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How Open Feedback Can Transform Your Business



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Employee feedback: Untapped potential

Two-way feedback can de-risk strategic projects, improve operations, and transform culture.

We've known for a long time that employee feedback is a valuable input for business leaders to surface new ideas and problems, reduce risk, and improve culture. But when we look at how most organizations gather feedback today, it's clear that there is a fair bit of disconnect between what we hoped for and what we're getting.


After 20 years of anonymous employee surveys as the most common method of collecting feedback, employees consistently report that nothing ever changed because of something they wrote in an employee survey. Why are people so pessimistic about the employee survey? The primary reason is this: The goal of employee feedback mechanisms has — until now — been to quantify your employees and reduce them to manageable statistics.

Did engagement go up or down? What's our participation rate? These are the questions of a leader focused solely on managing a scorecard instead of making a real business impact. Employee feedback is a valuable (and finite) resource. Organizations must stretch beyond merely measuring feedback and start using it to make a real impact on the employee experience, innovation, and strategic objectives.

Anonymous feedback isn't usually honest feedback

Most organizations believe anonymous feedback sets people free to be honest about what's happening without fear of retaliation. But in practice, you don't get much honesty at all from your people. Why is this?

Most organizations lack the culture, platforms, and processes to support and reward honest feedback. If an employee has concerns about their team's ability to execute on a major project, wouldn't you want to know that information right away? Non-anonymous, open feedback belongs at the core of a healthier, more productive, more innovative organization. Your people's honest opinions in an immediate, open medium are worth their weight in gold.



"It takes a different kind of leader to be vulnerable enough to listen to people being unhappy and look for a better way to do things. That's the essence of innovation: People innovate away from discomfort."

— Dawie Olivier, Chief Technology Officer, Jarden

Turn big, strategic objectives into small, regular conversations

Let's talk about how open feedback can make a material contribution to business goals.

Business objectives can be simple, like understanding well-being in your team. Or maybe they're more complex, like accelerating an organization-wide strategic project. Either way, managers and leaders can create "campaigns" of short weekly chats with their people to support these objectives.

These regular, open interactions can help you identify changes to strategy, tools, and processes that will most impact the operational metrics you care about. Then, you can use these chats to help drive adoption by involving the people who do the work. This practice will help ensure everyone is focused on making the right changes stick.

According to Salesforce Research, employees who feel heard are 4.6 times more likely to feel empowered to do their best work.





Conversations, not surveys

Stop treating your people like the subjects of a long-running experiment and start interacting with them. Your people need feedback that drives action, is open, is mutually owned by employees and leadership, is inclusive, and gives them the space to express themselves.

Traditional surveys focus on measurement and the aim is to get a higher response than last time. Although engagement survey data can be valuable in its limited way, it barely scratches the surface of what's possible when feedback is an open, mutually owned, and inclusive experience.

Traditional surveys capture feedback, but they are not designed to spur action and accountability. Anonymized feedback makes it harder for managers and leaders to pinpoint where the problems are. When managers and leaders cannot connect with those giving the feedback to understand and address the issue, positive change will remain out of reach. Your people need to be involved throughout the process.

Open conversations work because direct managers, skip managers, subject matter experts, project leads, and agile coaches can immediately ask for information, provide encouragement, or take action. When the feedback is open, you can close the loop that much faster.

Action at the edge

Dispersing authority and responsibility beyond the center of the organization empowers the people and people managers who can make an impact where it matters. This approach ensures feedback gets to the people it is most useful to (e.g., direct managers and skip-level managers).

According to Joyous customer data, as many as 13 opportunities for action or change are identified per person, per year based on the conversations alone (i.e., before any data is analyzed).

By adopting this approach to open conversation and feedback, organizations are identifying opportunities to improve culture, performance, and efficiency at a level where these insights can be deployed most effectively.





The Evolution of Employee Feedback

Once upon a time, surveys were an annual affair designed to find out how unhappy staff were. We've come a long way in the last 50 years, and employee feedback is no longer solely the concern of HR departments or People & Culture teams ...

The Measurement Era



1970
Staff
survey

Staff "satisfaction" surveys are a mammoth, multi-page affair, carried out annually. Reports are compiled by the Personnel department for the people at the top of the organization to understand.

Org Psych grows as a discipline. We start to pay more attention to the needs of the people in our organizations, their behavior, and their connections.



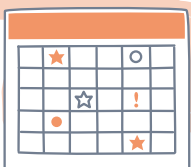
Academics link engagement to profit, and organizations take notice ...



People discover the joy of moving between multiple roles and companies, and the job-for-life is a thing of the past. Annual surveys shift to an engagement focus, as organizations realize simply being satisfied isn't enough to keep their best people around. Data is still anonymous and aggregated, and the now-HR department creates reports for senior management and owns the follow-up.

1990
Engagement
survey

We learn a lot about the benefits of more frequent employee feedback, and annual surveys begin to fall out of favor.



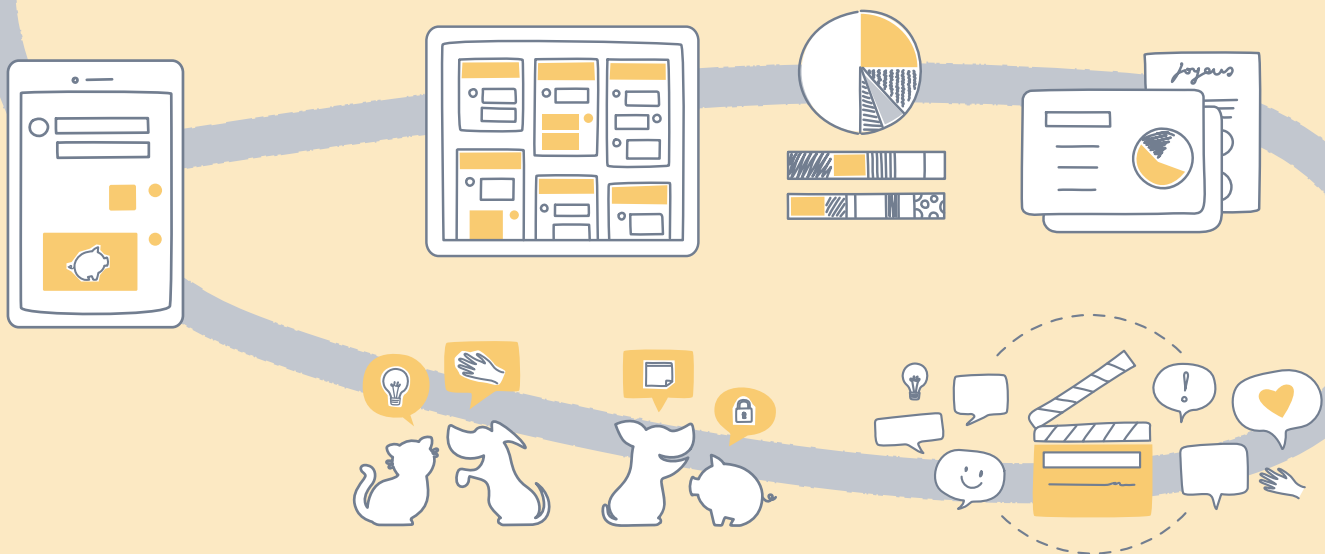
2010
Pulse
survey

Surveys are simplified and run more often, giving HR a constant flow of engagement data throughout the year. Sharing results (even with employees!) is faster and easier, though data is typically still anonymous and aggregated.

Behavioral, cognitive, and social science are increasingly applied to help us understand motivations and relationships, interpret responses, and make decisions.

AI and ML become more sophisticated: helping us understand connections and opportunities for change within the data.

The Outcomes Era



2020
Agile
feedback

Feedback is continuous, open, and conversational. It gets to where it needs to go within the organization, regardless of hierarchical boundaries. Reports can be created for HR and senior management, while employees and people leaders can take action on feedback to drive their own outcomes.

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Design the right conversations

Productive employee feedback doesn't just happen. These conversations need enough structure that they produce real opportunities for change. Here's a few best practices for designing conversations with your people.

Be outcome-focused

Don't focus on leaders' behaviors but on the outcomes of leaders' behaviors. This makes it easier for a leader to hear and act on an employee's response to a question.

Be inclusive

Aim for a Grade 6 reading level in your questions. This reduces the risk of confusion, especially among employees for whom English is a second language.

Be specific and non-ambiguous

Make sure that questions can't be interpreted in more than one way. For example, don't load a single question with multiple parts.

Be personal

Ask questions that enable people to draw upon their personal experiences.

Flow logically

If you're asking multiple questions, try to ensure that they flow from one to another in a logical, almost sequential way.

Be simple

Your people shouldn't feel confused at any point during the process.

Be respectful

Ask questions in a way that makes sure the answers won't hurt anyone's feelings.

Be action-oriented

Ask what the individual and direct managers can do about a problem/opportunity right now.

Be conversational

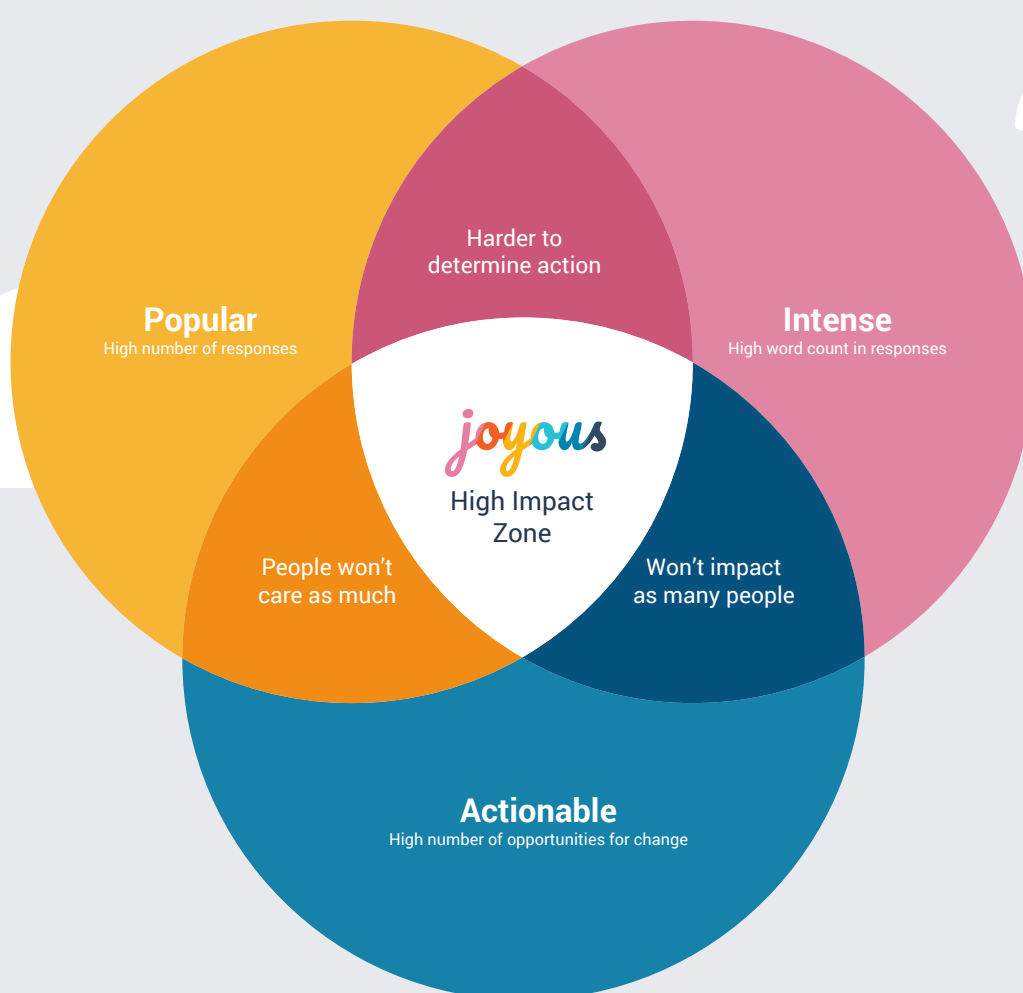
Frame questions in a way that an immediate manager might in a casual, in-person setting.



Which conversations matter most?

As you start gathering responses from your people, you may have a hard time determining which areas to prioritize. This graphic is designed to help you discern which issues deserve your attention first. The greatest impact will come from addressing areas that are popular, intense, and actionable.

The Joyous Conversation Universe



Psychological safety encourages feedback.

You won't get honest feedback from your people if they don't [feel safe doing it](#). Create a feedback environment that helps people feel safe speaking up about the things that really matter. While it might feel uncomfortable at first, it is important to remember that no other business communication channels are anonymous. Make conversations normal. Make attaching your name to your feedback normal too.



Putting your feedback to work

Even if something cannot be done to address it right away, acknowledging feedback is crucial. Unless, of course, you want your people to disengage from the feedback process altogether.

Want to get the most out of your feedback?

- **Let them give feedback on ANYTHING.**
Instead of giving people a narrow range of items to rate, open up feedback so that everything people care about is brought to the surface, one topic at a time.
- **Generate insights from the data.**
What do people care about? What themes come up most often? What topics do people write the longest comments on?
- **Look for opportunities for action.**
What actions can people leaders take? Pushing action to the edge means easy, smaller things get resolved for individuals, which enables executives to focus on strategic changes.
- **Coach executives to prioritize impact at scale.**
Executives need to ask themselves, “What is the single most impactful action you could take? What action would make the biggest difference to the most people?”
- **Connect feedback to business objectives.**
Turn your big objectives into tiny chats — so everything you discuss links back to and has an obvious impact on business objectives.



Feedback as a pathway to change.

Your employees have a wealth of knowledge, ideas, and experience that, when harnessed effectively, could transform your entire organization for the better. However, traditional surveys are not up to the challenge of collecting honest, actionable feedback.

Organizations need to commit to open, owned feedback processes that encourage honesty and action. We need to create space for higher-quality conversations with our people, capture the richness of that feedback, and put it to work on the front lines while also leveraging modern machine learning to develop game-changing insights

Are you ready to make feedback an engine of organizational transformation? Reach out now to schedule a demo.

[Schedule a Demo](#)



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