For starters, stop thinking of employee engagement as a plug-and-play activity. Successful employee-engagement practice is not about plugging in a set of tools and techniques that you just read about in some hotshot guru's latest book—and then expecting engaged employees to magically appear. It's appealing to think that because an initiative worked well at another firm, it will work wonders for you, too. Although it is true that certain methods are generally more effective than others, your company isn't general. You need to implement tactics specific to your situation. To figure out what those techniques are, leaders must first engage with their people. How you engage with employees is as important as the tactics you use.

Unfortunately, there is an increasing sense of unease about the growing distance between managers and those they manage. As executives spend more and more of their days in meet-

Surveying the Surveyors

Before you can increase employee engagement at your organization, you have to measure it, right? And to do that, you may want to begin by asking your workers the obvious question: "Do you feel engaged at work?" But hold on—*engaged* means different things to different people, none of which may coincide with your definition. This begs the question: What *exactly* are you measuring when it comes to employee engagement: satisfaction? happiness? morale? commitment?

Until about fifteen years ago, businesses often surveyed employees about some combination of these. But in the mid-1990s, some companies soured on satisfaction surveys because the answers they were getting weren't all that useful: They didn't change significantly year to year, and results didn't differ much between organizations, according to Ted Marusarz, leader of global engagement and culture at Hewitt Associates. Yet the main problem with surveys that simply gauged happiness or satisfaction was that top managers didn't know what to do with the results. Sixty percent of your workers are happy—OK, now what?

Increasingly, companies are less interested in happiness than in learning whether workers are emotionally involved with their work or, as Mercer puts it, in a "psychological state in which employees feel a vested interest in the company's success and are both willing and motivated to perform to levels that exceed the stated job requirements." Essentially, *engaged*. "For many years, we conducted long employee surveys, brought back a bunch of data, and found out that managers would have a tough time using the infor-

mation," says Jim Harter, Gallup's chief scientist for workplace management and well-being. "'Are you happy? Are you satisfied?' We've found that these are nice questions, but they are not how you measure engagement."

But they are how you might *start* to measure engagement. Many survey firms continue to ask what are known as reflective questions (often in the form of statements) that measure whether workers feel connected, satisfied, loyal, proud, etc. For example, Mercer's Employee Engagement Index asks individuals to rate five statements, including, "I feel a strong sense of commitment to this company and I am not considering leaving this company in the next 12 months." The Conference Board's Global Barometer for Measuring Employee Engagement is an eight-question survey composed of statements such as, "I am proud to work for (company name)," "My job gives me a feeling of accomplishment," and, "Overall, I am satisfied with my job." A main value of asking these questions, says John Gibbons, The Conference Board's senior adviser on employee engagement, is that doing so allows corporations to benchmark results over time and against other companies. Still, beyond benchmarking, the same question remains: Now what?

Most consultants today agree that it's not enough to measure *where* your organization's engagement levels are—you need to know *why* they fall where they do. By determining the specific drivers of engagement within a business, managers will have a better idea of the areas upon which to act to boost or maintain engagement. Thus, The Conference

ings with other executives, the engagement gap grows between them and their subordinates. Meanwhile, people want leaders who understand them and the work they do. They do not want leaders who are missing in action.

Nothing beats direct interaction between management and workers. It is foolish to expect that sending leaders to employee-engagement training will create an engaged organization overnight. Such training is only the beginning: Following the workshops, there needs to be time and opportunity for leaders to come together and share their learning so they improve over time.

THERMOMETER SOLUTIONS

Of course, you'll want to know if your efforts are working—and what better way than simply to ask your workers? Indeed, engagement surveys are great, providing information about strengths and areas for improvement. (That is, if you ask the right questions. See "Surveying the Surveyors," below.) Over time, you can follow engagement trends as well as benchmark within your organization and against other businesses. Be careful, though, that surveys don't lead to "thermometer solutions"—those based on measurements without understanding underlying causes.

For example, one manufacturer recently pored over its latest engagement-survey results; top managers were distressed to find low scores for employee recognition. The company's response: an employee-recognition program, complete with logo clothing and monetary rewards for high performance. A year later, management anxiously awaited new survey results. To their dismay, nothing had changed—employee recognition was still dismal.

The organization had created a classic thermometer solution by recognizing the problem, developing a solution, and implementing it without ever talking with those who filled out

Board packages its Barometer with a series of forty-six questions pertaining to organizational health, managerial quality, job design, workplace readiness, and extrinsic rewards. Similarly, after Hewitt asks its initial six reflective questions, the firm goes on to quiz respondents about growth opportunities, recognition, work/life balance, and other relevant issues.

Gallup, though, insists that it requires only twelve questions—the company's famous Q12—to identify the actionable core elements "that best predict employee and workgroup performance." Harter reveals that it took fifteen million responses before Gallup finally settled on the current version of the Q12, which includes statements such as, "I know what is expected of me at work," "In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work," and, "My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person."

"Over many decades, we'd collected tons of studies of organizations with the belief that every organization is different," Harter says. "So we thought that every company needed its own employee-opinion survey to capture what the culture is like. We used to think we had to tweak surveys by company, industry, even the wording of the questions. Over time, empirically, we found out that that wasn't really the case. These twelve statements work across all organizations. The only things you need to tweak are how you roll out the survey and the training afterward. Long surveys aren't necessary to find out what really matters in the workplace."

Not everyone agrees that a dozen questions are sufficient to measure engagement accurately. A typical Mercer survey is seventy questions, about 85 percent of which the firm pulls from its bank of 125 questions. The rest are customized per company, as are up to one-third of the questions on a Hewitt survey. "One size does not fit all," suggests Pete Foley, a principal at Mercer. "You have to get to know the company, people, strategies, and skills that are needed." Additionally, he believes that too many surveys don't move beyond "me issues"—my pay, my boss, my job—to address "we issues" with questions such as, "How can we operate more efficiently?" and, "How can we remove barriers so that employees can feel better able to contribute?"

In the end, the hardest part about surveying workers has nothing to do with the process itself. Instead, it's what happens—or doesn't happen—afterward. Many companies treat the surveys as the end of a project rather than the beginning. "It's easy to design a survey and collect data," Foley says. "The bigger challenge is doing something about it. Oftentimes, companies fail here." After organizations receive survey results, many neglect to strategize on ways to sustain or bolster engagement, which often involves education and training. "An employee-engagement survey is an opportunity to reconnect with workers," Hewitt's Marusarz points out. "Think about it as a communication tool as opposed to an assessment."

In fact, Marusarz has another piece of advice for organizations: "If you're not going to do anything useful with the information, you're better off not even collecting it."

—Vadim Liberman