Data Driven Organizations Case Study: Project Oxygen – Avi Skidelsky

Google is perhaps the most famous company in the world and largely one of the most successful, enough that there’s an acronym devoted to Google and a few other tech giants including Amazon and Facebook (now Meta). However, Google, like any company, had it’s issues. Google places a lot of importance on their engineers and given the technological nature of the company, that’s where the problem arose.

Since Google is first and foremost a technology company, it was and likely still is made up of engineers of one kind or another and those employees are among the most prioritized. Google operated on a project basis so typically there was a lot of change in employees reporting to various managers. They also noticed that engineers don’t like to be managed too much and would rather be coding and working than sitting in meetings and being micromanaged, and there is a very fine line between guiding and micromanaging when it comes to projects. Because of this, Prasad Setty and the people ops department founded PiLab to create Project Oxygen, trying to answer the question, are managers even needed for employees and projects like these?

The PiLab team first tried to seek out the relationship between employee turnover and quality of managers by looking at exit interviews. They discovered very little correlation and decided to abandon this idea due to low turnover rate.

Their second round of research focused on “Googlegeist” ratings and performance reviews. Based off of these metrics PiLab was saw incremental relationships which was exciting seeing as they didn’t expect to find anything. They were able to identify eight characteristics that separated the top scoring managers from the lowest scoring managers. They used this list of characteristics to create courses and initiatives for each of the eight characteristics to improve quality of managers.

To identify the managers that were “recommended” to attend these courses, they created two surveys, the upward feedback survey (UFS) for global business organization and G&A departments and the tech managers survey for engineering groups. Each survey consisted of 16 questions that spanned the eight identified characteristics. These questions were answered on a scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. These were voluntary and individual surveys were shown to managers with a substantial amount of reports.

Thanks to this process, incentives like the great manager award were created and because of all of these things, favorable scores rose from 83% to 88%. Five percent doesn’t seem like a crazy amount but in an organization as large as Google that five percent is invaluable. Due to the overachieving nature of a lot of Google employees, managers started to see these results as a competition and often wanted to improve their results without being prompted.

Since engineers are analytical minds, showing them data and the accompanying visualizations were effective in convincing them of the quality of research done by people ops and the PiLab. They brought in analysts, which made up PiLab, to show these findings so that they would be taken seriously that it’s not just some HR initiative, it’s quantitative and done by people who know what they’re doing, Google data, for Google studies, by Google employees, for Google use. While it’s not easy to quickly glance at the data and instantly understand what’s happening, it does a good job of showing the effects of good managers on various factors. The fact that it’s not easy to understand is because the data itself is complicated but the text boxes accompanying the chart make it much easier to understand and make inferences from.