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Improving the Customer Experience with Internal Partner Surveys

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To deliver a great customer experience, a firm has to operate as a well-coordinated team all focused seamlessly on delivering a great customer experience. That means not only front-line but operations, technology, and staff functions as well. This leads us to the importance of each function getting feedback from their internal partners.

Let's take a moment to differentiate internal partner feedback from other forms of employee feedback:

- Employee surveys tend to focus on the big picture: training, management, rewards and compensation.

- At the other end of the spectrum we have 360 feedback that focuses on the interactions between individuals working together (sometimes in the same function; sometimes in different functions).

- Internal partner feedback operates in the space in between – feedback between specific functions regarding how well they work together.

  - While the primary focus is on delivering to the customer, the feedback does not have to be limited to tasks that directly or indirectly affect the customer.

Other types of feedback can supplement the internal partner feedback. Elements of the employee survey may be assigned to specific functions such as Human Resources or IT. Similarly, 360 feedback from team members from other functions can provide additional insight as well. But the internal partner survey focuses specifically on the white space between functions where they must cooperate and interact.

Labels matter as well. You will sometimes hear people talking about internal customers rather than internal partners. From a practical perspective, there is not much difference. You will collect the data the same way and use it in the same way. However, it matters a great deal in setting the tone for a customer centric organization.

- First, internal partner makes it clear that everyone in the company has an obligation to consider how their function impacts the customer experience. It conveys that even if you do not interact with customers, you still have a role in the customer experience.

- Second, internal partner fosters two-way communication. The best solution may come from changes in both functions. But that will not happen if one function is in the "customer" role and not soliciting or acting on feedback.

DESIGNING A SUCCESSFUL INTERNAL PARTNER FEEDBACK PROGRAM

The first element is the name itself. Earlier versions of these programs were often referred to as internal customer feedback. The problem with that is not just semantics. Internal customer feedback is deficient in 2 important ways:

- The emphasis shifts away from the customer and to the front-line. It is no longer about the customer experience but about the front-line employee experience.

- More importantly, the feedback is one directional. To maximize results, you need both perspectives. As mentioned above, the source of problems is often in the white space between functions and unless you get feedback from both groups, you only have half the story.

There is no one way to build a successful internal partner feedback program but there are some guideposts.

- **Develop a regular rhythm.** It could be annual, semi-annual, or some other schedule. But make it an expected recurring event. Avoid being so frequent that the survey is disrupting work flow and/or leaves insufficient time to address issues from the last wave.

- **Avoid jargon. That includes acronyms.** You want it to be easy for partners in other groups to know what function they are being asked to rate. Include descriptions of what the group does where necessary.

- **Don't get too granular.** This includes both organizational subgroups and specific questions. The goal is to identify key pain points in working together. Cross functional teams can get into the details.

- **Avoid comparisons.** This is a partnership not a competition. The goal is to get better at working together not be the "winning" partner.

- **Ask for comments.** Don't be afraid of open-ends. Some of the best programs only ask 1 or 2 ratings and then targeted open-ends. Machine coding allows us to process large volumes of comments for easy categorization and review.

Internal partner feedback can be an important supplement to traditional employee feedback programs. Just as with customer feedback, action planning and follow-up will be key.

COACHING EMPLOYEES ON GIVING FEEDBACK

As with 360 performance feedback, it is important to coach employees on how to give feedback that will be meaningful and useful.

- **Offer constructive feedback.** There can be a human tendency to offer biting sarcastic feedback especially when frustrated. But that feedback is rarely helpful and tends to lead the partners to shut down.

- **Be balanced.** It is just as important to understand what is working well. One way to encourage that is right in the questionnaire design. Using Stop-Start-Continue open-end questions can encourage a balanced view, i.e.:

  - What are things we should stop doing to improve performance?

  - What are things we should start doing to improve performance?

  - What things are working well that we need to continue to do?

- **Be specific.** Whether positive or negative feedback, encourage employees to be as specific as possible. Use examples where possible. SmartProbe™ can encourage more robust open-end responses in online surveys.

  - Note: SmartProbe™ is an option that can be added to any online survey. SmartProbe™ simulates what live interviewers do: ask for additional information/probing specific reasons to obtain tone of respondent and the experience, and their true feelings about the interaction. Probing can be based on the number of words in the response or on pre-defined key words to elicit more detail.

- **Rate what you know.** It is important to allow employees to opt out. If they really feel they do not have enough interaction to provide feedback, do not force it.

TAKING ACTION ON INTERNAL PARTNER FEEDBACK

Internal partner feedback can be an important supplement to traditional employee feedback programs. Just as with customer feedback, action planning and follow-up will be key. In some cases, low hanging fruit will be identified that can result in easy fixes. In other cases, there may be need for significant process redesign planned and implemented by cross functional teams. Firms that have a process improvement program in place, e.g., Six Sigma, Lean Six Sigma, should be able to incorporate internal partner feedback into the pipeline for projects. Where those more formal programs do not exist, the company will need to plan for how to both prioritize the issues to be addressed and how to create and empower teams to address those issues.

CONCLUSION

While leveraging internal partner feedback is not necessarily easy, the rewards can be great. As any expert in process improvement will tell, the most persistent and costly problems can often be traced to the white space between formal functions. Internal partner feedback can bring these issues out into the light.

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