

# What's on your mind?



The biennial Employee Survey is coming. Here's why Boeing wants to know what its people need to become more engaged.

By Susan Birkholtz

**B**oeing employees soon will have the opportunity to again exercise an important responsibility as stakeholders in the enterprise—spending about 25 minutes telling the company what's on their minds. Launching May 18 and running through mid-June, the biennial Employee Survey provides employees with the “voice” to let managers know what's working in their teams, functions or business units and what needs to be worked on—and to participate in the solutions.

*Boeing Frontiers* recently spoke with John Messman, who heads the survey effort for Boeing's Employee Relations function, to find out why the company remains committed not only to finding out what employees need to become more engaged but also to ensuring that leaders respond to the input and take action.

**Q: How would you describe an engaged employee?**

**A:** Highly engaged employees are fully invested in their work. They take responsibility for their own success while doing all they can to contribute toward the success of their teams and of the company. They ask, “What's in it for us?” instead of “What's in it for me?”

**Q: What's the biggest influence on whether an employee is engaged?**

**A:** Managers definitely have the most influence over whether their employees are engaged. In fact, ensuring that their teams are engaged is a key responsibility for managers. Engagement is strongly linked to just about all of the Leadership Attributes managers are expected to model, in fact. The Employee Survey is a tool Boeing uses to gauge what we are doing right and what we need to improve on. It is up to managers to take advantage of this tool, to listen closely to the feedback they receive through their survey results, and to work with their teams to develop action plans, using the online tool, to address the areas needing improvement and to monitor progress along the way.

**Q: The company is facing tough economic times. Why spend money on a survey?**

**A:** Maintaining and improving employee engagement and productivity is more important than ever in a challenging business

environment like this one. If we're to weather the current economic downturn and remain competitive, we need every employee to be on board with the direction we are heading.

**Q: What would you say to employees who question whether the survey really can lead to change?**

**A:** I'm sure there are employees who have not experienced any change in their work experience as a result of their Employee Survey feedback. At the same time, however, we know about many leaders who have taken the data and are modeling the right behavior in listening to their employees and taking action. We need all managers to respond this way. That's why we continue to stress the importance to managers who receive reports to use the vendor-provided online action planning tool to create action plans based on their survey results and to follow through on those plans.

**Q: The average positive response to the question on the 2008 Action Survey about whether employees have seen changes taking place as a result of the 2007 Employee Survey was just 41 percent. Why the low score?**

**A:** We are taking this particular score very seriously. Obviously, the intent of our asking employees for feedback is for managers—assisted by their teams—to develop plans that act and improve on what the feedback says. There's no other reason to do the survey. Everyone needs to step up to the plate and work together to make change happen.

**Q: What tools do managers have to help them with their action planning?**

**A:** Boeing provides a variety of training, technology and tools so managers can address the engagement of their employees. The action-planning tool itself provides managers with their data to run reports, links to helpful resources, a template to create their action plans, and tools to track progress on their action items.

In addition, on the Employee Survey Web site (<http://employeesurvey.web.boeing.com> on the Boeing intranet)



# The engagement factor

Research indicates that there is a strong correlation between high levels of engagement and productivity. For example, a 2006 Conference Board study found that highly engaged employees outperform their disengaged colleagues by 20 to 28 percent. And a 2005 study by Sirota Consulting of 28 multinational companies found that the share prices of organizations with highly engaged employees rose by an average of 16 percent compared with an industry average of 6 percent. A coincidence? Not likely.

There also may be costs associated with a disengaged work force. A 2003 Gallup poll found the cost of disengagement to be between \$243 billion and \$270 billion annually due to low productivity. In one 2003 study by International Survey Research, companies with low levels of employee engagement experience a fall in their net profit of 1.38 percent, and operating margin fell by 2.01 percent over a three-year period. Conversely, companies with high levels of engagement found that their operating margins rose by 3.74 percent over a three-year period.

High levels of engagement are not easy for companies to achieve, however. According to a study by global consulting firm BlessingWhite, although North America has one of the highest proportions of engaged employees worldwide, fewer than one in three employees are engaged (29 percent fully engaged and 19 percent fully disengaged).

– Susan Birkholtz

## Q: Is the survey really anonymous?

**A:** Yes, absolutely. That's a commitment we make to our employees. Boeing is not able to identify who said what. That's why we use an outside vendor. Only the vendor can identify respondents, and that information is kept strictly confidential. What's more, we do not issue reports of quantitative data or comments to managers when fewer than five responses were provided. We want to make sure that individuals cannot be identified in any way.

## Q: Any last words to employees and managers?

**A:** Take the survey. Act on the results. This year, it's more important than ever. ■

[susan.l.birkholtz@boeing.com](mailto:susan.l.birkholtz@boeing.com)

**PHOTOS: (LEFT)** "Highly engaged employees are fully invested in their work," said John Messman, who heads the Boeing Employee Survey effort. **BEVERLY NOWAK/BOEING (RIGHT)** The Employee Survey Web site features resources such as a searchable best-practices database that details what Boeing managers have done to successfully address engagement issues. **BOB FERGUSON/BOEING**

we have a searchable best-practices database that details actions other Boeing managers have taken to successfully address engagement issues within their teams. Kenexa, our survey vendor, provides a similar database compiled from more than 3,000 of their survey customers around the world that managers can access via the action-planning tool. A key differentiator study also is available on the Employee Survey Web site, which outlines the practices that have resulted in high levels of employee engagement at Boeing and have led to improved business results.

## Q: What can employees contribute to the action-planning process?

**A:** Employees should play a big role in the action-planning process because they need to own and implement whatever changes ultimately are made to improve the engagement scores of their work group. To do that, they can volunteer to participate on action-planning teams and provide additional feedback to their managers to amplify what the survey results may indicate.

## Q: What's the difference between Employee Engagement and Employee Involvement? And where does satisfaction fit in?

**A:** They are inter-related. Employee Engagement is an individual's personal attachment to his or her work on both an intellectual and emotional basis—in other words, what employees think and feel. Employee Involvement is one way employees can be engaged through actively designing, operating and continuously improving their work either on an individual or a team basis. Improved "employee satisfaction" should be a result from both.

## Q: What improvements can we expect for the 2009 survey?

**A:** Each time we do a survey, we look at the questions to see if they need refinement or improvement. So some questions have been added and some have been removed. We also are improving the functionality in the reporting and action-planning tools. Perhaps most importantly, we are continuing to improve manager access to data so it can be even more useful to them.