

[How to Use Workplace Climate Pulse Surveys to Figure Out if You Have a Toxic Workplace](#)



It's scary to think that the [psychologically safe workplace](#) you try so hard to cultivate is actually pretty darn toxic. The fact that nobody's complaining doesn't mean everything's fine. Assuming that employees would just come to HR for help if they were having problems is naïve. It often requires active measures to determine whether [bullying](#), [harassment](#), [discrimination](#), or other abusive behaviour is taking place at your company. Otherwise, you may not learn about the problems until [somebody sues](#), complains to the government, and/or posts a scathing review of your firm on an online employment site.

One of the best ways to proactively uncover workplace toxicity is by anonymously surveying employees. The problem is that toxic workplace issues call for a kind of surveying that's more immediate and targeted than the general surveys that companies commonly use to monitor how employees feel about their jobs. A more effective alternative is a process known as "pulse surveying" in which employees fill out a regular, brief, and targeted questionnaire tracking the workplace environment or other aspects of their job over time. Here's a 10-step Game Plan for performing workplace climate and other types of pulse surveys at your workplace.

Step 1. Define Your Pulse Survey Objectives

Rooting out hidden workplace problems like toxic, unsafe, unethical or illegal behaviour is just one potential HR application. Data from pulse surveys can also help HR monitor progress toward and identify opportunities for achieving other key department goals such as boosting employee engagement, morale, productivity, company culture, leadership effectiveness, inter-department communication, and organizational transparency. So, the starting point for pulse surveying is to identify your objectives and ensure that they align with your overall HR department and company's business goals.

Step 2. Create a Pulse Survey Communication Plan

Pulse surveying doesn't work unless employees actually engage and respond at high rates. To gain the necessary buy-in, you need to let employees know what you're doing, how the survey process works, the goals you're trying to achieve and, above all, what's in it for them. Stress that surveying is an opportunity for employees to

provide meaningful, anonymous feedback that the company needs to make changes to improve their work experience. Communication goes beyond a single one-off announcement before launch. You need to maintain communication with employees throughout the survey process via multiple channels, such as scheduled email messages, face-to-face announcements by department heads or managers and/or push notifications through an employee app. Invite employees to ask and ensure managers are prepared to answer questions about the surveys.

Step 3. Set an Appropriate Pulse Surveying Schedule

Getting the timing and cadence right is essential to pulse surveying success. Surveys must be frequent enough to keep employees engaged but not so frequent as to cause them to experience “survey fatigue.” Consider how quickly the things you’re measuring are likely to change—for example, employee satisfaction tends to fluctuate more than engagement. Quarterly surveying is better suited for measuring long-term trends or shifts, while weekly or bi-weekly surveys should be reserved only for situations requiring immediate feedback. Other best practices for scheduling pulse surveys:

- Give yourself enough time between surveys to analyze and communicate the results of the most recent survey.
- Avoid surveying during busy periods when employees have less time to respond.
- Coordinate pulse surveys with other regular employee surveys you perform, such as annual engagement surveys.

Step 4. Create Effective Format for Pulse Survey Questions

Pulse surveys should be short and simple, requiring employees no more than 5 minutes to complete. Structure questions that will provide you the most informative answers. The typical approach is to list a statement about an aspect of what you’re measuring and ask employees if they agree or disagree. While YES/NO is the simplest structure, providing a numeric scale indicating ranges of agreement/disagreement, e.g., “1: strongly disagree” to “5: strongly agree” provides more nuanced information. Best Practice: Use the 70/20/10 rule in structuring your questions with:

- **70% Driver Questions** directly point to things that you can fix based on responses. Example: To the extent it elicits negative responses, the question “My manager stresses the importance of a harassment-free work environment” signals that you need to provide more effective harassment training to your managers.
- **20% Outcome Questions** enable you to measure the big picture, particularly in regard to employees’ satisfaction and workplace climate. Example: Negative responses to the question, “I feel like everybody in the office treats me with respect” signal that there may be something toxic going on in the workplace.
- **10% Open-Ended Questions**, such as “Which one thing could we do better to make you feel psychologically safe at work?” enable employees to express ideas, suggestions, or concerns that you didn’t anticipate in framing your rating scales questions.

Step 5: Ask the Right Pulse Survey Questions

With only 5 minutes to work with, you must ensure that pulse surveys ask questions that generate actionable information about whatever metrics you’re tracking, e.g., workplace environment, engagement, satisfaction, alignment with values, etc. 5 to 15 questions in total is the unofficial rule. While it’s important to keep each survey

new and fresh, you shouldn't drastically change it each time. Best Practice: Include 2 or 3 core "trend tracker" questions repeated on each survey to furnish a baseline and set of stable metrics that you can monitor from quarter to quarter or whatever your pulse survey frequency is. Select the remaining questions, including regular questions that you can rotate in and out, based on the current situation, previous feedback, and other factors.

Step 6. Guarantee Pulse Survey Participants' Anonymity

While it's not a legal requirement, allowing employees to complete pulse surveys anonymously is the best way to get candid and insightful feedback. Be sure to stress the fact that survey results are anonymous so that employees feel safe to share what they know and think about the company without fear of reprisal or retaliation. If you can't avoid them, at least strip away survey questions that ask for information that may enable the company to determine an employee's identity, e.g., the department in which they work. And let employees know that you do this to foster their trust.

Step 7. Test the Pulse Survey Before You Release It

For all your precautions, something about the survey you compose might not sit well with your employees. Maybe one or more of the questions is confusing or laden with technical jargon that some employees won't understand. Or a question might seem biased, self-serving, or framed to steer the employee to provide a specific response. That's why it's advisable to run each survey past one or more employees in the target group before releasing it company-wide.

Step 8. Analyze Pulse Survey Results

How you analyze survey poll data is just as important as how you gather it.

- Assess the reliability of each survey's findings by considering, among other things, how many employees responded to the survey, and how representative a sample those respondents are.
- Look for trends by tracking survey responses over time, focusing primarily on the core questions.
- Identify potential problems by zeroing in on low-scoring items or recurring negatives expressed in open-ended questions.

Step 9. Take Actions in Response to Pulse Survey Results

Pulse surveying is worse than meaningless if you're not prepared to take timely action based on the findings. When dealing with a toxic work environment, it's crucial to act immediately to meet your duties to employees under [OHS](#), [workers' comp](#), human rights (to the extent the target of the abusive conduct is a [member of a protected class](#)) and other laws. The longer you wait to address the toxic situation, the greater the risk of litigation, enforcement action, and liability becomes.

Step 10. Report Pulse Survey Results

Be sure to report the results of each survey not only to company leaders and managers but also to employees, including a description of the action you took or plan to take to address the problems surveying identified. This kind of transparency will affirm employees' trust in not only the surveying process but the company's commitment to furnish them the best possible work experience.