



Organizational Assessment . . . without tears

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There are a variety of “ways of knowing” about an organization.

- Focus groups are excellent when you’re not sure what questions to ask; a provocative question or two and a good facilitator can surface significant amounts of unpredictable material in short order.
- Interviews are good when the issues are more complex or even threatening. Requires a skilled practitioner.
- Direct observation can generate a surprising amount of valuable material. Just remember that “looking” has an impact; it isn’t neutral. Remember the Hawthorne Effect.
- If the core concern is around specific work activities, measures of work outcomes may be more revealing than personal opinion tools.
- Reconstructing several cases (failed projects, successful product launches, botched NDA filings, etc.) often brings a group to new insights. The high risk of people getting defensive or protective requires a very skilled facilitator and a strong process design.
- Non-obtrusive measures are indicators that take care of themselves. Number of sick days as a percent of employee base is a non-obtrusive measure of employee stress. How many employees take their lunch tray back to their office tells you something about the culture, it’s just not exactly clear what. So be careful how you interpret such measures.

Surveys are one of the more common tools for knowing, but they presume you know what questions to ask, and that people trust the administration enough to be candid in their answers.



Types of Surveys

- Culture survey
- 360° feedback
- Team building
- Organizational readiness
- Training needs assessment
- Knowledge transfer assessment
- Program evaluation

Surveys can serve many needs. Often there is a problem with no clear source, and a survey seems the best way to cast a broader net. The ubiquitous culture survey attempts to capture that intangible “something” that can’t be either ignored or controlled. Giving feedback to an individual on their style and behavior is an increasingly popular survey application.

Surveys can also help a team surface issues that need attention to address their inner workings as a group. The focus might be decision-making, managing conflict, trust, or just simple communication. The anonymous survey provides the group a way of “talking” to itself that might be too risky in a face-to-face format.

Organizational challenges can raise the question of whether the company is ready for the stress. A merger, divestiture, or strategic shift can strain work processes, working relationships, or require more trust and commitment than normal. A survey may be a way of testing the waters before proceeding.

Training organizations often want to survey their customer base to check on any unmet training needs. Although the intent is straightforward, it is tricky to ask people to identify what they don’t know. It is often better to ask managers what behaviors are missing. These can be a clue to a missing skill set. The companion to a needs assessment is a learning transfer assessment. Once we provided the training, did it result in behavior changes on the job?

And everyone knows the “smile sheet” at the end of a workshop. They can be a powerful tool for presenters or trainers to adjust their delivery. They have limited ability to track actual learning, which would take us back to the knowledge transfer tools.



Surveys Aren't About Data

- We erroneously treat surveys as data collection efforts
 - Inordinate focus on instrument, reports
 - The real test of the effort is the **use** of the data
- Employee surveys are properly viewed as **decision processes** (with a large data collection piece at the beginning)
- For those of us who are not the decision-makers, our challenge is to design the survey process to build **decision-readiness**

The title of this slide is obviously an overstatement. I'm trying to get your attention! Surveys are usually dominated by attention to the technical demands of instrument design, sampling strategies, data entry, data analysis, presentation of results, and responding to the innumerable requests for special cuts of the data. But the real value of the survey hinges not on its technical sophistication, but on its impact on unmade decisions.

It is the decision process that deserves our greatest attention. Delegate the technical details to a technician. Getting people ready look at results and DO SOMETHING is the greatest contribution to the overall survey effort. And the coarseness of the decision options should determine the degree of sophistication required of the survey.



Building Decision Readiness

- Think backwards: anticipate your audience
- Use bullet proof surveys
- Use appropriate benchmarks
- Select compelling outcome measures
- Focus on links, not just level
- Split your sample
- Anticipate the entire change process



Think Backwards

- Who will be in the room when the data is presented?
- What do they already (believe they) know?
 - Can their beliefs be reframed as hypotheses to test?
- What decisions do you hope they will make upon reviewing the data?
- What has prevented making decisions of that kind in the past?
- What data would influence their decisions?
- How do they like their data served up?

Who will be in the room?

- Executives who might charter additional effort?
- Managers closer to work processes?
- HR/OD/Training staff able to design interventions?

What decisions do you hope they will make?

- Charter additional data gathering?
- Allocate resources?
- Set policy? priorities?
- Structural changes?
- Address culture issues?
- Recognize their own culpability?

What has this group done in the past with similar issues? Where do they routinely get stuck? What would they need to get past such obstacles and take some action? How do they find data most compelling? Are they statistically sophisticated? Or more responsive to personal stories, with enough data to give them validity?



Bullet Proof Surveys

- People are reluctant to make decisions if they doubt the integrity of the instrument
- The two standard measures of instrument quality:
 - **Reliability:** it is insensitive to minor contextual changes
 - **Validity:** it measures what it purports to measure

Reliability refers to an instrument's ability to generate the same results in similar situations, over and over and over. An instrument with poor reliability might produce different answers depending on the gender of the administrator, the quality of the paper it's printed on, or other miscellaneous variables.

Validity reflects the confidence that the instruments measure what they say they measure. An IQ test should measure "smarts", not verbal agility, race, or social class. Validity is best established through independent research that tests the scores against independent measures of the same thing.

While standardized surveys can have validation studies to back them up, customized surveys have to rely on grouping questions into scales to produce greater validity (and reliability). That is, lumping 4 questions on teamwork into a single measure is a better indicator than a single question, which could be vulnerable to high levels of noise or distortion. (Scale construction is a fairly technical talent and should not be attempted without statistical guidance. The tools are correlations and Cronbach's Alpha.)



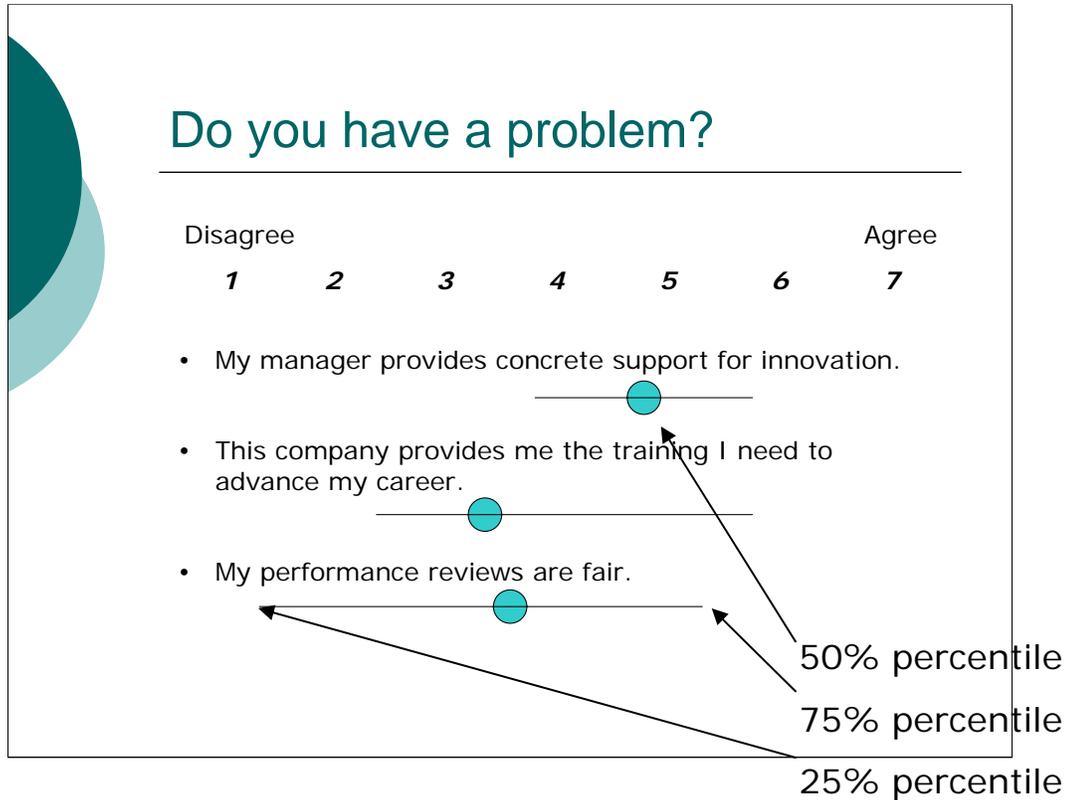
Benchmarking: how good is good?

- Benchmarking is unavoidable
 - A given score can only be interpreted compared to some reference point.
- Industry norms are only one set of reference points to consider
 - An "industry database" is NOT normative
 - For different issues, you would need different comparison groups
- Complementary Benchmark Points
 - Your strategic imperatives
 - Your corporate values
 - Self-referencing to previous performance
 - Your internal "best of class"
- Benchmarking does not tap into the value of the link between items, which is independent of level

Standardized surveys always offer comparison to industry norms as a selling point. But keep in mind:

- There is nothing prescriptive about an industry average
- Wanting to be "better than everybody else" on everything is a weak strategic objective
- For many job categories, the more relevant comparison is any local employer of comparable size; only technical talent is tied to an industry

There are other reference points that may provide stronger arguments for what's good enough. It should be possible to suggest what average scores should be given your strategic objectives. If innovative product design is a key goal, then questions about support for risk-taking, support for new ideas, or richness of customer input might all need to be higher than any industry average.



For each example, whether it is a “good score” or not depends on the comparisons you make. Data could be compared to a historical trend, or put in context of company values, or understood with internal comparisons:

Manager supports innovation

- Three years ago your average was 6.2
- Last year it was 5.4
- This year the average is 4.9

...and innovation is key to your success.

Company provides training

- What if providing training was a company value, a selling point in recruiting
- Compared to being a start-up where everyone is expected to hit the ground running

Performance reviews are fair

- The wide variance is a significant clue
- Suppose the averages were 5+ in Accounting, but ~2 in Manufacturing
- Suppose the averages were high for Boomers, but low for Gen Xers



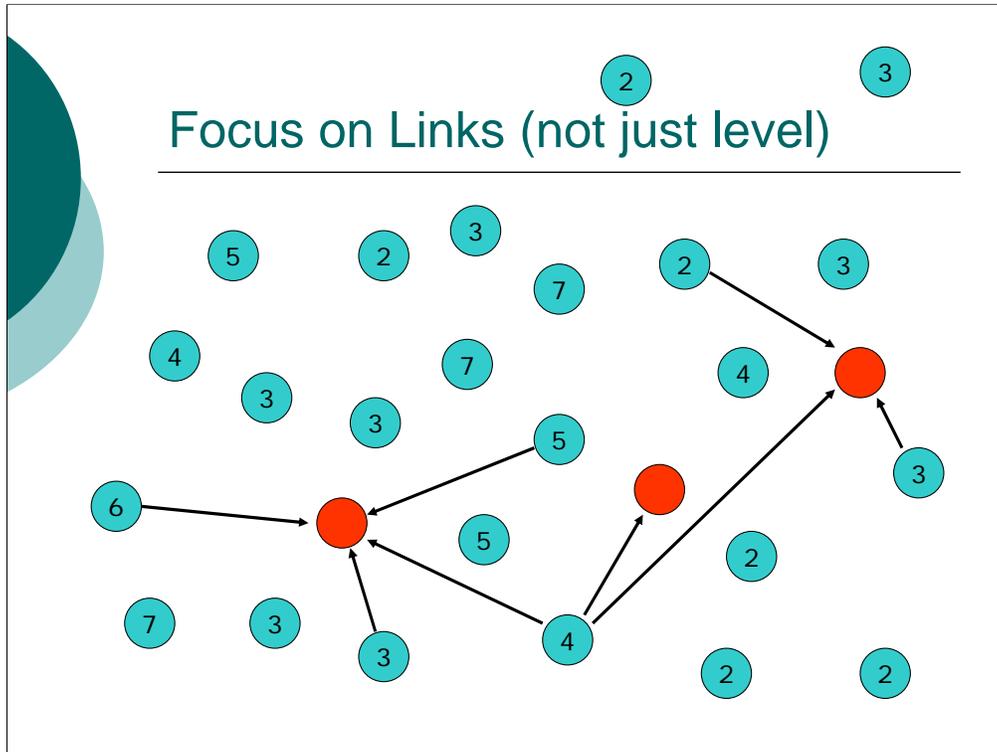
Compelling Outcome Measures

- Examples
 - Clarity of strategic objectives
 - Optimism for implementing strategic plan
 - Credibility of executive team
 - Quality of work processes
 - Job satisfaction
 - Loyalty / Turnover
 - Responsibility / Engagement / Accountability
 - Resilience / Burnout
- Definition
 - Late in the causal chain
 - Important to strategic goals
 - Important company values
 - Executives want to know how to increase/decrease them
- Value
 - Links the survey to key company issues
 - Focuses design of instrument
 - Anchors data analysis

Many of the questions in a survey are “inputs”, that is, they are the causes of other things. But at least some of them have to be “outputs”, that is, there are caused by all the other variables in the survey. The outcome measures should reflect the purpose of the survey. For example, suppose you were doing a survey in anticipation of a major shift in strategy. Perhaps the strategy has been announced but not implemented. The key outcome measures might be:

- Clarity of the new strategic plan
- Confidence in the ability to implement the changes
- Belief that senior management understands the complexities of the implementation
- Optimism that the new strategy will improve market position

The data analysis would focus on what drives these outcomes. For example, the data might show that confidence in the implementation is a function of my manager’s openness to diverse opinions. Such information would cue managers to do more listening and less telling.



Examples of questions that often score about 2:

- I'm paid commensurate with my expertise and experience
- Our meetings are well run and productive
- My work load is about right
- My performance reviews are fair and well informed

Now add in our outcome measures

- Optimism about implementing strategic plan
- Faith in senior leadership
- Desire to stay as long as possible

Example of an important 4: **Quality of teamwork between departments**

Could easily be linked to all 3 outcome measures

The medium level of the item is irrelevant; this is the best focus for additional effort. It is more critical than the questions with lower averages but no links to the outcome measures



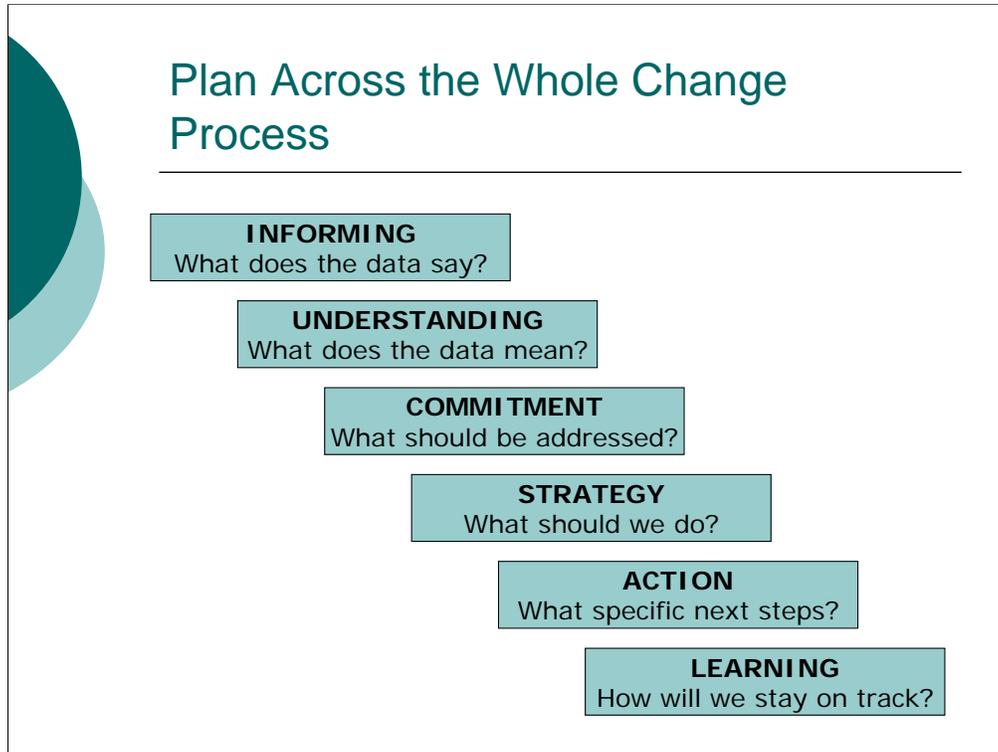
Split Your Sample

- Suppose you just found out the most important question?
- Wouldn't you want to ask just a few more questions about that one topic?
- Survey everyone born on an **odd** numbered day first
- Survey everyone born on an **even** numbered day to test out potential interventions on the most critical topic

One way to greatly enhance the decision readiness is to save half your sample to ask about potential interventions. That second data set would provide the strongest endorsement possible from the staff population about what intervention is most likely to address the most critical problem.

For example, suppose the first survey identified the quality of cooperation between departments as the most critical variable, that is, it had the strongest linkage to the most outcome measures. The second survey could present a set of 6-8 different interventions. For each intervention, we could ask “To what extent would this approach ‘hit the nail on the head’?”, and “How hard would it be to put this approach into practice in this company, at this time?”. And let's throw in one open-ended question as well: “What advice would you give to someone chartered to implement one of these approaches?”

The second data set, which would be collected in a much shorter time frame, would queue up potential interventions for the most critical issue. It would be harder to get much closer to “making a decision” than that!



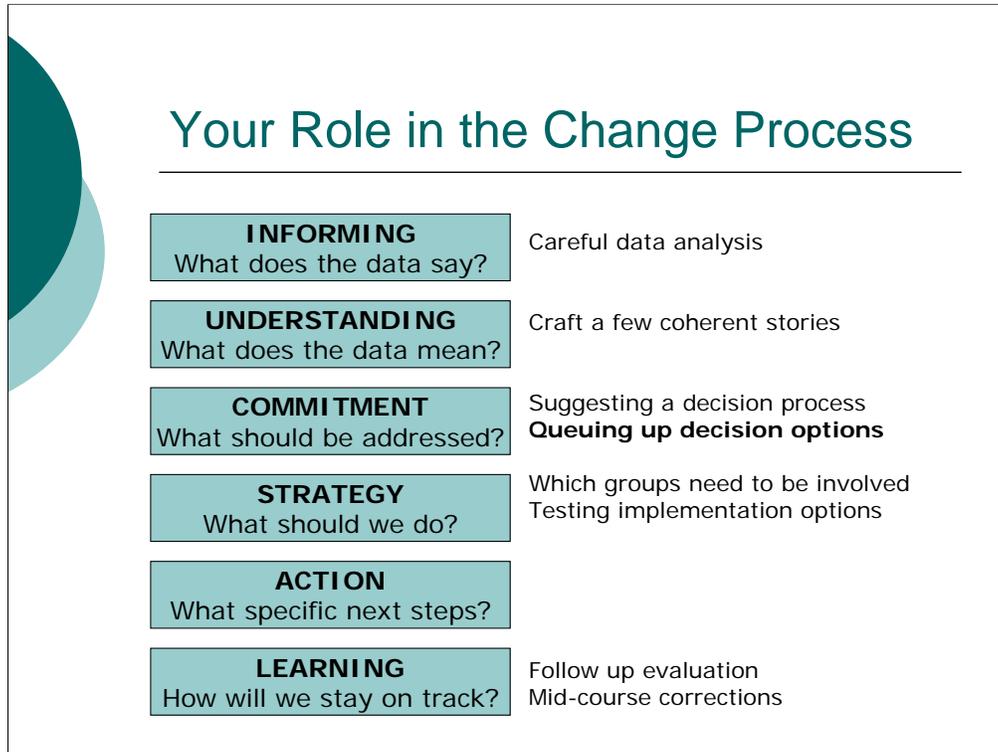
Understand the entire change process, not just the survey part

Structure and facilitate decision-making with the data

Make recommendations palatable to the organization

Be prepared to support a variety of change methodologies

- Executive coaching
- Employee task forces
- Targeted process improvement efforts
- Training development and delivery
- Team development



Understand your role in each phase of the change process. Where someone else is the major actor, be sure they have been coached on when to step up and play their part.

Obviously in a survey you would be heavily involved in gathering the data together and presenting it. But the presentation need not be just a lot of numbers. Weave the data into a story, into a coherent theme. Advanced analysis – along with your common sense – should suggest ways to link the data into a network of meanings rather than just a list of average scores.

You can facilitate the emergence of commitment by shifting the discussion to viable options. The use of decision tables helps a group settle on a path forward.

In the development of strategy, the data may indicate which groups are the most critical to target. For example, suppose we found that the quality of interdepartmental cooperation was crucial. You might analyze the data to identify those departments who scored the lowest on that measure. You might also find a set of departments who report high levels of intergroup cooperation; they might serve as an internal benchmark, and a source of good information on how to do it well.



Move from Data to Decisions

Scope	Focus	Level	Integra tion	Type

This slide is just an icon for the handout of a Decision Table. A Decision Table provides a powerful way to refocus the discussions on decision options rather than just data. Implications of the survey are summarized by suggesting an option within several categories:

- Scope of required response, all the way from “do nothing” to major redesign
- Focus of response, whether it be the entire organization, one department or perhaps a particular slice (new managers, Engineers, etc.)
- Level of response. Top down. Bottom up. And variations on those themes.
- How the decision should be integrated with other decisions. Some efforts need to be tightly coordinated, or delivered in a particular sequence; others can be undertaken independently of any other efforts.
- Type of response. Is it a question of skills? Values? Work design?

Members of the audience may disagree with any portion of the decision table, which should bring people back to what the data supports. In any event, they are debating decision options rather than interpretations.



Thank You

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