12 paradigms about organizational attitude surveys

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This article presents the most common paradigms that are part of the folklore of those that conduct organizational surveys. The writer of this article, that is himself not free of paradigms, reviews the paradigms and offers solutions, in places where he considers that paradigms might affect the results. This article is based on personal experience and represents the author's opinion only.

Nowadays, organizational attitude surveys became general practice with almost any large or medium organization using them at some extent.

Paradoxally, this wide distribution was not accompanied by a parallel development of a structured methodology and models, and that the surveys are still run ad-hoc according to the abilities and the preferences of the body that accompanies the surveys.

This being the situation, it is quite expectable that, in time, many paradigms (and even myths) were created around the attitude surveys. Based on the extensive experience of the author, that surely is himself not free of some paradigm, I chose to present a number of common and significant paradigms, and here and there, to suggest alternatives and directions.

As a rule, a paradigm is not necessarily something negative, but some of the paradigms presented here, have a high probability of adversely impacting the way the survey is built and analyzed and/or the way the survey is implemented and integrated in the organization as a tool of strategic importance for the management.

It is again stressed that this is a personal opinion only, and that the reader might no agree with it. But I believe that the mere presentation of the subject in writing may create awareness and even start debates that might contribute to the improvement of the organizational attitude surveys design, management and implementation.

Generally speaking, the paradigms presented in this article may be divided into two groups:

Paradigms of statistical nature	Paradigms of systemic nature
The **even scale** paradigm	The **(lack of) strategy** paradigm
The **10 points scale** paradigm	The "obsession" for an **action plan**
The **topic average** paradigm	The **dimensions importance** paradigm
The **significance level** paradigm	The **"Big fives" paradigm**
The **"Percent satisfied"** paradigm	The **anonymity** paradigm
The **random sampling** paradigm	The **textual comments** paradigm

Paradigms of a systemic nature

Paradigm 1: The (lack of) strategy paradigm

When the much-awaited moment for presenting of the results to the organization management comes, the general manager often asks me about my recommendations to the organization following the results.

This simple, and seemingly legitimate question, hides the fact that the organization has no focused vision and well articulated strategy for its human resources. While it could be expected that the survey would serve as a tool for reflecting the gap between the declared strategy and the actual situation as reflected by the survey, it looks like the management "takes a ride" on the survey in order to finally confront with strategic aspects in the field of human resources. Same as expecting the thermometer to tell us what the optimum body temperature should be.

It is clear that we are talking about a most common and accepted habit that may be encountered in many organizations. The correct situation is to have a human resources strategy that is unrelated to a survey and even in its total absence. The survey, as other measurement tools, exists for the purpose of revealing the gap between the desirable and the existing situation.

Therefore, the position holders in human resources are expected to "force" the management to formulate its credo in relation to human resources, and only then to present the survey results in order to detect the gaps.

Paradigm 2: The "obsession" for an action plan

Many organizations tend to determine the success of the survey by the number of changes and activities that came as a result. And, alas, in many cases, this measure does not point to a great success.

There is no doubt that a well built and analyzed survey should indicate activity directions and steps to be taken. But it will be wrong to consider the action plan as the most important outcome.

It must be kept in mind that the purpose of the survey is to reflect a situation that most of its characteristics are already known. The strength of the survey stays in its ability to reflect, in a clear and quantitative way, the attitude of the surveyed population towards the object of the survey and not in the quantity of surprises and dramas it creates.

The survey is a component of the modeling measurement that helps "put on the map" of the organization and of the management the surveyed issue. Its success should be measured in terms of its ability to perform this task.

This does not mean that we are opposed to drawing action plans as a result of a survey` we would rather recommend to abstain from putting pressure on the different units to derive an action plan "at any cost", and especially not without proper accompaniment of human resources or any other relevant body in the organization. In this context, it is important to remember, that most of the patterns revealed by the survey usually relate to cross-organizational issues rather than to unit specific issues.

Paradigm 3: The dimensions importance paradigm

There is no doubt that one of the expected outcomes of the survey is to point out the importance of the various dimensions in the eyes of the employees / managers, as a tool for prioritizing the issues that must be handled as a result.

One of the tools still used by many companies is a direct question about to the importance the answerer relates to a specific dimension or issue. Experience shows, that results obtained by this approach lack variance, and are mostly centered on "very important". It resembles the question children are asked: who do you love more, you mother or your father?

Most of the issues involved in the survey are important to the employee, and the employee has no real choice in grading his/hers preferences in relation to the "attitude of the direct manager" or "quality of the food served at the company's restaurant" …

As a solution, we would like to recommend the use of more advanced statistic tools that have the ability to draw conclusions and "to guess" from the multitude of data the weight a specific issue has in the general opinion of the surveyed population. (Such as "the percent of the explained variance" or SplitIndex$^{© 1}$)

It is important to remember that the use of this kind of tools requires extra care, since a low weight may be related to an issue due to a low variance in the grades it received.

Paradigm 4: The anonymity paradigm

This is definitely a sensitive issue that always rises in the design of the survey. The concern about safeguarding the anonymity is so high that it may sometimes lead to the survey cancellation.

We do not mean to argue that the concern the answerers might refrain from participating in the survey or might distort the results is not legitimate, or even partially justified, but my feeling is that this was taken out of proportion and that sometimes people like to "fear" the issue.

As a veteran in the field, I have not yet encountered a survey where this concern proved right, one way or another. I cannot be sure about it, of course, but the experience and special analyses of the survey help me quickly identify patterns and unreasonable results.

And even more, this concern expresses distrust in the employee and sees him/ her as a suspicious and persecuted person. Even if this kind of employee might exist to some extent, most of the employees are interested in expressing their opinions and cooperate willingly with the survey.

It is important, of course, to ensure the anonymity and to convince that this promise will be kept uncompromisingly.

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[1] Methodology developed by the author of this article, aimed at pointing out the issues that explain the gaps in the evaluation of a specific issue

Even if some of the answers are biased as a result of the concern the answerer might be identified, the statistical nature of the survey analysis makes it possible to absorb the distortions, without significant damage to the overall picture.

Paradigm 5: The "Big fives" paradigm

When a survey creates a multitude of data, it is natural to look for a way to present the main points. One of the ways used by many organizations is to present the five subjects that were graded highest and the five subjects that were graded lowest.

This approach is somehow naïve, and experience shows that there is a great chance that the same subjects appear in the list. This is due to the fact that each subject has its natural and proper characteristic, independent of the organization. Therefore it is to be expected that most of the organizations will grade it similarly: wages will always receive a low grade and the direct manager (surprising, isn't it) a high grade (we refer here to the average grade, not grades particular to specific units).

Therefore, it is imperative to use an approach that puts each issue in the right perspective and in its natural reference group. The most recommended approach is benchmarking vs. grades obtained in similar organizations.

Paradigm 6: The textual comments paradigm

The tendency to give much importance to the textual comments written by the survey answerers is justified, since they are supposed to point at important issues the statistical analysis does not reflect properly.

But the problem is exactly here: textual comments are often analyzed statistically by some categorization; in the best case the analysis will reveal the same patterns that appear in the main statistical analysis.

It is therefore recommended to take a much "softer" approach when analyzing the textual comments, if possible one that does not use statistical tools. There is no preferable method, but in our opinion the method should be based on the reading of the comments and the attempt to extract the feelings and the atmosphere the statistical analysis is likely to miss.

Paradigms of a statistical nature

Paradigm 7: The even scale paradigm

A classic dilemma when building a questionnaire is whether to use an even or an odd answer scale.

Those in favor of the even scale argue that it prevents the answerers to "drift to the middle", as if there was something wrong with it. In our opinion, the choice of the middle is not a drift, but a legitimate choice with the same meaning as any other choice. Actually, the fact that the even scale "forces" the answerer to be pro or contra seems to us the opposite of the reality where it is possible not to take sides but remain indecisive.

As a result, it seems that the odd scale enables the answerer to reflect in a more reliable and natural way the range of its feelings.

Paradigm 8: The 10 points scale paradigm

Another dilemma related to the answers scale is connected to its width. Many of those dealing with surveys tend to use a 10 levels scale, believing it has a higher sensitivity than the more common 5 levels scale.

The main disadvantage of the 10 levels scale is that it is not possible to attach an explicit wording to each category; therefore one cannot be sure that the person that answered 7 is less satisfied than the person that answered 8, a fact that might severely impact the reliability of the results.

Moreover, most of the world benchmark publications are on the 5 levels scale. The above reasons and many other (such as the difficulty of presenting a 10 categories distribution), make us recommend the 5 points scale.

Paradigm 9: The topic average paradigm

The typical questionnaire is divided into many logical topics, and each topic consists of many questions. In the organizational climate questionnaire, such an issue may be "*the working environment*" that may include questions related to workstation, office maintenance, ergonomic aspects and maybe also the quality of the meals and the relationships with the roommates.

Therefore it looks natural to average all the questions included in the topic and creates an average general score for the "*working environment*". This practice is completely unacceptable from the statistical point of view, since it "mixes oranges with tomatoes" and leads to a highly unreliable result.

It is not possible to give here a detailed explanation of the problem embedded in this approach, lets say only that is related in general to the fact that questions with a low correlation between them, that is to say that do not represent the same content world, are not to be averaged. As a rule, preliminary checks must be conducted before deciding to

bring several questions to the same dimension. The most popular check is Cronbach alpha and factorial analysis.

Paradigm 10: The significance level paradigm

One of my preferred paradigms! When I present results in different categorizations (lets say by gender), there will always be someone in the audience asking if the difference between the results has statistical significance. Indeed, something from their studies has subsisted…

Our unequivocal recommendation is to stop being worried by this academic question, and to change it to the question: "*is the difference meaningful from the managerial point of view?*" This is not the place to explain why the significance issue not always has an added value in the analysis of a survey, but the rule is that a significant difference from the managerial point of view is likely to be statistically significant, while a statistically significant difference is not forcefully significant from the managerial point of view.

There are special cases when the significance issue is important, but it is recommended to concentrate, in the majority of the cases, on the issue of the managerial significance.

The requirement of the audience to show the standard deviation, suffers from the same paradigm. (This issue will be addressed in detail in the next article)

Paradigm 11: The "Percent satisfied" paradigm

When analyzing a survey, a decision must be taken as to the leading index for the analysis of the different answers. A most common measure is the average (on of a 5 points scale), but many companies prefer to use the measure "*the percent of the persons with a positive attitude*". For example, when analyzing the general satisfaction question, the average measure will show a value such as 3.65 (on a of a 5 points scale) while the percentile measure will show 72% (the percent of the satisfied or very satisfied).

Both of the measures are legitimate and meaningful for the reader. Our claim against the use of the percentile measure is based on the fact that it transforms a 5 points scale into a 2 levels scale (as if the answers scale was 1- satisfied, 0- other). Statistically, this involves the loss of a great deal of information held in the broader scale that is much better represented by the average. It may be claimed that the average does not reflect the distribution, but this is true for the percentile measure also.

Paradigm 12: The random sampling paradigm

Most of the organizational attitude surveys are based to some extent on a random sample of the population, whether this was originally planned, or since response rate is never 100%.

Supposing we are talking about a random sample (each individual in the population has the same chance to be included in the sample), the calculation of the measures at the company level is done on the assumption (not always conscious) that all the surveyed subgroups have a proportional representation in the sample.

This assumption may be true, but in many cases this does not happen. For example, in a global organization having a division in India, response rate in this division may, due to cultural differences, be significantly higher than in other countries. Therefore, a simplistic calculation that does not take into account this fact, might give a too high weight, in the final score, to the attitude of the employees of the Indian division.

In order to overcome this obstacle, it is very important to assess the validity of the proportional representativity assumption, and if not proved, to perform the suitable weighted calculation of the results.

In conclusion

This article is very personal and based on the experience acquired from hundreds of different surveys in a wide range of organizations. It does not pretend to represent the absolute "truth" supported by scientific research, but is aimed at showing the general practice in many organizations and proposing alternatives to the existing, well rooted beliefs that may adversely impact the benefits that may be derived from the organizational surveys. The organizational surveys, in general, do not enjoy, in our opinion, a wide enough methodological attention from those involved in the field. I am looking forward to receiving comments on this article and even seeing works done as a continuation.