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What Employees Really Think About Best Practices:

Survey Uncovers 3 Things Employees Crave

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New survey results reveal insights on what employees feel is missing from their work environments, what gets in the way, and what helps them achieve goals.

Nearly 800 corporate executives, employees, and educators across the finance, healthcare, retail, aerospace, and defense sectors responded to an online survey conducted in February, 2012. Three practices emerged as critical to productive work environments, and one Fierce belief was reinforced: “Best practices” are not always best. In fact, they have the potential to impede progress when unchecked over time.

INTRODUCTION

In theory, best practices bring positive results. The intent is to use them to simplify processes, improve quality, save time, and provide consistency. Organizations create best practices to support employees, and help them succeed. However, a new survey conducted by Fierce, Inc. uncovered a dramatic disconnect:

- **44% of respondents claim their company’s best practices *hinder* employee productivity and morale.**
- **47% report their organization’s current practices consistently *get in the way* of achieving results.**

The reality is many well-intentioned, long-accepted practices are not only failing to fix the problems they are meant to fix, they are actually escalating problems and limiting performance. Yet no one steps in to change them because they are accepted as the way things have always been done.

OFFICIAL TRUTH VS. GROUND TRUTH

Within most organizations there is a discrepancy between *official truth* and *ground truth*. *Official truth* is what can be found in the internal and external marketing efforts, newsletters, training materials, and guiding principles. The *ground truth* is what people live day-to-day, what is discussed around the water cooler, and what people talk about in the hall after the *official* meeting has ended. Uncovering *ground truth* is critical for making informed decisions and changes.

While most organizations would say they value and maybe even exemplify the three practices respondents identified as most desirable, the *ground truth* is many

employees are not experiencing them in the workplace. Interestingly, the three identified practices are also the very tools organizations can use to ensure best practices remain relevant and do not turn into “worst” practices.

This white paper examines the three top-rated practices, why they are important, how to strengthen them within your organization, and how they can help ensure best practices remain relevant and useful.

TOP-RATED PRACTICES

- 1] **Transparency**
- 2] **Autonomy**
- 3] **Responsiveness**

“There is an overall lack of trust for organizations. Employers need to earn that back. Transparency is the answer to rebuilding trust, and giving employees insight into the organization’s decision-making process is a great place to start.”

Susan Scott, President and CEO, Fierce, Inc.

1] **Transparency**

No longer optional, transparency is a requirement in the modern workforce..

SURVEY RESULTS



Nearly **50%** identify **lack of company-wide transparency** and **too little involvement in company decisions** as key areas of concern.



Nearly **50%** selected **lack of transparency** as the **top practice holding their organization back**.

25% are concerned decisions are made by management behind closed doors.

21% dislike that information is disseminated on a “need-to-know” basis.

WHY TRANSPARENCY MATTERS

Because of the economic rollercoaster of the last twenty years, including the Enron scandal and the mortgage crisis, lack of transparency and closed doors are increasingly equated with dishonesty and corruption. “There is an overall lack of trust for organizations,” said Susan Scott, President and CEO of Fierce. “Employers need to earn that back. Transparency is the answer to rebuilding trust, and giving employees insight into the organization’s decision-making process is a great place to start.”

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Chris Douglas, EVP of Global Partnerships, Fierce, Inc.

TRANSPARENCY – THEN & NOW

“Closed-Door” Organizations

Report Annually
Decisions Come from Top Down (Hierarchical)
Information Delivered on Need-to-Know Basis
Employees Protected from Information Overload
Leaders Have All the Answers

Transparent Organizations

Report Continuously
Decisions Initiated at All Levels (Flat)
Information Accessible To All Employees
Employees Trusted to Make Decisions About What Information is Relevant to Their Needs
Leaders Engage Employees to Provide Answers

Omitting information no longer appears innocent. If people don’t have information in the 21st century, they are more likely to become suspicious and question why information is not available.

“In the absence of communication, people will fill in the void,” said Scott. “And it’s never positive. People won’t assume you’re not communicating because things are going well. They’re much more likely to think the company is in trouble or hiding something.” If companies are not sharing information, there is a good chance, the ground truth can easily be found on the Internet.

Oftentimes, employers think they are protecting their employees by not sharing information. They fear good news is premature, or they fear bad news would be demoralizing. “But the truth is, a problem exists whether we cop to it or not,” said Scott. “Employees would rather be trusted so they can have ownership and actively participate in solving the problems plaguing the organization. Our species is born to solve problems. People are happy to engage in the conversation, if you’ve been engaging with them regularly.”

GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

There is also a generational approach to open information sharing. “We’re finding that everywhere around the world, there is an expectation to be invited to the table and to be able to contribute,” said Chris Douglas, Executive Vice President of Global Partnerships at Fierce. “Everything is shared now, thanks in part to social media. Generation Y comes into the workforce with full participation as a mandate, and it sometimes butts up against the hierarchy and creates friction.” The good news is

inclusion and [diversity of thought](#) improve the decision-making process. Answers to complex problems are never far away.

LIVING IN A SHORT-TERM WORLD

Frequently, the reason transparency does not occur is the exact reason it should: Business is more complex than ever before.

Because of the unsure economy and the fast-pace of business, the world has become more focused on the short-term. More short-term decisions are made because the long-term outlook is difficult to grasp. What people do have are immediate connections and ongoing [conversations](#).

“Most organizations want to be transparent, but they get caught up in the idea that messages need to be neatly packaged or buttoned-up,” said Douglas. “What people actually desire more closely resembles what you see in social networking—running dialogue.”

BUILDING TRANSPARENCY

Given the overall trajectory of business, it’s no longer possible to move forward on autopilot. “The modern-world requires more check-in points,” said Stacey Engle, EVP of Marketing at Fierce. “People want to know what’s going on along the way, and forward-thinking organizations clearly communicate with employees well before final milestones are hit.”

Leaders define the organizational culture through day-to-day actions—by having an open-door policy, welcoming questions, and allowing people to have insight into the decision-making process. Organizational cultures are shaped by daily practices. And the most powerful practice of all is [conversations](#).

In terms of best practices, transparency encourages diverse input. When people are aware of what is going on, and feedback is solicited, checks and balances ensure practices remain relevant and up-to-date.

2] Autonomy *The freedom to make appropriate decisions ensures employees remain focused and engaged.*

SURVEY RESULTS



Nearly **50%** identify the most beneficial practices as those that encourage accountability, development, and individual empowerment within the organization.

“Employees aren’t interested in being treated as cogs in the machine. Today’s employees want to have their hands on the steering wheel and have a clear understanding of their role in the big picture.”

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WHY AUTONOMY MATTERS

Studies show employees have three basic desires when it comes to work—competence (a strong understanding of their work), autonomy (the ability to decide what they do and how they do it), and relatedness, the ability to engage with others through the course of their work.¹

Autonomy, the degree to which people feel they have control over the way they perform their work, contributes to overall motivation. “Employees aren’t interested in being treated as cogs in the machine,” said Scott. “Today’s employees want to have their hands on the steering wheel and have a clear understanding of their role in the big picture. While the more hierarchical organizations of the past offered autonomy exclusively to higher-level employees, today’s organizations engage employees by offering increased autonomy at all levels.”

Work environments that support autonomy foster employees’ experience of psychological empowerment and increase retention.² Trust and job satisfaction increase when team leaders and members do not feel constantly monitored by controlling supervisors and coworkers and feel they have some say in how and when they complete their job tasks, their overall growth and development, and how they are rewarded.³

CONTINUOUS DEVELOPMENT

The natural arc of employee development begins with the desire to learn and become skilled in one’s current position. As competence builds, the desire becomes more about looking for future growth and possibilities. Over time, the urge to grow supersedes job satisfaction. When employees want to grow and do not feel they have the opportunity to drive their own growth and create plans through ongoing [conversations](#), organizations lose valuable people.

“Development is critical, if you want to improve decision-making abilities,” said Scott. “If there is too much handholding, you’re not preparing future leaders.”

Promoting talent from within improves morale by recognizing talent and rewarding effort. Providing opportunities and supporting growth builds loyalty and encourages people to take ownership of their work. Internal promotions also save time and money by shortening adjustment periods.

1 Deci, Edward L., and Richard M Ryan. (Eds.), *Handbook of Self-Determination Research*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2002. Print.

2 Liu, Dong, Shu Zhang, Lei Wang, Thomas W. Lee. “The Effects of Autonomy and Empowerment on Employee Turnover: Test of Multilevel Model in Teams.” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 96.6 (Nov 2011): 1305-1316. Print.

3 Gagné, Marylène, and Edward L. Deci. “Self-Determination Theory and Work Motivation.” *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 26.4 (2005): 331-62. Print.

BUILDING AUTONOMY

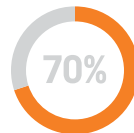
Autonomy is also built through daily [conversations](#). Leaders may state they trust their employees to make their own decisions, but people are only truly empowered when they understand which decisions are theirs to make, which decisions need to be jointly made, and which decisions should be passed along to others. Providing clarity not only supports delegation, it also creates roadmaps for professional development and opportunities for employees to request more responsibility.

As for best practices, autonomy provides the freedom to employ creative problem-solving skills and strategic thinking—all while avoiding the trap of “group think.” When employees are entrusted to take cases on an individual basis, they are fully engaged in outcomes instead of blindly following protocol.

3 | Responsiveness

The only thing worse than not requesting feedback is requesting feedback and doing nothing with it.

SURVEY RESULTS



70% said they would candidly approach decision-makers within their organization if they felt a company practice needed to be re-evaluated or adjusted.

Among respondents who reported limited benefits from their organization’s current practices, **less than one third** believe their company is willing to change practices based on employee input and feedback.

WHY RESPONSIVENESS MATTERS

Trust erodes when organizations request feedback and do nothing with it. “Employees who are willing to come to management with concerns are offering a valuable gift,” said Engle. “If organizations are unresponsive, employees will stop offering advice and recommendations. If you set up shop, and it’s a façade you’re worse off then you were before.”

The first step is to seek out opinions. A past [Fierce Survey on employee engagement and productivity](#) shows the disconnect between leaders and their teams when it comes to seeking feedback.

While **almost all (98%)** respondents believe a leader’s decision-making process should include input from the people impacted by the decision, a full **40%** feel leaders and decision makers continuously fail to ask.

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The next step is to do something with the feedback once it is received. And the sense of time has sped up in the last ten years. Responsiveness no longer means in the next monthly memo. Check-ins are now more immediate. Newsfeeds or tickers keep communication open and ongoing and provide reassurance to those invested in the organization.

The good news is when organizations do really listen, and people feel heard, decision makers are able to make unpopular decisions, and people are more likely to understand and support them.

When employees have a voice, they feel as though they are contributing—like they are part of a team. And as a result, they become more engaged.

BUILDING RESPONSIVENESS

One way to bridge distances and build connections is through modern technology. Online forums and crowd sourcing are popular tools for seeking feedback and soliciting advice.

“Crowd sourcing is invaluable,” said Douglas. “If you have a huge bowl of jellybeans, and you have enough people estimate the number, the right answer will emerge. Crowd wisdom is key.”

Insights, knowledge, and resources are available within most organizations or within other organizations across the globe. The undeniable answer is to invite the wisdom in, connect with others, and let people know when they have made a difference in the way things are done.

When employees have opinions or suggestions for best practices, and they are heard and acknowledged, they are not only more productive, they feel more engaged and connected to their organization. In turn, happy employees create happy customers.

CONCLUSION

Organizations frequently become wedded to ideas about leadership introduced decades ago. Life, and business, took place at a different pace then, and changes were usually seen coming from a long distance. The luxury of long-term foresight is less common in the modern workforce. What is common, and easier than ever, is the ability to connect regularly, openly, and honestly with others.

Transparency, autonomy, and responsiveness are more than words in a mission statement; they are actionable practices that transform the way business is done.

The common thread running through all three top-rated practices is they are supported through regular connections. Daily [conversations](#)—whether they take place in the hallway or an online forum—build trust and strengthen relationships. And relationships are the culture of an organization.

ABOUT FIERCE

Fierce, Inc. is an award-winning [leadership development and training](#) company that drives results for business and education by developing conversation as a skill. Fierce creates authentic, energizing and rewarding connections with colleagues and customers through skillful conversations that lead to successful outcomes and measurable ROI. Tailored to any organization, Fierce principles and methods translate across the globe, ensure individual and collective success and develop skills that are practical, easy-to-learn and can be applied immediately. Fierce's programs have been successfully implemented at blue-chip companies worldwide, including Ernst & Young, Starbucks, Wal-Mart, Coca-Cola, CARE and Crate & Barrel. Fierce has received numerous industry and business accolades. The company has twice been honored as an [Inc. 500|5000](#) company, and in 2011 was named to TrainingIndustry.com's [Companies to Watch](#) list and Seattle Business Magazine's [100 Best Companies to Work For in Washington](#) list.