



Perception surveys: Myths and managing results

My December 2011 BIC article, "Do-It-Yourself Safety Perception Surveys: Six Important Steps," generated many emails and calls to my office. In response, I would like to expand on the previous steps by addressing many common myths and misconceptions.

Myth: Perception measurements are effective leading indicators. While perceptions

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may be a leading indicator to results, they are not a leading indicator by themselves. Since perceptions are beliefs that already exist; they are lagging. Just as a near miss is an event that already occurred, a perception is a belief that already exists. Both are lagging. They are both measurements that provide insight, but are more descriptive than prescriptive.

Management: Developing leading indicators is outside the scope of this article.

However, consider obtaining insight by answering the following three leading indicator questions:

1. What exists that creates the current perceptions?
2. What behaviors could be experienced that would create personal and shared stories, influencing a change in a perception?
3. What is the frequency and extensiveness of positive stories compared to negative ones?

Myth: There is more value in benchmarking yourself against other companies than a customized approach. First, a quick disclaimer: I think there is value in both comparing and customizing. More value for your investment, however, lies in a customized approach. Most of the prepackaged survey programs simply provide your standing in the range of those who have participated. Fewer allow you to compare yourself to other organizations that are better performers in the industry. Great perceptions and great results are not always an effective correlation. In fact, it can be dangerous to believe if you have great perceptions, you should experience great results. Organizational performance is far too varied

and complex for it to be that simple.

Management: What is the goal of the survey? Comparing yourself to other companies is an exercise in futility. The DNA of your culture is and will always be unique. Moreover, your capabilities will be different and are more important than how close you come to another's characteristics. Measure perceptions to determine if you are creating an accurate framework of beliefs that influences attitudes, behaviors and experiences in the organization. Furthermore, measure to understand how you can improve and/or leverage your unique capabilities. Determine how you can be better, not just how you can improve what is undesirable.

Myth: The purpose of the survey is to understand and address negative perceptions. Regrettably, most approaches to perception surveys use the results to "fix what is wrong," thus perpetuating another negative experience with safety measurement. What often follows is either decreased participation in future attempts or individuals providing answers they feel the company is looking for, rendering the survey pointless.

Management: Sustained excellence in any performance category is never obtained through an exclusive focus on weaknesses. Of course, they should be understood and managed. However, you will gain stronger, willing and aligned commitment when measurement is also used to help people improve their strengths. Your culture is and always will be different. What is the best it can be and how can you create the belief excellence is achievable? What experiences can you provide that demonstrate to the population the company wants to be the best and values and responds to input? Never forget understanding perceptions is of great importance, but not as much as what you do with them.

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