Six Guidelines for Successful Survey Content

All surveys have a few general "rules to the road" when developing content. Keep these in mind as you go through the design process.

Make things simple at the start.
Surveys should begin with a question, or short series of questions, easy to answer. Asking difficult questions at the start may discourage participation. For example, asking a rating question about a supervisor may be a bit more difficult to answer than one asking about whether you're happy in your job.

Be mindful of the number of questions you ask.
A survey's job is to gather feedback about information that matters. Resist the urge to use lengthy questionnaires filled with questions that might provide results that would be "nice-to-know", rather than those that are need to know. A well-designed questionnaire stays focused and orderly to optimize completion.

Essential questions or not.
One of the best ways to determine how essential a question may be is by asking yourself the following: "How will we use the results to this question?" If you can't see a use for it, then it may not be needed!

Structured questions vs. open-ended.
Most surveys use question formats that rely on rating scales or multiple choice. These are typically a bit easier to complete, rather than where there are no answer choices provided or you seek a ranking of items. This said, don't be afraid to use at least one open-ended question that yields a verbatim comment. Verbatims often bring life to what a survey taker is trying to convey and yield additional insights.

A few cooks, but not too many.
Before developing the survey, get a general feel from stakeholders about survey content. Once you've heard from them, develop a questionnaire and have it reviewed by a colleague or two to make sure the content and structure is clear. Ambiguity or confusion are hinders to a successful process.

Responsive design probably matters.
Finally, be aware of how your employees may be taking the survey. Today, most are done online and this means employees may be at workstation, on a tablet or even a smaller mobile device. This has implications on question structure and calls for a system that offers responsive design. Check to be sure your program can accommodate these various response possibilities.