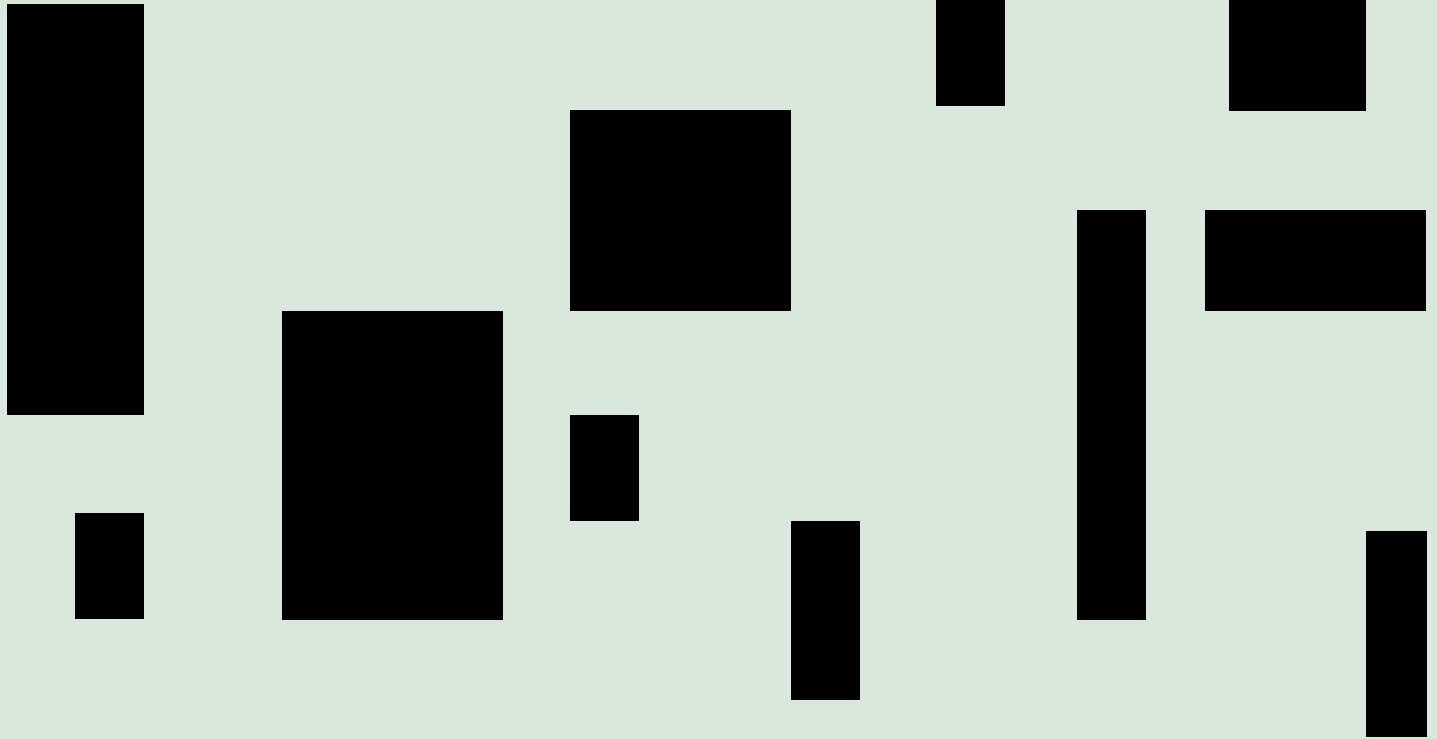
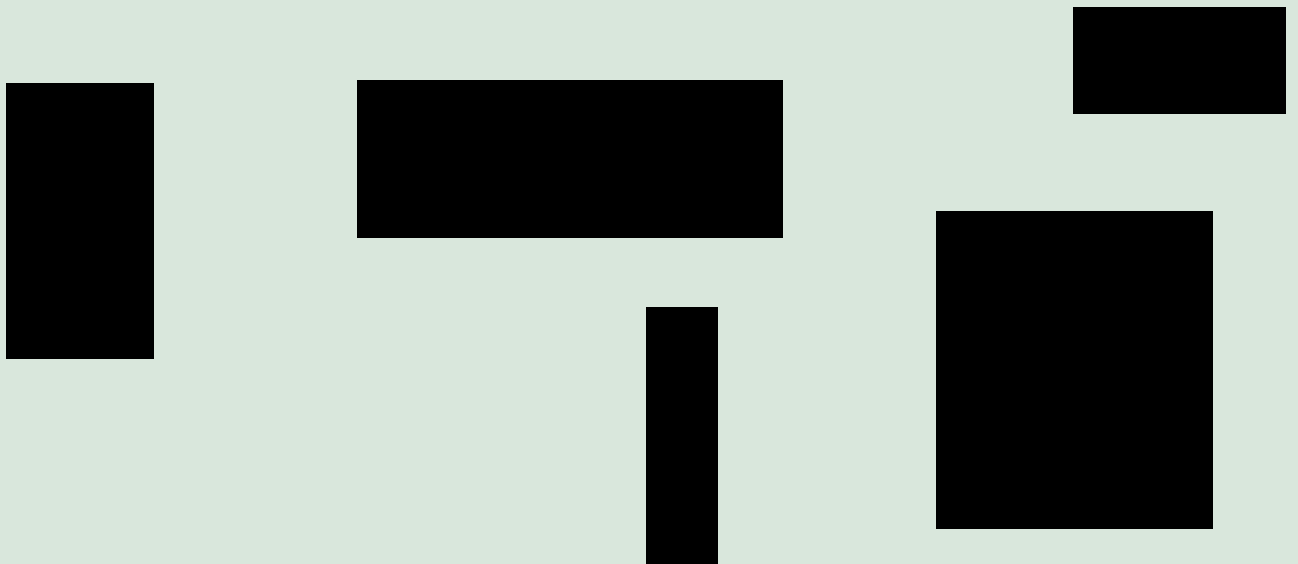


# Perspectives



Deploying a listening strategy:  
lessons learned



# Deploying a listening strategy: lessons learned

The employee survey world is changing. Companies large and small, across all industries and regions, are eager to move beyond sole reliance on a traditional survey event to a more agile employee listening strategy. This trend is being driven by advances in technology that allow organizations to deploy a range of targeted listening tools on a more ongoing, continuous basis. These include pulse surveys, onboarding and exit surveys, online chats and jams, social media scans and more.

This development is very positive as it reflects a desire among leaders to stay more connected with their employees and prioritize the employee experience and workplace culture. At Willis Towers Watson we've consulted with many clients and written extensively on how to make this transition successfully (reference *From survey event to listening strategy: capture the value of employee opinion* and *Why an Effective Listening Strategy Starts With the Annual Employee Survey*). While most of that work is tied to specific guidance for particular circumstances, there are also a handful of general principles we've learned that are useful to keep in mind if you're embarking on such a transition, regardless of the specific solutions you may be deploying. Here they are:

## **Be prepared to act, not just listen.**

Although we sometimes might wish it were the case, the rules of organizational behavior are not suspended just because you label something a "pulse." In other words, if you ask employees questions they will (rightly) expect you to share the findings with them and address any issues you uncover. This doesn't have to be extensive (especially if the

information you collect is narrow and the number of employees accessed is minimal), but it can still be burdensome if you are collecting information on a frequent basis (e.g., monthly). More importantly, however, is that you must design the process in a way that will enable you to take action. For example, suppose you find that only 10% of employees think leadership is doing a good job, but you didn't ask any other questions to help you understand what specifically leadership is or isn't doing, and you didn't ask enough employees to understand which divisions/departments/countries/job levels most strongly hold this view. In this case, you really aren't enabled to take any action other than to ask more questions of more employees, defeating the purpose of the pulse survey in the first place. As an extreme (but real) example of a (poor) approach: We know of at least one firm that advocates asking

one single question of roughly 500 employees for organizations with more than 50,000 employees. We are hard pressed to see any value whatsoever in such an approach. Instead, we think the solution here is to include enough questions to really understand a given issue and a sufficient number of employees to validly represent critical groups. This will likely mean including a broader set of questions on a narrower range of topics, and involving a larger group of employees, in order to best drive positive change.

**Recalibrate your expectations for improvement.** If done properly, surveys deployed on a more frequent basis should focus on issues that change more often. For example, it makes little sense to deploy a monthly pulse survey asking about satisfaction with benefits or understanding of the business strategy unless your benefits or business strategy changes every month. It may, however, make sense to deploy a monthly survey asking about local workload and stress. In this latter case, however, one must still manage expectations regarding the degree of variability to expect over a given period of time. Is a seven-point decline reason for panic? A 12-point increase reason for celebration? The reality is, we don't know. Assuming a validly representative sample (see next point), each organization will still likely

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have its own workload/stress cyclical patterns and variability. Thus only by collecting and tracking data over a long period of time inside the company will it be truly possible to gauge true gains and declines. This means that the execution of an employee listening strategy should be viewed as a long-term commitment, delivering increasing value over time. Sharing this context with leaders is an important way for HR to add strategic value to the listening strategy activity.

**Remember: Even the most thoughtful analysis can't salvage bad data.** Two aspects of data validity are critically important and yet are too often overlooked when we are focused on the ability to flexibly deploy surveys as often as needed. The first is the evidence that what we are measuring is actually related to business performance. Indeed, it was only after decades of employee research that consistent and compelling evidence began to emerge that employee engagement reliably predicts business performance, after previous concepts had failed to do so (e.g., employee satisfaction and commitment). Further, even today the evidence for the causal nature of the relationship is still evolving. In contrast, there is zero such evidence that many of the concepts being measured today in the name of employee listening are related to business performance. This does not mean it's a bad idea to measure them or that this evidence may not someday emerge, only that we should be mindful about what we are measuring and why, and temper our reactions based on the implications we truly understand. Decades ago we learned that "satisfied" employees are not necessarily productive ones, perhaps because their satisfaction was derived from having few productivity demands

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placed on them. Similarly today, employees who describe their mood with a smiley face (versus a frown face) may tell us little about organizational performance.

The second aspect of validity that is critical to keep in mind is the representativeness of a certain group of data. Here the parameters are well known and subject to the laws of statistics: For any population, we know how well a given sample will represent it based on the relative size of both. We know, for example, that to represent a population of 10,000 we need only a sample of roughly 3.5% (drawn randomly). However, as our population decreases, the proportion of the sample we need increases. So, for example, to validly represent a group of 500 we need nearly half (48%) in our sample. The point here is that examining critical "break down" groups based on too little data can be highly misleading. A group of 50 people may seem like a substantial "sample" but the statistical reality is that it tells us virtually nothing about a group of 500. The good news is that this challenge can be easily addressed with the thoughtful design of a sampling protocol to validly represent critical groups.

**Have a plan for how to route and address issues quickly.** The idea of an "always on" survey that enables employees to contribute suggestions or raise concerns at any time is compelling. Indeed, since employees have ideas and experience all day every day, why not leverage them to improve the business? While this approach makes sense, it's important to remember that once we open up this funnel we have no control over what issues might emerge, and therefore we need a clear plan of how to monitor the information and route it appropriately, and quickly. For example, even if we clearly communicate to employees that serious ethical concerns or code-of-conduct violations are matters best addressed by an ethics hotline, some employees will still likely raise these kinds of concerns in an employee survey platform. This may be an especially acute concern in the litigious U.S., where documenting certain violations raises all kinds of legal responsibilities. The solution here is to ensure the needed resources are on point to continually review the information, which may be of high volume. Employee concerns may be best handled by HR business partners, who may be able to split the work according to the areas they represent.

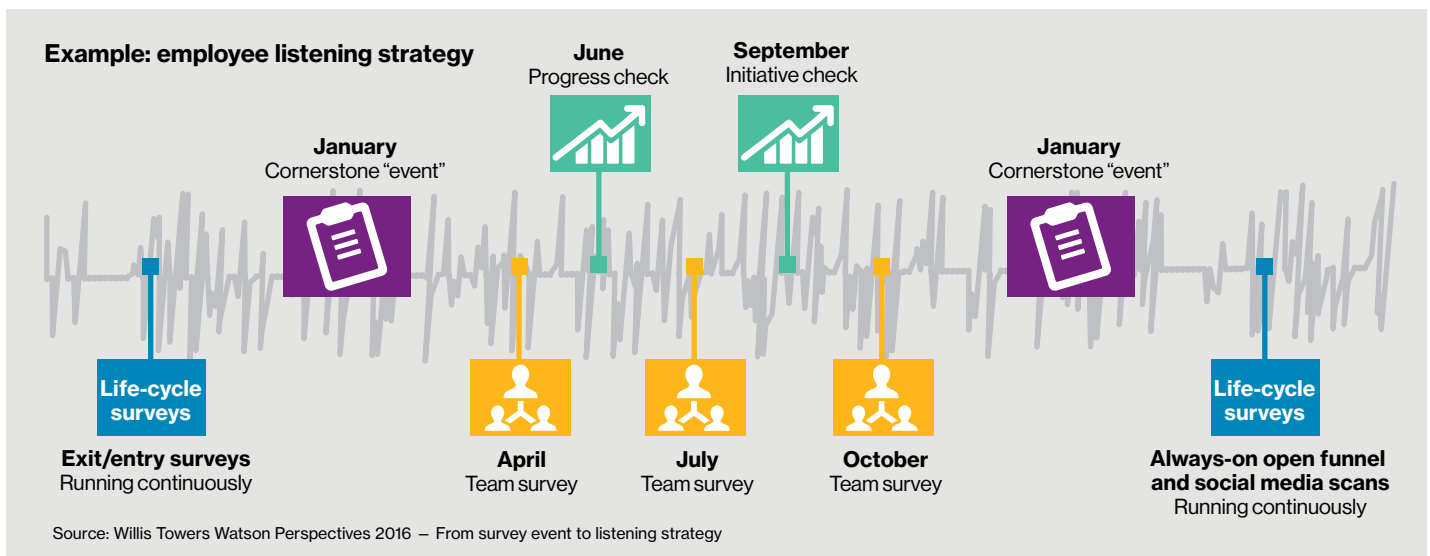
Suggestions for improvement could valuably feed into an innovation team, as one example.

**Manage your managers.** Among the many different models for deploying a listening strategy, a popular one involves enabling managers to survey their employees whenever they wish on topics of their choosing. This approach offers the most flexibility but also the least control, which is worth keeping in mind. For example, left to their own devices managers may ask biased, misleading or confusing questions, or even communicate to employees through their questions messages

that are better left unsent. Further, managers may easily misinterpret the findings and/or take unproductive (or even harmful/retributive) action. Managers may also over-survey their employees, or even unintentionally survey overlapping groups, as such when a department head surveys his group without knowing that the division they are a part of is deploying a survey the following day. Despite these issues, surveys focused on manager-level action can be extremely valuable, if done properly. Ideally, this involves coordinating a common set of core questions across manager surveys so as to enable broader issues and

leverage common solutions. Clearly, the solution here is to establish some type of internal center of excellence or other mechanisms to ensure quality and avoid known pitfalls.

The execution of a well-designed employee listening strategy, leveraging modern technology tools and approaches, can bring tremendous value to a business. The challenge for HR professionals is to temper the excitement these new solutions provoke in order to channel that energy into the thoughtful planning and careful management needed to ensure success.



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