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**ARE SURVEYS “EVIL?”**

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Leadership Pulse™ Research Results  
from October, 2006 Pulse Dialogue™

Energy Update and

***Are Surveys “Evil”?***  
Leaders’ Perspectives on Surveys

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## Introduction

The October Leadership Pulse™ report covers two topics: first, we continue to track the energy level of respondents. We trend leader energy because it is a key indicator of performance, and due to simplicity in using only one question, it works for our busy audience of senior executives. Second, we investigated leaders' perception of various aspects of customer and employee surveys.

We focused on the topics of surveys themselves in response to a few trends we are seeing in the business world. Organizations are becoming much more willing to use surveys, both at the corporate level and via individual managers. There seems to be a growing interest in doing surveys because there is easily accessible technology available. Also, initiatives such as employee engagement programs, change management initiatives, quality improvement efforts, and more, often begin with surveys. Lastly, many consulting firms have created or are inventing their own surveys. The results are many surveys going out to many people.

But does quantity equal quality? What are we seeing as a result of this flurry of survey activity? Are the people using surveys creating a process that is helping their organizations, or are we simply adding more numbers to the data pile? Although we cannot answer all of these questions with the leadership pulse study, we start to investigate these questions by asking the leaders in the study to address the topic of the value of surveys to them personally and to their organizations.

As you will see in the findings, there is an incredible amount of ambivalence about surveys. Most of the respondents do not think surveys are “evil,” but at the same time, they do not find them particularly useful either. Even when individual respondents provided numeric scores that were favorable toward surveys, the comments were not positive.

After reviewing in detail the results of the two sets of questions (energy and surveys), in the last section I provide some suggestions on how to evolve surveys so that we can create a more honest dialogue with employees and customers. Using a model that spells out the differences between surveys and data and dialogue tools, it becomes clear how to move a survey or score-taking process to one that uses interactive dialogues and produce fast, measurable results.

If you have comments or feedback on the results, please write to me at: [theresa@eepulse.com](mailto:theresa@eepulse.com).

Theresa M. Welbourne, Ph.D.

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## **The Leadership Pulse Study**

The Leadership Pulse research taps into a large sample of executives (over 4,000 to date) who have agreed to participate in short, Pulse Dialogues™ (our word for short surveys<sup>1</sup>) conducted every two months. We gather data on topics of strategic importance to leaders and then provide results to those who participate in this study. Our goal is to learn from data, create a dialogue around the subjects we study and help leaders continually learn so they can use the data to bring value to their organizations. The results presented in this report are from the Pulse Dialogue that closed on October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2006. A power point presentation and individual personal reports were made available to all participants approximately two weeks after the closing of the Pulse Dialogue.

### ***Who responded to the Pulse Dialogue?***

A total of 307 leaders participated in this Leadership Pulse. See Appendix A for complete sample characteristics.

#### *Company size*

Forty-five percent of respondents came from companies with less than 100 employees. Thirty percent work at companies whose size ranged from 101 to 5000 employees, and the remaining 16.8% work at companies with more than 5000 employees. 7.5% of respondents did not provide this demographic information.

#### *Their jobs*

Of those who responded, 35% were in C-core positions (e.g., CEO, CFO, CIO, etc.), 18.4% were VP level, and 16.2% were at the Director level. Approximately 12% came from senior managers, managers, and non-managerial professionals. The remaining 8% were external consultants, and 5.2% of the sample did not provide job level data.

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<sup>1</sup> I have changed the word to Pulse Dialogue as a signal that the process used is an attempt to evolve the traditional survey process. For example, the dialogues are done on a more frequent basis with fewer questions, and we provide everyone who participates with results and multiple ways to engage in dialogue about the results. In addition, participants receive personal reports that compare their own results to averages for people in their industry and the overall sample. We think the dialogue and learning is the key to this information exchange, where in traditional surveys scores and one-way communication are the overall goals.

## *Their industries*

Over nineteen industries were represented in the current sample, including 15.5% from manufacturing, 15.2% from the engineering and information technology sectors, 4.2% from wholesale and retail services, 6.8% from services (other than consulting), 9.1% from government, public transportation and not-for-profits. Only 0.6% of the sample did not provide industry level data.

## **Energy Pulse™**

As part of the on-going research, the Leadership Pulse tracks leaders' energy levels over time. Background information on energy and validation of the Energy Pulse metric can be found on the eePulse web site ([www.eepulse.com](http://www.eepulse.com)). Numerous multi-firm and within-firm studies have demonstrated that the one-item energy question predicts (using longitudinal, predictive research methods) turnover, customer service scores, sales, absenteeism, quality, 360 performance ratings, and more. The net is that ***when energy goes down, if no intervention is implemented, then individual and firm performance will go down in the near future.*** Also, we discovered that leadership energy is a lead indicator of all employee energy because leader energy affects employee energy.

The data for October 2006 (see Figure 1 below) reveals that ***across all industries, energy levels have rebounded slightly from their lowest point in the preceding 17 months.*** The data also reveal that 24% of the current sample is reporting in what we call the "danger" zones (either overly energized to the point of potential burnout or not energized); both conditions predict sub-optimal performance levels (See Table 1). Our research shows that energy is not something to be maximized but optimized. Thus, we use a proven method of using self-reported productivity levels to create what we call a productivity zone and ultimately report whether employees are in the "zone" of productivity<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Zone status is calculated by using the answer to a separate question which asks respondents to rate the energy levels where they are most productive. The self report method has been found to predict performance outcomes. The process and metrics are trademarks of eePulse with a patent pending on the methods and technology.

Figure 1. Energy Trend Data All Industries: Past 17 Months

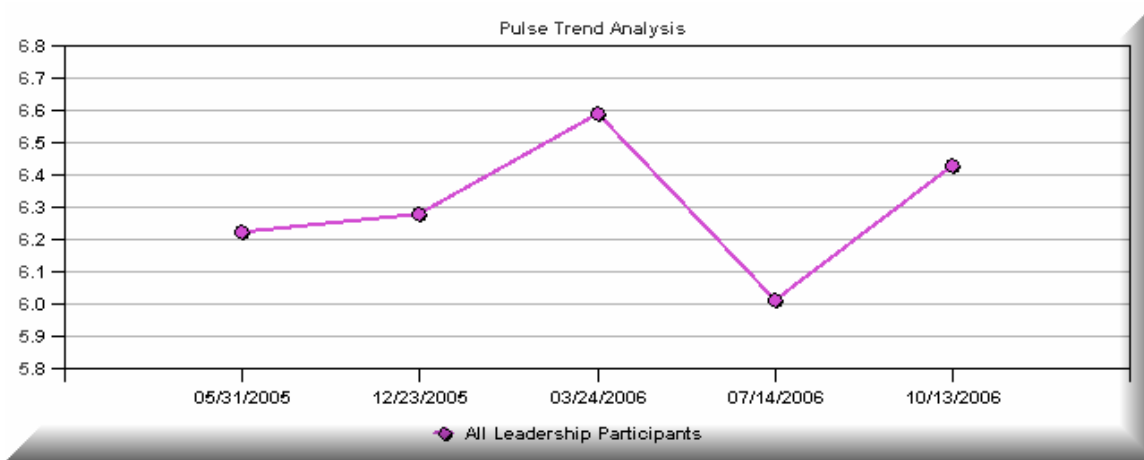


Table 1. Energy Levels of Current Sample (N = 307)

Response Scale	Percent
8.76 - 10.0 Overly energized	12%
6.26 - 8.75 Very energized	47%
3.75 - 6.25 Energized	28%
1.25 - 3.74 Somewhat energized	11%
0.0 - 1.24 Not energized	1%

Table 1 shows the percentage of respondents in what we call the “danger zones.” As energy is an optimization construct (both too much and too little are problematic), it is important to identify the percent of the population reporting in the very high range (overly energized) and the very low range (not energized or somewhat energized). A total of 24% of the current sample are reporting at rates that are considered to be at risk.

While the results reveal an overall increase in energy level across all industries, the overall results mask an important energy trend. Specifically, there is a continued energy dip for those who participated in the current and previous Pulse Dialogue. Investigating the within-person change scores (i.e., respondents who have participated in the current and previous pulse) we see that energy is still on the decline for 106 respondents. So while the overall results suggest an energy rebound, the within person scores reveal that energy scores for those who responded to the previous and current pulse continue to dip.

In Table 2 below, we review the energy data by industry level to help delineate unique energy trends for specific industries.

Table 2: Industry Level Energy Results

Group	Pulse (SD) <sup>a</sup>	Change <sup>b</sup>	WPC (#) <sup>c</sup>	Zone <sup>d</sup>	PLow <sup>e</sup>	PHigh <sup>f</sup>	Energy (%)		
							Low Energy (0.0 - 3.74)	Medium Energy (3.75 - 6.25)	High Energy (6.26 - 10.0)
All Industries	6.46 (2.09)	↑	0.42 -0.21 (106)	-0.95	7.41	8.61	13	28	59
Agriculture	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Biotechnology	7.25 (1.54)	↑	0.13 0.00 (1)	👍	7.14	8.13	25		75
Communications	6.49 (2.11)	↑	0.80 -0.75 (2)	-0.06	6.55	8.49	19	19	63
Construction	5.83 (2.36)	↓	-1.59 -3.75 (2)	-0.94	6.77	8.24	25	25	50
Consulting	6.69 (1.80)	↑	0.26 0.84 (14)	-0.60	7.29	8.58	9	29	63
Engineering	6.19 (2.67)	↓	-0.90 -2.31 (8)	-1.25	7.44	8.78	25	31	44
Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate	6.08 (1.47)	↑	0.99 0.41 (7)	-1.66	7.74	8.43	11	39	50
Government	6.38 (2.39)	↓	-0.29 -0.50 (4)	-1.02	7.40	8.60	13	25	63
Health Care	5.53 (2.68)	↑	1.10 0.00 (3)	-2.08	7.61	8.79	27	27	47
Information Technology	5.63 (2.34)	↑	0.13 -0.04 (13)	-1.96	7.59	8.64	19	35	45
Manufacturing	6.45 (2.04)	↑	0.10 -0.57 (28)	-0.85	7.30	8.43	11	32	57
Mining	5.00 (0.00)	NA	NA	-2.72	7.72	8.78		100	
Not-For-Profit Agency	7.05 (1.98)	↑	0.48 0.80 (8)	-0.49	7.54	8.82	7	29	64
Other	6.21 (2.37)	↑	0.33 -0.75 (2)	-1.52	7.73	8.56	18	29	53
Retail Trade	6.69 (2.37)	↑	2.40 1.25 (1)	-0.11	6.80	9.15	14	14	71
Services (other than consulting)	7.10 (1.99)	↑	2.13 1.42 (6)	-0.92	8.02	8.95	5	24	71
Transportation and Public Utilities	6.70 (2.39)	NA	NA	-1.08	7.78	8.43	20		80
Web-based Technology	8.06 (1.47)	↑	0.96 -0.13 (4)	👍	7.86	8.42	13		88
Wholesale Trade	7.63 (0.95)	↓	-0.12 0.00 (0)	👍	6.64	8.37			100

<sup>a</sup> Average (Standard Deviation) | <sup>b</sup> Change from Previous Time Asked | <sup>c</sup> Change for Respondents Answering two periods in a row  
<sup>d</sup> Points above or below Productivity Zone | <sup>e</sup> Lower Productivity Boundary | <sup>f</sup> Upper Productivity Boundary  
 👍 = 0 to 2.5%; 📈 = 2.6 to 5%; 📉 = 5.1%+

The first column includes a list of all the industries sampled. An NA indicates that there were not enough responses from that industry to create a summary report in this particular Pulse Dialogue. The second column heading, *pulse*, is the average energy score for each industry. SD is the standard deviation of energy. The smaller the SD, the more similar are the scores of the respondents from that industry. The third column shows overall *change* from the previous energy score. The associated arrow indicates whether the current energy score has increased, decreased, or remained stable. The WPC column is “within person change” and calculated only for those people who responded to two Pulse Dialogues consecutively. This is an important number as our sample changes over time. When the WPC and overall change scores show a consistent directional change, confidence in the overall pattern of results increases. The fifth column, *zone*, represents the area in the energy distribution where leaders are most productive. Energy scores that fall within the upper and lower productively zone



are classified as “in the zone” (research shows being in the zone positively predicts performance outcomes). Thumbs up is an indicator of being in the zone; blue and minus sign is below, and red and positive sign is above the productivity zones. The sixth and seventh columns represent the lower and upper bound of the productivity zone.

Referring back to Table 2, the current results indicate that even though overall energy levels have increased since the last pulse dialogue there are only three industries operating within their productivity zones ( Biotechnology, Web-based Technology, and Wholesale Trade), as indicated by the “thumbs up” symbol in the zone column.

An examination of the “change” column (and WPC change column) shows energy scores in retail trade increased 2.4 points. When this increase is coupled with an increase in within person change we are more confident that respondents’ energy in the Retail Trade industry is an accurate reflection of the industry’s current energy score. This same pattern is seen for those representing the Services (not consulting) industry. That is, we see energy increases in both the change and within person change column, which increases our confidence that the energy increase is an accurate representation of the industry.

Along with the quantitative data we collect, we also ask respondents to provide insight on topics of interest through open-ended comments. The energy comment question asked participants to 1) provide an explanation for the consistent downward trend in energy over the past 17 months, and 2) speculate on future energy levels.

### **Energy Comment Question Posed**

The following open-ended question was posed to participants:

*In our last Pulse Dialogue we found that energy slipped. Please provide comments about why you think the overall number went down and what you expect to see in this month’s results.*

The energy comment was assessed on two dimensions. First, comments were coded for expectations of future energy levels. Specifically, each comment was coded for a directional prediction by classifying the prediction as either a 1 = increase, 2 = decrease, or 3 = no change. Then a simple count was tabulated.

The second step in assessing the data involved creating higher-order categories that could then be used to classify comments into related themes, which leads to the understanding of patterns in the comment data.

The results of asking participants to predict future energy levels are presented in the following table. It is clear that the majority of participants did not attempt to predict future energy levels. For those who did respond there were approximately equal predictions of the three possible outcomes.

Table 3: Comment summary: predictions of energy levels

Next Pulse Energy Level Prediction	Count	Percent
na	157	0.79
increase	16	0.08
decrease	13	0.07
same	11	0.06
<b>totals</b>	<b>197</b>	<b>1.00</b>

Note: na = no response.

While few respondents attempted to forecast future energy trends, they offered 177 possible explanations for the downward trend in energy. This represents a 58% response rate for the energy comment.

The following table displays the categories created to classify each comment. offered as an explanation for the historically low energy levels.

Table 4: Comment summary: Reasons for energy declines

Reasons for Energy Slippage	Count	Percent
work load	33	0.17
other	27	0.14
world events	21	0.11
economy	21	0.11
seasonal	20	0.10
na	20	0.10
don't know	16	0.08
personal	9	0.05
lack of resources	4	0.02
natural cycles	4	0.02
work/family conflict	3	0.02
multiple demands	2	0.01
change	3	0.02
lack of recognition	3	0.02
lack of confidence in leadership	3	0.02
stress	2	0.01
staffing	2	0.01
compensation	2	0.01
performance mgt	2	0.01
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>197</b>	<b>1.00</b>

The top 8 comments capture 86% of all responses

Note: na = no answer. Other reflects comments that did not include more than one comment and/or did not fit into an existing category.

The most often cited reason for the current energy dip was “workload” in its various forms. World events, the economy, seasonal changes, and personal reasons such as age and health were also offered as explanations. A sample of comments from the top categories allows you to view the accuracy of our categorization process and the variety of explanations leaders offer for the historically low energy levels.

#### *Work load*

“Too much to do and not enough time. The biggest problem is continuing to take on new initiatives, without new staff and without taking anything off the agenda.”

“Burnout is easy when less people are doing more work and unable to focus on what they do best because they need to do everything well enough to survive and keep afloat.”

“As a general statement, we are trying to keep too many plates spinning at the same time. There is never enough time to feel fully energized about anything.”

#### *World events*

“I think current events that affect our country and our economy play a great role in how energized we are at work. We do not work or live in a vacuum and other influences play a part in how we feel and how well we are able to concentrate on our work.”

“Numerous factors (from my own perspective): psychological effects of world [current] events; pressures of globalization; aging of your sample group.”

“Mood of country. Lack of credible leadership. Stuck in Iraq.”

### *Economy*

“Too many worries about the state of business in general in the US economy, both from the staff and management perspective.”

“Current economic conditions have curtailed innovation in our industry, resulting in some level of complacency, and associated malaise.”

“Negative financial news wears you down. I would expect it to be up this time with the rise of the stock market & falling gas prices.”

### *Personal*

“Age and the amount of work required to operate a business.”

“Energy level is very situational and subject to changes that are very person specific. In my case, I am semi-retired and feel less attached to the real energy driving factors.”

“Age and health.”

### *Seasonal*

“I think energy levels are generally higher during the summer when we look forward to getaways and vacations with lessened stress. Holidays increase stress levels which sap our energy.”

“People probably kick back a little more in the summer. It is tough to be at work when the weather is nice outside.”

“During the summer, I might guess that most of the energy is used for children being home from school, vacations, temperature is warmer, and we work too hard. Consequently, I think summer people slow down somewhat to attempt to enjoy their family quality and recreation time.”

Interestingly, we found that respondents pointed to several factors external to the work environment as potential causal agents of energy loss. For example, 14% of respondents suggested that world events (e.g., war in Iraq, political events) were so consistently negative that it was draining energy to the point of affecting their work. In addition, respondents suggested the economy was depressing energy (e.g., “So hard to make a buck”, “Business is slow”) and finally 10% of our sample suggested that energy levels were directly related to seasonal changes. In particular, they thought summer brought on extra family responsibilities which ultimately affected overall energy levels.

It is interesting to compare the leadership pulse data to the information we obtain from the within-firm studies we conduct. When you ask the same question within a business, the comments that come back tend to be very tactical in nature, focusing on things that can be done quickly to get productivity blockers out of the way that are affecting energy. This is probably because within a firm, the results are being read by a manager seeking to take action, where in our study; the data are being shared for learning purposes.

This means that the purpose of the survey has a lot to do with how people will respond and what type of detail they will provide. The next section of the Leadership Pulse focuses on leader attitudes toward surveys, and both purpose and action, you will see, are important aspects that affect their opinions of the survey process.

### **Attitudes Towards Surveys: Are Survey's Evil?**

Participants were asked the degree to which they thought the annual employee survey and customer surveys were “evil.” I followed up with a few other questions about surveys that were more traditional in nature.

We defined the word evil before asking the leadership pulse participants to answer the question. For your benefit, evil was defined (borrowed one of the on-line dictionary definitions) as:

***Something evil = “a situation that is very unpleasant, harmful, or morally wrong”***

The first step was to review the degree that leaders perceived, according to our definition, surveys as “evil”. As you might expect, most of the 307 respondents were content enough with surveys to decide that they were not actually evil. The table below reports the percentage of people who agreed (using a 1 to 5 scale, where 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree; respondents who agreed answered 4 or 5 on the scale).

Table 5: Summary of evil survey questions

Question	Percent agreeing or neutral	Mean (SD)
I believe annual employee surveys are evil.	11%	2.28 (1.03)
I believe customer surveys are evil.	6%	2.02 (.99)

However, after delving into the details, I found some interesting variability in the degree to which subgroups were more or less favorable about these types of surveys. When it comes to employee surveys, the group that is most likely to think they are evil was those that reported their job function as within research and development (not information technology or IT), with 23% agreeing. Other groups with relatively high agreement scores are: engineering at 22%, finance and accounting at 20%, marketing at 19%, and manufacturing at 17%.

When it comes to customer surveys, the subgroups with higher agreement on surveys being evil scores are similar: finance and accounting came in at 20%; manufacturing 17%, marketing 13%, engineering 11%, and research and development (not IT) at 8%.

You may wonder why anyone would think a survey is evil. Below are some of the prevalent comments that explain these attitudes:

“They are poorly worded, do not address the real issues, fail to be acted upon constructively, and are typically used to manipulate employees.”

“People have learned that surveys can be manipulated so the importance of surveys has been minimized.”

“Auto dealership surveys tell you "they have to have an 'excellent' response to all questions". This is intentionally skewing the data.”

“Most of the time the information goes into a black hole or is used to "beat people up" for not making the right scores. More often the focus is on fixing the numbers instead of understanding what is being said. The last one we did the CEO did nothing with the information.”

“Surveys do not lead to improvements. It seems more like a "check the box" exercise.”

“The problem with most surveys is the lack of feedback and action after the data is collected and analyzed. Most leave you with a sense of "Why did I bother?"

Clearly, there are people who are not having positive experiences from taking surveys. However, even with those negative experiences these individuals were willing to take time to share their opinions and experiences in this particular survey.

### Other dimensions of surveys

In addition to the “evil survey” questions, I asked a few more traditional questions about surveys. The overall responses are in the table below:

Table 6: Summary of survey questions

Question	Percent agreeing	Mean (SD)
The annual survey we use at my company is something all employees value.	24%	2.84 (.90)
There is a definite and high ROI from our annual employee survey.	27%	2.82 (.98)
When I receive a customer service survey, I feel much better about the company.	47%	3.21 (.99)
I experience high value from participating in customer surveys.	30%	2.86 (1.05)

Reviewing these additional scores, it becomes clear that although not many individuals consider surveys “evil,” they don’t think very highly of them either. In fact, the comments are in general not very favorable. And as you dig into the data, you quickly see that the most favorable comments come from the people in jobs most likely to do surveys.

#### *From individuals in marketing:*

“When a company conducts a survey I feel they are making the necessary steps to want to improve as a business”

“I have participated in my own companies’ surveys and as a customer of another company. I feel providing feedback is critical to improving the customer experience”

#### *From individuals in human resource:*

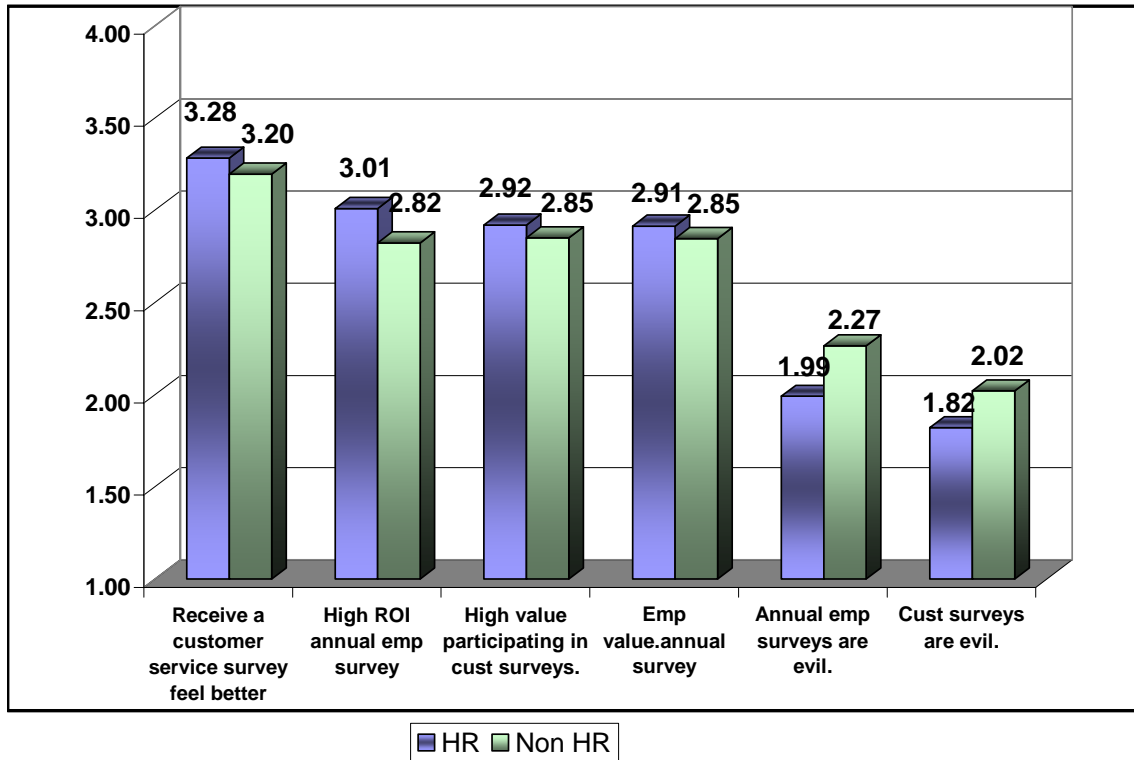
“I have written them, and have participated in them. I believe, if done well, they can be a valuable tool in information gathering and continuous improvement.”

“If surveys contain relevant content and are used they work great.”

“Surveys are a valuable tool for leadership to assess the attitude of the workforce.”

To further investigate the notion that those who regularly use the surveys or the data they produce we looked for differences in scale scores between HR vs. other respondents. The following graph displays the results of this analysis.

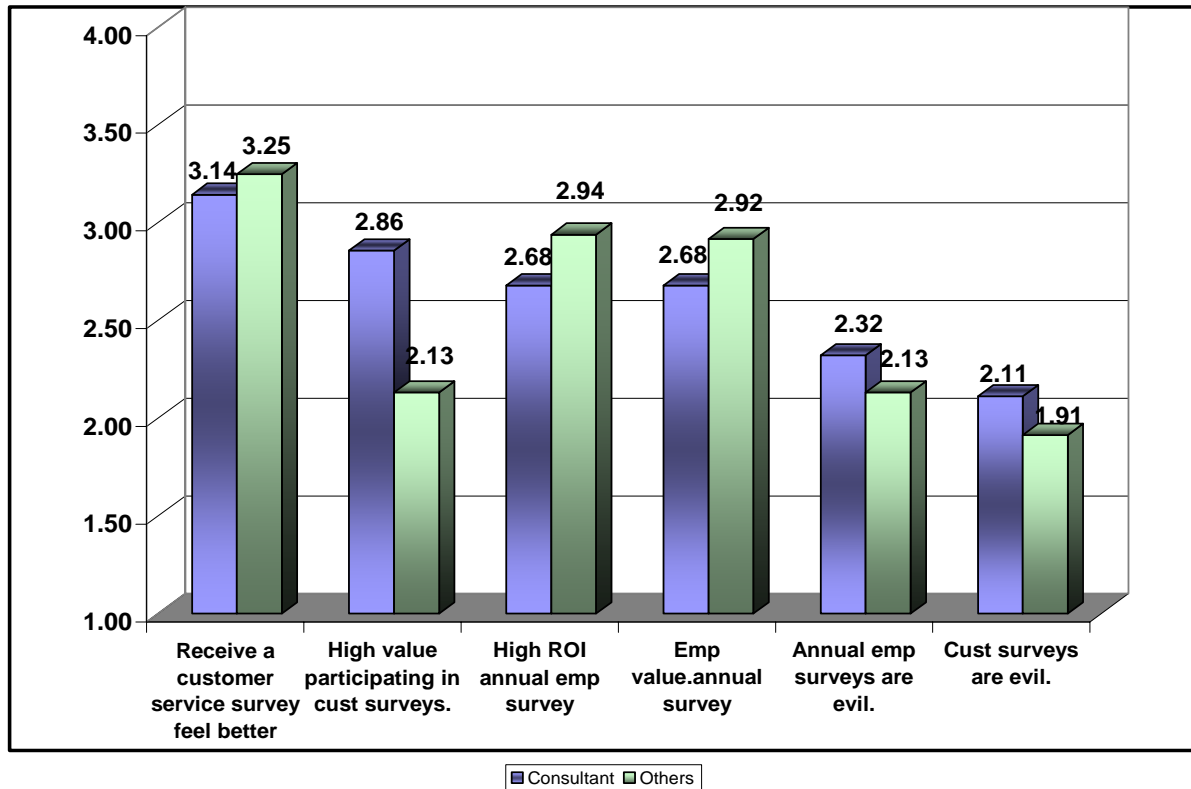
Figure 2: HR vs. other respondent results



The results indicate that, indeed, HR professionals are more likely to have positive attitudes towards survey outcomes and are less likely to agree that the employee and customer survey is “evil”. However, their scores are not much more positive than anyone else. We also had a sample of consultants and, given their association with survey use, examined their attitudes.

Figure 3: Consultant vs. other respondents’ results





After reading all the comments my take is that even the positive comments are not very positive. In general, people are very ambivalent about surveys. They don't really "hate" them (although I did not ask that question specifically), but they don't like them either. So, what's going on? The next section explores the results of the comment data to attempt to drill down into the thought process of the respondents.

**Survey Comment Question Posed**

The following open-ended question was posed to participants:

*Please use the space below to tell me about your experiences with surveys.*

The responses to the survey comment question were assessed on two dimensions. First, we determined whether survey experience was overall 1) positive, 2) negative, or 3) neutral based on the participant's affect and/or wording. Next, we created themes that could be used to classify each comment.

The following table displays the breakdown of the overall affective response expressed in the comment data to the survey experience.

Table 7: Attitudes toward surveys: Comment analysis

Overall Affective Responses	Count	Percent
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<b>Neutral</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>0.41</b>
<b>Positive</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>0.32</b>
<b>Negative</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>0.27</b>
<b>Totals</b>	<b>184</b>	<b>1.00</b>

A majority of the responses reflected ambivalence with the survey experience. Indeed, the majority of participants' affective response could be either positive or negative depending on several factors that are discussed below. The numbers alone support the ambivalence conclusion in that 41% of the comments were classified as possessing a neutral affect towards the survey process. 32% reported positive affect, while 27% reported negative outcomes associated with the survey experience.

The next step in the comment data analysis was to classify the comments into broader themes that allow us to speak of patterns within the data. The following table displays the themes that emerged through the classifying process. The first aspect of the comment data is to note that out of 307 participants, 184 provided a written response. However, 13 of those responses were a response of na. Thus, out of 184 written responses there were 171 comments related to the survey experience – that equates to a 57% response rate.

Table 8: Attitudes toward surveys: Themes

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percent</b>
follow through	40	0.22
metric integrity	27	0.15
other	21	0.11
increase knowledge	20	0.11
length and depth	20	0.11
ethical	13	0.07
na	13	0.07
false expectations	12	0.07
valued	10	0.05
wrong scope	4	0.02
feedback	4	0.02
<b>totals</b>	<b>184</b>	<b>1.00</b>

So what does this list tell us? It provides the reasons for the ambivalence. For example, the comment most often cited fits into what we labeled “follow through”. This type of comment reflected concern with either lack of follow through or the need to insure it. Indeed, the comments reflected the notion that without follow through the survey process could actually undermine the very issues they were designed to solve. Examples of comments classified under the follow through label:

“In general they have become a waste of time. No reasonable feedback is generated and concerns are rarely addressed.”

“Feels like a lot of effort on my part, with no results. That about sums it up.”

“My low scores on the value of surveys & their ROI are do to the failure of Top Management at my previous employer to report on and take action on any of the information obtained from two annual surveys that were taken.”

The second most often cited comment related to what we termed “metric integrity”. Metric integrity concerned issues such as implementation, analysis and the careful construction of the survey, including; scope of the questions, relevant content, application of appropriate research standards, item design and other issues related to design.,

“Clearly the most important factor is item design, poorly worded surveys yield poor results.”

“They are usually poorly designed.”

“In conclusion, my biggest problem, which happens frequently in surveys, is that none of the choices are appropriate. This muddles the information that the survey-provider is trying to gather.”

Eleven percent of the comments related to what we termed “increase knowledge”. This came in various forms, but generally highlighted the idea that important information can be gathered on a wide range of issues through the survey process.

“When supported from the top, surveys can be an invaluable tool to help focus improvement efforts and get quantitative feedback through longitudinal analysis.”

“I encounter compliance and ethics surveys in my work. They are generally very useful to gauge the "culture" of a workplace. They can also gather useful information about compliance and ethics problems -- especially sexual harassment and other problems that are not otherwise reported to management or via hotlines.”

“We have done Customer surveys in the past that have provided great and useful information that has impacted our pricing and product strategies.”

An additional 11% of comments were labeled as “length and depth”. This concerned a tendency for surveys to be too lengthy and lacking in depth in areas that actually matter to respondents.

“They serve a purposes, but are almost always far to time consuming, and break things down to number scores without true context which limits the ability to do true analysis.”

“I actually find filling out surveys to be a pain in the neck and rarely (unless the service was exceptionally good or bad) add in comments. Quick and easy is the only way I’ll respond -- I don’t personally perceive any direct value to me.”

“Generally too long. Forced to respond according to a rating scale that doesn’t always fit how I would like to respond.”

**Lack of viable alternatives?**

Keep in mind that the sample studied here is managers; they need data to do their jobs well. Perhaps the respondents did not take an overly negative view on the scoring of their attitudes toward surveys because they cannot imagine a viable alternative to the traditional survey. This makes sense to me because I see many companies continue to spend lots of money to do surveys even though they admit they get no or close to no value out of the process. Perhaps it is the hope that there could be something more keeping everyone from turning away from surveys. Maybe it’s our own personal need for ‘voice’ that keeps us hopeful our data will go somewhere and result in action.

Rather than hope, I think it is time to suggest alternatives to surveys, or at least it’s time to define what a survey is and is not. I would suggest that (1) surveys and (2) data and dialogue<sup>3</sup> tools are two points on a continuum describing stakeholder relationship management tools.

Figure 4: Surveys to Data and Dialogue Tools



*Surveys:*

- One-way communication (you ask questions of the survey respondent).
- Focused on getting a score.
- Primarily uses quantitative data.
- Interested in benchmarking (which means question wording cannot be customized).
- No guarantee that the survey taker’s concerns will be met.

<sup>3</sup> Data and dialogue driven leadership and variants of that are trademarks of eePulse, Inc.

- There may be no action whatsoever; company may be content with score or only want the score.
- Focused on survey developer's agenda.

*Data and dialogue tools:*

- Two-way and interactive communications.
- Focused on getting deep understanding of a situation and then engaging the other party in a dialogue based on an initial conversation or collection of data.
- Score is only used to start the dialogue.
- Not focused on benchmarking; questions are customized.
- Extensive use of qualitative data.
- Guarantee you will listen and drill down to take action, but no guarantee that all comments and dialogue will result in action.
- Focused on a business agenda and a desire to understand using the language of the population being studied.

**What types of dialogue tools exist today?**

Dialogue processes or tools have existed for some time. Focus groups and any type of meeting can be used to engage people in dialogue about a number of subjects. The goal is to truly understand a customer or employee experience by letting them speak up.

Today, technology has allowed a number of organizations to create sophisticated dialogue tools that replicate and enhance the focus group approach. Blogs and on-line collaboration tools all fall into this domain.

**Data and Dialogue Driven Leadership™ tools: The next frontier**

I am convinced that merging data collection tools (survey technology) with rigorous on-line dialogue tools is the next frontier for both doing research, for knowledge management, and for creating and sustaining high involvement or high performance organizations.

The Leadership Pulse study grew out of my interest in changing how I did academic research. For the last three years, a group of leaders have been answering what I call short Pulse Dialogues every two months. I change the subject, collect trend data, and share the data quickly so I can engage the respondents in follow-up dialogue.

My goal has been to create a learning team. We have an agreement that I keep the Pulse Dialogues short, and I agree to get the results back to everyone within weeks. This deal has worked well so far.

The Leadership Pulse study is an outgrowth of work that I've been doing within organizations since 1996. Starting with a number of high technology firms and then moving to more traditional organizations since then (large automotive companies, financial services firms, hospitals, not-for-profit organizations, global and complex organizations), I have worked with firms that use data collected from their organizations as frequently as weekly (in most cases bi-weekly or monthly) to engage their employees in ongoing dialogue about things that are blocking productivity and ideas for improving the organization. Data is delivered to ALL the managers in the organization, and the technology I use has evolved to the point where all employees receive reports that help them do self diagnostics and you might say "self dialogue" to understand their own work challenges.

The key to their success is the multi-level nature of the dialogue. Dialogue starts at the top of the organization, but each manager has his/her own data to then engage in high level and rich dialogue with employees. The ongoing nature of the process strengthens relationships, trust and engagement at all levels of the organization.

### **Are surveys evil?**

Surveys are evil when we lie to employees or customers about their use. They also may be evil if we don't communicate what we plan to do with the survey data, and respondents are basing their decision to participate on an implied trust or hope that something will happen. Also, as the survey respondents noted, they are evil if confidentiality is compromised in any way. Basically, surveys are evil when the process used violates the real or perceived relational contract we have with stakeholders (employees, customers, vendors, partners, etc.).

The key to preventing "evil" survey syndrome is full disclosure. Be honest with employees and customers. In most surveys we simply want a score, but we promise to do more. Most stakeholders will give you data for a score and be happy in doing so if you clearly state the exercise is for the score only.

Generally, employees and customers want more. It is the need to express an opinion (voice) and to have someone actually listen and then perhaps see something change for the better that drives the continued participation in surveys, even when people don't like them. Why would we not want to take advantage of what our employees and customers have to say? If we open ourselves up to listening to new ideas and gathering information about what's blocking productivity, then we can use the interactive nature of a data and dialogue process to effectively improve our organizations.

### **Conclusion**

Data and dialogue tools hold great promise in being able to deliver on improving the #1 asset any company has – its relationships with stakeholders. I have learned that data and dialogue tools also are incredibly powerful for managing change, integrating new leaders, building brand recognition, changing culture, engaging employees, and

improving firm performance very quickly. Below is a quote from a senior executive who was writing to a colleague about his experience in moving from surveys to data and dialogue tools:

*“The results were outstanding, the morale, the employee participation in the company and the energy level all were noticeably better, but more importantly, **our customer metrics improved, new processes were introduced, problem areas addressed, and we saved \$8 million dollars on employee ideas.** Tools are just that tools, in and of themselves they do nothing, but used within a management process that knows how to use the tool and is committed to it, they become powerful enablers.”*

Rather than being ambivalent or angry about surveys, it is time to let our frustrations surface so that true improvements can be made. If change happens and we evolve surveys into leadership tools, there is huge potential in the wins for employees, managers, shareholders, and business in general.

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### **To Learn More**

If you are interested in being part of the ongoing efforts to help leaders bring added value to their organizations please contact Dr. Welbourne at [theresa@eepulse.com](mailto:theresa@eepulse.com).

If you are currently not part of the Leadership Pulse study group, and you wish to participate (or sign up leaders within your organization), you can register at <http://www.umbs.leadership.eepulse.com>.



**Appendix A: Sample Characteristics**

Demographic distributions	
Company Size	Percent of total
	%
Less than 100 employees	45.3
101 to 500 employees	15.2
501 to 5,000 employees	15.2
5,001 to 25,000 employees	7.1
25,001 and over	9.7
No response	7.5
Total	100.0
Job Level	Percent of total
	%
C-core job (CEO, CFO, CIO, CAO, etc.)	35.0
VP level job (VP of any functional area)	18.4
Director level job	16.2
Senior manager level job	4.5
Manager level job	5.5
Professional in non-management position	6.8
External consultant	8.4
No response	5.2
Total	100.0
Industry	Percent of total
	%
Agriculture	0.3
Biotechnology	2.6
Communications	5.2
Construction	1.3
Consulting	18.1
Engineering	5.2
Finance, Insurance and Real Estate	6.5
Government	2.6
Health Care	5.2
Information Technology	10.0
Manufacturing	15.5
Mining	0.6
Not-For-Profit Agency	4.9
Other	6.5
Retail Trade	2.3
Services (other than consulting)	6.8
Transportation and Public Utilities	1.6

Web-based Technology	2.9
Wholesale Trade	1.3
No Response	0.6
Total	100.0

Functional Area	Percent of total
	%
Engineering	2.9
Finance / Accounting	1.6
General Administration	1.6
General Management	24.3
Human Resource	36.6
Information Technology (IT)	4.9
Manufacturing	1.9
Marketing	5.2
Other	5.2
Public Relations	1.3
R&D (other than IT)	4.2
Sales	4.5
No Response	5.8
Total	100.0