Manager Training for the 2015 Survey Report  
November 16, 2015 Webinar Questions and Answers from Dr. Brandon Sullivan

Q1: What is the biggest take away for leaders from today’s presentation?
A1: The biggest take away would be the points covered on slide four. There are a lot of details and data and many different things we covered. However, the most important thing to remember is these three pieces. You do not need to be a statistician. As long as you are focusing on how to involve faculty and staff in discussing the results, sharing the results, and taking action, you are going to be advancing engagement. That is the really main take away from this slide and the presentation.

Q2: How will engagement strategies be impacted by the decision to not administer the survey next year, and possibly switch to every other year? How does that impact action strategies or an overall engagement strategy?
A2: Employee engagement happens every day whether you are attending to it or not. So, doing a survey is a way of systematically gathering input from faculty and staff that can inform a better understanding of what you do well, and where to take action to improve, so it really should not have a big impact on engagement strategies. Teams and units should focus on how to engage employees and improve work environment continuously whether they have survey data or not. At the same time, the engagement survey provides a useful measure, and there are a number of leaders that we have worked with who are interested in seeing their 2015 data as a possible measure whether their efforts over the past year or two have yielded results, particularly any survey items that would be sensitive to those efforts. Leaders may need to focus a couple of years out to see how that picture of engagement looks for their particular area of the organization.

Q3: This is a two part question regarding the data and the survey questions themselves. First, the results for some of the drivers are based on just two questions, so are answers to two or three questions statistically significant for each section? And second, how were these questions determined to be the measure of significant indicators in these areas?
A3: The survey questions themselves were based on two pieces of information. One, there is a large body of scientific research on engagement and how to measure it. At the same time, within the University, those things that drive engagement may look different here than they do in other settings, such as the in the private sector, which is where a lot of engagement work is happening. Therefore, we took a set of validated survey items from the vendor (Hay Group) that have been used many times and we also put together a faculty advisory committee and consulted with many leaders to look at how these factors play out at the University of Minnesota. This allowed us to write questions that feel relevant for people here at the University. So the final survey questions are really a hybrid of these two approaches.

In terms of a driver only having a couple of survey items, we wanted to keep the survey short. The previous survey was about 200 items long, and response rates were really low. Peoples’ time to do a survey is very precious so we made a decision to have a survey that was shorter. It is not intended to be a precision instrument that is to measure engagement from a purely scientific perspective. Rather, it is intend to gather input that can be useful for making decisions on where to take action. The question may be coming from a participant who is thinking about statistical reliability and those kinds of things, and this is not what this survey is designed to do. This instrument is designed to be quick and easy for people to fill out but also tap into something we know from both our own research and research external to the University that it is important for employee engagement. Data from the engagement survey should always be used in combination with other information you have, such as discussions, meetings, and your knowledge of current issues, concerns, etc.
Q4: Since we are not getting data every year, should we have different goals each year if the survey may be administrated every two years? How do action plans and the frequency of the survey impact one another?

A4: Those are really good questions, and I am not sure if I can do justice in answering those questions because we may not have all the answers ourselves. We started out with the current engagement survey with the intention of doing it annually and focusing on the work environment. The work environment is something research has shown is actionable and has a big impact on performance, turnover, and all sort of things. So the focus for the first three years of the survey was on measuring the work environment.

Here at the University, in different areas, the pace varies a lot. So whether we can get something done in 12 months, or 9 months, or 18 months, or 24 months, across different areas at the University is different. But a year is pretty common term for this kind of measure. In talking with some leaders about the previous survey, which was bi-annual, one of the common complaints was that the data was 18 months or more old, and so much had changed so that leaders didn’t know how relevant it continued to be for their organization. That is why we decided on an annual basis for administration for the current survey.

Going forward, we are exploring what will meet the needs of the University. And it is not likely to be radically different from what we are doing now. The work environment is still incredibly important and engagement is important. So we are going to take a look over the next few months to enhance the survey, and whether that is adding to, or changing some of the items, as well as timing of administration. We have discussed doing a bi-annual survey, but we will see as more units are taking more action on things measured on the survey. A lot of leaders and employees want more data, more often than once every two years. And so we need to balance that with all concerns about cadence.

Q5: How often should the organizational action plans be changing as we get new data? Do goals necessarily need to change every year with new data or even looking at all three years of data? How consistent should the plans for action be or should they change?

A5: Goals for impacting engagement vary because it depends on what it is you are working on. Some things are much easier to change in a shorter period of time, and other things may take more time, or you may have three or four things you are working on, and you phase them in over a period of time.

One of the realities is that people underestimate how long it takes to make small changes within an organization. Culture is one example. If you can make culture change in five years, that’s amazing. Research shows that it is takes a long time to make changes in culture, and many items on the survey relate to culture change. In terms of specific goals for engagement, it’s going to be important that those goals are tied with your objectives and priorities as a unit and thus, generally are worked on in longer time frames. So they should not necessarily change or shift around.

However, if you are focusing on clear expectation and feedback and you are trying to help your managers and leaders do more around giving more feedback to your employees and encouraging employees to seek out more feedback, then maybe that can be accomplished within a year or a year-and-half before you see some changes. It is more reasonable and straight forward. Ultimately, the actions and goals for engagement really should tie to the priorities of the unit, and that should also clarify the time frame.

Q6: Why is there no question about salary or benefits?

A6: Some employee engagement and job satisfaction surveys include these items and others do not. The research is pretty clear that pay, in particular, is not a big driver of engagement, most of the time. One exception is that if pay is considered widely unfair, or if you feel like you are considerably underpaid that may become an issue for your
engagement with the organization. But generally speaking, when you look at the drivers of engagement, it is not in the top five or 10 most of the time. Thus, it is not shown as a key driver, but that does not mean we won’t include it in the future.

Q7: Can you say a little more about why it is better not to first focus on items with high unfavorable scores and why a high neutral score is important?

A7: To clarify, this is a rule of thumb. That does not mean you can’t decide that if you have a 60% unfavorable responses on a survey item, that this isn’t where you should focus your efforts. There is nothing wrong with that, and that is your judgment call, especially if it makes sense in your context. But generally speaking, it is a lot easier to take a group of people who are unsure or having a mixed experience and address a few things that may move them into having positive experiences, than it is to take a group of people who are having a negative experience on some issues and try making it positive. It is a heavier lift and harder work. So a lot of times, the advice that we give to leaders and groups is, if you are trying set achievable goals, looking at the large neutral tends to be a little more successful.

Q8: Could you please walk through another set of data? I don’t understand how you calculated the trend data.

A8: For example, on slide 22, if we take survey item number 22, “My department demonstrates a commitment to supporting my overall wellbeing.”

In 2015, this year, the green bar is 58. That means the unit is 58% favorable on item 22. If you look at the 2013 same unit result, it is -2. So that means that the 58% favorable is two percentage points lower than 2013. That means in 2013 that it was 60% favorable. If you look at the 2014 column, which is -3, that means that 58% is 3 percentage points lower than the result in 2014. So 2014 would had been 61% favorable. So that is how you can compute those scores if want the percent favorable scores for each of those years.

Q9: Do you have a sense of how certain major HR activities such as the Upgrade, the Job Family Study, and paid performance for Civil Service employees, may have impacted the results, especially in 2015?

A9: We will find that out shortly. We have not seen the data yet for 2015. The vendor is in the process of compiling the data and producing the reports that will be distributed shortly. But there is a lot going on and a lot of big initiatives. I am sure one of the big questions on everyone’s mind is the big events of the last year or several of months how that will impact the results. So, I do not have an answer but certainly when you have events that impact an institution, it will generally be reflected in the results. In addition, the comment reports often provide some of the context, so we are encouraging leaders to pay close attention to comment reports to see if the comments are about the larger University initiatives or more specifically to the kinds of activities happening in their specific organization.

Q10: What do you mean when you say the ‘practical significance’ with a smaller “n” size [number of responses] for a leader’s results? How do we calculate that, particularly for units with an n size of 10 or 15 people? How do we think about the significance of the changes as compared to the results in the benchmark data?

A10: It is not a calculation, like statistical significance, and it has a whole different meaning. Practical significance is the idea of what is meaningful, so what really will make a difference in your employees’ day-to-day experience. So, when you have a small group and one, two or three employees change their view—such as when two people who didn’t weigh in last year, but decided to respond this year, and their responses were negative—this may give you a fairly large percent change difference, but it is only two people. You may have a decline of 20% or 30% from last year, and if you have an overall small group that may be only a few people. So it is important to keep that in mind when you are looking
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at the results. It is not to single people out, because that can be a risk because it is human nature when you are looking at a report. The rule of thumb is to not focus on who said what, but rather to realize that the sky is not falling. When you have double-digit declines, and it is probably due to one or two people, this needs to be considered as a small group changing their opinion, or the results are based on different people taking the survey. That is also why it is so important to consider the other information you have about your organization to provide context.

Q11: How should we be thinking about this year’s data as compared to the totality of the last three years of data? Especially for taking action?

A11: The first step is to look at the unit report for this year, and whether the response rate is consistent year-over-year. Looking at all three years, you can make some meaningful comparison across years and thus determine whether scores changed over the last three years in terms of whether they are generally going up, or down, or staying flat. So if you have a stable response rate throughout the three years, you can really look at each year as a snapshot of what is going on. If things are trending up, you may look at your most recent data and the actions you took to determine whether there was a positive impact. If however, and this may be the case for number of units, the response rates are all over the board or have changed quite a bit, this is where you might have to do a little bit of mental averaging of the data and take a look at themes that persist despite the are widely varying response rates. In addition, gather input from people who have been on the team over the last three years in terms of what they are seeing, and validate some of those themes. Regardless of the response rate, validating the survey data with your employees by having discussions is the most effective way to make meaning of the data over time. Thus, I wouldn’t put any hard and fast rules on how to compare them, rather I would pay attention to what is generally trending up or down and what that suggests about where you want to focus your effort.

Q12: For managers who did not get the 10 needed responses or do not have 10 direct reports, what would be your suggestions on how that can effect employee engagement? How we might talk through engagement with our staff?

A12: There are number of options and none of them are ideal—I will admit that up front. But there are number of options for this situation and you can think about which one would apply best to your case. In some cases, sharing the next level up report is a really good way to go. If you are a part of a larger unit, and the next level up has a report, sharing that data and having the discussion focus on how the boarder unit comes out in the data and how that fits with the experiences your employees are having is an option. Sometimes, however people would say that the next level does not mean anything for them because our area is too different. In that case, you could take some materials that we have on engagement that outline what engagement is and the drivers, and have a discussion with the team about the work environment, engagement, what is going well, what are some issues to address. You may already have a sense about what some of these are so you can suggest areas for discussion and possible action. It may be helpful to bring someone in who is external, maybe from human resources, to facilitate a conversation with the team to gather that information. Those are two options to try when a unit doesn’t have enough responses to get a report. Again, I would go back to the notion that engagement happens every day, one way or another, whether you are attending to it or not, or taking the survey or not. So if you do not get a report, there are still a number of things you can do to address engagement in your area.