



STOP Before You Conduct That Survey!

Don't waste money on useless surveys. They may do more harm than good.

By Stephen C. Rafe

Nonprofit organizations, particularly those that rely heavily on volunteers, often conduct studies in hope of gathering information that will help them become more successful. Although such studies may yield useful information, their findings are of no value unless something further is done with them.

The key is to convert the data into actionable steps – and do something with what you've learned. Even before that, you need to ask whether the information you've generated is useful. Indeed, you ought to ask that question in future tense while you're designing the study. And then there is the ultimate question: Will all the planning, preparation, and expending of human and financial resources be justified by the outcome? None of this will be worthwhile unless the study results in meaningful change or reinforcement that your organization is already carrying out what the findings recommend.

Studies are a start, not a conclusion

If you label surveys themselves as “actions” and see them as end results, you could consider yourself fortunate that nothing has changed. But that's not true. When you do something that suggests constructive change will result, you raise people's hopes. So when they receive a survey, they take the time to respond. Then others process the results, analyze the findings, and submit a report. The report is then published

“The key is to convert the data into actionable steps.”

“Will all the work be justified by the outcome?”

and circulated. And perhaps some recipients even read it . . . before they file it away. And nothing changes.

Symbols are not substance

Surveys give the appearance of action, but they don't change a thing. They're merely *symbolic* gestures, lacking meaningful substance. Despite the resources expended on them, the risk is that you will simply continue to conduct business as usual.

Substantive actions are different. They require doing something about what you might expect the symbolic actions to produce. For example, a survey might reveal what people expect from your organization. If you don't put those expectations into practice, people will become disenchanted with the process, and you have done more harm than good.

The problem with trying to effect substantive actions is two-fold:

- 1. Not everyone may agree** with the intended outcome or with the steps and timetable needed to achieve it. The more your actions alter the organization's core practices, the harder it becomes to maintain people's commitment to the plan.
- 2. Employees – both paid and volunteer – tend to assume follower roles** and defer to one individual who is willing to take charge – especially if that individual prefers the status quo.

It's important to speak up

Accepting conformity and the status quo gives a false sense of order. It keeps leaders from confronting the need for change, as Michael Ba Banutu-Gomez, professor of management at Rowan University, tells us.

There is another side to the issue as well. Trying to avoid conflict causes many followers to open themselves up to being exploited by unscrupulous leaders. Followers need to stand up to their leaders and ask tough questions about an idea's feasibility.

It's the clash of conflicting views that provides the diversity needed to spur innovation. Leaders and followers both need to confront their fear of conflict and change. Only then can they move beyond symbolic gestures to substantive, meaningful action. 

Stephen C. Rafe (stephen@rapportcommunications.net) is president of Rapport Communications (rapportcommunications.net), a consulting and coaching firm specializing in behavior-based communication (written and spoken), which he founded in 1986. Author of three HarperBusiness books on presentations and interviews, he has held executive positions in the nonprofit sector.

“When you send a survey, you raise people's hopes.”

Putting Feedback to Good Use

For more on leading through action and putting surveys in their proper place, take a look at these resources. Starred articles are available through the Society's library at NonprofitWorld.org/members.

***What Followers Want from Leaders: Capitalizing on Diversity** (Vol. 25, No. 5)

***Taking Action to Manage Change** (Vol. 29, No. 2)

Great Leaders Teach Exemplary Followership and Serve as Servant Leaders, *Journal of American Academy of Business* (Vol. 4, No. 1-2)

***Adapt to Change to Survive** (Vol. 24, No. 2)

***Do You Have the Skills of a Servant Leader?** (Vol. 28, No. 6)

