

Getting nearer the truth, with anonymous surveys

“Will I get in trouble for writing this?”

This is a key question on the minds of staff as they respond to a survey. And it's a problem for school leaders, who need to know what staff are really thinking – not just what they think leaders want to hear.

In reality, most leaders are happy to hear the unvarnished truth. It's hard to run a successful organisation otherwise. But, for many staff, there's always a seed of doubt. School leaders must overcome this if they are to get nearer the truth.

Even if staff aren't worried about getting in trouble, they may still be trying to give socially desirable answers – to tell you what they think the acceptable, desirable or 'right' answer is – not what they really believe.

Anonymous surveys have a practical benefit too: it's much easier to collect, store and share survey results if you don't have to worry about personal, private and sensitive material within it.

So anonymous surveys have substantial advantages (we look at a couple of potential disadvantages below). This has a few important implications for leaders' attempts to gather staff voice:

1) Design anonymous surveys

The first step is building surveys which are anonymous. This means not asking staff for their names, and not using survey platforms in which results are linked automatically to staff email addresses.

2) Be cautious about asking questions which might help identify staff

Leaders often want to know how different groups of staff are doing. Are new teachers getting the support they need? Are maths teachers spending longer marking than English teachers? Is the school struggling to retain older (or younger) staff?

These are all good questions. You can design a survey to include both the questions you want answered and demographic questions, allowing you to break down how different groups of staff respond to each.

The problem is that – in almost all schools – just two or three demographic questions is enough to identify the respondent. Female, maths teacher, teaching more than ten years: must be Diana. Early-career teacher teaching Key Stage 2: must be Liam. Music teacher: must be Usman.

Our first recommendation is that – ordinarily – leaders shouldn't ask potentially-identifying questions in surveys. If there is specific relevance, we recommend being very selective. Choose the demographic question which has a direct bearing on the issue you're looking into (for example, subject taught when looking at marking strategies), rather than asking lots of questions which you don't need, and staff may not want to answer.

3) Use an external survey provider

As a school survey provider, you would expect us to suggest using an external provider. But there's particular relevance to this question. First, our surveys are anonymous by design. We've designed our systems to ensure the identities of respondents are safe. Second, however, responding to a survey run by an external provider offers worried staff an additional layer of reassurance.

What-ifs...

There are a couple of what-ifs which spring to mind and are worth tackling:

What if staff need support?

Sometimes, individual staff responses suggest they need individual help of some kind. We don't think this undermines the underlying principle. Leaders who want to offer individuals support have a few options. They can:

- Go back to all staff to invite those who have raised particular concerns to get in touch personally
- Reinforce key messages to all staff (like where to get help), knowing that the individuals they're concerned about will hear that message
- Add a question to the survey inviting staff who are happy to speak further about the issues they've raised to say who they are

The important thing to remember is that – even as the leader scratches their head about how to help an individual colleague – they now know about a concern they might otherwise have missed entirely. They are better off with the anonymous survey than they would have been without it.

What if staff say something rude or unkind?

Luckily, of the tens of thousands of staff survey responses we've collected, this almost never happens. The overwhelming majority of staff treat the chance to give professional feedback as an important opportunity. (You can count the number of times we've spotted issues or school leaders have raised concerns on one hand.)

But our underlying belief is that it's important to know what staff are really thinking. We'd

rather that didn't mean staff venting. But if staff do need to vent, first, it's very useful to know how they feel. Second, it's better they're doing that to leaders, through the survey, than to colleagues in the staff room.

Conclusion

Effective leadership is about making good decisions. To make good decisions, leaders must be as well-informed as possible: they must know what staff, pupils and parents are really thinking, seeing and doing. They're much more likely to be able to find this out if staff feel able to tell leaders what they're really thinking, without fear of the consequences (however misplaced this may be!). For all these reasons, we believe that an effective survey protects staff anonymity.

Key takeaways:

1. Leaders learn more about what's really going on when surveys are anonymous
2. To achieve anonymity, leaders must be careful to avoid asking questions which would make people identifiable.
3. You may want to consider using an external survey provider to offer another layer of reassurance

If you'd like to discuss your current approach, and hear about School Surveys can help you run genuinely anonymous surveys quickly and effectively, [get in touch](#).