

Following Up on Employee Surveys: A Conceptual Framework and Systematic Review

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Executive Summary

This article addresses the underexamined area of employee survey follow-up processes within organizational development (OD), noting that despite widespread survey use, post-survey action planning is frequently neglected in both practice and academic literature. The authors argue that the follow-up process constitutes a distinct human resource practice warranting dedicated theoretical and empirical attention, separate from adjacent practices such as 360-degree feedback, multisource feedback, and upward feedback. To structure the review, the authors developed an original conceptual framework drawing from Nadler and Tushman's Congruence Model of Organizational Behavior (1980), Burke and Litwin's Model of Organizational Performance and Change (1992), and Porras and Robertson's Change-Based Organizational Framework (1992). A systematic review of 53 peer-reviewed records published between 1952 and 2021 was conducted using PRISMA-P protocols. Key findings indicate that psychological outcomes were studied most frequently, while organizational strategy, external factors, resources, and culture/climate received minimal empirical attention. Results across studies were broadly mixed, with most reporting some positive effects but significant variability in implementation quality, study duration, and change agent involvement. The authors conclude that managers are central change agents whose enablement through training and resources is critical, and that substantial research gaps remain across nearly all components of the proposed framework.

Key Insights

1. The employee survey follow-up process is conceptually distinct from 360-degree, multisource, and upward feedback practices due to its group-level, bottom-up orientation toward general work conditions rather than individual performance appraisal.
2. Research on the follow-up process is sparse, fragmented across disciplines, and uses inconsistent terminology, with the most recent dedicated review prior to this work published over 30 years ago (Neuman et al., 1989).
3. Findings across 53 reviewed studies were broadly mixed: psychological outcomes were the most studied category (38 studies), while organizational strategy, external factors, and culture/climate were almost entirely unexplored empirically, representing major research gaps.
4. Manager and leader enablement — through training, time, senior management support, and access to change agent resources — emerged across multiple studies as a recurring factor associated with more effective follow-up processes.
5. Publication bias is acknowledged as a likely limitation, as null results in intervention studies tend not to be published, potentially inflating the apparent positive effects of survey feedback interventions in the reviewed literature.

Practical Takeaways

- Organizations implementing employee surveys can expect greater difficulty harvesting benefits when action planning steps are skipped or when managers lack the training, time, and top management support needed to facilitate team-level feedback discussions.
- The reviewed evidence suggests that varying the structural model for feedback meetings — for example, using peer or intergroup designs rather than the classic work-family waterfall model — may address psychological safety concerns, though additional comparative research is needed to draw firm conclusions.

Frameworks Mentioned

Congruence Model of Organizational Behavior — Nadler and Tushman's (1980) input-transformation-output model of organizational behavior, used to structure the conceptual framework for the employee survey follow-up process.

Burke-Litwin Model of Organizational Performance and Change — Burke and Litwin's (1992) model distinguishing transformational and transactional factors in organizational change, used to inform the specific variables in the authors' conceptual framework.

Change-Based Organizational Framework — Porras and Robertson's (1992) framework identifying work setting and human system as the two main domains relevant to organizational change, used to structure the human and organizational system components of the review's model.

360-Degree Review — A multi-source performance appraisal practice collecting vertical and horizontal feedback from superiors, subordinates, peers, and self-ratings, discussed as a related but distinct practice from employee surveys.

PRISMA-P — Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses protocol, used to guide the systematic literature search and screening process.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The article fills a genuine gap by providing the first comprehensive, systematic review of the employee survey follow-up process in over 30 years, grounded in established OD theory. The use of PRISMA-P protocols adds methodological rigor. The conceptual framework is logically derived from multiple well-regarded models and provides a useful organizing structure. The authors are transparent about research gaps and do not overstate conclusions. **Limitations:** The final sample of 53 records spanning nearly 70 years is modest, reflecting the genuine sparsity of the field rather than a methodological weakness, but it constrains the strength of conclusions. Study heterogeneity — varying designs, industries, measurement points, and intervention quality — severely limits cross-study comparability. The authors acknowledge likely publication bias, which may inflate apparent positive effects. The restriction to English and German language publications and exclusion of gray literature may have omitted relevant evidence. The framework, while comprehensive, remains untested as an integrated model; no empirical validation of its proposed relationships is offered. The article is primarily conceptual-integrative, and many of the 'practical implications' are inferred rather than directly evidenced by the reviewed studies.

Organizational Practice

The article describes organizations conducting periodic employee surveys (annual or pulse-format) followed by structured feedback processes at the team level. The bottom-up follow-up model involves managers holding feedback discussions with their direct teams, reviewing psychosocial work environment data, and co-developing action plans. In some organizations, internal HR personnel, external consultants, or occupational health professionals support managers before or during these meetings. A 'waterfall' cascade structure is commonly used, in which higher-level managers receive and discuss results first, serving as models for lower-level groups. Some organizations apply top-down action planning at the organizational or departmental level. Variation in practice is substantial: some organizations conduct thorough action planning with trained facilitators, while others treat data collection as the endpoint without follow-through.

Strategic Implications

The review points to a persistent implementation gap in employee survey practice — widespread survey adoption is not matched by equally widespread follow-up action — which represents a systemic inefficiency in how organizations use a common diagnostic tool. The emphasis on manager enablement as a recurring finding suggests that PMS design increasingly intersects with leadership development infrastructure. The absence of empirical work on organizational strategy alignment and external cultural factors indicates that current PMS frameworks may underweight contextual variables in survey program design. The mixed effectiveness findings across five decades of research suggest that the field has not yet converged on reliable implementation parameters, which has implications for how organizations evaluate the ROI of survey programs. The growing use of pulse surveys noted in the article implies that follow-up cycle times are compressing, potentially amplifying the consequences of inadequate action planning processes.

Validation Status: passed
