Centering transparency and empathy in employee surveys to build community and generate dialogue

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Abstract: When the pandemic began in March of 2020, library personnel transitioned to remote work. Personnel used to working on-site, not only needed to figure out how to work remotely but to learn to live confined to their homes, disconnected from friends and family. For many, the erosion of personal agency amplified feelings of organizational mistrust, illustrated professional inequities, and catalyzed anxieties that typically are not at the forefront of employer concerns.

Libraries responded in part by surveying personnel about their work-related needs and their personal well-being. At Penn State University, the Libraries surveyed all personnel consistently between March 2020 and April 2021, securing over 2,100 responses to questions aimed at identifying workplace challenges, and to better understand and react to supporting personnel needs. This poster discusses survey techniques employed which leveraged the reporting function of Qualtrics and related practices to maintain a sense of community, communicate organizational empathy, and enable action at the department level while maintaining and building trust in assessment initiatives.

Respondents reported positive impacts relating to sense of community and organizational empathy resulting from real-time sharing of results and weekly summaries presented at organization-wide forums ensuring administrators heard concerns.

Coupled with department-based reports and transparent practices maintained and built trust in assessment activities while enabling action at the individual level.

We will ask you for some high-level demographic information to help us take appropriate follow-up action based on your input. Responses will be analyzed by Library Assessment and shared with the Safe Return to Work group, Library Administrators and supervisors to enable appropriate follow-up. A list of supervisors who will see responses is available. We also encourage you to speak to your supervisor about specific questions, suggestions, and concerns.

Questions:

Q1. The pandemic created significant workplace challenges across the Penn State University Libraries. For a more full return to the workplace, we would like you to understand how you can best support you during this transition. To contribute input, please complete this survey which may take up to 15 minutes to complete.

We appreciate your open and honest feedback and encourage you to make meaningful and impactful adjustments as this survey evolves.

Design, methodology, or approach:
Standard introductory elements used to communicate purpose, duration, confidentiality and use of results felt insufficient given the moment.

Once overlooked software features became components of an evolving survey strategy aimed at soliciting sensitive information, promoting community, facilitating empathetic practice, and enabling action, all highly valued by respondents.

Updated practices communicated through a change log integrated in the survey introduction aimed to:
1. enhance transparency
2. address concerns over anonymity
3. allowed for broad real-time sharing of results
4. address concerns expressed by directing responses to leaders closest to personnel to intervene
5. communicate concerns were heard.

Summarized results were presented at organization-wide virtual forums.

Findings:
Library personnel appreciated updated practices which allowed for openly sharing personal struggles supported by enhanced practices to maintain anonymity. Respondents reported feeling more connected to peers who were working remotely and on-site. The practice of real-time sharing of responses initially met with concerns over privacy, although this quickly changed to support as the practice was found to provide relief through the realization that many were struggling similarly.

Contact Steve Borrelli, emb95@psu.edu with questions.

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