Employee Feedback and Engagement Maturity Model

BY FRED JEWELL AND KIMBERLY M.

If you were to ask almost any senior executive of any organization whether their organization strives for an engaged workforce with a culture of continuous improvement, the answer would be 'of course.'
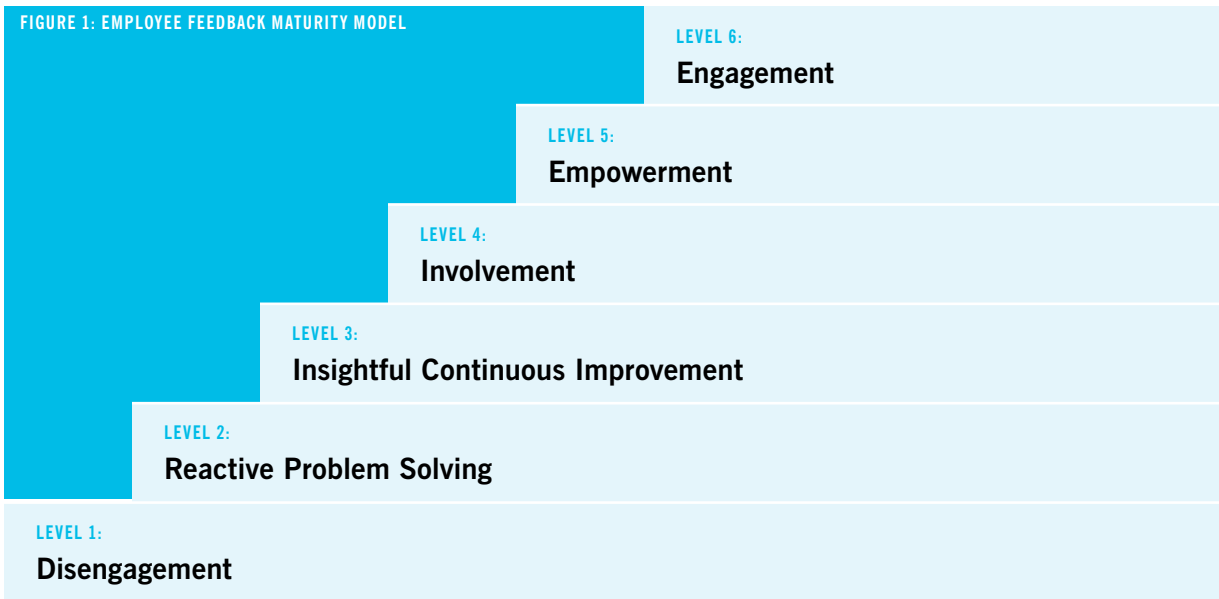
Process improvement techniques and methodologies abound in the form of Six Sigma, Lean Six Sigma, and Total Quality Management — all of which involve some element of employee engagement in the process of continuous improvement. Most organizations start with the most basic of tools for obtaining employee feedback — the employee survey. "Old school" employee satisfaction surveys have given way to employee engagement surveys. The goal of these surveys is usually twofold: to improve bottom-line results from the ideas generated by employees, and to improve the engagement of employees in the work that they do, which, in turn, can lead to improved productivity and employee retention, and can impact the bottom line.

These surveys can be insightful, but the processes in place around them are often lacking in their ability to drive real culture change and improvement in engagement scores. In effect, engagement surveys aren't engaging. Worst case, they can even bring down engagement when, year after year, no significant engagement or change results from the survey results. With some simple improvements to the processes around employee engagement surveys, they can become a driver for change within an organization.

Most companies react to employee engagement survey results without, ironically, engaging the workforce to generate ideas or, better yet, establishing employees as the owners of the changes that will ultimately improve operations and drive up engagement scores. Our research has led us to define a maturity model that can help organizations change the conversation with their employees to drive real, meaningful change and employee engagement.

Our employee feedback maturity model consists of six levels, each characterized by the actions taken by leadership and employees within the organization. The maturity model shown in Figure 1 is described below.

Key features of the model include the roles of leadership and employees and their actions. Our definition of leadership refers to anyone who is usually involved in the initial review of employee feedback before the general population of employees gets to see the results. Therefore, an employee is anyone who doesn't fit into the leadership group described above.

FIGURE 1: EMPLOYEE FEEDBACK MATURITY MODEL

LEVEL 6:
Engagement

LEVEL 5:
Empowerment

LEVEL 4:
Involvement

LEVEL 3:
Insightful Continuous Improvement

LEVEL 2:
Reactive Problem Solving

LEVEL 1:
Disengagement

The other key components of the model are the actions taken by leadership and employees. Those actions are described below:

SEE
Improvement opportunities are observed within the organization in the course of everyday operations.

ASK
Leadership asks for feedback from employees on how things could be better.

ACT
Actions are taken to implement improvements.

SAY
Employees provide feedback to leadership on how things could be better.

UNDERSTAND
Leadership takes the time to dive deep into the feedback received and works with employees to gain clarity on the suggestion and the underlying issues behind the opportunity for improvement.

DRIVE
Employees drive the planning, prioritization and project management behind the improvements to be implemented.

■ LEVEL 1:

Disengagement

FIGURE 2: LEVEL 1 PROCESS DIAGRAM		
LEADERSHIP	SEE ⟶	ACT
EMPLOYEE		
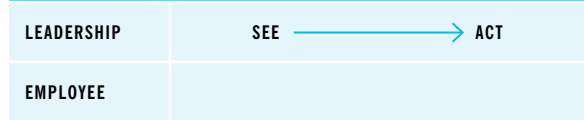
At Level 1, leadership is effectively the only part of the organization involved in continuous improvement activities. Leadership "sees" what is going on in the organization and "acts" to adjust accordingly. Of course, leadership has limited bandwidth, so only the highest priority improvements can be acted upon. Employees working in organizations that are at Level 1 are characterized by a "job" mentality where the focus is on doing their own job well, but not worrying much about the overall process in the organization or how things could be better. Power is consolidated within the leadership team, so they wait to be told what to do. This isn't a problem, because leadership doesn't expect them to take anything on by themselves. This can create a culture of dependency, a victim mentality amongst employees, and make every problem in the organization somebody else's problem. Organizations at Level 1 aren't winning any awards for being a great place to work. The key to moving forward when stuck at Level 1 is asking your employees for input.
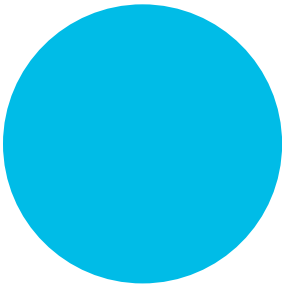
Reactive Problem Solving

FIGURE 3: LEVEL 2 PROCESS DIAGRAM		
LEADERSHIP	SEE AND ASK	ACT
EMPLOYEE		SAY

At Level 2, leadership begins to seek input from their workforce. Not only are they observing the day-to-day operations of the organization, they're actively asking employees for feedback. Because an employee survey is the least confrontational and most convenient way to seek input and feedback, leadership usually starts there. Focus groups and other direct feedback mechanisms are sometimes better tools, but they can also be time-consuming and usually cannot provide everyone in the organization with a voice, simply because there are too many people to talk with directly. Employees provide feedback, but it is still up to leadership to take action. The bandwidth limitations on action present in Level 1 organizations are still present in Level 2 organizations, but they are compounded by the time it takes to develop the survey, ensure participation, and analyze the feedback. This usually results in better quality actions to take, but less time to implement them. Because most organizations operate on an annual cycle for things such as employee surveys, there is a limited amount of time for actions to be taken and results to take hold. Most organizations have an employee survey cycle that looks something like this:

- One to two months preparing the survey and getting leadership's buy-in on the questions to be asked
- One month for employees to take the survey
- One to two months to analyze the results
- One month to put together plans to address the issues

All of the activities listed above leave leadership about half of the year to take action and implement improvements. With such a limited window for action, results are almost impossible to see before it's time for another survey, causing employees to mention the same problems as last year.

At Level 2, leadership is still not expecting employees to take on actions on their own. Employees, however, do have an opportunity to provide input, and good leadership will summarize the results and report back to employees on the actions they are planning to take to address their ideas and concerns. The data from the surveys is often vague and unclear, so leadership needs to make assumptions to act on the employee input. They don't have time to "peel the onion" to get to the core of the ideas and concerns raised. In addition, because leadership bandwidth is limited, only a few significant actions can be taken in a given year, and there could have been thousands of suggested improvements to be made. For an individual employee, the scope of the action taken can be disheartening. Over time, employees can feel like they are providing feedback into a black hole. The key to moving forward when you're at Level 2 is taking the time to truly understand the ideas and concerns generated by your employees.

Insightful Continuous Improvement

FIGURE 4: LEVEL 3 PROCESS DIAGRAM			
LEADERSHIP	SEE AND ASK	UNDERSTAND	ACT
EMPLOYEE		SAY	

At Level 3, leadership takes Level 2 one step further and seeks to understand the feedback coming from their employees. By meeting with employees, asking them to describe their ideas and concerns in more detail, and then asking more questions, they are able
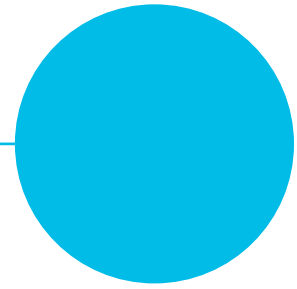
to gain insights that make for more impactful actions. Employees feel heard even more, and the quality of the actions taken increases further at this level. However, leadership is still limited in their bandwidth to make improvements on their own. The key to moving forward when you're at Level 3 is getting your employees in on the action of making improvements.

■ LEVEL 4:

Involvement

FIGURE 5: LEVEL 4 PROCESS DIAGRAM

LEADERSHIP	SEE AND ASK	UNDERSTAND →	ACT
EMPLOYEE	→ SAY	↑	→ ACT

Getting employees involved in the implementation of improvements is the key characteristic of Level 4. Once leadership has a handle on the underlying ideas and concerns expressed by the employees, they not only take on actions by themselves, they also assign some implementation actions to employee teams. These groups often go by terms such as task force and action team. These teams can make great progress given the right focus and resources. Employees see employers making changes to the organization for the better, shifting the culture from leadership doing things "to us" to leadership doing things "with us." This seemingly minor culture shift is an important step in the evolution of an organization to get people taking ownership of the organization and its outcomes. The notion of stewardship will take hold at this stage. Stewardship of the organization and its cross-functional processes begins to drown out the it's-not-my job attitude common in lower maturity organizations. Employees begin to see themselves as partners with leadership in improving the business and their own day-to-day experience at work. Leadership also realizes the benefit of the additional bandwidth provided by employee action teams. At Level 4, one of

the most interesting employee survey questions we've heard is "What question would you like us to ask you that we haven't asked you in the survey?" This question involves the workforce in the continuous improvement process in a much different way than relying on leadership to come up with all of the right questions. Ultimately, though, the organization is still primarily dependent upon leadership's inquiries into what could be better at Level 4. The key to moving forward when you're at Level 4 is to reduce or eliminate the reliance on leadership asking for ideas for improvement and moving into a true employee-led improvement program.

■ LEVEL 5:

Empowerment

FIGURE 6: LEVEL 5 PROCESS DIAGRAM

LEADERSHIP		UNDERSTAND		
EMPLOYEE	SEE → SAY	↑ →	DRIVE →	ACT

Level 5 requires leadership to let go as drivers of continuous improvement and employees to step up and identify improvements to the business. The organization is no longer dependent upon employee surveys and other formal feedback mechanisms to leadership to make change happen. Employees take it upon themselves to identify opportunities and present them to leadership for input. At Level 5, leadership still takes an active role in analyzing the opportunities presented by the employees and helps the employees focus their efforts on the underlying issues in the organization. Employees, though, are the drivers of continuous improvement and they prioritize the issues and opportunities the organization faces and take action. This structure helps to build leadership skills and makes it easier to identify high potentials within the workforce. Consulting with leadership is a key piece of the process at Level 5, though, and employees don't have the freedom to fix things on their own without

IT'S ALWAYS BETTER FOR LEADERSHIP TO PRACTICE ENGAGEMENT RATHER THAN SURVEY ENGAGEMENT.
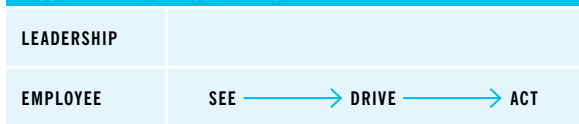
leadership consultation. They key to moving to the next level for organizations at Level 5 is to allow employees free reign to make things better on their own.

Engagement

FIGURE 7: LEVEL 6 PROCESS DIAGRAM	
LEADERSHIP	
EMPLOYEE	SEE ⟶ DRIVE ⟶ ACT

At Level 6, employees take it upon themselves to make improvements to the organization. Of course, improvements that involve fundamental changes to policy or culture will still need to be approved by leadership, but leadership allows employees to improve processes without their involvement, and employees understand that it is up to them to make change happen when things aren't working as effectively as they could. To get to this level of engagement, leadership must be supportive of employees, yet constantly turn complaints and challenges back on employees themselves. "It's not working well. Hmm. So what can you do about it? What can we do about it?" Operating at this level requires a culture where employees feel true ownership of the processes and outcomes of the organization. Maturing to the Engagement level in and of itself can be a key driver establishing this proactive culture.

USING THE MODEL AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This model is useful in helping to think through the next steps for your organization in maturing how well you tap into the creative and operational energy inherent in your workforce. Step back to look at your organization to understand your level of maturity and consider what to do next. Pragmatically, different parts of your organization will likely operate at differing levels of maturity, and your organization will likely exhibit characteristics of multiple levels. None of that diminishes the value that comes from reflecting on where you are and how you can move your organization forward.

One key recommendation that comes from the work we've done to build this model is to question the usefulness of the annual employee survey. The number of hours that go into building, distributing, completing,

collecting, analyzing, summarizing, and communicating the results of employee survey data easily exceeds the number of employees in the organization, usually because the time it takes employees to take the survey and hear the results is at least an hour, if not double that — not including any time for acting on the results. In many cases, that time could be better spent in employee-led idea-generation and action-planning sessions. It's always better for leadership to practice engagement rather than survey engagement.

The other challenge to the employee survey is the annual frequency most organizations default to. In our experience, the amount of time to make significant change happen in an organization based on the feedback from a survey is longer than the time available. Organizations should consider an 18 month, biannual or longer period between surveys. "As needed" timing for employee surveys can also be very useful. Tying a round of surveys to major events, cycles of the economy, or other drivers can make the timing and the input of employees more relevant and actionable.

Finally, we recommend getting into a routine of "pulse-check" surveys on an ongoing basis. These short, often one-question surveys can be a quick and easy thing for employees to respond to and can be used to identify new opportunities for improvement or as a way to measure the effectiveness of newly deployed improvements.

One thing is clear: moving to higher maturity levels where employees are involved and engaged in identifying and acting upon opportunities for improvement will improve overall employee engagement and business results.

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