



Too hot to handle?

Assessing opinion on matters of high sensitivity

From time to time it is important to gain a reliable assessment of peoples' opinions on issues that are particularly sensitive. These issues vary greatly but we group them together because they have a high emotional element, address cultural or organisation taboos, have a commonly perceived impact on job security / career progression / individual well-being.

For example, attitudes towards diversity are notoriously difficult to assess accurately because most people have a strong perception of the 'right' things to say. Other typical examples are green and climate change issues, but there are many more.

We have developed an approach that is particularly effective in gaining a good understanding both of views generally in a population and identifying pockets of particular difference.

Firstly, we conduct a series of interviews amongst groups of people who will be comfortable together. Crucially, these groups will comprise individuals of very similar seniority, carefully avoiding any reporting relationships (e.g. 360° appraisal). Furthermore, and contrary to usual best practice, the groups should be as homogeneous as possible. You are more likely to get a good understanding of attitudes towards gender from all-male or all-female groups, thus avoiding self-censorship.

Our interviewers are professionals who understand the use of 'clean language'. Enthusiastic amateurs or professionals experienced only in traditional facilitation are likely to bias the results by failing to obscure sufficiently their own opinion. Additionally, the interviewers need to be adept at capturing exactly phrases used by participants that express an opinion within the appropriate context and in particular language. For example, someone might say, "*When budgets are cut, training is the first thing to go.*" Never mind that HR always talks about 'learning' rather than 'training', that Finance say 'allocation' not 'budget', and that the sentiment is untrue anyway! We capture the thought exactly as it is expressed.

At the end of the round of interviews we will have a very large number of these attitudinal or behavioural statements and, working with our sponsors we reduce the overall number to a manageable size – eliminating duplication and those that fall outside the defined research parameters. We can then run a statistically robust survey amongst the wider population, offering each statement unedited and asking to what extent it rings true for the respondent – typically a four-point scale with an additional 'doesn't apply' option.

We can then analyse the survey data just like any other survey, looking at the demographic splits as required.

The key is that we avoid introducing researcher bias, and use the lingua franca of the people as much as possible. This, we find, produces, reliable and illuminating information cost-effectively.