

Tool: Community Pulse

Overview

Surveys are powerful and versatile tools for taking the pulse of your school community. They allow you to expand the number of people you consult, increasing the number of perspectives you take into consideration and providing a check against groupthink and bias. A survey of your school community is also a great way to confirm your team's hunches and prioritize among multiple pieces of a problem. They are an effective way to deepen your understanding about what the right course of action might be before you embark on a year-long effort to solve your problem, and can be a great skill for members of your teacher team to develop.

Use this tool to help guide your team through the planning and execution of a community pulse survey.

Checklist—Is a Survey Right for You?

- Are you interested in consulting more than 15 people? Do you have 2–3 weeks?
If not, consider a quicker method such as targeted interviews or empathy mapping.
- Are you interested in consulting fewer than 50 people?
If you are consulting more than 50, it may be a good idea to ask for support. There are lots of subtleties to writing a good survey, so it is a good idea to call in some experience before sending one to a large group.
- Is this a sensitive topic?
Consult school leadership if you have any doubts.

Step 1: Develop Questions

- Start by brainstorming your general questions about the problem. These can be prompted by discussion or other problem-analysis tools. Use the following guiding questions to help:
 - What are we still curious about?
 - What do we want to know about how others experience the community?
 - What do we believe about our problem that we want to confirm?
- Break these down into more targeted, specific questions. These will be your survey questions.
- Write your survey questions so that they are easy to understand and answer; use clear language that is appropriate for respondents, and keep in mind that respondents will most likely be choosing an answer that you provide.

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Step 2: Develop Responses

- For each question you came up with in Step 1, prepare a set of possible responses.
- For closed-ended questions:
 - Think of a range of possible responses for each question, including responses that contradict your expectations. Avoid yes/no and “check all that apply” questions.
 - Use a scaled approach to capture nuance (e.g., “never,” “sometimes,” “usually,” “all the time”; or “not at all,” “a little,” “a medium amount,” “a LOT,” etc.).
 - Aim for a number of response options that gives everyone a natural choice without overwhelming them. Four to five is the ideal for most questions.
- For open-ended questions:
 - Ask yourself if an open-ended question is worth the additional challenge you will face when you have to analyze 15+ responses in all their variety. If you can collect the responses you need with closed-ended items, you should.
 - Think about using open-ended items to accompany closed-ended questions on the same topic. They are best for expanding on topics you have already asked about.
 - Be especially clear about what you are asking them to write.

Step 3: Revise Your Survey

- Order your questions logically, so that themes of questions are asked together in an order that leads a reader along intuitively.
- Check the language. You should always say things simply, in as few words as necessary.
- Use the checklist on the next page to help refine aspects of the survey.

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Survey Checklist

- Did you ask any “double-barreled” questions? You should only ask about one thing at a time.
- Did you ask sensitive, embarrassing, or incriminating questions? You should always ask these indirectly, by asking generally about the respondent’s peers (e.g., “Has anyone in your classes been the victim of bullying?”).
- Did you ask any leading questions or hint at your preference through the responses? Rewrite them so that they are completely neutral.
- Did you ask too many questions for the planned survey length? Consider the following advised timing: basic closed-ended questions = 30 seconds each; tough closed-ended questions = 60 seconds each; short open-ended questions = 60 seconds each; and long open-ended questions = 2–3 minutes each. Consider trimming questions if the survey feels long.
- Did you ask any identifying information (e.g., gender, race, primary language, disciplinary history, etc.)? Consider whether it is necessary and, if so, for what purpose. You might also consider whether there is another way to collect that information that does not involve asking the question on the survey. If you need to ask identifying information questions, always ask those questions at the end, since seeing them may prime respondents to consider stereotypes while answering any questions that follow.

Step 4: Field-Test Your Survey

- Make sure that you ask someone to test the survey for you. You can either:
 - ask a colleague to take the survey. This is usually quick and easy, and it is good for catching obvious issues.
 - ask one of the potential respondents (such as a student). This is a little harder to arrange, but yields more useful feedback.
- After they finish, ask them to tell you if any parts of it are unclear or confusing. You should also time the survey during field testing so that you can make necessary adjustments if it is too long. You can also ask them to explain the thought process behind their answers to see if you are getting the kinds of responses you are hoping for. After the field test, look at the data and what it tells you. Ask yourself: Does it answer my questions? If it were a representative sample, would it allow me to make decisions and/or take action? Which questions are the most helpful? Can I cut the others?
- Revise the survey based on the feedback you have gathered.

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Step 5: Administer Your Survey

- Administering surveys involves ethical responsibility. Data should only be shared when appropriate and necessary, and anonymity should be protected. Consider these responsibilities and how you will live up to them before administering the survey.
- Prepare for how you will communicate the purpose of the survey so that respondents understand and answer questions honestly.
- If possible, use technology! There are free survey tools like SurveyMonkey, SurveyGizmo, and Google Forms that can be used to administer your surveys. These save you from time-consuming data entry.

Step 6: Analyze Results

- Calculate the number of responses of each type for each closed-ended question.
- Use graphics and visualizations only if they clearly communicate a major takeaway.
- Save your colleagues time by pulling the major headlines out of the data, and communicate those first.

Next Steps

- Use *Problem Statement Readiness Check* to guide next steps (see page 37).