

5 Steps for Impactful, Inclusive Employee Surveys

“You can measure diversity, but you can’t measure inclusion” is a common misunderstanding when it comes to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). In reality, you *can* measure inclusion, and one of the most powerful ways to do so is with employee surveys.

Employee surveys can help you understand how your workforce is experiencing your culture. Surveys can uncover whether employees from different demographic identities or backgrounds (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, veteran status, etc.) experience the organization differently with respect to engagement or inclusion — those data are a helpful prioritization tool, providing insights that can help inform your broader DEI strategy. However, the way these surveys are designed can have a dramatic impact on the quality of the data collected. And while we find that intentions may be good, most companies barely scratch the surface when it comes to using surveys to understand the employee experience.

Paradigm Data Insights

We looked at data from dozens of companies, representing 100,000+ employees, who use our [Blueprint](#) platform and found:

- 85%** of companies consistently survey employees
- 48%** analyze employee responses by gender
- 40%** analyze employee responses by race/ethnicity
- 16%** of companies take an intersectional approach to analyzing data (e.g., race/ethnicity and gender, together)

Below are five steps for using employee surveys to measure and drive progress on inclusion, from survey design to deployment, analysis, and taking action on the results.

1. Create a Strategy

- **Determine a cadence:** At minimum, an annual survey is a good place to start, but if you're a high-growth organization or experiencing dramatic change, you may want to survey employees more regularly.
- **Take advantage of different survey types:** You can augment robust annual surveys with shorter "pulse" surveys throughout the year. These shorter surveys are especially helpful for tracking progress around key DEI gaps you're working to close or low-scoring items you're focused on improving. You can also survey subsets of employees to see if a certain initiative was successful. For example, a short survey after a training can help you understand whether the training achieved the intended impact (e.g., behavior change, increased motivation).
- **Collect robust demographic data:** Take an inclusive approach to collecting demographic data so that you can analyze results across a range of identities. In addition to collecting key organizational data (e.g., level, team, tenure, etc.), we recommend collecting:

Gender identity (including non-binary options)

Caregiver status

Race / ethnicity, with the ability to select more than one category

LGBTQ+ identity

Veteran status

Disability status

Age

Keep in mind, some geographies have strict laws about the data you can and cannot collect — be sure to consult with your legal team and work with a trusted survey partner to stay in compliance.

2. Design an Impactful Survey

- **Work backwards from your goals:** The best place to start is at the end. What types of claims do you want to be able to make with the survey results? What populations do you want to be able to analyze? What insights are you hoping to glean? Clarity on your purpose and goals will help you refine what questions you ask.
- **Don't rely on single questions for complex concepts:** Cultural concepts like fairness, belonging, and voice are all part of understanding your employees experiences and the inclusivity of your organization. But those concepts are complex and multifaceted — no single question will capture them in their entirety. Consider 3-5 questions about the concepts you care about the most, and use academically validated indexes where possible. This increases confidence in the accuracy of responses.
- **Collect demographic data at the end:** Requesting demographic information after asking about employee experiences will help you identify differences in experiences without prompting employees to consider their identity before answering those questions, which may trigger stereotype threat.

3. Encourage Employee Participation

- **Stress confidentiality:** Explain how the data will be used, who will have access to the data, and what efforts will be taken to ensure confidentiality. Confidentiality is especially important when collecting demographic data. For example, employees who might be the only person of color or queer person on their team might worry that their responses will be attributed to them as individuals — you should proactively share that survey data is only analyzed in aggregate, with a minimum sample size.
- **Communicate why employees should care:** Explain how the survey insights will be used to inform DEI and people strategy. This can be especially effective when highlighting actions that you have taken based on previous survey feedback— doing this can help employees understand that you value and will take action on their feedback. For example, “In last year’s survey, we heard that many employees felt unclear about advancement opportunities at the organization, which is why we implemented career ladders and a framework for managers to conduct growth-focused conversations.”
- **Consider incentives:** Articulate an ideal response rate and encourage participation via friendly competition or rewards.
- **Give reminders:** Remind employees about the survey through multiple channels and have the message come from different people, from executives to team leads. Doing so can help reiterate the value that leaders and managers across levels are invested in learning from feedback gathered in the survey.

4. Analyze the Data

- **Go beyond the overall average:** Understanding the overall sentiment of employees is important, but go deeper into the data — for example, looking by team, geographic location, and tenure. Most importantly for your DEI efforts, look at data by demographic identity to understand where there are differences.
- **Take an intersectional approach:** Identities are complex — the experience of White women and Black women may differ greatly, but if you just look at a single aspect of identity, you won’t see that gap. Analyze data across multiple identities and with an intersectional lens whenever possible.
- **Consider small group sizes:** A challenge that smaller organizations often face when looking at survey data is small sample sizes for certain groups, especially for the most underrepresented identities or within smaller teams. In some cases, when analyzing survey data, very small groups can be rolled up into an aggregated, broader group — for example, “people of color” or “women of color.” To ensure confidentiality, establish (and stick to) a decision rule for these groups — for example, only analyzing data for groups larger than five respondents.
- **Identify your key strengths and opportunities:** When analyzing data, you can identify things you are doing well and things that can be improved (across all employees and when looking at experiences across groups). For example, you may see that engagement is high for senior members of the team, but those scores decline significantly at lower levels, and this pattern is more pronounced when looking at employees of color.



5. Communicate Key Results and Take Action

- **Be transparent about survey results:** When communicating survey results, you should take ownership of the results and emphasize that you care about how employees experience the culture, understand both the strengths and challenges of the culture, and are committed to addressing opportunity areas.
- **Highlight progress and outline initiatives:** Don't simply share the results – clearly communicate how you'll take action. For example, if you find that employees with disabilities have lower engagement, share your plan for addressing that gap, even if your plan is to collect more information from employees about their experiences (e.g., via focus groups or one-on-one conversations).
- **Create a plan for measuring and sharing progress:** As mentioned, conduct an employee survey at least once a year and consider using shorter “pulse” surveys to measure changes during the year. Using your annual survey results, track changes in scores from year to year, as well as how gaps between demographic groups have closed (or widened). Share results and actions in a relatively timely manner after each survey (e.g., within a few weeks or months of survey close, if possible), highlighting what progress has been made on the key opportunities identified in the previous survey and how it ties to your action plan.
- **Set people up for success:** If you need employees — especially team leads or managers — to take action, be clear on what you need them to do, give them context on why, and provide the support they need to be successful. Make sure that managers and leaders are prepared to answer questions that their teams may have about the results by providing them with talking points for frequently asked questions.

Following these five steps, you can design and deploy employee surveys that give you the insights you need to foster a more inclusive culture.

Looking for a trusted survey partner? Paradigm can help — we support companies with everything from survey design to analytics.

For more information on our Inclusion Surveys — and our Blueprint Strategy and Analytics platform, from which this resource was adapted — visit paradigmiq.com