "What can we put into place that will allow us to communicate more effectively with each other?"

Don't ask: "Why are we not communicating effectively?"

Do ask: "What would it look like if we had the highest possible level of trust with one another on this team?"

Don't ask: "Why do we not trust each other and score low on this question every year?"

Positive vision

The future can be a potent stimulator of optimism because of the possibilities it holds. The best minds and most engaged people on your team will relish the challenge to create a positive vision for the future. Leverage this principle for all it's worth by continuing to focus on what the vision looks like. Then, work backwards to determine the steps you need to take to get there together. Also, when you work through the issues revealed by the survey, don't forget to focus on the positive scores! It's an uplifting experience for the team to acknowledge the things it does well. It also gives you, as the leader, a great opportunity to take your strengths to the next level while celebrating the team's successes.

Creative collaboration

Before you launch into the meeting, implement the rules of brainstorming to reinforce the importance of generating ideas and to keep the team focused on discussing solutions. For example, seek a quantity of ideas at first, then identify the ones that have a lot of energy around them. Encourage people to piggyback on the prioritized ideas to build more complete solutions, including action steps. Everyone needs to feel they are playing a valuable part in the process.

Owning solutions

Creating solutions together allows for equal ownership and broader application of accountability. Rather than coming out of a focus group with all the action items focused on you (the leader), this new format should be

facilitated so that the *entire team agrees to the action items*. Build a specific list and confirm agreement regarding next steps. Publish it after the meeting and make the follow up an agenda item at future staff meetings.

If you identify an item that is solely your responsibility, ask the team for their support and feedback to ensure you are making progress. Don't just ask for general support and feedback! Be specific. Paint a picture of what effective support and feedback looks like. Then, when you receive that support and feedback, reinforce the team's behavior in a way that lets everyone know how much you value it. Set a whole new expectation for support and feedback so it becomes a cultural norm within your team.

Leader as catalyst

Approaching the survey results as a catalyst for positive change can have an enormous impact on the team's level of engagement. The evidence from the research done by Drs. Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer, published in the excellent book *The Progress Principle*, points to the leader's role in facilitating progress on meaningful work as the number one driver of engagement. That means your progress on tackling engagement issues together as a team actually serves as a catalyst of engagement!

Momentum of small wins

People generally have low expectations that anything different will happen as a result of taking the engagement survey. Achieving immediate small wins is a crucial factor that can change that mindset. People need to believe that progress is taking place before they will fully get on board. Kickstart momentum by identifying some low-hanging fruit items from the ideas the team generates. Focus on achieving those small goals, communicate the results, and give credit to the people that made it happen. Then keep the momentum going by identifying what's next. This process can make a real difference in the engagement level of your team.

Remember – the theme of the new approach outlined above is *future possibilities*, not an analysis of what happened in the past. The results of your survey are not the ultimate prize. The survey is simply a tool that serves as a snapshot in time showing where you are as a team. The ultimate prize is the higher level of engagement within your team that can result from following up on your survey results with a proactive, positive, and future-focused attitude.

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