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The Survey That Measured Fear

Why your annual engagement survey hears the wrong people, and what to ask instead

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The short version

No action is worse than no survey. If you ask people for their opinion and nothing changes, you have told them their time was wasted.

The survey hears the wrong voices. Long-tenured high performers stop answering honestly. New people play it safe. Unhappy people unload. Your comments skew toward the people you are least likely to keep.

Most survey programs never close the loop. In 2026 research from Perceptyx, 71% of employees said their company shares survey results. Only 51% said anything actually improved.

Ask better questions in person. The question that moved our engagement score was simple: if you had no money but could fix one thing, what would it be?

The ritual

It is September. There is cake in the break room. It is the only month all year with birthday cake.

There is a bowl of candy bars on the table. The boss calls to say thank you for your hard work. It is the only recognition call you get all year, and it comes the week before the survey launches.

The email goes out. Subject line: we value your feedback. All responses are anonymous.

Everyone on the floor knows how this works. People call it "five to stay alive." On a one-to-five scale, a five is invisible. A two gets traced back to you.

Results come back weeks later in a beautiful slide deck. Scores are up two points from last year. Leadership celebrates. A town hall gets scheduled.

Meanwhile, 40% of the team will quit this year. The survey score and the turnover number do not move together. They are not measuring the same thing.

The survey hears the wrong voices

Every survey assumes the answers represent your workforce. They do not. Three groups answer in three very different ways.

1. **Your long-tenured people check out.** They have taken this survey every year. They have watched nothing change. So why bother? They mark it down the middle, or skip it, and they leave the comment box empty.
2. **Your new people play it safe.** They are generally happy, and they fill it out. But they are just starting their careers and they do not believe it is anonymous. They are not going to risk being honest.
3. **Your unhappy people unload.** Someone who already has one foot out the door has a lot to say, and the comment box is their chance to say it.

Now aggregate the comments. They skew toward unhappy people and new people. The voice you are missing is the one that matters most: the happy, long-tenured, high performers who know how the work actually gets done.

And every answer counts the same. Your top performer's score weighs exactly as much as the score of someone who is already planning to leave. A better approach is to look at engagement next to performance, so you know whose experience you are actually measuring.

Anonymous is a promise employees do not believe

Most surveys require a login with an employee ID or email. That makes them confidential, not anonymous. The vendor knows who said what. Employees understand the difference, even when nobody explains it.

Small teams make it worse. If your manager is the problem and your team has six people, you are not going to write that down. Your manager reads the comments. It would not be hard to figure out who wrote them.

So people disguise their writing. They skip capital letters they would normally use. They avoid words they normally say. Think about that. Your employees are working to hide their own voice from the survey that claims to want it.

The participation rate is not what it looks like

Survey programs love to report 80% participation. Here is how that number often gets made.

1. **There is a list of names.** Managers get a report of who has not taken the survey yet: go talk to these 10 people.
2. **People get called in.** Not taking the survey becomes a performance conversation.
3. **Some managers watch.** Some managers have sat in the office and watched the screen while an employee filled it out.

By the time a pressured employee finally takes the survey, they are annoyed. How honest do you think that answer is?

All that pressure produces good-looking results. Everyone can celebrate the two-point gain. It does not mean anyone is more likely to stay.

Where the feedback goes to die

Even honest feedback has a long trip to make. A frontline employee with a great idea can be ten steps away from anyone who can act on it. Every step is a filter.

Leaders at the top cannot read thousands of comments, so someone summarizes them. That summary is another filter. By the time an idea reaches a decision maker, it has been smoothed into a theme on a slide.

The vendors know this. A few years ago the big survey companies realized many clients were not using their reports at all. Companies paid for the survey, received the deck, printed it, put it on a desk, and never held a follow-up meeting.

Perceptyx's 2026 State of Employee Listening research puts numbers on the gap. 71% of employees said their organization shares survey results. 59% said action plans are created. Only 51% said the feedback led to any actual improvement.

No action is worse than no survey. When you ask for someone's opinion and nothing visible happens, you teach them that speaking up is a waste of time. Next year, they answer accordingly.

Why companies keep doing it anyway

When I stopped leaning on our annual survey, I got pushback. Some of it was fair. All of it was predictable.

- 1. It costs a lot, so it has to work.** We were spending more than \$1 million a year on the survey. When you spend that much, people want to see year-over-year improvement.
- 2. Leaders were bonused on the score.** The number became the goal, even though it did not tie to turnover, customer results or anything else we were trying to fix.
- 3. Everyone else does it.** Most large companies run an annual survey. Nobody wants to be the one that stopped.
- 4. It feels like action.** Running a survey feels like listening, even when nothing changes afterward.

What we did instead: magic wand interviews

Before I founded EIP, I spent 20 years in operations at a Fortune 10 company. On my teams, we replaced most of our reliance on the survey with conversations. Most people call them stay interviews. We called them magic wand interviews, because of the first question.

The magic wand questions

If you had a magic wand, what part of your job would you eliminate to make things better for you?

What would it take to get you to go to a competitor?

When you go home and talk to your family about your job, what do you usually say first?

If you had unlimited money, what would you fix?

If you had unlimited resources, what would you fix?

If you could only fix one thing, what would it be?

If you had no money, but could fix one thing, what would it be? This is the one that changed everything.

The "no money" answers were gold. They were problems we could fix quickly, without waiting for budget or corporate approval. So we fixed them, and we told people we did.

Small fixes, big impact

- 1. Meeting times.** We moved meetings to different times of day, because people had to pick up their kids.
- 2. Recognition.** We changed how we recognized people, including recognizing them publicly, not just once a year.

3. Report colors. Our reports were designed in color, but the printers were black and white. Printed out, every line looked the same. We fixed the colors.

Some of these sound almost silly. That is the point. They cost nothing, they were fast, and they proved that someone was listening.

72 to 81

engagement score on my teams

#1

in the division, and the most improved

The score went up because we stopped chasing the score. We fixed what people told us, in person, and closed the loop.

What to do instead

- 1. Decide before you survey.** If you are not prepared to act on what you hear within 30 days and tell people what you did, do not ask.
- 2. Run magic wand interviews.** Start with your long-tenured high performers, the voices your survey is missing. Ask the no-money question every time.
- 3. Fix the free things first.** The no-money list is your quick-win list. Most of it needs a decision, not a budget.
- 4. Close the loop by name.** Tell the people who raised it what you did. Not a company-wide memo. A conversation.
- 5. Stop paying leaders for the score.** Tie incentives to outcomes like retention of your best people, not to survey points.
- 6. Read the score next to turnover.** If engagement is up and your best people are still leaving, believe the turnover number.

Take action this week

CEO: Ask two questions about last year's survey. What specific actions came from it? Which employees were told about those actions by name? If neither answer is clear, fix the follow-through or stop running it.

Manager: Ask each person on your team the no-money question this month. Pick one answer you can fix without approval. Fix it, and tell them.

Supervisor: Think about the last time someone gave you honest feedback. What did you do with it? Your team remembers, and it decides what they tell you next.

How EIP helps

You may be able to stop paying for an annual survey that tells you what happened last year.

Honest Read™ gets the answers employees will not put in a survey, through interviews and small listening sessions run outside your chain of command. Then it helps you close the loop.

Flight Risk Score™ (patent pending) uses HR data you already have to show who needs a conversation now, and what to raise. No surveys and no integration.

Our Council of current and former executives reviews the findings before anything is recommended. Then we stay with you through the fix.

Start with a conversation: eip360.com | hello@eip360.com

Sources

Ewen, L. "HR workload remains a top barrier to listening program success, report says." HR Dive, March 31, 2026, reporting Perceptyx's State of Employee Listening research. hrdive.com

Stories are from the author's own career at a Fortune 10 company. Names, places and identifying details are withheld.