



Top 12 Reasons Employee Listening Programs Fail



How, when, and where we work has become an increasingly complex and variable proposition. Today, teams are dispersed, highly decentralized, and often communicate asynchronously. This makes it impossible for a single leader or even an entire global HR department to just 'get a sense' for how employees are doing – and more importantly, what actions may be needed to ensure a high-performing, positive, and equitable employee experience.

In response, more and more organizations are investing in a comprehensive employee listening strategy, and with good reason. Research shows that listening to your employees, acting on their feedback, and actively communicating the impact of those actions increases overall engagement and trust in the company. In turn, organizations with highly engaged employees experience lower turnover, increased productivity, improved collaboration, and greater customer satisfaction.



The Business Impact of Employee Experience Strategies

Business Outcomes

2.2x

More likely to exceed financial targets



2.4x

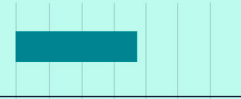
More likely to delight customers



Innovation Outcomes

3.7x

More likely to adapt well to change



4.3x

More likely to innovate effectively



People Outcomes

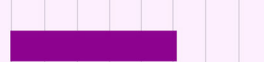
5.1x

More likely to create a sense of belonging



5.2x

More likely to be a great place to work



5.1x

More likely to exchange and retain employees



Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2021

The Definitive Guide: Employee Experience | Copyright © The Josh Bersin Company, 2021
All rights reserved. Not for distribution. Licensed material.

But designing and implementing an effective employee listening program is a multi-step journey, and there are plenty of hazards along the way. Based on our nearly 20 years of employee listening experience, implementing tens of thousands of surveys for some of the largest and most complex organizations in the world, we have a few tips on what not to do if you want to generate the desired business outcomes. Here's our list of the most common reasons employee listening programs fail and what you can do to avoid them.

Connecting the Dots

Like any business initiative, a successful employee listening program starts with strategic planning that involves the right stakeholders and establishes a clear set of success metrics. Let's explore the reasons that can cause your employee listening program to fail before it even begins.

1. Employee listening isn't supported by leadership.

A successful employee listening program requires buy-in from organizational leaders, but they often don't see the benefits. For many senior executives, an employee listening program is strictly a "people and culture" project, not a business initiative that can impact company growth and performance. However, this view may be changing. [Willis Towers Watson](#) found that 66% of employers have increased listening programs since the pandemic but only 31% have a formal process in place. So, the trend is shifting in the right direction, but more needs to be done, and the research backs up the importance of a strategic listening program.

As seen in the graphic on the previous page, organizations with a great employee experience were able to translate that performance to bottom line factors ranging from financial returns to customer retention. But leaders at all levels must see themselves as integral to that experience, because, they are.

An increasing body of research¹ has shown that the best leaders engage with employees in a way that more closely resembles a person-to-person conversation, rather than a series of commands. Furthermore, they model good listening behavior, and foster cultural norms that instill a conversational sensibility throughout their organizations. By talking with employees, rather than simply issuing orders, leaders can even retain or recapture some of the qualities – operational flexibility, high levels of employee engagement, tight strategic alignment – that enable startups to outperform their better-established rivals.

¹ [Leadership Is a Conversation; Boris Groysberg and Michael Slind, Harvard Business Review](#)

From the earliest phases of your program, it's critical to communicate the benefits of listening to leaders and managers – personally, professionally, and to the larger organization – and enable them to serve as active participants and vocal advocates for your program. Work with them to set clear goals that align with company or departmental objectives, and to help them see a direct connection to the metrics that matter most for their own success.



2. The survey is pre-built and generic.

Many organizations fall into the trap of sending generic engagement surveys that don't reflect their unique culture and employee experience. These one-size-fits-all surveys come across as tone-deaf to employees and lead to irrelevant feedback that doesn't translate to significant action. As Bradley Wilson, director of consulting excellence for Perceptyx, writes, ["Partnering with a survey provider who offers a one-size-fits-all solution is like going to a doctor who prescribes cough syrup for all her patients, whether they have a cold or a sprained ankle. It will work in some cases, but not in most."](#)

To be most effective, employee surveys need to balance the organization's need for data against what is asked, how often, and how it is measured. The content must focus on specific issues that are important to the organization's success and the objectives it hopes to achieve (e.g., create an innovative culture, foster a more inclusive workplace, retain top talent) while asking for this information in an actionable way. Employee feedback on critical topics resonates with leaders and results in clear post-survey actions that can drive meaningful change.



3. Survey questions are not actionable.

The questions truly make the survey. If you aren't asking the right ones, what's the point? For instance, asking for feedback about things that aren't within the power of company management to change, or that company leadership are simply not willing or prepared to act on, is pointless. Additionally, some questions may be poorly worded or constructed, leaving respondents confused. Others may not be focused on a clear topic, are ambiguous, or are too high level to result in clear takeaways. Asking these types of questions will only serve to frustrate responders and lower your participation rates.

Avoid this pitfall by ensuring questions are written clearly and concisely, and have a clear action. Use a consistent rating scale throughout the survey to ensure employee perceptions are accurately captured. And when it comes to employee perceptions, remember that the questions themselves can sway opinions or influence overall results about how employees perceive the organization. By asking about experience, clarity of direction, manager effectiveness, and company culture, it communicates to employees that leadership cares and is listening.

4. There is a lack of ownership or accountability.

An employee listening program is a collaborative effort, but many organizations make the mistake of not assigning clear owners for critical action items, or assigning ownership for needed actions to the wrong team members. In some cases, HR drives the entire program without involving executive or departmental leadership. In others, multiple teams are involved but roles or tasks aren't clearly defined.

Assign owners for survey design, deployment, and analysis during the planning phase. Once surveys are complete and key takeaways have been identified, assign action items to the relevant leaders and managers. Follow-up activities should also be assigned and scheduled to ensure accountability. This can include additional pulse surveys to ensure the actions being taken are aligned with what employees wanted and expected, and are moving forward to completion as expected.

Establishing Credibility & Trust

Even if HR and leadership do everything right in designing a listening program and ensuring all of the relevant stakeholders are involved, it can still fail if employees aren't willing to participate. In order for data captured from surveys to be truly representative of your organization, your company must have a good response rate. And there is a 'sweet spot' when it comes to participation rates. If it's too low, leadership may not be confident enough in the insights provided to use them in decision-making, but if it's too high (close to 100% participation), leaders may fear that employees were less than truthful and therefore feel skeptical about using the information.

The average response rate cited for employee surveys fluctuates depending on your source. Some have it as low as 30-40%, while others say 65-85% is ideal. At Perceptyx, our customers are generally at the top end of that spectrum, and we believe companies should strive for the 80% or above mark. So how do you get to that threshold? It starts with identifying why employees aren't responding in the first place.

5. Employees don't believe leaders are open to feedback.

Getting employees to complete surveys is a common challenge, often because employees don't believe the organization is really listening or will act in response to their feedback. Perhaps, the organization failed to act on previous survey results, hasn't communicated well about its reasons for issuing the survey, or its intention to use the data to improve the employee experience. Or maybe it issued a survey that doesn't reflect the real issues on the minds of its employees.

[Encourage and optimize employee survey participation](#) by asking the right questions, providing easy access to the survey, and demonstrating that employee feedback will be heard. Be sure to communicate the larger goal to employees, so they see that providing feedback will result in an improved workplace experience. And most importantly, act on the survey responses! Actions should be timely and communicated thoroughly, and then followed up on to ensure employees see a direct link between the survey feedback and company responses.

6. Employees feel pressured to respond positively to surveys.

In other cases, employees will participate in a survey, but won't share what's really on their mind. They believe the purpose of the listening program is to validate leadership's performance or strategy, and employees will steer clear of saying anything critical. Some employees may also feel that their candid, even negative, responses will be linked back to them and hinder their future progression in the company.

Encourage employees to be candid by communicating that the purpose of the listening program is to improve their experience. Also, create surveys so that responses are semi-anonymous (identifiable by team and demographic, but not individual employees). Then make sure employees understand that they won't be identifiable by name, so they feel comfortable providing honest feedback. Managers must also see survey results as a way to improve. If leaders get defensive or act defiant, it will stop employees from responding honestly.

Not sure how to drive the right level of post-survey actions or effectively engage managers in communicating and responding to employee feedback? C.H. Robinson, a large global transportation and logistics company, faced a similar challenge with its employee survey, and needed to restore credibility and trust about how the company would respond to employee feedback in its revamped program.

After its initial employee census, a follow-up pulse survey asked employees two simple questions: Did your manager share survey results with you, and do you believe that action would result from the initial survey? The results were revealing.

[READ THE FULL STORY](#)



Linking Data to the Right Actions

The benefits of an employee listening program are only fully realized when HR, leadership, and management take meaningful action in response to employee surveys. Here are some ways organizations fail to respond to employee feedback.

7. Listening is a “check box” exercise.

Too many organizations ask, but have no plan or intent to act on survey results. HR may believe the listening program is finished once surveys are complete and the feedback disseminated. If it stops there and leaders and managers aren't asked to create action plans based on survey results, the program has failed.

Your listening program is only just beginning when employee responses come in. The next steps are equally critical: analyzing the results, uncovering key themes and takeaways, defining the actions that will lead to effective solutions, and then communicating and following through on those actions as a unified organization. While the steps may be clear, the process can seem overwhelming. That's why the Perceptyx action planning functionality outlines a simple, evidenced-based method for behavioral change at the grassroots level.

The Perceptyx 1-2-3 Action Planning Approach

- 1 Select one issue to focus on. This should be an issue that, if acted upon, will produce the largest gains in the team's engagement.
- 2 Identify two things to do about it.
- 3 Ask leaders and managers to commit to three dates on which they will review this topic with their team and complete the agreed upon action steps.

Our research has found that of the organizations that enable their managers to identify issues and take action, 74% see improvements in engagement over time, compared to just 8% that survey but don't act.

[Learn more about why acting is just as important as asking.](#)

8. The organization takes the wrong actions.

Some organizations do act on survey results; however, their actions don't improve the employee experience. This happens when the survey questions don't address fixable issues or accurately reflect the problems that employees are facing. Additionally, if you fail to follow through and measure whether actions were effective, you have no way of knowing if the agreed upon activities had the desired impact in the eyes of your employees. All of these things will cause your listening program to fail and participation rates to lag in the future.

To ensure this doesn't happen, your organization must start with a clear goal and use it to inform the survey questions. Then analyze the survey results, create and share an action plan based on feedback, and be sure to follow up after to determine if the actions are resolving employees' issues. You cannot assume employees understand what is being done or why after a survey. You have to effectively communicate the why, what, who, and when when [taking action from employee engagement survey results](#).



9. Managers aren't prepared to debrief their team and plan actions.

Failing to share the specific department or team survey results with managers and then asking them to form an action plan relevant to their team is a common reason listening programs fail. Too often, the survey results are presented to the leadership team as a whole without departmental, business unit or geographic breakdowns. Within this scenario, managers are not aware of team specifics and are not properly coached on how to address the problems their direct reports face.

To avoid this, managers must be presented departmental/regional-specific survey results and analytics. Additionally, managers must understand the results, so that they can create an action plan that utilizes their employees' responses and ideas. They then must share the results and plan with their team in a timely manner and continuously check-in to learn if the actions are making a difference. Employees must believe their manager is committed to resolving the issues they face if your listening plan is going to work.



10. Leaders aren't receptive to negative feedback.

Negative feedback is part and parcel of an employee listening program, and it's up to HR to properly prepare the leadership team for that eventuality. If they fail to do so, leaders may be caught off guard by negative perceptions and react poorly to feedback from employees. Of course, even with preparation, some managers are not equipped to handle negative feedback. This will be very disruptive to your employee listening plan and the overall employee experience.

One key goal of a listening program is to understand the nuances of your current employee experience through the eyes of your people, learn what may be hindering progress in the workplace, and then correct those issues. Therefore, leaders must be encouraged to use any negative responses as an opportunity for growth. They should address the issues with their team, be open about the feedback, and keep the lines of communication open to help employees understand that the feedback, even negative, is appreciated.

Want more information about how surveys can help inform and support effective leaders? Develop from Perceptyx is a multi-rater, 360/180 feedback product designed specifically to provide leaders with critical insight into others' perspectives of their efforts. When combined with data from other Perceptyx listening channels, organizations gain exceptional insight into manager effectiveness, and how to help them improve. [Start building better leaders.](#)



11. Survey results are tied to promotions and bonuses.

Organizations that base promotions and bonuses on survey results are listening to employees for the wrong reasons. Doing so compels leaders and managers to achieve scores that benefit them, rather than learn what can be done to help employees and the organization as a whole.

A listening program is about empowering employees and listening to their voices, not rewarding managers and leaders. Avoid tying promotions and bonuses to survey results to ensure it's as accurate and authentic as possible. When managers know they will be rewarded for high scores, they may be more likely to encourage employees to respond in a way that benefits them or their department, or manipulate the results in some other way.



12. The organization doesn't analyze and report on results.

Many organizations stop short of analyzing survey results and take employee feedback at face value. This leads to high-level takeaways that fail to get to the root cause of issues or identify problems specific to teams or employee groups.

Take the time to compare results to past surveys, filter results by team and demographic, and connect related areas of engagement. [Another sector of insights that often goes unaccounted for is missing data](#). Non-responses, or employees who choose not to answer a single question, can actually provide valuable information if you include it in your analytics.

As Perceptyx's Brett Wells, Ph.D., director of people analytics, and Lauren Beechly, Ph.D., director of client consulting, noted, "Although one cannot make direct conclusions about engagement for non-responders, analyzing non-responders against data external to the survey, such as performance, sales, or turnover, can provide greater clarity about their likely levels of engagement."

Once the results are analyzed and determinations are made about employee feedback, share and discuss results with relevant stakeholders and determine how to best act on the feedback. By analyzing results and understanding the data, your organization will be able to create an action plan that will resonate with employees, which is key to a successful employee listening program.



How to Become a Successful Listening Organization

There are multiple reasons employee listening programs fail – but each is avoidable with effective planning, action, and communication. In summary, to implement an employee listening program that improves the employee experience and boosts business performance, follow the tips outlined below.

- **Start with an objective** – Define specific goals for the listening program (e.g., create a culture of innovation, improve manager performance, or retain top talent). Tailor the survey questions to those goals and prepare to take the necessary action to accomplish them.
- **Involve the right stakeholders** – Ensure the listening program is a collaboration between HR, leadership, and department/regional leads. Set clear responsibilities for each stakeholder.
- **Take meaningful action** – Respond to employee feedback with actions that accomplish the goals of the listening program. Debrief department/regional managers so they can resolve the issues specific to their direct reports.
- **Understand the purpose of listening** – Remember that listening isn't meant to validate leadership performance or inform workforce and compensation planning. The purpose is to help employees succeed so the organization succeeds.
- **Communicate the intentions of listening** – Share the goal of the employee listening program and the post-survey action plan with employees. Encourage them to provide candid feedback and be sure to effectively communicate that employee feedback will be heard, listened to, and acted upon.

At Perceptyx, our goal is to help leaders and their people thrive by delivering the continuous insights and feedback needed to power business performance. Our advanced employee listening and people analytics technology, supported by the deep domain expertise and commitment of our consulting and customer service teams, are uniquely positioned to help you design and execute a winning people strategy. [Get in touch](#) and let us show you how.



Perceptyx is redefining the employee insights industry, delivering enterprise-level listening and people analytics solutions to more than 500 global customers, including one-third of the Fortune 100. The Perceptyx platform makes it easy for managers, HR executives, and business leaders to uncover insights deep within large, complex organizations, driving meaningful action to improve business outcomes. Driven by intellectual curiosity and a culture of innovation, Perceptyx is helping people and organizations “see the way forward.”

For more info visit

www.perceptyx.com