



The future of employee listening

Five questions to consider

Over the past two years, employees have had to cope with a tremendous amount of terror, trauma, and change. If you haven't asked your workforce how they are feeling, what their concerns are, and what support they need now and in the future, it will be challenging to serve them well. During times like these, it's critical that your employees feel heard, understood and supported. Various studies have found that **social support** increases our resilience and ability to cope. Listening to your employees is an effective way to both provide support and solve organizational problems.

So what's the best way to listen to your employees as we move to an endemic state? Your pre-pandemic approach won't work – it could be perceived as callous or tone-deaf. Ensuring your workforce feels heard in today's world requires an approach to employee listening and research that is nimble, empathetic, and responsive. Based on our experience, the best way to design an **empathetic employee listening** program that is in tune with both the current and future needs of your workforce is to focus on five key questions.

1. What challenges are we facing? Many leaders and decision-makers are eager to gather feedback on an ongoing basis with the hopes of gaining a deeper understanding of employee attitudes, concerns, and observations. But oftentimes organizations rush into research without first identifying what they need to learn. When we work with clients to design employee listening programs, we start by focusing on the business first.

What are the biggest internal and external challenges your organization is facing, both now and in the future?

What are your main strategic priorities for this year? The next five years? The next decade?

How efficiently is your organization operating in this new world of **hybrid work**?

How effectively is your organization preparing for the future of work?

What are your main people priorities?

What are your employees worried about?

By exploring these questions with our clients (before developing survey questions) we can help them think carefully about what they need to learn as an organization. We have found this information is the critical foundation for any successful employee listening program, providing the basis for more tactical decisions about instrument design, sample selection, administration techniques, and report and action plans.

Common challenges organizations are facing

Immediate Concerns:

Managing Risks

- Turnover
- Burnout
- Return to the Office
- Culture Erosion
- Collaboration

Mid-Term Concerns:

Resetting the Employee Experience

- Total Rewards
- Wellbeing
- Sustainability
- Hybrid Work
- Inclusion & Belonging

Long Term Challenges:

Preparing for the Future of Work

- Future Skills
- Future of Jobs
- Future of Leadership
- Future Structure & Culture
- Future Employee Contract

2. How do we need to evolve? The pandemic has altered almost all aspects of the employee experience, changing everything from where people work to how they interact with clients, colleagues, and customers. Now there are strong signs that employees' core expectations about work are changing. In recent months, an unprecedented number of employees have **quit their jobs** in search of opportunities that are safer, saner, and more **sustainable**.

Considering the size and scope of these changes, now is a critical time to evaluate the extent to which your organization is prepared for the future of work. Is your **employee value proposition (EVP)** still compelling? Are your rewards and benefits aligned with the new **lifestyle contract** that is emerging? Are your leaders and managers learning how to share leadership? Or are they still operating out of a command and control mindset? What impact will automation, robots, and the **fourth industrial revolution** have on your

approach to job design, employee development, and organizational structure? What aspects of **your culture** do you need to let go of, maintain, and evolve as you prepare for the **future of work**?

Traditionally, organizations have used employee surveys to maintain the status quo, foster commitment, and preserve organizational stability. That strategy will no longer work in a business environment that has become increasingly volatile and unpredictable. As we move closer to an endemic state, employee listening programs need to continue to help organizations learn, adapt, and evolve. If your organization is still focusing on using measurement to manage your workforce, if you are not listening to your employees and engaging them in an ongoing dialogue about their observations and experiences at work, you are going to be blindsided when the next crisis that hits.

Four critical questions to consider



Culture

How does our culture need to evolve?



Leadership

What type of leadership do we need in the future?



Employee Value Proposition

Is our EVP still compelling?



Employee Experience

How has the pandemic affected our employees?

3. What's the best way to listen to our employees? Organizations often assume the best way to listen to their workforce is to conduct a pulse survey, but that's not always the case. Surveys are effective for measuring attitudes about topics that are well known and empirically established. But for new, emergent, or ambiguous events like this pandemic, exploratory research techniques using qualitative methods often generate better insights.

Considering the complexity of current events, we think the best way to listen to your employees is to take a multi-method approach. During one-on-one conversations and team meetings, managers should ask employees about their pandemic-related

concerns. Online focus groups and digital discussions can be used to have broader conversations across regions and business units. **Unmet needs assessments** and conjoint methodologies can be used to help employees identify and prioritize their critical concerns. And targeted pulse surveys can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of your organization's response to emerging issues.

The way you listen to your employees matters. As **Michael Nichols writes**, "Being listened to spells the difference between feeling accepted and feeling isolated." Now is the time to conduct research in a way that makes your employees feel accepted, supported, and understood.

Taking a multi-method approach to listening

Listening Approach	Full-Census Survey	Pulse Surveys	Digital Focus Group	Total Rewards/EVP Research	360 Assessment
Description	Robust continuous listening to understand employee experiences and perceptions.	Agile, targeted continuous listening with strategic employee research programs.	Enable organizations to crowdsource people insights in a live, collective conversation.	Used to understand what issues and rewards/benefits are most pressing and/or preferred by your workforce.	Part of a leadership development program to assess behaviors and competency areas.
Recommended Use and Timing	Every year or 18 months for an organization-wide snapshot and to reset priorities.	Quarterly to track priorities and/or on-demand for onboarding, exit, role transition, etc.	Periodically as needed to deep dive on a specific challenge.	Every 12 to 24 months or as major shifts take place in the work environment. Redefining rewards/EVP	Every 12 to 24 months to help leaders identify development focus areas and track progress.

Insight & Action Planning

Continuous process that combines expert consultative services, best practice know-how and comparative benchmarks to develop insights that inform action plans.

4. What's our process? Determining who should participate in your research—and when—is critical to any successful listening campaign. Asking the right questions to the wrong people at the wrong time usually produces little more than low-quality data and a frustrated workforce. For example, asking new employees about their work experience too early (e.g., the end of their first day) or too late (e.g., the end of their first year) can greatly limit what your organization learns about the onboarding process.

When we help our clients select their research sample and determine the frequency of their assessments, we start by focusing on the ideal. From a purely scientific perspective, what would the perfect research population and cadence look like?

Next, we consider the impact on participants. As continuous listening and regular pulsing become the norm, survey fatigue is becoming a common problem in many organizations. Listening programs can collapse under their own weight, leading to dissipated interest and energy, when they become a burden to employees.

Finally, we focus on the impact that pulse programs and employee inquiries will have on decision-makers. Research campaigns wither without follow-up and action. Before launching a listening campaign, it is critical to make sure that leaders, managers, employees, and other decision-makers have the bandwidth and capacity to absorb new research findings.

Developing a designed change process



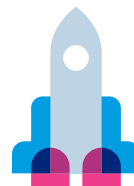
Dialogue

- Listen
- Learn
- Explore



Design

- Ideate
- Explore
- Evaluate



Deploy

- Plan
- Deploy
- Measure

5. How will we turn listening into action? Employee listening campaigns are only useful if they generate strategic insight and action. Surveys, pulses, and focus groups create expectations for change; employees expect something to happen as a result of providing feedback. If your research doesn't lead to insight and action, employees will quickly become disengaged.

Now is the time for organizations to be nimble, responsive, and efficient. Considering the dynamic and

chaotic nature of events right now, it is important to develop a rapid response strategy to complement your research efforts. In many organizations, post-survey action planning efforts take weeks or months. Given current conditions, a long lag between feedback and action isn't going to be effective. If your traditional actioning process is slow and cumbersome, find ways to streamline it. Flash reports, rapid report-outs, pre-designed best practices, micro-learning and micro-lessons, and **discovery and action dialogues** can help.



Change is up to you.

If you are in charge of employee listening in your organization, you are in a unique position to help your workforce cope with one of the most profound dynamic series of events we have faced in decades. The only way to support your employees while ensuring the long-term success of your organization is to balance deep empathy with economic realities. The five questions presented here can help you design an employee listening campaign that will allow your leaders, managers, and employees to express their concerns, identify emerging problems, and work together to find new solutions and meet the challenges of the day.

Speak with a consultant or visit our **website** to learn more.