



HOT TOPIC

GLOBAL EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT SURVEYS IN CHINA

Addressing Cultural Distinctions to
Maximize Effectiveness



The exploding growth of the Chinese economy and the drive to build new businesses has emphasized the importance of employees and what they think. Across all markets and geographic regions, considerable investments are being made in assessing employee attitudes; however, the cultural distinctiveness of China's work environment can make survey projects challenging. Western survey methods and best practices need to be adapted to the local culture in order to produce meaningful results.



INTRO

When surveying employees in China, using Western methods without modifying them to the local culture will likely result in lackluster participation and misleading results. Surveys conducted in China will generate more meaningful and actionable results if the deep-rooted cultural dynamics of the workforce are successfully incorporated into the survey design, administration and reporting phases of the program. This can significantly improve the level of support for the survey and encourage employees to provide honest responses.

The influence of Confucianism is deeply rooted in Chinese society. Social harmony is central to Confucianism, which makes the development and preservation of personal relationships paramount.

Traditionally, Chinese employees have a strong sense of loyalty to their employers and many believe surveys diminish the authority of managers or expose their weaknesses. To avoid discord, employees may be averse to completing the survey or may temper their responses if they choose to participate. These strong influences should drive how an engagement survey is positioned.

Important key messages to communicate include:

- The purpose of the survey is to improve the organization, not to criticize the performance of managers or senior leaders.
- The company will take action on the survey results.
- Employee feedback will contribute to the well-being of the entire organization.

In this paper, we will highlight the main differences between China and Western cultures and how such differences should be addressed when conducting employee surveys in China.

We examined our global norms to determine how employees in the U.S. and China answered the following question:

“Considering everything, how would you rate your overall satisfaction with your company at the present time?”

61%

of U.S. employee responded favorably

52%

of Chinese employees responded as such

EMPLOYEE SURVEY CYCLE

Before cultural differences can be addressed, an organization must first confirm that all phases of the employee survey are included in the process. This will help to ensure that the necessary steps are taken to make the survey meaningful and actionable:



Interview

Interview senior leadership, managers and employees to gain buy-in for the survey and promote a greater understanding of the organization's goals, strategies, culture and survey expectations.



Design

Discuss survey vision, format, administration, translation needs, confidentiality concerns and system requirements. Construct a framework for survey content development.



Pre-Test

Conduct a pre-test to ensure items are valid and easy to read, particularly when translated into different languages.



Survey Administration

Monitoring participation rates and following up with reminder communications can help maximize employee participation in the survey process.



Data Analysis and Reporting

Compare current, historical and normative data to make benchmark comparisons and track performance across multiple years. Collecting demographic information enables results to be segmented based upon employee characteristics, which can help identify appropriate follow-up actions.



Interpretation and Feedback

Managers identify strengths and areas for improvements, prioritize opportunities and identify trends and key issues. Examine historical and normative comparisons to develop follow-up strategies best suited for the organization.



Data Analysis and Reporting

Leadership needs to be held accountable for implementing action plans that focus organization resources on issues most critical to success. Involving employees in the action planning process and communicating the steps that have been taken based on the survey results are essential to implementing effective and lasting change.

UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Companies need to understand the cultural aspects that are the foundation of good business when designing and administering an employee engagement survey in China. Some of the fundamental dynamics include:



Personal Relationships

Guan xi (i.e., “relationships”) is the foundation of good business. A firmly established relationship can sometimes mean more than a written contract.



Trust

People tend to trust only those with whom they have established relationships or guan xi. Although developing and nurturing relationships in China can be demanding, the time and money required to establish strong ties is typically worth the investment.



Business Culture

Western companies must make themselves known to Chinese companies before business can be conducted. This may require individuals to spend a considerable amount of time socializing. Once a relationship is established, it must be nurtured for business to continue.



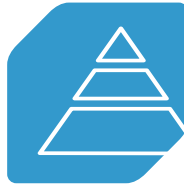
Communication

Face-to-face meetings (both official and social) are a preferred way to communicate with others and maintain strong relationships. Chinese workers tend to keep good relationships by not talking directly about problems; therefore, direct confrontations are often avoided.



Personal Interaction

The importance of guan xi sometimes results in people being passive and sensitive unlike American culture where individuals are often aggressive, proactive and persistent.



Hierarchy of Power

Chinese society and businesses strictly observe rank where the individual is subordinate to the organization. Business people prefer to be addressed by their title and last name. If the person does not have a title, or you do not know it, address them as “Mister” or “Madam.”



Decision Making

Patience is truly a virtue in China. Allow ample time for group decision making and discussions as well as allowing the decision to go up the ranks for final approval.



Time Management

The needs of a business relationship will take precedence over a schedule or a list of tasks to be completed. During formal business meetings, frequent interruptions are not uncommon.

Chinese Perceptions Of Employee Surveys

Based on the work we have conducted with various companies in China, employees tend to have both positive and negative attitudes about surveys. Those attitudes are often contingent on an individual's location and the type of organization for which they work.

Employees from larger cities and/or international organizations are inclined to have more positive attitudes about an employee survey program. These individuals tend to believe:

- A survey is a two-way communication channel where employees can share their thoughts and opinions with leadership.
- The survey can help the organization better define their strengths and weaknesses.
- Management will use the results to improve the work environment.

Individuals from smaller cities, state-owned companies and/or private companies tend to have more negative attitudes towards employee surveys. They are likely to feel:

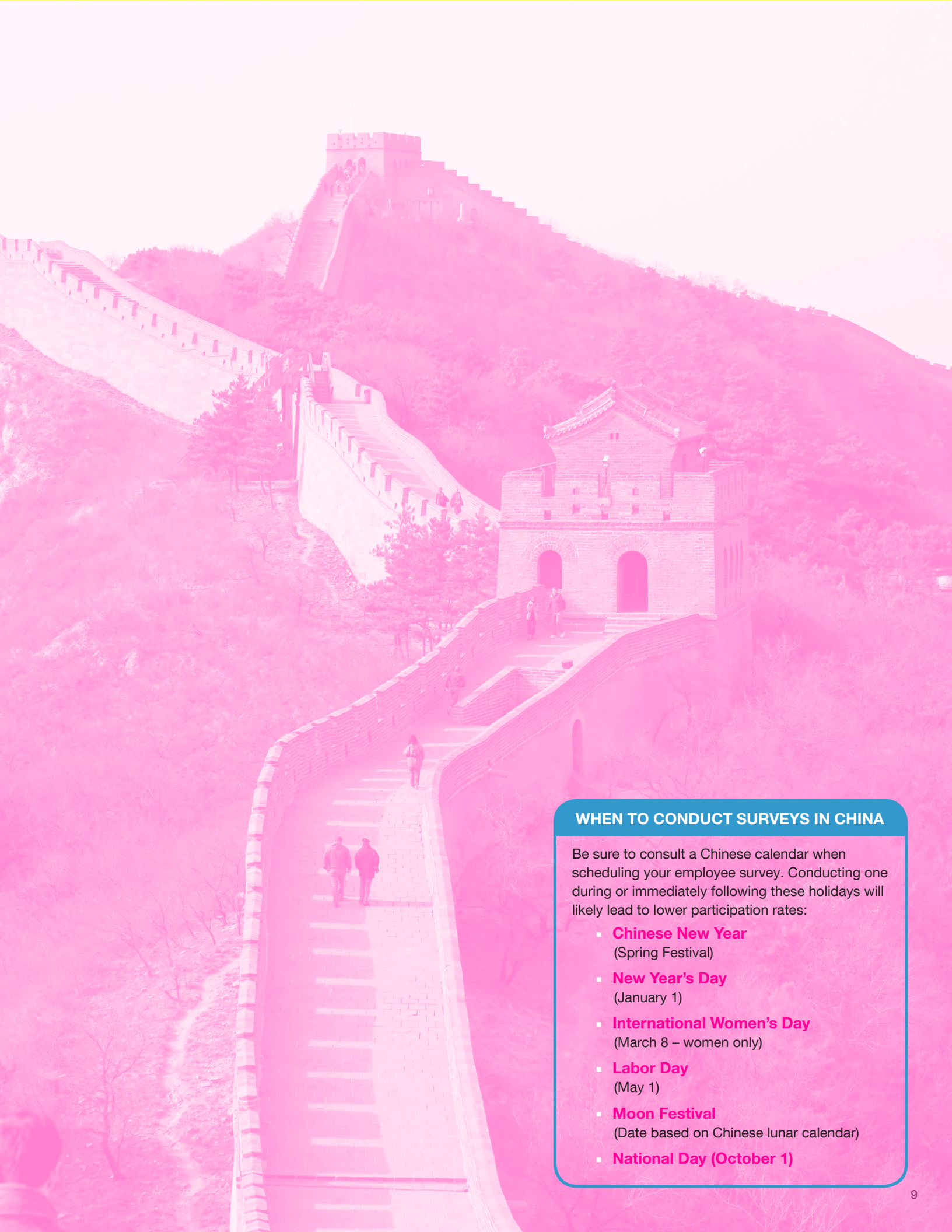
- A survey is a political game or a marketing tool. No one really cares about the results and no action will be taken.
- Survey items do not directly relate to their individual situations so participation and/or candid responses are pointless.
- A survey can help organizations improve their brands and reputations in order to attract employees; however, survey results will not be used to help employees.

THE VALUE OF ACTION PLANNING

According to internal research, the average company spends about \$9 per employee per year on surveys. Smaller organizations can spend as much as \$30 per employee depending on the scope of the project. For most companies, employee surveys are a valuable investment in improving communication between employees and management and gaining insight into their opinions and behaviors.

Conducting a survey is instrumental to better understanding an organization's most valuable resource – its employees. Simply asking the right questions is not enough. To achieve better customer service, higher retention rates, improved productivity and increased profits, a company must follow through with actions and make sure employees know the implemented improvements directly link to the results of the survey.

Action planning is certainly the most challenging aspect of the survey process, but it's also the part that can add the most value to the organization. Small actions, even at the work-group level, can open the door to new opportunities.



WHEN TO CONDUCT SURVEYS IN CHINA

Be sure to consult a Chinese calendar when scheduling your employee survey. Conducting one during or immediately following these holidays will likely lead to lower participation rates:

- **Chinese New Year**
(Spring Festival)
- **New Year's Day**
(January 1)
- **International Women's Day**
(March 8 – women only)
- **Labor Day**
(May 1)
- **Moon Festival**
(Date based on Chinese lunar calendar)
- **National Day (October 1)**

GUIDELINES FOR A SURVEY ADMINISTRATION

A successful employee engagement survey will highlight the linkage between an organization's people and business results. When a company has global operations, using a survey process that accommodates multiple languages so employees can participate in their native language is key to improving the response rate and the quality of the data.

A properly designed survey - tailored to the cultural dynamics of the workforce - can reveal new insights that improve customer satisfaction, increase efficiency and ultimately boost the bottom line. Here are some important guidelines to follow when conducting a survey in China:



Secure the support of senior leadership

Cultural differences make senior leadership support essential. Since Chinese employees will not want to do or say anything that would taint the reputations or status of those above them, leaders must openly endorse the survey effort and reinforce that feedback will be used to improve the organization.



Position the survey as a communication tool for improving the organization

Provide proper communication channels to let employees know the purpose and importance of the survey and be sure to answer questions in a timely manner. Reinforce that prompt action will be taken based on the results.



Maintain confidentiality

Anonymity is very important since employees have a strong commitment to their employers and may not want to provide truthful responses out of fear that they may negatively affect their guan xi with managers. Using an outside vendor can encourage candor and help maintain the confidentiality of responses.



Make survey content clear and relevant

Survey content needs to be valid, actionable and applicable to the employees and the organization. A pilot or pre-test can help to ensure clarity especially when translating content into different languages or dialects. Compensation and leadership are two necessary categories to include as they are highly valued in Chinese culture.



Have an on-site presence

Local support and service is important to the business relationship since the Chinese culture values face-to-face communication. When conducting employee surveys in China plan to have a team from the home country on site to provide assistance.



Provide a comfortable environment

If paper surveys are required due to limited access to computers and/or the internet, organize designated meetings where employees can gather to complete the survey. Be sure to create a relaxed environment such as a meeting room with tea and coffee.



Make reports relevant and localized

Management reports should focus on the data and details while executive management reports center on trend and summary information. Report formats should be attractive since Chinese management evaluates their quality not only by content, but also by appearance.



Respect cultural hierarchy

Be sure to respect the hierarchical structure by distributing survey results to senior leadership first, then to managers and finally to employees. Do not speak directly to employees. Go to managers first for approval.



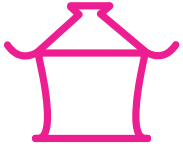
Replace focus groups

In the U.S., focus groups are an effective way to collect opinions; however, in China, such methods do not work well since most Chinese employees are reserved and prefer to express their thoughts in writing instead of speaking out. As an alternative, elicit suggestions individually from employees through survey technology or by collecting thoughts on paper.



Turn data into action

Make a firm commitment to take action on survey results. Leaders should interpret the results and implement changes that employees can witness and benefit from; otherwise, future participation in surveys will sharply decline.



Conducting employee surveys in China requires a distinct approach. A concerted effort needs to be taken by practitioners to be culturally competent at every stage of an employee survey project. Only then can the successful measurement of employee attitudes in China be guaranteed.

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We deliver customized employee and customer surveys that measure the vital link between employee engagement, customer satisfaction and business performance. We help large organizations identify specific attitudes and behaviors that impact their bottom lines and convert survey data into actions that enhance both employee and company performance.

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