

What's Next After Employee Opinion Survey?

By Uwe H Kaufmann

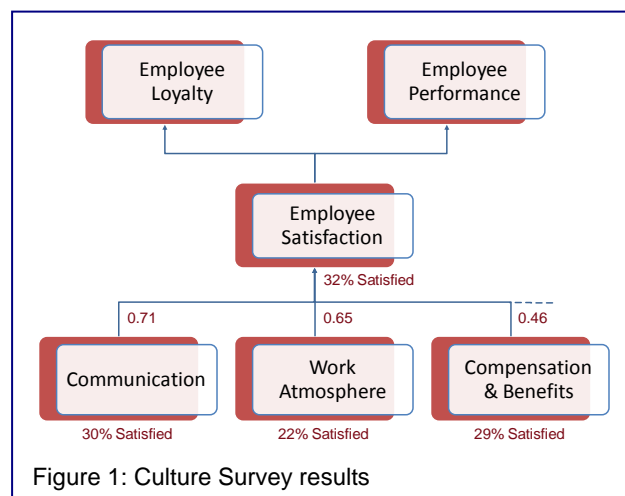
Background

OurBank is a small German bank with approximately 300 employees working either in the headquarter office or in one of the branches. OurBank went through an acquisition, i.e. we became part of a large American multi-national enterprise focussing on financial services.

Due to the acquisition and the resulting uncertainty, staff turnover was sky-high, morale was down and performance was unsatisfactory. All communication activities nicely drafted in the 100-day M&A plan were not able to make the turn-around. Further talking about “Change Management” would have been devastating. Surveying employee satisfaction every quarter only reemphasised the problem for the management and sent the wrong signal to the staff. So, what happens next?

Employee Survey Results

Analysing the latest employee survey data pinpointed major drivers for staff dissatisfaction as Communication, Work Atmosphere and Compensation & Benefits. Applying a well structured employee survey enabled the use of some simple statistics to derive the importance for the different categories. Communication came out on top, Work Atmosphere second and Compensation & Benefits ranked third. As usual, employee survey results only highlighted in which areas the symptoms for the problems occur. They did not show the details behind the numbers and hence could not be used to derive remedies.



Using WorkOut to Tackle Issues

Since OurBank was in a rather bad shape we needed to act quickly. And, based on the experience we had with previous attempts of introducing something “new” we concluded that all outside-in approaches – be it head-quarter-driven or led by consultants – would not work in our environment. We needed an approach with high staff involvement and accountability that could deliver results as soon as possible to drive motivation and increase credibility. We decided to deploy the so-called WorkOut to swiftly dive into the symptoms for staff dissatisfaction, get a clue about the underlying causes and draft action plans.

Successful WorkOuts require little time for the actual “event”. However, a workout’s success is assured by careful and thorough preparation. The **topics** for our three WorkOuts were given with Communication, Work Atmosphere and Compensation & Benefits. Although, these themes seem to sound HR related and would suggest an HR person to be sponsor or

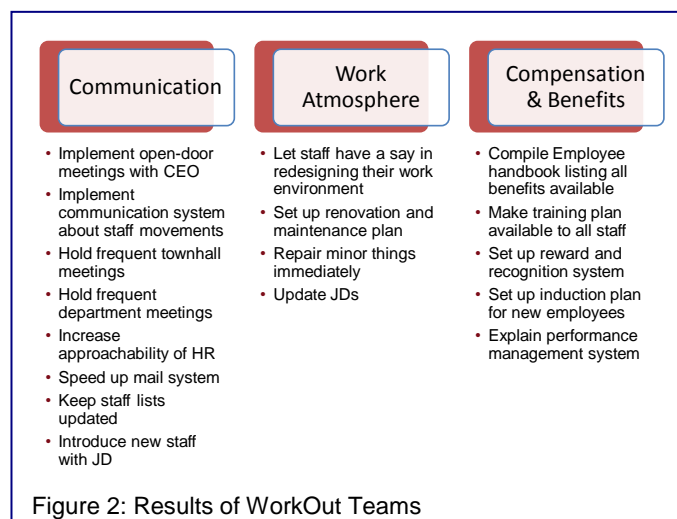
lead the WorkOut, we hesitated to go this obvious way. The major reason was that our staff saw the “new HR” as being “installed” by our new parent company, a situation that could hinder participation and open discussion. Instead, sponsorship for these three WorkOuts was given by well respected managers of departments or teams: our sales director, a branch leader and a key account manager.

After convincing these **sponsors** it was not difficult to find volunteers for the WorkOuts. Additionally, they could make sure we had a “good mix” in the teams by “volunteering” some people with a positive mindset towards common goals. Since we were able to involve branch staff and front line bankers who are normally good in building relationship and working in teams, it was rather easy to identify **facilitators** for our WorkOuts.

The **goals** were defined as increase in employee satisfaction in our three focus areas. The **preparation** for the WorkOuts by some of the team members – after a short briefing – included collecting information about the issues and the root causes. This very informal process was mostly done by chats with colleagues and friends who – after some warm-up – were willing to share their frustration and even give some ideas to overcome the issues.

The format the 3-day WorkOuts took were:

1. Identifying potential root causes for the issues
2. Prioritising these root causes
3. Generating solution ideas for major root causes
4. Prioritising ideas
5. Developing solutions and
6. Drafting implementation plan followed by
7. Sign-Off



At the end of the WorkOuts the teams presented their solution ideas and implementation plans to the sponsors

who had the task to make a decision. The decision was either “will be implemented”, “will be considered” or “not possible because...”. The aim was to demonstrate a commitment to as many implementable solutions as possible in order to send positive signals into the organisation.

Key to achieving this was excellent communication between sponsor who did not participate in the WorkOuts and the facilitators/team leaders. This communication was essential for avoiding surprises and frustration about impossible and impractical solutions thrown up for consideration at the end by doing the reality-check with the sponsor over the course of the team meetings.

Using TownHall Meetings to Reach Out to All Employees

Our WorkOuts ended on Friday. On Wednesday the following week, a TownHall meeting (all staff meeting) was scheduled – amongst other topics - to inform the whole organisation about the outcome of the WorkOuts. Although we had both, creative and impactful ideas for improvements and an immediate approval rate of more than 50% for all three groups, doubts

were on many faces of our staff. Therefore, the follow-through in implementing viable suggestions, led by sponsors and carried out by solution owners was critical.

Each WorkOut thus led to action plans and tracking systems to monitor implementation as well as long-term results. Only this would give us the reduction in staff turnover caused by dissatisfaction. We updated our WorkOut status on the intranet weekly to keep track of the implementation publicly. After two weeks, a decent percentage of the “smaller suggestions” were implemented already, after half a year 90% of all approved items were considered in place.

Conclusion

Collecting the Voice of Employees is a standard process in almost all modern organisations. Using the information collected in a structured way to the benefit of the organisation and following through to drive results, however, is not as common. WorkOut is one of the less technical, more employee engagement driven methods to “work out” relatively small issues in environments that lack copious amounts of “hard data”. This application cuts across industries and organisations. The benefits of WorkOuts are:

1. Involves many staff members on a voluntary basis, hence helps to drive motivation
2. Can work with little data and does not require complicated tools
3. Is designed to generate ideas for improvements quickly
4. Is designed to lead to some immediate changes and providing that the effects are still tenable in the long run
5. Requires signing-off the ideas and results by the management immediately and therefore ensuring public buy-in by the management

Using WorkOut is not only aiming on delivering results. It also puts tremendous emphasis on the way to get these results and planting the seeds for change in employees’ minds.

Remark

The success of approaches like Six Sigma or Lean must not blind-fold and lead us to the illusion of having a silver bullet that cures all aches.

“If you have only a hammer, everything looks like a nail”. Make sure you have more tools than the hammer and apply them appropriately.

About the Author

Dr Uwe H Kaufmann is the Singapore-based Managing Director of COE. He has extensive experience in implementing a variety of approaches to collect and analyse customer feedback, to optimise and to redesign processes as well as to enable organisational redesign and change. Uwe is a German national and can be reached at Uwe.Kaufmann@COE-Partners.com.