

UNDERSTANDING THE OVERALL “CLIMATE” IN YOUR OFFICE

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Most business owners have a good understanding of things like cash flow, business prospects, sales and other tangible measurements. To truly have a finger on the pulse of the business, however, you've got to understand what's going on in terms of employee morale. As a business grows, that can be harder and harder to gauge. Do you really know what your employees are talking about around the proverbial water cooler? The bigger you get, the more important it is to have a way to measure what I call the “climate” in your office.

Climate assessments can be critical to the success of a business. When I teach the science of profitability to my students, I give them a simple equation that's been proven over and over. Happy, productive employees equal satisfied customers. And satisfied customers equal solid business financials. In other words, by understanding the overall climate in your business you can catch problems before they create repercussions to your bottom line.

What exactly is a climate assessment? It's an organizational tool that human resources practitioners like me have used for years to diagnose and illustrate an overall company culture. As a business owner, you can do informal climate assessments any time you like. I recommend at least a couple times a year, more if you feel there might be serious problems. Employers who perform this simple assessment will have a definite competitive advantage, as they will recognize what makes their employees “tick” and can reap the benefits of happy, satisfied employees.

A climate assessment should provide a business owner or leadership team with a snapshot of the current employee environment, depicting your overall strengths and opportunity areas in your business. The assessment also focuses on the “whys” behind employee actions and probes deeper into the roots of how employees really feel about their jobs and their employer. It sounds a lot more complicated than it really is.

Here are some simple steps you can follow to perform your own climate assessment:

- Pick your population. Is there is a particular department or group you're concerned about? If you're a smaller business, obviously you can perform the assessment for your entire staff. You may still want to pinpoint certain functions within your organization on which to focus. If functions aren't being performed well, chances are you might have some hidden morale issues with the people who are responsible for those functions.
- Identify your method. For very small offices, you might want to consider starting to schedule one on one time with your staff. Although this seems easy to do on an ad hoc basis, I often find that people get missed this way particularly as the business grows. Keep a short set of questions with you that you ask your staff on a regular basis. And schedule time for coffee away from the office if you can.

- If you're a bit bigger in staff size, you can either use focus groups or something called "culture software." Some of the software that I would recommend might be *name* or *name*. But don't be afraid of focus groups. They sometimes have a stigma attached to their name. It's still the fastest and most effective way to gather the information you want!
- Choose your project leader or facilitator. I recommend using an outside consultant if you can, but if that's not in the budget try to find someone who is as impartial and fair as possible. If you're very small, a focus group might include your entire staff! Just try to make the environment as safe and comfortable as possible.
- For a focus group, pick a good location. Go offsite if that helps, but get your employees used to speaking their mind openly by providing an environment that is safe, casual and fun.
- Choose your questions carefully. Whether you're meeting one on one, conducting an informal software survey or have decided to conduct a focus group, your questions are the key to the success of a climate assessment. I love to ask employees what *they* would do if they were named the president of the organization. Or what they hope *won't* change in the future as you grow. Obviously you have to look for the negative issues that might be cropping up in your organization, but try to frame your questions in a positive light when at all possible.

Once you're satisfied with your own questions, it's time to announce what you are doing. Don't make this a 'stealth' mission, you will always be found out. Most employees will be pleased that their employer cares what they think, and will be impressed that you are trying to do this in a managed, scheduled manner. You may even realize a bit of productivity upswing a few days before and weeks directly following the assessment.

Finally, it is vital that the overall assessment results are shared with the employee base or at the very least, certain changes within the environment are visible to employees as a result of the assessment. All in all, climate assessments are an extremely economical way to improve your company environment and sustain a high-performance culture. If done properly, the assessment results can foster lasting financial benefits for years to come.