

How to facilitate effective action planning?

by

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Any ranking survey elicits a similar response to that of a live cricket match. Until the last ball the excitement is infinite. If you had bet on the winning team after the match, you would have got into the euphoria of celebration. If your team had lost, you would not want to even think about the match. Both such responses defeat the purpose of participating in a Best Places to Work survey. The survey is just an excuse to get the entire company to reflect on their people philosophy, behaviors, policies and practices. A top ranking is just a confirmation that while success is difficult to attain and even more difficult to maintain, the company is on the right track. A low score, especially if it comes as a rude surprise, is a wakeup call.

Hence action planning is an important next step after the announcement of the survey results. This article illustrates the common mistakes to avoid in action planning, an indicative action planning workshop structure, facilitation tips and steps to be taken following an action planning process.

Common Mistakes:

1. **Focusing on all the 57 statements:** All the statements in the GPTW survey are important. However a company cannot excel everywhere. Hence it has to decide action planning based on two considerations. Consideration one is which statements differentiate it from others and constitute the employer brand. On such statements, the company has to be the best among its benchmark companies (95th percentile and above). Consideration two is identifying statements that constitute hygiene expectations in that industry. For example a safe workplace is a hygiene expectation in a BPO. The company should be in the first quartile (75% and above) in such statements.
2. **Planning around the low scores:** There is always a temptation for HR or the Management to look at the lowest survey scores and make action plans around them. A better approach is to identify the strengths (life giving forces) and reflect how they can be leveraged to address the blocks.
3. **Ignoring the key drivers:** It is fairly obvious that not all the statements of a survey have an equal impact on overall employee perception. It is a simple process to statistically identify which are the factors which have a disproportionate impact on overall employee perception and work on them
4. **Leadership and HR department making action plans on their own:** When employees answer a survey, they generally expect that management and HR will do something about their engagement levels. Most companies fall into this trap and make unilateral action plans without

consulting employees. In reality, every employee contributes to his or her own engagement. Creating a great place to work® is not a “management project”. All employees have a stake in it. Involving all the employees in action planning is a clear message to employees saying, “Thank you for participating and giving an honest feedback. Now here are the results. Let’s understand and dialogue together and partner to create a great place to work.”

5. **Making plans based on the scores:** Survey scores indicate the symptoms and not the problem. The actual problems lie in the assumptions, management policies, stories, practices, symbols and rituals. Hence it is important to go deeper. Conducting focus group discussions with a cross section of employees provides rich input for any action planning workshop. In focus groups employees share stories collaborating the highs and lows in the survey report. These stories constitute the mindset of the collective (culture). They give insight into what’s right and what needs to be enhanced and what’s wrong and what needs to be changed. Also, employee comments from the survey provide a rich source of data and often help in identifying the root causes.

Indicative methodology for Action Planning:

Reflection: Share the survey scores with the leadership team, line managers and the entire organization in this order. One day is ideal and if that is not possible a minimum of half a day is required for facilitating an effective dialogue. While the internal/ external facilitator can conduct the leadership and line manager dialogues, the line managers should conduct such a dialogue across the organization in functional or cross functional teams. Dialogue begins with a non-judgmental absorption of the results. An honest sharing of understanding follows. Participants discuss surprises, blind spots and confirmation on areas where good work has happened. At this stage, there is a temptation to get into action planning and create a laundry list of to do’s. Skip such a discussion. Get the group to reflect on their employer brand promise and scores on the statements that reflect the brand promise (that creates the differentiation). Big ticket action planning will emerge from such statements. Then look at other items from the lens of bench mark companies especially that belong to your industry. There are certain basic expectations/ promises that all the companies in an industry make (similar to what we know as key success factors in strategy). Ensure there are plans to meet these basic expectations. However the group has to expend its energies in realizing its brand promise.

Organization wide ownership building: This can be done in cross functional or functional groups. You may involve 25-200 people at a time. In case you want to conduct a reflection process for large groups, use large scale interactive process (LSIP) methodologies. For small groups, an island seating arrangement is ideal for a dialogue. After sharing the survey results, get the participants to reflect on the survey result and capture stories that encapsulate the participant’s experiences on both high and low scores. As a next step in the process, get the participants to dig deep into the stories to identify the root causes of high and low scores. Participants classify the factors under policy related, practice related

and skill related. While policy related are presented to management as recommendations, detailed action plans can be made around the practice and skill areas. Each participant also makes personal action plans to improve his/ her engagement and the work team engagement. Line Managers reiterate their commitment to the process and the action plans.

Aligning HR policies, practices, symbols and rituals: The reflection events will bring out clear connects and disconnects in the HR policies, practices, symbols and rituals with living the Great place to work® dream. Do not make this the HR department's agenda. Constitute a cross functional "Change Maker Team" and give them the mandate to design and implement for alignment. Such a team should be for a 90 day period after which a new team should be constituted. HR department facilitates and supports such a team. The team should report to the CEO or a senior leader for effective results.

Aligning leadership style: You may notice that the leadership style of all the members in the leadership team and the line managers may not be in synchronization with the great place to work® behaviors. It is important to provide coaching and training support to help members align their leadership style with GPTW behaviors. Using GPTW behaviors as prerequisites for career development generally helps in achieving the alignment.

Ongoing Reflection dialogues: Once in a quarter using a random sample conduct pulse checks to learn about employee perception. The pulse checks could be done using a questionnaire or a focus group methodology. Such a quarterly reflection helps in keeping on course and builds a sustainable great place to work culture.

Facilitation Tips:

Action planning is not an activity; it is an engaging and an ongoing process: Every organization has a rhythm. Cultural change is an ongoing process. Do not expect miracles at the end of the action planning workshop. View the action planning as an intervention and not as an event. Weave the intervention with mindset change, skill building, coaching, positive reinforcements and alignment with HR and Operational systems.

Use Appreciate Inquiry: Organizations which have low scores and poor stories on specific statements surprisingly also contain islands with the system which practice contra behaviors. Identifying, celebrating and learning from such stories help in transforming the organization. This approach known as appreciative inquiry is radically different from the traditional problem solving approach.

GPTW is a social contract and not an economic contract: Do not fall into the trap of overemphasizing economic benefits from becoming a great place to work®. Research indicates a definite business case for becoming a great place to work® organization. However, it is important to enable the leaders and employees of the organization to appreciate that organizations are social bodies as much as economic bodies. Being fair, respectful, building trust are not opportunistic ideas, they are basic requirements

irrespective of whether an organization is doing well or not. Doing well is a function of the leadership capacity to channelize such a philosophy.

Conclusion:

Participating in a survey is a double edged sword. While it provides a vent to the positive and negative energies of employees, if the survey results are not handled well, it would create greater dissatisfaction and cynicism for any such survey in future. Hence leaders are advised to use the power of the survey to build greater ownership and commitment amongst its employees and live the great place to work dream.

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