Dr. Abraham Wald was born in 1902 in Austria-Hungary, or what is today Romania. As an adult, he fled Nazi persecution to the U.S.

But during WW2, Wald was asked to solve a problem for the Royal Air Force. Where would limited materiel be most effectively utilized to reinforce, or “up-armor” Allied warplanes? Wald meticulously tracked the damage to returning bombers…

… and found their heaviest damage on the wings and fuselage.

“Jolly good!” said the top brass of the RAF. “We’ll reinforce those areas in black.” “No,” said Professor Wald. “The deadliest strikes are hitting the cockpit and tail. You haven’t considered the aircraft that never return from their missions.”

In other words: Our greatest vulnerabilities are hiding from our view. We ignore the missing data at our peril. “Death by surveys.” Let me tell you what this means for what we think we know about our faculty.

You know from instinct, and research has proven, that surveys are increasingly in use, everywhere, in part because it’s become so easy to use them. I’ve listed some of the most popular, national faculty surveys here. Full disclosure: I am director and P.I. of COACHE at Harvard, and retain the prerogative of putting my organization at the top. What I haven’t listed are the surveys from disciplinary associations, the AAUP, polls from the media, and legions of earnest doctoral students… and of course, your own surveys. On climate. On parking. On sexual assault.
27 percent of faculty told us they’d been asked to take four or more surveys from their own institutions just in the past year. “Death by surveys.”

So is it any wonder that response rates are falling? It’s becoming harder and harder to convince people to participate. I have found evidence of this trend across the spectrum of social science. Faculty are no exception. In fact, they’re practically the rule. On average, COACHE sees a 59% response rate at participating institutions. FSSE, 48%. The Chronicle and HERI either don’t report it or don’t use methodologies that tell them. But based on their public reports, their faculty response rates are below 40 percent. That’s 60 percent of faculty… missing. And that’s not uncommon.

This becomes a problem because faculty matter so much. And because they are not missing at random from these surveys; some categories of faculty are less likely to respond. These findings support what has for some time been the “First Law of COACHE”: there is no capital-F faculty, but instead, many faculties. So, we cannot simply generalize our survey findings across the faculty population. In fact, my work of the past three years on nonresponse has found that, the faculty who are missing from surveys are, arguably, the same faculty who are the greatest target of interest in national, state and institutional policies today:

- faculty of color, particularly African American and Asian faculty;
- foreign-born faculty;
- those in disciplines like science and engineering;
- tenured faculty, that is, those who will likely be sticking around for life;
- faculty with longer institutional memories;
- that is, who have been in their positions longer;
- and the long-term associate professors…

These are the faculty who are less likely to participate in surveys of workplace attitudes. The result for associate professors has the greatest magnitude of difference: nonrespondents have been in that rank six years or longer, on average, than the associate professors who do respond to surveys. These people, these lives, are underrepresented in your data. What happens when we ignore them?
Because survey nonrespondents score lower on batteries of organizational citizenship behavior, or OCB. Faculty in my study? They rated lower than the survey takers on a type of OCB called civic virtue. Put simply: the faculty missing from your surveys are also missing from your committee meetings, your senates, they’re not reading your mass emails or attending the gala events. So, if you are surveying them about opinions on the future of your campus, for example, you are missing—nonrandomly—a number of faculty who are going to be an important part of that future, whether you—or more importantly, whether they—like it or not.

And, as it turns out, you have cultivated a cynicism about the surveys you’ve been throwing at them. Just 1 in 3 faculty believe surveys play any role in institutional decision making. And these are the faculty who actually took the time to respond to a survey about it in the first place! So you can imagine how cynical the nonrespondents must be.

And that’s exactly the problem. Too often, we are left to imagine who isn’t responding to our surveys. Rarely does an institutional report seriously consider the potential impact of nonresponse. We can do better. But how? How do we reach these faculty? And how do we win them over?

First, be credible. Prove the survey is worth their time
Tell them: Whom will the results help? How? What changed as a result of the last survey? And whenever you do make a change informed by your data, be explicit about that connection.

Also, leverage salience theory, created by Robert Groves, now Georgetown’s provost, shows us that we get better results when we “microtarget” the population. Figure out what’s important to each subgroup, then alternate the message—and messenger—accordingly.

Oversample your nonrespondents. You will get more accurate data if you spend more time and resources recruiting those faculty who are less likely to respond. It requires a lot of “retail” work. Why should you do it? Because you will defeat the restriction of range effects that come with homogenized response sets.

After the survey, conduct focus group follow-ups with any important populations who are underrepresented. Ask them, “Why?” And do the data we have collected make sense for you?

Create a survey clearinghouse for institution-wide approval of all in-house and third party surveys. If a survey invitation doesn’t include their seal of approval, faculty are free to ignore it.

Make honesty the best policy. Think and write about limitations of
nonresponse. You’ll look smarter, and you can use the information, to borrow a phrase from Bob Zemsky, to “lean against the bias.”

**Finally, Stop. No, really, Just stop.** Faculty are asked to respond to more surveys than are really necessary. Just because it’s easy doesn’t mean you should do it. Give them a break!

In any event, I hope you have seen that a well-executed survey can initiate a process of engagement with and among your faculty. A survey alone, however, cannot supplant that process. Data are a beginning, not an end.

The Royal Air Force took Wald’s advice and reinforced the cockpits and tails of their aircraft, and we all know how that story ends: Lives were saved, the good guys won, and what you might not realize is, Wald became a renowned faculty member at Columbia and one of the most important statisticians of his era.

Yet.

Wald’s sisters, a brother, their spouses and children, his parents and other relatives, all died in Nazi crematoria and concentration camps. Just one brother survived.

I have to believe that Abraham must have thought *every day* about what the missing in *his* life might have said.

We can all do better in our daily work, I think, if we stop, and—rather than dismiss the silent ones from our communities, from our decisions—we instead contemplate the silence. *Invite* it. *Pursue* it.

Every missing number has a story to be told.

Thank you.