

# Shaping a Learning Process and Realising Change: Reflection, Interaction and Cooperation Through Survey Feedback

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## INTRODUCTION

In the Netherlands, the major purpose of using survey research in organisations is to measure employee satisfaction. Other applications are mapping customer satisfaction, culture measurements and periodic industrial health investigations. It is estimated that more than half the companies in the United States have used questionnaires over the last ten years for internal investigations (Kraut, 1996). There are no figures for the Netherlands, but a recent investigation of about 200 consultants who are following a course for their further professional development tells us that about half of them use questionnaires to obtain information about the organisations they work for.

In general, managers take the initiative in using questionnaires to get information about a topic relevant to them. Survey research often functions as a 'barometer' that shows what the situation is and where they should take action. Consultants present the outcomes, make recommendations and supply lengthy reports with extensive appendices. Often the outcomes are more negative than expected or hoped for and there is a great temptation to avoid talking it through with employees. An understandable fear is that the discussion will end up in a litany of complaints and that this will make the situation even worse. Managers also take negative outcomes as personal criticism. After all, they are responsible for the smooth running of their organisation. And thus a powerful potential for improvement remains unused due to the belief that discussing outcomes is not effective or because people don't know how to make it effective. Major problems persist because they are ignored. Or a manager tries to solve the problem single-handed, even though it can only be done by involving others. Employees read lack of a reaction to the outcomes as a lack

of interest in what they think or as a refusal to enter into discussion. And if a manager does talk, it's the problems that are emphasised. It results in reactions like 'She's so bossy, all she does is come round and to tell us what has to be improved' and 'Look at him, he's so indecisive and doesn't take charge'.

The non-use or uninformed use of survey outcomes is problematic. Schuiling (2002) remarks pertinently that this means that research into employee satisfaction generates dissatisfaction. A similar problem applies to questionnaires about other topics too: people have expressed an opinion and expect something to be done, but subsequently they hear nothing or the problems are exaggerated. Completing a questionnaire gets things moving. Not continuing that movement then causes delay.

The central question of this chapter is how effective feedback can be realised whereby management and employees engage in a meaningful discussion about what is going badly and what is going well in the organisation and how things can be improved. The principles of survey feedback and experiences with working with the intervention are helpful to consultants and managers who want to organise discussions in which the information collected via questionnaires functions as a potential for learning and changing. There is no default for working with the intervention; it requires customised work. This chapter discusses the following questions to provide insight into the intervention and the process of choosing that goes with customised work.

### ***What is the Difference between Survey Feedback and Survey Research?***

Section 1 starts with the background to survey feedback, the progress of the intervention and the effect. This is followed by a comparison with survey research.

### ***What Choices are Available in Working with Survey Feedback?***

Section 2 is about the contents of the survey. It determines what will be discussed during the feedback. The second choice concerns the organisation of the feedback process. To make that choice you need to find out which type of interaction contributes to problem-solving.

### ***What is the Role of the Consultant Who Supervises Working with Survey Feedback?***

Section 3 focuses on a real-life example. It illustrates the role of the consultant and shows how he/she organises a feedback process with an organisation.

### ***Which Conditions Determine the Success of Survey Feedback?***

Section 4 starts with conclusions. Reflection on working with survey feedback in practice delivers four conditions for success and teaches us when survey feedback is not suitable. The chapter ends with six design principles for effective feedback meetings.

## BACKGROUND TO SURVEY FEEDBACK

Survey feedback is an intervention aimed at improving how an organisation functions. The two central elements in a survey feedback process are data collection with a survey (questionnaire) and feedback of the outcomes to the people involved (French & Bell, 1995; Cummings & Worley, 1997). Kuhnert (1993) adds that the explicit goal of feedback is to get people to take action themselves to remedy the problems that have been identified. Specific action is possible as a result of the conclusions that people draw during the feedback. The idea of collective action distinguishes survey feedback from survey research; the major aim of the latter is information gathering (Fowler, 1984; Edwards, 1997). In fact, the entire setup of the survey feedback process is directed at mobilising people to get to work on improving the situation.

Information about the intervention, which originated in the US, was first published in the early 1960s. By that time Mann (1961) had already been working for a good ten years on its development. In his method feedback is given to departments or teams, and managers discuss the outcomes with their own teams. At the end of the 1960s an edition of the same handbook included a chapter about the state of affairs at that time (Miles *et al.*, 1969). Among other things it discussed how the intervention ensured that groups in the organisation became their own *change agents* and took the responsibility themselves for improving their situation. Neff (1965) and Nadler (1977) have written in detail about working with survey feedback in practice and have developed variations. These days the intervention is used mainly in *organisation development*. In their authoritative review, Porras and Robertson (1983) call survey feedback one of the few interventions with a solid theoretical founding. Boonstra (2004) states that survey feedback contributes to the success of organisational change, because the relevant parties make their voices heard through participation and gradually learn collectively.

There has been relatively little attention in the Netherlands given to survey feedback. We can only guess why. As far as we know, up to 2001 no scholarly publications by Dutch researchers had appeared. It is more difficult to find out whether any consultants are working with survey feedback. At any rate, there is no network of professionals exchanging experiences. It is precisely the interaction between research and application in practice that is important for the development of an intervention. Three recent doctoral research projects may change this situation. Schuiling (2001), Bennebroek Gravenhorst (2002b) and Werkman (2006) all describe various applications in practice, reflect on them and contribute to the further development of the intervention. Several publications that build on these doctoral theses (Bennebroek Gravenhorst, 2002a, 2003, 2004; Schuiling, 2003) show the practical value of survey feedback and offer organisations assistance in working more effectively with questionnaires.

Undertaking a survey feedback in an organisation is not simple. When the survey feedback process is being set up, attention must be paid to both elements of the intervention. It is not for no reason that Kuhnert (1993) talks about the *art and science* of survey feedback. Setting up a survey research project requires specialist (scientific) knowledge. There is an art to utilising the feedback possibilities to optimum effect. Both are relevant to the first condition of developing improvement actions: the parties concerned accept the outcomes as valid and are prepared to take the results as a point of departure. This not only requires unambiguous questions and clarity about the meaning of the outcomes, but also, for instance, a technique for making less positive outcomes discussible. Controlling

feedback techniques also contributes to the parties recognising their role in the problems and wanting to do their best in coming up with solutions. An essential part of the feedback process is that the parties become and remain the owners of the outcomes. The methodical working out of a survey feedback process goes through a number of phases. They offer something to hold on to when working with survey feedback as an intervention. Each phase has a set of coherent activities aimed at a particular part of the intervention. Kuhnert (1993) distinguishes five phases: planning, design, data analysis, report and implementation. For each he discusses things that are important to the use of a survey feedback in a real situation. The essence of this is that it is important in every phase to take into consideration the objective of the feedback. If management development is the objective, this results in a different interpretation of the five phases compared with when it is about improving internal communication. This is one of the reasons why every survey feedback project requires a customised approach.

French and Bell (1995, p. 220) give a classic implementation of this kind of phasing. They discuss Mann's classic steps which illustrate what the intervention can consist of in practice:

1. The top of an organisation is involved in planning the survey.
2. A survey is used to collect data from all members of the organisation.
3. Outcomes are submitted to the top of the organisation, then via hierarchical lines to units.
4. Managers discuss the outcomes in their units so that (a) people interpret the data together and (b) plans are made for improvements.
5. A consultant helps managers prepare the discussion and may be present to answer technical questions about the survey or the outcomes.

Many variations have been developed. Practical experiences with survey feedback and reflection on it are essential. Schuiling's (2003) approach has nine steps. An important addition is that he pays attention to continuity after the feedback. A survey feedback ends with making plans for improvement, but that does not guarantee their execution. Werkman (2005) developed the design of a survey feedback together with small groups of managers and employees. These groups determine the steps that need to be taken and the interpretation of those steps. Working with a group like this is an effective way of transferring ownership of a survey feedback to the organisation.

Besides varying the classic steps themselves, you can also vary the interpretation of the steps. Thus managers can play a less central role in the feedback (Schuiling, 2001; Bennebroek Gravenhorst, 2002; Werkman, 2005). One possibility is, for instance, that an external consultant supervises the feedback (Werkman, 2005). Another possibility is for managers to supervise the feedback meetings from a process role (Bennebroek Gravenhorst, 2004). An effective survey feedback is not achieved by faithfully executing fixed steps and following a prescribed interpretation. Putting together a survey feedback process is an exercise in design (Schuiling, 2003). The term 'exercise' emphasises the importance of a well thought-out design and shows that it is a complex task to customise it to the situation at hand, the problem for which survey feedback is being used and the people who are working with it.

The effects of survey feedback start with creating a joint investigation. The outcomes of that investigation serve as the basis for solving problems together. In this situation

people will often treat each other differently from usual in a work situation. The interaction between management and employees changes. Discussing the outcomes and developing solutions together create movement to change (Schuiling, 2001; Bennebroek Gravenhorst, 2002; Bennebroek Gravenhorst & In 't Veld, 2004). It is also possible that as a result of the feedback the people concerned discuss steering the change and develop alternatives to it (Werkman, 2005). Survey feedback serves as a means to learn together, which differs in principle from survey research as a measurement tool (cf. Meijer, Berkhout & Ruiten, 2001). To recapitulate, survey feedback contributes to:

- exchange and interaction about a relevant theme;
- insight into the situation in an organisation;
- communication about important issues;
- cooperation in realising improvements;
- mutual understanding of groups and individuals of their perspectives and interaction.

Survey feedback cannot be interpreted as survey research with steps bolted on or in which the outcomes are discussed a little differently. The only correspondence is that information about a relevant theme is collected via a questionnaire. Understanding the intervention and being able to work with it requires a substantially different way of looking and acting. With survey research the consultant interprets the outcomes as a *model of reality*. They give him/her an accurate account of the situation. The role of the consultant is to interpret the outcomes and make recommendations. That is the expertise that he/she brings. Management can implement the recommendations. With survey feedback, the outcomes are an *aid to discussions about the reality* (or realities) of all parties concerned. They give a precise account of the situation, but the people who supplied the information interpret its meaning themselves in feedback meetings. The role of the consultant is to develop a form for holding discussions effectively during the meeting. The form of discussion must make it possible for people to interpret the outcomes collectively and draw reasoned conclusions. The consultant is thus the supervisor of a learning process. Table 15.1 lists the differences.

**Table 15.1** Differences between survey feedback and survey research

Survey feedback	Survey research
Emphasis on learning from outcomes	Emphasis on measuring
Random sample not possible due to feedback sessions	Random sample possible
Outcomes are for the use of the organisation	Outcomes are for the consultant
Owned by organisation members	Owned by management and consultant
Reporting to all parties concerned	Reporting to management
Outcomes are an aid to discussion	Outcomes are a model of reality
Collective interpretation and conclusions	Management takes note of conclusions
Collective development of necessary actions	Management can implement recommendations
Collective realisation of improvements	Usually no noticeable improvements
Consultant concentrates on supervising the learning process	Consultant concentrates on doing the research

## CONTRIBUTION TO ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

Survey feedback can be used for different purposes. As far as we are aware, scientifically-based survey feedback is used mainly for organisational change in the Netherlands. Survey feedback for group and management development is being used more and more. Increasing self-steering in organisations and thereby encouraging personal development are central to the way Schuiling (2001, 2003) works with survey feedback. With Bennebroek Gravenhorst (2002a, 2004) it is mainly about monitoring a change in progress and getting an organisation-wide discussion going about the change. Werkman (2005) focuses on making perspectives of different groups in changing organisations visible and discussible. Van Ginkel works with survey feedback for group and management development (cf. Van Ginkel & Hattink, 2002). His work is based on a methodology developed by Bales (1988).

The way survey feedback contributes to organisational change depends partly on the contents of the survey. It determines to a large extent which subjects will come up during the feedback meetings. Nadler (1996) distinguishes three types of surveys:

1. In organisation diagnosis using a survey aims at assessing organisations. The goal is to map out the state of an organisation and its human capital. An organisation-wide survey identifies and diagnoses the functioning of the organisation, people's motivation and satisfaction, and reveals problems and pressure points. Feedback of the outcomes to all concerned contributes to insight into the situation and the support base for getting to work on problems and pinch points.
2. In organisational change, the survey is oriented towards a range of topics or to one specific theme. The aim is monitoring the progress of the change or determining the results achieved. When the progress is being monitored, the feedback stimulates interaction about the approach and support for the continuation of the process. When results are being established, the feedback contributes to evaluating the content of the change and the chosen direction.
3. With change of teams or individuals, the survey aims at diagnosing how they are working and changing it. The goal is to map out the behaviour of teams or managers. Feedback from the outcomes contributes to insight into oneself. The difference between one's own perceptions and the perceptions of others forms the basis of change in the direction of a more shared perspective and more effective functioning.

What survey feedback can contribute to organisational change also depends on the organisation of the feedback process. An important criterion of the success of a feedback meeting is that the right people participate (Nadler, 1977; cf. Schuiling, 2001; Bennebroek Gravenhorst, 2002a). In that case, the question is who enters into discussion with whom, and what is emphasised? In the Dutch doctoral research projects mentioned above, the following forms of feedback were developed and applied:

- People in existing departments discuss their outcomes in accordance with the classic design of survey feedback. The main emphasis of the discussion is getting a clear picture of a specific situation. Then departments develop solutions to problems, solutions they can implement themselves.

- People from different departments enter into discussion about each other's outcomes. In that case the emphasis is on understanding difference and using those differences – for instance, to improve cooperation between the departments.
- Members of a management team, middle managers and employees discuss their own outcomes. Understanding their own perspective in comparison with that of the other(s) is stressed, often linked to the roles that hierarchically different groups play in the (changing) organisation.
- Interaction between hierarchically different groups about their perspectives is also possible, for example if a management team enters into discussions with departments. Exchanging perspectives and understanding difference are emphasised.
- Feedback to the entire organisation or to non-natural groups (composed horizontally or diagonally). During conferences people discuss the general outcomes of different organisation parts in relation to their own perspectives.
- Exchanging perspectives and collective forming of judgements are emphasised.

These methods are similar in that the persons concerned learn with each other about organisational diagnosis, organisational change or how teams function. In this process people change the context of organising and changing together (Boonstra, 2004). Even when filling out the survey people gain knowledge about the subjects. During the feedback people learn what is going well in their organisation and what is going less well. Thinking collectively about ways to improve and realising it strengthens an organisation's functioning or change process. The interaction that occurs during the feedback ensures a collective perspective on solutions for the pinch points identified. The approach chosen contributes to the support base for implementing improvement actions. So, survey feedback lays a solid foundation for improvement. Of course, after a survey feedback attention must be paid to working on the improvements. There is no one standard form of feedback that will deliver the best results. To be able to choose, you need to find out which interaction is desirable, given the organisation's circumstances.

## WORKING WITH SURVEY FEEDBACK IN PRACTICE

To give some insight into the practical application, I will sketch the progress of a survey feedback project in six phases. The discussion of the phases is based on my experience using survey feedback for monitoring changes as described in the previously mentioned publications. I will illustrate the general description of each phase with an example (shaded boxes) from a recent survey feedback project at a primary school where 50 people work. The size of this organisation was relatively small for a survey feedback and this keeps the examples simple and clear.

### **Phase 1: Check the Possibility of Working with Survey Feedback and Determine the Objective**

Preparatory to a survey feedback discussions are held in the organisation about what the intervention means, which outcomes can be expected and what the possible follow-up might involve. Representatives of all parties participate. A survey feedback can be initiated

if the basic principles are clear and people believe it is a meaningful intervention to work with. In the first phase, the parties concerned also determine what the objective of the survey feedback is.

**Box 1**

A primary school has expanded enormously since it first opened. The school started with a team of about ten. Now 50 people work there. This requires a different style of management and a different way of collaborating. That is why the board has taken on two more people and section coordinators. In the junior, middle and senior sections the assignment of duties has changed as well as the work meetings. The changes were drawn up together and introduced formally at the beginning of the new school year. After six months the principal noticed the staff seemed restless and questions about the changes were being raised. There was a discussion with the board. People acknowledged the tensions and were prepared to enter into discussions about it. The aim of the survey feedback is to gain insight into what is going well and what less well with the changes and to find out what can be done to improve matters in the next term.

**Phase 2: Working Out the Approach and Planning the Survey Feedback**

Making the design for a survey feedback process is about determining the precise approach of the subsequent phases, the planning, the division of tasks, the provision of information to the parties concerned and the survey. In planning, the main focus is on finding a suitable moment to fill out the survey. The feedback then takes place – preferably in 2–4 weeks. Two weeks after that, meetings can be planned for working out solutions. With task division it is preferable that people in the organisation do as much as possible themselves. It is important that the parties involved take responsibility for working out the approach. This contributes to people feeling they own the survey feedback. It is important in informing the parties concerned that people know what the goal is and what is going to be done with the outcomes. Tried-and-tested surveys are available for most topics. Making a survey requires specialist knowledge. Often it is possible to modify the method, instructions or contents to the specific situation.

**Box 2**

Two consultants work out the approach and planning with the same group they started with in phase 1. Being together is an important characteristic of the school. That is why there is a preference for filling out the survey during a meeting with the entire team, and also for planning the subsequent meetings so that everyone can be there at the same time. There is a three-week gap between each of the three evening meetings. The school principal takes responsibility for the communication and demonstrates his support for the methodology. A customised version of a survey is worked on. This is part of the Change Monitor, a methodology for ascertaining how things are going and what could go better.



It is essential to take enough time during the initial phases. The objective and the approach need to be fine-tuned with the parties concerned for a survey feedback to work properly. Working out a concrete idea of the last phase of a survey feedback (and preferably after that too) at the outset contributes to success. A meticulous design is required so that the outcomes can be interpreted during the feedback and solutions to problems developed. Experience shows that a flying start means delays a few weeks later; it may even undermine the result.

### **Phase 3: Filling Out the Survey, Data Processing and Analysis**

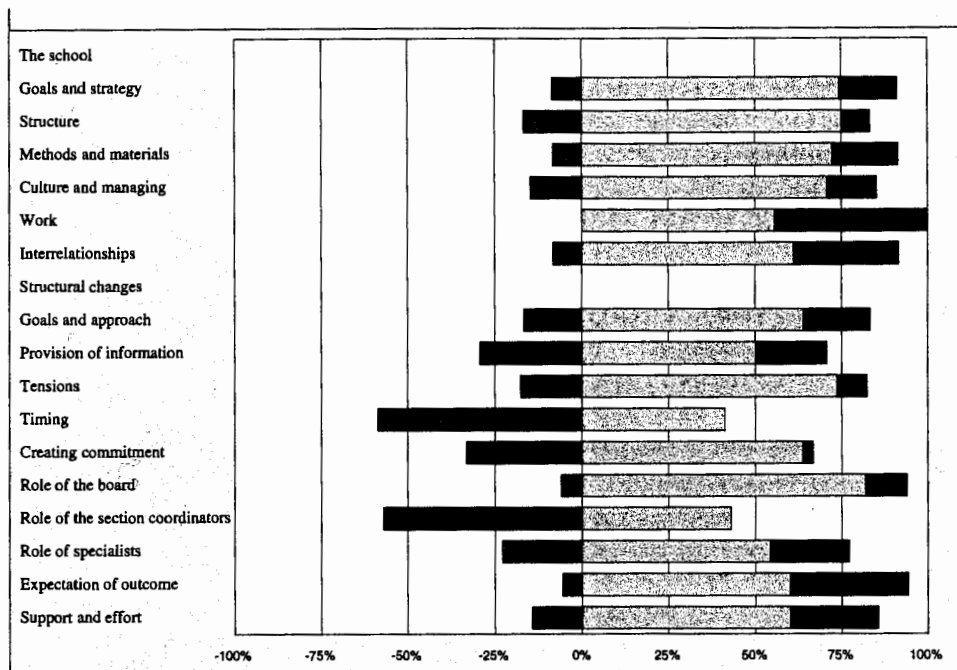
Filling out a survey requires choosing a suitable opportunity, form and supervision. It is relevant that the opportunity underlines the importance of the survey, for example a moment set aside during working hours with an introduction by the board. Group meetings during the working day contribute to a high response, but can sometimes be difficult to organise. Filling out the survey online is handy from a research perspective but not everybody likes it and sometimes it can present logistical problems. Filling out a survey at home and returning it in a self-addressed envelope is easy to arrange, but results in a lower response rate. I prefer the survey to be filled out at work. A supervisor can discuss the goal, and answer any questions about the contents while it is being filled out. Data processing and analysis require specialist knowledge and therefore it is desirable for this to be outsourced.

#### **Box 3**

At the primary school everybody fills out the survey at the end of a study afternoon attended by the entire team. The school principal is present. He repeats the objective of the survey feedback and indicates how the outcomes will be discussed. He fills out his own survey on the spot, with the team. The consultants who are supervising how the methodology is being used are also present. They answer questions about one topic from the survey, so that the whole team reads the statements concerned in the same way. They also observe the team, which is important for the feedback.

#### **Box 4**

As preparation for the feedback meetings, the external supervisors develop a work form to be fine-tuned with people in the primary school. The feedback meeting starts with a short explanation about reading the outcomes and the method. The outcomes are presented in a graph which shows which percentages of the team think very negatively, negatively, positively and very positively about every topic from the survey.



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The procedure is as follows:

1. Everyone looks at the outcomes for themselves.
2. On three green sheets everyone writes down what struck them in a positive sense.
3. On three red sheets everyone writes down what struck them in a negative sense.
4. Everyone takes the sheets with them to a subgroup (made up of a cross-section of the school).
5. The subgroups discuss and order the positive and negative outcomes.
6. All the subgroups present their conclusions to the entire team in a plenary session.
7. Joint discussions about the conclusions.

The supervisors fulfil the role of content expert when they indicate how the outcomes should be read. In addition, they have a process role: they introduce the work form, facilitate the discussions in subgroups if necessary and supervise the plenary discussion about the conclusions. After the meeting they produce a report that contains the conclusions of the working groups, observations and the themes for the next meeting. During the feedback all the outcomes are reported. To ensure interpretation and discussion, the outcomes are not given in advance.

#### Phase 4: Feedback

The way the feedback takes place depends on the design (see section 2). The design is not just about the composition of the groups. Preparation, supervision, reporting and presentation are also important. Preparation involves the arrangement of the feedback meeting (open or steering form, formulation of the questions?). Supervising the feedback is about who does the supervising (their own manager or an independent process supervisor?) and

in which role (interpreting or facilitating?). Reporting is about the form (all outcomes or a selection, available in writing beforehand or not?). The answers to the questions about setting up the feedback depend on the context. It is therefore important to have knowledge of the context so that the feedback matches the specific situation. In a general sense what we can say about presentation is that it is relevant to present the outcomes in a simple way, preferably on one page, or no more than a couple of pages. The more easily and quickly people understand the outcomes, the more attention there will be to the discussion.

### Phase 5: Developing Solutions

It is important to separate the development of solutions from the feedback of the outcomes and drawing conclusions, because they are different kinds of activity. The previous phase was about interpretation and analytical thinking, oriented towards insight and integration. This phase is about creative thinking, aimed at new ideas. When working out solutions it is relevant to develop a few alternatives first and then make a choice. Alternatives can subsequently be worked out. In this phase, preparation, composition of the groups and supervisions of the meeting are again points for attention.

#### Box 5

For the preparation of the development of solutions, the supervisors propose a work form. Prior to the meeting the principal asks people to indicate which theme they would like to get to work on. People can choose from: the balance between central control and self-control, the balance between careful decision-making and speed of decision-making, the balance between unity and diversity, managing in the new organisational structure and resolving healthy conflicts. Or they can introduce a new theme. The themes are in the report of the feedback meeting and integrate the conclusions about what was not going well in the change process at the primary school.

The procedure is as follows:

1. Subgroups are formed on the basis of preference for the themes.
2. Subgroups discuss what the essence of the problem is for their own theme.
3. Subgroups discuss when the problem is solved and what the desired situation looks like.
4. Subgroups discuss possible variations of solutions and make choices.
5. Subgroups present recommendations for solutions to the whole team.
6. Plenary discussion of the recommendations.

The supervisors facilitate the discussions in the subgroups and the plenary discussion. At the end of the meeting they evaluate, with the team, how working with the methodology went. The board closes the meeting and thanks the team. After the meeting the supervisors and the board discuss what to do next. The wish is to organise a day with the board and a number of people from the team. During that day they can work on putting the proposed solutions into action. The school principal communicates this to the team.

### Phase 6: Realisation

A survey feedback ends with the development of solutions. The way those solutions come about provides results like shared insight into the problems and a support base for improvement. Nevertheless, it is important to pay attention to the realisation of the plans. That is why I include phase 6.

Plans that are made in organisations are not realised automatically in general, or with survey feedback as the preliminary process. After phase 5 and consultation about the realisation and possible decision-making, the solutions can be implemented. Sometimes the solutions are worked out in phase 5 and it is a matter of deciding who will do what and when, and when that will be ready. Often more is necessary, for example, if departments have to work with other people to realise chosen solutions. Finally, it is important that attention is paid to determining the result and that this returns in the planning. A good way to make sure of this is to link the realisation to other activities.

#### Box 6

At the primary school the board is going to spend a day with the section coordinators and a number of teachers who also have specialist duties on giving further shape to the realisation and the continuation. One of the supervisors from the survey feedback is present. During the day the people make a list of the proposed solutions, draw up priorities and discuss ideas that were raised after the last meeting. The role of the section coordinators is a specific item of attention. Some things can be done immediately before the summer. Other actions are less pressing or require more time. They are given a slot in the coming year. That retains attention and over the year the implementation will come up (e.g. during the two-monthly meetings with the annual plan on the agenda).

The boxes illustrate one way of giving form to the phases of a survey feedback. At the same time they show that this is not practicable as a standard, step-by-step plan in every organisation. Making a design for a survey feedback requires well thought-out choices that match the situation in an organisation and the changes at play there. The phasing discussed and the points for attention can serve as a guideline. In practice, besides knowledge of surveys, working with survey feedback requires the consultant to have insight into the basic principles and the progress of survey feedback, skills for facilitating groups in self-investigation and attention for the implementation of improvement plans. Consultants can develop and strengthen their methodology by gaining experience in practice, by reflecting on it and, with parties concerned, learning how structured interaction on relevant problems can result in supported ideas for improvement.

## CONCLUSION AND METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON USING SURVEY FEEDBACK

This chapter shows what survey feedback implies, how the intervention contributes to organisational change and what its use means in practice. Discussing the outcomes of a survey and collectively developing solutions for identified problems form the core of

survey feedback. The intervention differs substantially from survey research and requires a different approach and different supervision. Although the development of survey feedback started 50 years ago, little use has been made of it in the Netherlands. There is an increase in the number of survey research projects, but that does not usually lead to improvements. The contribution of survey feedback to organisational change depends on the content of the survey and on the feedback process. The content offers insight into a specific problem such as the situation in an organisation, the progress of a change process and the functioning of teams or individuals. The effects of survey feedback are mainly determined by the way in which all the parties concerned discuss the outcomes with each other. It is precisely that feedback that is lacking in survey research. An effective feedback process leads to a joint perspective on relevant issues, interaction about possible solutions and a support base for realising them. The feedback activates all the parties concerned and creates a movement directed towards change. There is no default, step-by-step plan for working with survey feedback. Division into phases and the corresponding points for attention can function as a guiding principle. Effective use in practice requires customised work, so a consultant cannot offer survey feedback as an off-the-peg product. He can, however, offer it as a service. The reflections below can be helpful for professionals who want to offer survey feedback as a service and want to match it to the specific situation of their client.

It is relevant to understand the context in which it is possible to work with survey feedback. Setting up and giving survey feedback requires effort from all parties concerned and supervision by a professional. Positive and negative experiences with more than 30 survey feedback projects teach us that a suitable context has the following characteristics:

- the opportunity of doing things better or differently with the same people (or more people);
- the desire to enter into discussion with all parties concerned about what is working well and less well in a (changing) organisation;
- the desire to think collectively about solutions for identified pressure points;
- the desire to realise those solutions;
- uninterrupted time to fill out a survey and for feedback meetings about the outcomes.

During the talks in phase 1 (see section 3) the consultant can find out the extent to which these characteristics are present. For instance, if it turns out that there is insufficient time for meetings about the outcomes and for developing solutions, it is important to create space for that. At the same time, generally at least 50 people are required to use a survey.

Survey feedback is a time-consuming intervention (Schuiling, 2003). That is why it is important to find out whether the intervention is appropriate, for a survey feedback is no sinecure. A general question that applies to choosing any kind of intervention is whether it can be done more simply (Beer, 1980). The basic principle when working with survey feedback is that everyone does their best and contributes something. Filling out the questionnaire is reasonably easy, but organising feedback meetings that everyone can attend is often difficult. Time is needed, and that is in short supply in many organisations, especially during periods of changes. Attention is also needed for a good design and professional support. People expose themselves during discussions and this must be treated

seriously. Energy and effort are needed to address the solutions. Working on this collectively and taking responsibility for it is often new to managers and employees alike. This kind of investment can encounter difficulties and must therefore be considered carefully.

Survey feedback is certainly not possible in a crisis, while staff reductions are underway or during serious conflicts. In times of crisis the time and peace needed for survey feedback are absent. With staff reduction and in conflicts tensions obstruct an open discussion about the outcomes. Survey feedback is likewise impossible if management only wants control information and no feedback meetings with all the persons involved can take place to learn about changing.

A suitable context is essential, but it is not enough. Through reflection on earlier survey feedback projects and reversal of disappointing experiences I have formulated the conditions required for working effectively with survey feedback. They have already been outlined in the chapter, but not named as such.

1. *Agreement on the basic principles of survey feedback, the goal and the approach*

This is central in phase 1 of a survey feedback process. The client and the consultant take the time to talk through the basic principles of the intervention. They work out *why* a survey feedback is suitable, *what* its use must result in and *how* it will be worked with. Spending time on mutual wishes and expectations at an early stage clarifies ideas of working with the intervention and makes it possible to determine whether it is meaningful to get to work.

2. *Total implementation of the worked-out phasing*

Starting with survey feedback requires that the persons concerned commit themselves to a conscientious approach and completion. Should the outcomes of the survey be 'disappointing', that is another reason for entering into discussions and for developing solutions to pinch points together. Starting but not finishing is counter-productive and undermines the credibility of those who have committed themselves to the intervention.

3. *Supervision aimed at maximum effect of the survey feedback for an organisation*

An organisation obtains content and process support in executing a self-investigation, in analysing the outcomes and in getting continuation actions going themselves for tackling the problems that have been identified. That demands a well thought-out customised design and professional supervision.

4. *A suitable form of cooperation that stimulates ownership*

Various possibilities are available for giving shape to the cooperation when the investigation is being performed and the outcomes are being discussed. It is important that the parties involved take responsibility themselves for realising the approach. This also contributes to people in the organisation feeling that they own the survey feedback and that as a result of the outcomes meaningful actions can be undertaken.

In conclusion I discuss the role of the consultant in the design and supervision of feedback meetings. Feedback meetings are an essential part of the intervention and that is why it is relevant to discuss the design principles for an effective meeting. These principles are used in the example and are based on reflection on earlier applications. They bear out the principles of Nadler (1977) and complement them (cf. Bennebroek Gravenhorst, 2002a, p. 40).

The first principle is that recognisable outcomes are available and that these are presented in an accessible form. A department's own outcomes appeal more to the department than general outcomes. It is the responsibility of the consultant to present the outcomes in such a way that they can be read without specialist knowledge. The second is that the division of the group and work forms generate precisely that interaction desirable for improvement. Knowledge of the context and insight into existing patterns are necessary to adhere to this principle. The third is that drawing conclusions and developing solutions do not occur at the same time. The two activities must be separated to avoid superficial conclusions being drawn. The fourth is that good questions and a supporting structure steer the meetings. Attention is needed in conclusions for what is going less well *and* for what is going well. What is not going well has to be improved, and what is going well generates energy and is motivating. Balance prevents complaints and a negative spiral. Thinking solutions through properly and giving them concrete shape often does not succeed in one meeting. A subsequent meeting may be necessary to move from talking to action. The fifth is good supervision. Good supervision does not mean that a consultant does everything. The more an organisation can do the better. That encourages its own learning process. The consultant provides support where necessary. The sixth is that attention is needed for the continuation during the meetings about solutions. Although the talks during those meetings are often a special result, it is of course also about the implementation of improvement plans. Following their realisation and making it visible show the value of the idea that people have developed together in feedback meetings.

These design principles can point the way for working with survey feedback in practice. The consultant determines the precise interpretation in consultation with managers and employees. Together they ensure effective meetings in which the parties involved exchange perspectives, discuss ideas and work on change and improvement. Experience teaches us that people find this instructive and challenging *and* that it delivers well thought-out and supported solutions.

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