CONTINUOUS LISTENING: A LOOK BEHIND THE CURTAIN

Just because we are dazzled by technological advances like Continuous Listening, with its speed and convenience—doesn’t mean it makes us better.

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“Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain.”

- Wizard of Oz
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I first started doing employee research forty years ago. Back then, job-one was to convince the HR leader or the executive team that if they really wanted to learn what was going on with their workforce, and listen to their employees, simply doing a few focus groups was not the answer. In fact, that approach was frequently misleading and sometimes even destructive. Focus groups are made up of small samples that can’t be representative of the entire population. In the typical focus group, the most articulate and/or persuasive person wins the point, regardless. They could be one of the most valuable employees, or just some slug with a bone to pick.

Unfortunately, that wasn’t even the worst thing about focus groups. I just didn’t learn about that until after a few decades of doing research. The worst thing, unfortunately, needs some explaining, and most people prefer short-and-simple, to long-and-involved. But in this instance, it’s worth going a little deeper. Why? The issue has taken on much more relevance in the age of social media, crowd sourcing, and Continuous Listening.

Over the years, employee-research companies, including my own, have tried a wide variety of approaches to understanding the issues that were most critical in establishing a level of job satisfaction. Then, more recently, we sought to understand the critical issues of employees’ engagement. These approaches included regression techniques, importance scales, innovative ways of posing questions to employees, recording, and analyzing their responses. You’ve heard the expression, what goes around, comes around. Well, here we go around...again.

The combination of technology and social media have led to the newest fads, and innovations commonly referred to as crowd sourcing, Continuous Listening, or real-time employee engagement. These high-tech, approaches to ongoing listening recreate some of the same problems we needed to solve forty years ago. Essentially, we now have new focus groups—ON STERIODS!

This truly amazing technology tends to make us focus in wonderment on the complexity of the plumbing rather than the quality of water that flows into the glass, despite the fact it is the quality of the water that sustains us.

For starters, important technological advances that enable processes like continuous listening and real-time feedback can sometimes dazzle us so much with their speed and convenience that we lose track of the sound science and thought leadership that have proven to produce the best long-term business results. This truly amazing technology tends to make us focus in wonderment on the complexity of the plumbing rather than the quality of water that flows into the glass, despite the fact it is the quality of the water that sustains us.

Ideas and concepts that make people and businesses better are the miracles, not the speed and convenience by which they are delivered. Dr. Martin Luther King’s speech is the miracle, not the speed and convenience of its streaming on YouTube.
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Likewise, the innovative science of workforce management, and the sound principles of asking the right questions, measuring the right things, and attacking the priority issues with commitment and focus, is the miracle. It is not the continuous-listening data downloads of ever-changing information in real-time.

If the data isn’t ever-changing, then why would one need to be continually measuring it? If it is ever-changing, it clouds and confuses us when it comes to the enduring factors that build an elite workforce. Some factors in business change quickly and for these, agility is the secret to success. Improving workforce performance takes commitment to a goal, and focus over time. Priorities can’t be ever-changing. Again, smarts, focus, and commitment win, NOT tail chasing.

Continuous Listening and the other real-time feedback systems have a place. If you want to know if your employees would rather have a ping-pong table or a foosball table in the break room, or which aspects of the benefits package are most valued—bingo. You can get the answer quickly!

But if you want to know how to build a great workforce, and attract and keep the best talent, then do not focus on ever-changing variables. Instead, learn the specific, enduring factors that influence your employees to want to work harder, stay longer, and care more, day in and day out, and stay relentlessly focused on those.

Also, I am struck by the disturbing lack of evidence, minus the science, that any of these innovative and technological approaches have demonstrated the ability to focus managers and leaders on issues that actually make their workforce more productive and effective. Some providers feature a couple of client testimonials. But they are almost always about the process, with all its bells and whistles, and never about actual results. Why? We need to dig deeper.

Here’s what I learned. It’s a long story but I’ll try to keep it simple. No matter how innovative and automated or even old school, you do it, when you ask employees what’s most important to them in their jobs, you NEVER learn anything about the best way to make your workforce more productive and effective. There are two major reasons.

First, when you ask the importance question, no matter how you do it, you immediately learn everyone’s pet peeve. You get a whole lot of different perspectives on what’s wrong with this place! So, what’s bad about that? It brings to mind a major study I once lead. It involved a specific industry and the goal was to contrast a sample of the very best managers with a sample of managers that were clearly not performing even close to the same level. We wanted to learn the factors that best explained the differences in performance between the managers in both groups.

A key part of the study included a lengthy structured interview made up of wide-ranging questions relevant to management and leadership. I remember one question in particular that demonstrated a clear and obvious difference between the two groups. The question went something like this: A colleague came to you and told you about another employee who was negative about your ability to manage. What will you do? The responses from the low performing group were dominated by different ways of chasing the negativity. Most could not resist the temptation to either investigate, or go directly to the person and ask them. This wasn’t all that surprising until we contrasted these responses with those of the super-star managers.
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For the most part, the super-star group was quick to point out the pitfalls of chasing all the negativity in the workplace. Some included the caveat of making an exception if the person complaining was one of their top performers, but they quickly followed it up with an acknowledgment that it was neither their job, nor even a realistic possibility, to please everyone, and that their time would be much better spent on other priorities. So, we learned an important concept.

The best managers optimize their impact by spending the most time and energy exploring and investing in opportunities, and less time chasing the negative. Executive teams relying on Continuous Listening and real time feedback to make decisions, and set priorities, are actually like playing a high-stakes game of Whack-A-Mole. And you know how that goes. It doesn’t matter how hard and fast you whack, there’s always more moles!

So why would any executive want to employ a system that draws out a wide range of responses, the vast majority of which are directed at problems and negatives, not opportunities? When you decide to go down this path, Continuous Listening quickly becomes continuous tail chasing! Plus, it’s no fun!

Let me be clear—if you’re doing any form of Continuous Listening, and you are seeing continuous change, you are likely NOT measuring employee engagement—

you’re probably measuring mood. Do you want to improve mood or do you want to improve performance?

Now for the second, and even more important problem with these listening techniques. With a big majority of the employee surveys that I have lead or supervised—which is well into the thousands—the survey items were followed up with one to three open-ended questions that employees could choose to respond to. They were usually some variation on what are we doing well, and, where do we need to improve? So much time and energy was frequently committed, and unfortunately, many times, wasted on how to analyze and utilize this information.

After observing and studying all of this open-ended feedback, over many years, it finally dawned on me what I was looking at. Here’s the problem. Whenever groups of employees are given the opportunity to identify the factors that are most important in their jobs, the responses vary widely across a vast range of topics. However, three factors are consistently OVER-represented in the data. They are like false positives in the diagnosis of a disease. The three factors—false positives—that prove again and again to take up the most air time are: fairness, compensation, and work-life balance.

CONTINUOUS FALSE POSITIVES

FAIRNESS COMPENSATION WORK/LIFE BALANCE

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Before we go into all three, one at a time, in more depth, allow me to point out a universal truth. So, here’s the bottom line about fairness, compensation, and work-life balance and the role they play in building a successful business: NEVER, in the history of human enterprise, has a company risen to greatness by focusing on treating everyone the same—fairness, increasing the cost of labor—compensation, and lowering workplace expectations to reduce stress—work-life balance.

Let’s start with fairness. One problem with fairness is that it means something different to everyone. If you are a top performer it’s fair for you to be paid twice as much as some others. But if you are not in the elite top performing group (usually less than 20% of the total population are in that group) fair means everyone gets paid the same. Suffice it to say that treating everyone the same (usually the majority opinion) is NOT a great way to build a great workforce.

Now, what about compensation? First off, it comes in many forms: pay, benefits, perks, etc. The spontaneous opinions expressed about compensation are dominated by one primary sensitivity—the grass is always greener somewhere else! There is always an example of some company that compensates better, or someone with a better deal. In other words, it’s never enough! And a majority of employees have their personal examples that prove it, at least to themselves. If you want to know if you are paying employees enough, focus on performance, and do a market study. Don’t ask them! You could go broke if you listen, and if you don’t listen it just creates another pet peeve to hear about from your Continuous Listening process.

To be clear, compensation is important and we all need to get it right. It can be the major factor in retention. However, it is hardly ever a major determining factor in how motivated and engaged employees are, moment by moment as they go about their work. In other words, compensation can determine if an individual stays or leaves, but it is hardly ever a factor in how hard they prepare for an important meeting, or how far they are willing to go to win back a disappointed customer, or how determined they are to answer the phone before the third ring. These types of behaviors are influenced much more by other factors. And fortunately, those factors don’t generally cost as much.

Now for my favorite: work-life balance. The popular press loves it. But I can say with great confidence that it is completely misunderstood and is often overreacted to by most. Don’t get angry with me just yet. I’m certainly not saying that it’s never a problem. Sweat shops exist in various forms, employees can be taken advantage of, and at certain stages of life, especially for young parents, the obligations of work, even in a job they love, can produce high levels of negative stress and guilt. Even though it can create a serious problem, relying on the data from millions of surveys, I can still prove the case that work-life balance is almost never the key to creating a great place to work, and a highly engaged and productive workforce.

Consider this. I’ve been interviewing employees for forty years. I’ve looked for opportunity after opportunity to ask people to describe the time when they have been most motivated and engaged in their work, and felt best about their job. In almost every instance, they describe a time when they took on a big challenge. They describe it as hard and allude to how it tested and stretched them. They often talked about how they worried about being successful, and thought about it night and day. Then, they go on to say that in the end it worked, and the growth, learning, success, and recognition was exhilarating.
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If you don’t believe me try it yourself. Focus especially on your best people. Those are the people that you most need to keep.

...RELYING ON CONTINUOUS LISTENING AND REAL TIME FEEDBACK TO MAKE DECISIONS, AND SET PRIORITIES, ARE ACTUALLY LIKE PLAYING A HIGH-STAKES GAME OF WHACK-A-MOLE.

To build on this point...in all the structured employee interviews I’ve analyzed, when asked to describe the time when they were most engaged, NEVER ONCE has anyone described a time that was stress free and their life was in perfect balance. NEVER ONCE! Burn out does NOT happen from working hard on a challenge that fits the talents, abilities, and aspirations of the individual. Burn out, and an out-of-balance life, happens when an individual finds themselves in an overwhelming situation because it is so ill-suited for their particular talents, abilities, and aspirations.

So, what does work?

Here’s the really good news. It really is quite possible to learn the key factors that currently cause employees to want to work harder, stay longer and care more. This, I believe best exemplifies the single best definition of employee engagement. Employee Engagement, if defined this way will never go out of vogue, or become less relevant, or be negated by a totally new idea. At least not until all the work is done by robots. Who doesn’t need to learn the overriding, current-but-enduring issues that cause their people to want to work harder, stay longer and care more?

If you doubt me then please answer the following question:

When is it unimportant for managers and leaders at every level—from the C Suite to the front line—to better understand what they should focus on in order to make employees in their down line more motivated, committed, and conscientious?

How do you influence your people to want to work harder, stay longer, and care more? That is a question that always has been, and always will be, not only relevant, but also critically important to building an elite workforce. And...it is answerable.

This is the single best reason to listen to and learn from your employees. You just have to do it right! If you just find some new-fangled ways to ask them what matters to them, you will either need to ignore most of it, or be prepared to chase an unlimited number of grounders with little or no return on investment, and then get focused on things like fairness, compensation, and work-life balance. None of which will help build a truly great company.

The right process includes measuring the right issues with the right wording, identifying the specific issues that are currently most influential to the engagement level of your employees. Then you must focus managers and leaders, at all levels, on those issues that will make the most impact. With this approach, progress and improvement are a consistent outcome.
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From a database involving over 21 Million employee surveys, we were able to conclusively identify the six manageable factors that are most likely to impact engagement as defined above. A key word here is manageable. These six factors are all things that managers and leaders, at various levels of the organization, can act on and influence. Every organization is different, so these are definitely not the only things that can drive engagement. But, they are by far the most likely drivers. If you would like more information on other possible drivers of engagement please see Chapter 14 of my book No Pegs, No Holes.

There are some shared characteristics with these six drivers of employee engagement. First, as discussed above they are actionable. Second, they are not likely to be the factors that are revealed through crowd sourcing or Continuous Listening techniques.

These issues are consistently UNDER represented using those techniques, whereas, fairness, compensation, and work-life balance are OVER represented.

For example, when people have the option to choose between more appropriate recognition, or a pay-raise, they almost always go with the money. Yet, we have seen situation after situation, where, when recognition was proven to be a driver of engagement, and a thoughtful approach to providing recognition was implemented, not only did the recognition result in better engagement scores, but also resulted in things like less errors, higher customer satisfaction, stronger purchase intent, better renewal rates, etc. Many of these factors drop right to the bottom line in a way that is measureable. Most of the time, that is much more difficult to demonstrate with pay raises. The six factors that most drive employee engagement—the factors that most cause your people to want to work harder, stay longer and care more—are as follows:

Future Vision: All things being equal, many employees would rather work for a cause than a company. Leaders who can do the best job of articulating the importance of the work, and the value that it has in the lives of people, can gain a big advantage over their competition. When employees can visualize a future that matters, and then come to believe that they can play an important role in creating that future, they are much more motivated, focused, and engaged.

Leadership Trust: Employees want to work for leaders who they trust. When leaders can clearly articulate values that resonate with their employees, and then demonstrate the practice of those values through their actions, commitments, and decisions, employees are much more likely to embrace the vision and goals of the leaders and commit emotionally to playing an important part in reaching the stated goals.

Communication: Communication can also build trust. Once people begin to feel a part of an organization they can hardly ever get enough information. However, what employees seem to crave even more is communication that goes
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both ways. Managers who can help their people feel listened to can have a huge positive impact on engagement. In fact, when employees feel listened to they are more likely to listen to and incorporate the feedback from their leaders.

Involvement and Belonging: Every single human being has some basic interpersonal needs, and even insecurities that follow them to work every day. Most want to fit in, feel a part of something bigger than themselves, and feel cared for. These interpersonal needs get addressed most effectively in the workplace in two primary ways. People who feel a strong sense of affiliation and belonging with a team that they relate to, will feel more strongly connected to and involved in the overall organization. Also, Managers who invest in their people individually, and find appropriate ways of demonstrating that they care, can have a huge, positive impact.

Growth and Development: Most human beings have an intrinsic need to express their best talents and to learn and grow. The problem is that each person has a different idea about what exactly growth looks like for them. Managers who take the time to understand the talents, the goals, and the aspirations of each of their people, and make an effort to identify appropriate avenues and realistic expectations for growth and learning in the work place, can contribute much to the motivation and commitment of their employees.

Recognition: Any success that is NOT followed by appropriate, meaningful recognition is, at least slightly less likely to repeat itself. The problem is that what feels like recognition to one person may feel like manipulation or even feel patronizing to another. Managers who have the knack or the discipline to catch their people succeeding or improving, and then to find the right way to recognize the achievement can significantly increase motivation and engagement. Organizations that invest in effective formal recognition programs set a good example that actually increases the frequency and effectiveness of the informal recognition.

Another thing these critical, workforce-engagement factors have in common is that they tend to be enduring and usually change somewhat slowly over time. Sometimes they can even become almost imbedded in the culture. The exception is of course, a crises or breach of some sort that could cause their scores to drop dramatically. This point can’t be emphasized enough. If your process is measuring things that change from one moment to the next, or from one week to the next, then there are really only two realistic possibilities. You’re either measuring the wrong stuff, or something is happening that is bad enough that you don’t need a survey to know about it.

These six critical drivers of engagement are rather enduring factors. People do NOT change overnight with regard to their perceptions of things like the vision of their company, or their opportunities to learn and grow, or their sense of belonging. We certainly know of situations where focused leadership teams were able to make great progress in critical areas in as little as three months. However, if they make the mistake of changing their focus after three months, those improvements will not be sustained. This is another reason why a comprehensive annual survey project, supplemented by optional check-ins or pulse surveys is so vastly superior to Continuous Listening or real-time engagement projects that never lead to better business results.
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Once you have done the research and identified and validated the priority issues, select the two issues that you think your team or organization can address most effectively. Never try to boil the ocean! I can document across hundreds of studies, that companies or work teams will make more progress across all six priorities by focusing on just two of them than they would have made by focusing on all six.

Make a plan, set an annual goal and go to work. In twelve months, the next study will provide everyone results on how they performed against their goals and allow you to reassess the priorities and reset your goals. It always works. Starting in year two you will not only have the opportunity to learn what continues to drive employee engagement and what has changed, but also you will know what drives improvement in engagement. Managers can then become more focused and effective by learning the choices and action plans that moved the needle the most.

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Once you have established which of these priority issues will give you the most bang for your buck, Continuous Listening can become a distraction and cause managers and leaders to take their eye off the ball. Occasional pulse surveys to monitor progress can increase accountability and stimulate progress. However, doing a full blown, comprehensive study to review progress and set new priorities on more than an annual time table has NOT proven to be more effective. However, waiting much more than a year will cause managers to lose interest and feel less accountability. It may also cause you to miss the impact of other changes that might have taken place in the work environment.

Innovative technologies are wonderful. But when it comes to building a great workforce, the tail should never wag the dog. Just because we CAN listen continuously and in real-time, doesn’t mean we SHOULD.

Now for the best news! You can have two great things at once. You can have the best, most innovative technology, and the best science and thought leadership working together. You just need to rely on the science and thought leadership to make sure you appropriately use the technology. Apply the science to ensure that you are emphasizing smart listening and focused listening and not Continuous Listening and whack-a-mole.

To that point, if you are interested in focused listening and/or smart listening, we should talk. At Workforce Science Associates, this is our business and we are the best at it. We have had direct exposure to virtually every approach that has been tried and tested in the last forty years. Our best practices are proven and we are willing to do whatever it takes to stand behind them. If you need to learn more about how to improve your workforce, or how to improve your current process, please let us share our learnings and our passion with you. Highly engaged people are not only much better employees, they are also better spouses, parents, friends and community members. This is our best way to help make the world a little better by contributing to the energy, vitality, and quality of life of an unlimited number of people. We would love to join with you in this important endeavor.
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ABOUT US

Our partners have spent the last 40 years doing ground-breaking, proprietary workforce research—and we used it ourselves in order to build our own companies. In fact, we started Kenexa as a team of two with no revenue. Using our own workforce solutions we quickly grew to 200 employees fueled by $40 Million in annual sales. We took our company public, and staying true to our science and solutions, grew to over 3,000 employees with $400 Million annual sales. And our core competency was all about helping our clients better manage their most important resource—their workforce. Today at Workforce Science Associates we have a new mission—to share what we’ve learned with the world. This is what we mean when we say we have intelligent workforce solutions. We would be thrilled to share them with you.

BILL ERICKSON

...has played a key role in building and studying great companies for over 40 years. After fifteen years as Executive Vice President of the Gallup Organization he was a founder of Human Resource Innovations, later to become Kenexa. After Kenexa’s IPO on the NYSE, Erickson served as its Vice Chairman. Kenexa quickly grew to become the world’s largest provider of employee research, and was acquired by IBM for $1.3 Billion. Bill is currently a Partner at Workforce Science Associates, LLC.

Bill Erickson is the author of

NO PEGS, NO HOLES: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ELITE PERFORMANCE

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“Erickson is a thought leader in how to identify and nurture the talents of people to maximize their performance.”

Billy Beane, Executive Vice President & Co-Owner Oakland Athletics

Played by Brad Pitt in the movie MONEYBALL

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“Replaces management myths with common sense and uncommon science.”

Rance Crain, Former Editor & Chief Advertising Age