editor's WORKSHOP

Gill on qualitative research

Making sense of Qualitative Research

Practical tips on conducting one-on-one interviews and focus groups.

The thought of doing employee communication research and measurement in addition to all of their other day-to-day tasks is understandably daunting to many communicators. But the fact remains that measurement is a key component of every strategic employee communication program. And here are just a few reasons why:

- Ongoing measurement allows you to **hone your strategies, messages, and vehicles**
- Research and measurement allows you to **become an expert on your employees**. One role you have as a communicator is to act as the link between employees and management. Research and measurement enables you to know exactly what the employees in your organization are thinking, feeling and, basically, "where they're at." And it won't just be what YOU think the employees are saying; you'll actually have data to back it up.
- Being an expert on the employees in your organization also serves to "get you a seat at the table" and **become a valued member of the management team.** Next time management wants to know what employees will think of a new policy or a new idea, they'll come to you first because you'll have the direct line to what employees want and need—you'll know them best. In addition, results of employee communication measurement can create a trip wire to alert management to any issues around your company's strategies.
- Measurement can **show value** and that's why the other departments do it and you need to do it too! Next time someone comes into your office wanting to know the value of what you do, whether it's your company publication or your new Intranet Web site, you'll have the evidence to show them.
- Measurement will accurately tell you your employee communication program's **strengths and weaknesses.** You'll find out what you are doing well and what you can improve—it will allow you to set and attain realistic goals.
- Conducting employee-communication measurement also **promotes two-way communication** by giving employees a venue to give feedback. It makes employees feel heard and lets them know that their opinion counts.

Last month in *SEC*, Greg Gordon wrote about employee-communication audits, which are often broad-scale projects with several measurement components including analysis of existing communication vehicles, qualitative research, quantitative research and action planning. When a full-scale employee-communication audit is not within your means, here are some quick, hard-hitting qualitative research tactics you can do right now:

One-on-one interviews

A good place to start your measurement program is to sit down and talk to other employees in your organization. One-on-one interviews (sometimes known as "individual depth interviews" or IDIs) are especially useful when gathering information from senior management, but they can be useful across all job levels. Keep in mind that the main purpose of interviews are to collect lots of detailed, rich information—not only to find out the interviewee's perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes (POBAs) about employee communication, but to **get behind** the POBAs by digging deeper and drilling down with follow-up questions. This is where the power of one-on-one interviewing really lies—even to a higher degree than focus groups.

To start, plan on interviewing at least one person at each level (front-line, supervisor, etc.) from each department in your company, if possible. Make sure you randomly select your interviewees—this will assure that you hear from a representative sample and not just the outspoken individuals or the employees that you already know. When scheduling your interview appointments, tell the interviewee that they don't have to bring anything and do not need to prepare. The last things you want from these interviews are canned answers.

Although the interviews don't have to be formal, you don't want your interviews to occur in a noisy cafeteria at lunch. Pick a private office where you can talk freely for about 30 to 60 minutes. It is highly recommended that you audio tape your interviews so that you can concentrate on the interview "flow" and not have to take notes—it is much better to be "with people, not paper" when interviewing.

To prepare for the interviews, you'll want to create a guide containing 10 or so open-ended questions. This will also help maintain consistency across the interviews so that you can compare one interviewee's responses with another's.

Write questions that:
- Uncover main communication issues
- Discuss POBAs
- Explore the reasons behind the interviewee's POBAs
- Identify the interviewee's view of "ideal" communication and get ideas
- Achieve "buy-in"—get interviewees to become communication "ambassadors"

Some possible questions that you may want to include in your interview guide are:
- What is the purpose or role of communication in our organization?
- What are the strengths/weaknesses of communication at our organization?
- What would the ideal communication process look like?
- How effective is formal communication here on a scale of one to 10? What makes it effective/ineffective?
- How would you know when communication is good or working just right?
- Does formal communication help you understand your role in the organization—the reason why what **you** do is important to the overall success of the organization?

And don't forget to include follow-up questions to probe for more information. These questions can be more specific (e.g., "What exactly makes you pick up and read [or not pick up and read] the employee newsletter each week?" "Which articles do you like the most/like the least?") or simply be requests for more information (e.g., "Tell me more about that idea").

To analyze your interview data, you'll want to do a few things. First, jot down some notes and initial impressions as soon as you finish the interview. Then, read through your transcripts and pull out themes and common trends. A "theme" becomes readily apparent by the frequency with which the idea comes up and the intensity with which it is conveyed. Often your initial notes will clue you into the major themes. Some examples of themes from interviews are "too many communication vehicles" and "leaders lack credibility." More on theme identification is discussed in the focus-group section of this insert.

The final step in analysis is to summarize your findings for each question and then compare answers and themes across interviews. Differences between job levels or departments are especially noteworthy and sometimes the contrast can be surprising.

Keep in mind that third party, formally trained interviewers can be used to increase the validity of the interview data. Obviously, interviewees tend to be more open and honest with an objective, outside interviewer who is not directly connected with employee communication in their company.

Employee focus groups

Focus groups are moderator-led discussion groups. Some people think of them as "group interviews," but this is not truly accurate. In fact, focus groups should not look anything like group interviews, with the moderator asking a question and each participant taking their turn to answer. Instead, focus groups are intended to be more dynamic with members of the group responding to and interacting with one another. The idea is that this interaction will stimulate more ideas, get to a deeper level of detail and achieve greater insights. A "great" focus group is one where a "snowball effect" starts when one person's comments set off a chain reaction of other people's comments—this is often called a "roll" by qualitative researchers.

Focus groups about employee communication can be conducted to:
- Identify the range of communication issues
- Explore reasons behind the issues
- Find connections and relationships between issues
- Identify barriers to effective communication
- Discover drivers and facilitators of effective communication
- Generate solutions and ideas directly from employees
- Clarify where and at which levels in the organization issues occur
- Introduce the survey process and gauge employees' reactions to it—what would make it work best and most smoothly?
- Find out the specific changes employees want in their employee communications

Focus groups serve as a logical step before conducting quantitative research, such as an employee survey, because they'll clue you in on the topics and issues that need to be addressed on the survey (hypothesis generation) and help you to use the right language (questionnaire construction). Focus group data can also help you explain the quantitative findings from a survey (post-survey analysis).

Employee focus groups are generally about 90 to120 minutes long, so it's best to schedule a two-hour block of time. It is highly recommended that you audio tape the focus group sessions so that you can concentrate on moderating the group and have transcripts prepared for your analysis.

A group of between 8 and 12 employees is a good size, and it is crucial that you randomly select participants and do not mix job levels or job status. Even if they do not know one another, most front-line employees will not feel comfortable speaking honestly and openly about work issues in front of higher levels. To avoid this bias when selecting participants, obtain separate lists of employees based on job level (e.g., front-line, supervisor, manager). Then, choose the *nth* employee from each list; for example, if you have a group of 150 employees at a job level and want a focus group of 10 employees, you'd choose every 15th name. This sampling method will control for job level, but should provide a good mix of gender, age and years of service. It is always a good idea to recruit a few extra participants in case some do not show up.

The way that focus group participants are recruited depends entirely on the organization. A method that works well for one organization may not work well for another. After selecting the list of potential participant names, you could:

- Send a letter to participants
- Call participants
- E-mail participants
- Notify supervisors and have them personally send participants (after providing them with the names—do not have the supervisors choose the participants because you'll surely get a biased group!)

Regardless of how you invite participants, make sure you include a couple of statements about what the meeting is about, the time and place of the groups, and your name and phone number as a contact for questions. An additional issue that will need to be addressed is whether the groups will be held during work hours or after work hours. There are pros and cons to both; for example, if held during work hours, front-line employees will likely be motivated to show up but may have to find coverage on the floor. On the other hand, if you hold your focus groups after work hours, you may need to pay employees or offer some other incentive to get them to show.

Focus groups follow a semistructured format similar to one-on-one interviews. A focus group guide will help you outline the issues you want to address and ask follow-up questions, while allowing time to explore other areas that may come up. In general, focus groups have four stages: Introduction, rapport building, in-depth investigation and closure.

During the introduction stage, the moderator and participants are introduced and the rationale behind the group is explained to the participants (e.g., "We will be talking about the effectiveness of communication here at Company X" or "We will be talking about our new intranet site today—what's good about and what's not good about it"). Usually 10-15 minutes are spent on this stage. This is also a good time to set some guidelines for the group—focus-group "rules" such as:

- No side bar conversations
- Free to disagree, not looking for group agreement
- No comment is too small or meaningless
- Really want candid, honest feedback
- Respect fellow participants—try not to interrupt each other
- No wrong answers

Several tricks are known to help build rapport with a focus group. It starts with setting the right tone—one that is light and friendly, but also professional and down to business. It is important for the moderator to appear relaxed and to set the participants at ease. Participants will often be nervous about what is expected of them, especially if they've never attended a focus group. It is good to break the ice with a little humor, starting during the introduction stage and continuing through the whole group session. Also, it is critical to "eat your guide," which means knowing it so well that it becomes a part of you. You wouldn't want participants to feel like you care more about the paper in front of you than about them and what they are saying. A moderator must appear organized, in control, well-prepared, and energized.

Other rapport-building tips include:
- Respect what participants say—really *listen!*
- Keep a steady pace—don't let the energy of the group drop
- Ask nonleading questions—don't let the participants feel that they need to answer a specific way to "please" you
- Encourage quiet ones by making direct eye contact, nodding and smiling
- Occasionally stand and move around
- Use props, such as flip charts and note pads

A very common problem in focus groups is overly talkative or outspoken participants who try to monopolize the session and shut down the rest of the group. One way to combat this is to tell the group at the beginning (during the introductory guidelines or "rules") that you may need to stop or interrupt them in your role as moderator. You want to make it clear that you are not being rude, but that you just have a lot to cover and it's easy to go off on tangents in focus groups. Then during the group if one person is taking over, you can put up your hand to gently stop them and say "I'd like to get back on track" and then ask another question, or say "I'd like to hear from some besides X." This usually is enough to prevent offending anyone, and the rest of the group will appreciate your moderating skills!

The in-depth investigation stage is the "meat and potatoes" of the focus group, generally lasting between 70 and 80 minutes. This is when the discussion focuses on the critical issues/topic areas in your guide. It is a good idea to develop your focus group guide questions based on the one-on-one interviews you've done, your own experiences at your company, the "word on the street," and previous studies, if any. In general, focus group questions start broad and then narrow to specifics. Run potential questions past colleagues to make sure they understand what you're asking.

Some good employee communication areas for your focus group guide to cover include:
- Strength and weaknesses of current communication methods
- Content of communication vehicles—are they getting the kind of information they want and need, are they receiving strategic communication, is there a topic area they want more information about or getting too much information about?
- Usefulness of communications—what communications do they receive that are really useful to them or not useful at all?
- Quality of information—how would they describe it, what words come to mind?
- Perceptions of leadership—do they know who they are and what they are focused on, are they credible, can they communicate with senior management or is it just top-down communication?
- Business issues and challenges—do employees know and understand the current business issues facing the company, what impact do the business issues have on them personally?
- Changes—what are some changes they have noticed in the organization?
- Ideal communication process—how would they design the perfect communication process, what would it look like and how would they know it was working?
- Roles—what do they see as their role in communication, how can the communication department best help them in that role?
- Specific issues or special topics to your company (e.g., mix of media, Intranet usage, etc.)

These topic areas provide the structure for the focus group, but keep in mind that the normal flow of the group may not follow the exact sequence you have in your guide. A moderator must be flexible and move around within their guide. Regardless, each area will need to be drilled into for the detailed, rich information that is gained from focus groups. Probing questions are the best way to do this; when asked tactfully, they will reveal more in-depth information and clarify responses.

Some of the best probes include:
- "Can you give me an example of that?"
- "Please tell me more about that."
- "What makes you like/dislike that?"
- "What exactly makes that useful/not useful?"
- "I'm not sure I understand what you mean…"

Closure of the groups occurs by asking if there are any other communication issues that need to be addressed or if anyone thinks something important has missed being said. After this, the moderator will make some concluding remarks, tell them what will be done with the data, wrap up the group and thank the participants for their time.

Analyzing focus group data is much like that of one-to-one interviews. First, capture your thoughts right away—these "hot notes" often provide insight into the big issues going on and will make your analysis easier later (when the groups start to blend together). Also jot down any behavioral observations that you noticed—what was the energy level of the group, were people engaged or did they seem to resent being there, which topics and issues really perked them up?

Content analysis is a good method to analyze the data from employee focus groups. It involves identifying the themes and issues that surfaced during the groups based on their frequency and intensity. Themes often become clear after reviewing your "hot notes" and reading the transcripts of the focus groups. The number of themes identified is dependent on the number of groups, but usually 6 to 8 are noted. Some examples of themes include "employees lack understanding of future goals," "rift between employees and management," and "employee communication not primary source of information." Themes are defined and illustrated with verbatim statements that precisely capture the essence of the theme.

After identifying the themes, the data is coded. Coding involves assigning a theme code or number to statements made during the focus groups. The frequency of themes for each group can then be calculated and groups can be compared with one another based on the frequency of themes. This is a way to "quantify the qualitative data" and note differences among the groups. For example, let's say one theme is "credibility of leadership." You may find that the focus groups with lower job levels (e.g., front-line) talked about this issue a lot in the focus groups and with considerable intensity. On the other hand, your higher job level groups (midmanagers) may not have mentioned the credibility of senior leadership at all. A disconnect on this theme of credibility is clear and should be addressed in future employee communications.

A note about the value of using a third party moderator: Just like one-to-one interviews, there is a clear benefit to using an objective, formally trained moderator. The data collected will be more valid because participants will be more comfortable being candid, and a trained moderator will likely be more skilled at gathering useful, detailed information.

Concluding remarks

As with all employee communication research and measurement, it is imperative to report the results of your one-on-one interviews and focus groups. Avoid the "black-hole syndrome!" Keeping the sources confidential, report to the whole organization what you found in your qualitative research and what you plan to do about it. Make sure there is an opportunity for two-way feedback. Try to get employees involved in your strategic communication plan created, in part, from the qualitative research you have accomplished. And finally, continue to do qualitative research on a regular basis in combination with quantitative measurement.
Good luck!