I Can't Get No Satisfaction
Observations by Alan Sadowsky

Almost every company that I've worked for in the past 10-15 years has found it necessary to implement some sort of Employee Survey. In some cases, it's been the result of growing complaints among employees. In other cases, it's the result of a high rate of employee turnover. In a very small number of cases, these surveys are done because senior management actually wants to get an idea about how employees feel. The vast majority of employee surveys however are born out of Human Resources, because it's the "appropriate" thing to do.

Most of the surveys today are presented as "employee satisfaction" assessments, and typically follow a common format and model:

1. They usually consist of 75-to-100 questions.
2. They are always anonymous.
3. They are always multiple-choice.
4. An outside company always tabulates the results.
5. They produce days (if not weeks) of follow-up reviews and meetings.

Depending on the size of the company, they can involve thousands of people, take countless hours to administer and complete, and provide little if any benefit to anyone other than the firm lucky enough to administer the survey. Those folks are making a pile of money.

When you look at the tens of thousands of layoffs that have taken place in the past year, and also look at the fact that the companies laying off these people are still showing a profit, you have to question whether employee satisfaction is truly a concern in the corporate boardroom.

When you look at the Enron debacle, and the devastating effect that it's had on almost every Enron employee, you have to question whether employee satisfaction is truly a concern in the corporate boardroom.

When you look at the rush to outsource and consolidate significant pieces of a company's core business, you have to question whether employee satisfaction is truly a concern in the corporate boardroom.

But let's focus on the issue, and not get sidetracked on other bones I have to pick with the business community…

I strongly believe that there are several inherent problems with the entire Employee Survey process, and I would like to address two of them in this editorial.

First, the nature of the questions themselves is at best subjective. There is too much

latitude in the wording of the questions, and too much room for broad misinterpretation. I also believe that the order in which the questions are presented is intentional, and purposefully influential.

Second, the spectrum of responses – ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" not only complicates the ability to properly communicate one's true feelings about a specific topic, but also complicates the ability to accurately measure the global response base. Together, these issues ultimately result in qualitative flaws in the final calculation of the survey outcome.

To correct the first problem, all questions and/or statements should be written in very simple and basic terms, so there is no question in anyone's mind as to what is being asked. The obvious advantage here is the elimination of potential misinterpretation, and an all-encompassing focus on getting genuine results to specific questions. For example, here's a statement that appears on most employee surveys:

"I have the necessary tools to do a good job."

A more appropriate statement would be:

"I would be able to do my job better if I had more of a say in the tools and training I receive."

The first statement makes the assumption that you have the necessary tools to do your job well. In this case, the "good job" criterion has already been established. The response then becomes strictly tools-specific, and doesn't provide any constructive information that the employer can use to determine "if" there is a problem, and exactly "what" that problem may be.

The second (suggested) statement makes no assumptions about what a "good job" is, and opens the door to motivating the employee to set his or her standards higher than what may be expected. Additionally, the response goes beyond the borders of being tools-specific, by taking into account factors like training, management, communication, process improvement, and productivity.

To correct the second problem, the only possible responses to all questions and/or statements should be either "yes" or "no". There is no better way to measure your results. Providing a myriad of "subjective" responses lends itself to "subjective" interpretation, and further clouds the final outcome. It's no secret that introducing more variables into the mix of results makes it easier to skew those results towards a 'desired" conclusion.

I strongly believe that there is tremendous value in Employee Surveys, but I also strongly believe that this value lies in the validity of the results obtained. If companies are honestly interested in what their employees have to say, there are better ways to accomplish that than through Employee Surveys. In fact, there are many of us in the workforce who subscribe to the precept that the introduction of an Employee Survey is a

sobering sign that the company has already lost touch with its employees, and there is much more at stake here than meets the eye. If however the survey were the only practical way to go, it would be nice to know that the survey itself had the ability to provide some meaningful results.