Introduction/Background:

In doing background research, I came upon different views of employee satisfaction surveys. However, after scouring a variety of sources I found an approach that I think well suits the format of your iteration.

Professor Armin Trost teaches human resources at Furtwangen University in Schwarzwald, Germany. As a consultant for a myriad of large corporations such as Lufthansa, Deutsche Telekom, and Audi, he has established himself as a brilliant mind in talent acquisition and HR. In speaking about our current type of survey, he said the following “(Try to think about what the employee is saying, not what the question is asking)”. In a video ironically called ‘Employee Surveys don’t Work’, Professor Trost lays out how he believes employee surveys should be used to affect worker sentiment in your organization.

To begin, Trost starts by describing how he sees employee surveys mismanaged, so as to distinguish what makes these questionnaires effective. From his experience, organizations generally start by using a survey to attempt analyzing a potential improvement in the environment. In other words, they use the survey to tell them where issues in employee sentiment exist. When this issue is seen and interpreted by management, they enact policies or actions to raise employee sentiment for the next iteration of the survey.

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| Survey Employees  (Looking for problems) |  | Identify potential improvements  (Plan to fix problems) |  | Attempt to achieve targets (Fix problems) |

Figure 1: A misguided decision flow process involving employee satisfaction surveys, according to Professor Trost

However, this involves a flaw. The format above assumes that you know what questions to ask in the first place. The most important part of designing a survey comes from understanding what you want to ask your employees and presenting that question clearly.

Trying to use surveys to accurately understand the intricacies of your ground level operations is a misuse of what the tool is used for. In a description of the traditional survey process, Professor Trost denotes a step of the system as ‘prestudy’. This is a reconnaissance period, in which the leadership tries to question their understanding of the workplace. Understanding individual sentiment throughout your organization allows you as a leadership team to understand why people might feel satisfied or dissatisfied with the organization.

Once a potential improvement is identified, use the employee survey to measure an indicator associated with the causal factor. Use the current year’s survey to get a baseline for the question, then compare with data as it is gathered over the next few periods. The ideal scenario involves some sort of action on the part of leadership at an executive or local level to improve that indicator, which would thereby improve employee satisfaction with the organization.

In order to find an appropriate indicator, I would reference an important statement by Professor Trost; “Think about the answer they will give you, not what the question is asking.” Try to narrow the possible answer of a question to the point that a response gives exactly the type of information that you are looking to extract, so as to be able to compare it to other responses.

Now that we have a variable we want to affect, use changes to the workplace to change the environment as you wish. Then, use the indicators to mark your progress. Set targets and do the best to achieve them, then look to the same prestudy methods of gaining intelligence on how employees feel towards the issue after the workplace changes.

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| Prestudy  (Looking for problems) |  | Determine indicators |  | Survey for indicators (Baseline or Control Values) |  | Enact Workplace Changes (Try to fix problems) |  | Resurvey (Compare against Control, try to reach targets) |

Figure : A suggested decision flow process for improving the workplace utilizing employee satisfaction surveys

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| To clarify, I’ll use a hypothetical scenario using our survey as a template (Please note that this scenario is not indictive of the actual results):  Take as given that we conduct a prestudy, speaking to individuals at a variety of different levels throughout the organization. In this portion, we seem to see an aggregate feeling that communication between the various levels of the hierarchy is inefficient in some way. We will treat communication as purely the information exchanged between the various levels of the hierarchy, NOT the effectiveness of leadership to act on that information.  Now that we’ve identified an issue, we find a way to measure how individuals feel about communication among different levels of the system. I would argue that there are several key questions to pay attention to within the survey that may act as indicators.  “My voice is heard in my department or program” (Meaningful work) – The question is good, but the wording is vague. If the terms of department and program are left to an individual’s discretion, they may answer with the entire organization in mind or just their immediate environment.  Narrowing this question to analyze one relationship will tell you more than asking about the general systems ability to accept grassroots input. An example of the reworded question might be: “My immediate supervisors hear what I have to say.” Or “Executive management understands my department’s needs.”  “Supervision effectively communicated with all team members” (Supervision) – This is a well worded question that analyzes the relationship between middle management and grassroots employees.  Now that we have 2 indicators for the communication between various levels of the organization, we survey the population to get an accurate baseline response set. Now that we have our original data, we create a program or change within the workplace aimed at helping communication between the different layers of the organization and use future surveys as a way to measure the effectiveness of various solutions.  Now that we have 2 indicator questions, we will enact a workplace change to address the issue. As time goes on, we will use future survey results to measure the impact of our environmental revisions. |

Methodology:

This year will be about creating baseline statistics of the various questions. I will create various analysis useful for comparing our current data with that of future surveys to determine the changes in the workplace environment.

Results:

Conclusion:

There are several changes that I argue would help increase the effectiveness of the employee survey from its current format. To begin, I would group questions, but I wouldn’t consider all of them to aggregate to some value. The information here specifies where there might be problems, not an accurate overview of how influential the factors are.

While I do agree in the effectiveness of having categories of questions aimed at middle management and executive leadership, I would change the questions in the ‘Meaningful work’ category to serve some other purpose. What do you mean by Meaningful work? Is it the pride with which individuals take in their job? Or is it the ability of the organization to fulfill the goal set to them?

The meaningful work category seems to be a measure of various aspects of the organizational culture. Between asking its internal reward and input tendencies via the questions “I feel appreciated for the work that I do” and “My voice is heard in my department/program”. So in the interest of clarifying presentations, I would change the meaningful work category to work culture.

Next, and most importantly, I would ensure consistent archiving of each periods surveys. Having the raw information will leave open lines of questioning for future analysts.

Finally, I would try to do pronounced reconnaissance on your workplace environment before the next survey. Understand how people feel and think about your organization, and the sources of strife that can be analyzed with good survey questioning. Think about questions you can ask to your employees that result in the same categorical responses (Poor-Excellent) that give you specific information about how employees feel.