HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION | collaborative on academic careers in higher education

Crafting your Communications Plan

Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey | Module 3

Implementation of any initiative at a college or university will wither on the branch without faculty engagement. A well thought out communications plan can make all the difference in gaining faculty buy-in, both in terms of garnering strong and representative response rates, but also in implementing policies based on your results. How we communicate to faculty sets the tone for the entire initiative and establishes trust and accountability.

It is important that your team convenes early in the Survey Administration Timeline to outline and begin working on your plan. In the pages that follow, we will offer tips, guidelines, and tactics for building out your institution's communications plan.

Promising Practices

Vary the message, the messenger, and the medium

We often think that a single email (sent repeatedly) or an all faculty open forum is the best way to reach our faculty. Yet we also have a sense that there are some faculty who never open those messages or attend those events. If we work under the assumption that there are many faculties and they will have differing priorities, interests, and concerns, then it only makes sense that we try different messages to reach them. The same can be said about the people delivering those messages. In some cases, an email from the Provost will work. Other faculty respond when they hear from colleagues. Shifting the medium helps reach faculty who might be unwilling to speak at a forum but are willing to comment on a shared document or a webpage.

Focus on process

One of the most common complaints we hear from faculty is that nothing is ever going to be done with the data. Sometimes that is the case but more often, faculty are unaware of the work because we don't communicate the process. If faculty believe that a presentation is a standalone meeting, then they are less likely to attend. Conveying the steps along the way and *the steps ahead* make the case that this isn't just another report that will end up on someone's desktop.

Make your plan longitudinal and iterative

Connected to the previous practice is the idea that communication plans need to be built out over time. Perhaps more important is to give yourself permission to change those plans based on what you learn from your faculty. Then, tell your faculty about those choices. When your faculty hear that you are making adjustments, it sends the signal to them that you are listening.

Plan for feedback

Rarely if ever do we define an effective communication plan as one-directional, yet that tends to be a common approach. This seems even less logical in higher education where we are surrounded with highly intelligent consumers of data. When we push content out instead of engaging faculty in generative discussions, we are treating faculty as problems to be solved when we should be leveraging them as problem solvers. Be sure to account for how you will capture faculty feedback and questions, and identify a point person to monitor and respond to these messages.

Set goals and identify measures of effectiveness

As you build your plan out, ask yourself what you think an engaged faculty discussion might look like. What are the metrics that gauge engagement for each communications channel, and what indicators do you want to use to measure the effectiveness of your effort?

Questions to Consider

You all have communications offices and faculty who can help you flesh out your full plan, but in any organizational communications initiative there are some high-level questions to begin with.

Who are the potential recipient groups?

It may seem obvious that you want to communicate with your faculty, but there is no such thing as "the faculty" as a monolithic group. It is important to outline the different subsets of your faculty so you can begin to think about how your messaging and outreach might differ between them. Try to be specific and break down broader categories into more granular levels (e.g. faculty → non-tenure track, faculty of color, STEM / Business / Humanities, etc.). Once you have compiled a preliminary list of faculty groups, go back through and ask yourselves: *who might we be missing?*

Who are the potential messengers at your institution?

People often act on a request because the person making the request wields some sort of power or influence over them. Consider who on your campus might be an influential messenger for information regarding the Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey, and what type(s) of power they might possess for certain recipient groups. Some types of power and influence to consider are:

- Legitimate power: This is the type of power granted by holding a position or title of significance
- Reward power: The power of being able to reward your audience for taking a desired action
- Expert power: Power granted when the sender is considered to be an authority on the subject matter

- Referent power: Power granted when the sender is viewed as a credible source or similar to the recipient in some way (this might include faculty on your campus who have a reputation for being a tough critic)

What is the bottom-line message you are trying to convey?

It can be tempting in an initiative of this scale to try and pack a lot of information into one single communication. Especially with email and digital communication, however, you audience will often be scanning the material for one key takeaway or action item. In order to make sure your communication has a clear core message, you can share a draft with a colleague that's not working closely on the project and ask them what they think the one core takeaway from your email or flyer, or slide deck is. If they do not get your bottom-line message, go back and simplify. Focus more on the bottom-line message and repeat it more often.

How might the message be interpreted, or mis-interpreted?

Consider your audience's level of knowledge about the survey and/or COACHE, their possible reactions to the initiative, and potential reason for being invested. Frame your message to align with the audience's unique needs. Appendix A of this document provides some examples of lenses that you might what to apply to your communications, and sample language to convey these different messages.

Who can faculty contact on your campus with questions and how?

Simply relying on one-way communication can result in miscommunication and a feeling of being excluded. Consider who on your campus will be responsible for fielding questions from faculty about the survey, and how they will be reachable. For example, it may make sense to set up a dedicated email inbox for questions related to the survey. You can, of course, always direct faculty to COACHE's FAQ page and support team (coachefaculty@abtassoc.com) as well.

What channels of communication are available to you?

When selecting a communications channel, be sure to consider the wide array of mediums available to you. Some examples might include:

- Email
- Intranet/employee portal
- Faculty lounges
- Community meetings (e.x. faculty senate, faculty collective bargaining group, school- and college-wide meetings, etc.)
- Newsletters (e.x. HR, Provost's Office)
- Social media
- Website (see Georgia State University's webpage for an example)
- Campus newspapers

Consider which of your recipient groups are most likely to encounter your message where, and what effect the medium of communication might have on their interpretation of the message's importance.

At a minimum, we suggest sending a pre-launch email, a post-launch follow up message, and a post-survey communication (see Appendix A for samples).

What is the institutional context of your communications?

Every year there is something happening on campus, or in recent memory, that might color your faculty's perception of the survey. Be sure to consider what these contexts might be for your institution and how you might be able to address or assuage concerns through your messaging. Also consider whether there are institutional events or other initiatives that you might be able to leverage to inform the timing and messaging of your communications.

A Note on IRB Compliance and Communicating with your Faculty

All formal communication with faculty about survey participation must be approved by Harvard's Committee on the Use of Human Subjects. Contact outside of approved IRB protocol may violate the protections promised to human subjects. Any concerns about possible IRB violations should be brought to the attention of COACHE staff immediately.

Participation in the survey is completely voluntary, and no one will know who has or has not responded. Any coercion of faculty to participate in the COACHE survey is strictly prohibited by IRB protocol, is inconsistent with the mission of COACHE, and undermines the validity of your data. Please remember when communicating with faculty that even subtle comments may be interpreted more strongly than intended (especially when delivered from someone in a position of authority). Err on the side of caution when encouraging your faculty to participate; COACHE staff are available to assist you if any questions remain.

Please review the enclosed Appendixes for IRB approved language.