Measuring Staff Satisfaction

Sylvia Jefferson and Carlotta Royal

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the Sonoma County Human Services Department (HSD), line staff and supervisors serve clients. Managers and executives serve line staff and supervisors. To ensure that line staff and supervisors have the resources and satisfaction necessary to meet the needs of the community, the HSD Executive Team implemented a defined method for measuring employee satisfaction and implementing interventions that address identified areas of staff concern. HSD's design, analysis, and reporting of the employee survey measures staff opinion through questions, such as whether they feel valued and safe in their work environment. In addition, HSD implements multiple and varied interventions in units, divisions, and the Executive Team to improve employee satisfaction within the working environment. Furthermore, HSD reviews the survey results over time to ensure that the continuing efforts put forth by managers and executives to support line staff and supervisors are successful so that client services are accessible and staff are responsive to client needs. Through our research, we concluded that Santa Clara County Social Services Agency can also benefit from a staff survey.

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Introduction

What does staff satisfaction mean to an organization?

"Employee satisfaction is the terminology used to describe whether employees are happy and contented and fulfilling their desires and needs at work. Many measures purport that employee satisfaction is a factor in employee motivation, employee goal achievement, and positive employee morale in the workplace. Employee satisfaction, while generally a positive in your organization, can also be a downer if mediocre employees stay because they are satisfied with your work environment" (Heathfield, 2010). "In 1997, Development Dimensions International (DDI) conducted focus groups, interviews, literature reviews, and surveys to determine drivers of an effective service environment. DDI found evidence of a circular relationship between employee satisfaction and retention,customer satisfaction and loyalty, and increases in company profitability. In addition, employee satisfaction was strongly related to employee commitment and loyalty, and both measures have proven relationship to retention and productivity" (Corporate Executive Board, 2003).

Is staff satisfaction as important in an organization that serves needy clients as it is in sales-related private sector businesses? Many of us know that private sector businesses give employees many rewards and benefits to create a happy working environment with hopes of increasing efficiency and improving customer satisfaction. Sonoma County Human Services Department's (HSD) Director Jo Weber believes that staff satisfaction is just as important in her agency as in any private organization. Jo has three major goals for the agency: she wants clients to feel welcomed and get help to meet their needs; she wants staff to feel valued, safe, and happy to work at HSD; and she wants the community to look to HSD as a resource and to value human services (County of Sonoma, Human Services Department, Executive Team).

So, how can HSD accomplish these goals? Many studies have shown a direct correlation between staff satisfaction and customer satisfaction. If that correlation holds true, then Jo and the Executive Team must help the staff to feel valued, safe, and happy to work for HSD; as a residual effect, Sonoma County's clients will feel welcomed and get the help that they need. In turn, the community will look to HSD as a resource that values human services.

In addition to meeting her goals, Jo believes that increased job satisfaction can create a high-quality future workforce. During an interview with the director, she stated, "The best advertisers for recruitment are the people already working here"

Knowing that staff satisfaction can help meet her established goal and help create a future high-quality workforce, Jo asked herself, "What is the best way to measure staff satisfaction?" She believes that an all-staff survey provides a much clearer picture than simply asking volunteers to voice their opinions through other avenues. As a result, the idea of the Employee Survey was born.

Santa Clara County Social Services Agency (SSA) has a similar goal of meeting client needs. The agency views itself as a "culturally sensitive and socially responsible public agency providing high quality, professional, financial, and protective services for residents of Santa Clara County." SSA has not yet have developed a method to measure, improve, and maintain staff satisfaction; therefore, a detailed case study into the HSD staff survey was conducted to understand the process and to find out if it will be benefit SSA (The County of Santa Clara, 2011).

Implementation

The Employee Survey came at a time when the new executives in Sonoma County were trying to learn their jobs: all but one were new in their positions. Naturally, they were concerned about going forward with the survey and having an added burden in their workload; however, if Jo had not implemented the survey that year, she feels there never would have been a good time. The executives felt trepidation going into the survey the first year, and, frankly, there is still a little bit of nervousness each year (Stuart, 2010).

Jo began the Employee Survey as a first-year director. She used a copy of a survey from a neighboring county, which was comprised of 37 questions. Jo knew that she needed to hire staff to analyze the survey, which is when she hired Marla Stuart. Marla has an MSW and is trained in statistical data analysis.

Marla Stuart, Division Director, Planning, Research, and Evaluation (PRE), was asked to review the survey process and make necessary changes. Although the survey was long and Marla wanted to reduce the number of questions, she used the same survey for three years to create accurate trend data.

After the third year, the survey was reduced in size. In addition, the questions were reformatted to make them more clear and easier to understand and answer. Survey questions must be valid and reliable, meaning that the questions will measure what they intend to measure and they will give the same results if given again with the same group. Marla decided that she would use 12 reliable questions that were developed by the Gallup Organization. "These 12 questions are used in 114 counties and 41 languages and are shown to effectively measure employee engagement." Even the most controversial question, "I have a best friend at work", was kept intact.

Questions must also be easily understood and susceptible to only one interpretation. "A question is 'valid' if it is a very specific question that measures what is intended to be measured" (Redlich, 2011). Two-part questions were removed because the staff may want to answer one way for the first part of a question and a different way for the second part of a question. An example is the survey statement, "[My] workload is fair and reasonable" (Stuart and Torchia, 2009). How should one answer the question when the workload is fair (equally distributed), but unreasonable (quantity too high for all)? To alleviate the problem, the question was broken up into the following two questions: "In my Division, management understands that the current workload is difficult"; and, "Workload is fairly distributed in my Unit." The change allows the staff to answer appropriately. Indeed, the results of the 2009 survey showed a 10% change in opinion from the 2007 survey.

Marla's philosophy for conducting the survey is to engage all employees who have different ways of communicating (Stuart, 2011). In addition, Jo is "committed to anonymity" (Weber, Invitation to 2010 HSD Employee Survey). To meet these goals, the survey is given in two forms: via SurveyMonkey (an on-line application that collects and reports employee responses), and in the traditional paper format.

Jo chooses to deploy the survey annually, although some members of the executive team would like the survey to be distributed less often because they feel that there is not enough time to make changes. On the other hand, Marla would like the survey to be distributed more often to gauge the staff's feelings outside of the budget season.

June was chosen as the best time to conduct the survey because most of the staff were present and not on a vacation or a furlough; however, June also has its downsides—it is the heart of the budget season where layoffs may occur. Marla believes that a possible good time for the survey is sometime in the fall. The survey samples the staff satisfaction at a point in time. Because opinions fluctuate throughout the year, Marla would like the survey conducted more frequently. Regardless of the time frame, the stakeholders find that the survey is useful and necessary to continue.

The survey questions are discussed with the executive staff each year. The goal is to ensure that the questions are still relevant. They decide whether it is necessary to remove questions from or add additional questions to the survey. Union opinion is also sought for questions or comments before the survey is released each year. In June of 2010, the executive team met with the Joint Labor Management Committee to discuss questions or comments they had regarding the annual Employee Survey. Ideas from the meeting were used to develop the next survey.

The Response Rate

A "[r]ule of thumb about return rates: A response rate of at least 50% is usually considered adequate for analysis and reporting. A response rate of 60% is good. A response rate of 70% is very good." (Babbie and Rubin, 1993)

HSD hopes for a response rate of 70%. The other 30% of staff may be those who think that all is fine in the department or who think it is extremely terrible and completing a survey will do no help. Others may feel that the survey is not anonymous. (Stuart, Promoting Staff Satisfaction)

Division directors use non-county funded incentives to increase the participation rate and achieve or exceed the desired goal. HSD employee's 660 full-time equivalent codes and nearly 3% of additional extra help staff members are invited to complete the survey, with the exception of the executive team.

In the beginning, staff members from one division did not want to complete the survey because they did not trust their lead manager. They felt that the results would not be anonymous and would get back to the manager; as a result, there was a poor response rate. Once the manager was no longer in the position, Jo worked with the staff to close the communication gap between management and the staff. She wanted the staff to feel included in the discussions and to feel safe and secure in the anonymity of the survey. The response rate the following year improved greatly.

HSD's goals are for 70% of the staff to complete the survey and for half of those respondents to either agree or strongly agree in all areas that are questioned. The response rate in the 2010 survey was 73%, the highest since HSD began the survey in 2007. For every question, over 50% of the staff either agreed or strongly agreed: this is the highest scoring in the survey's history. (Stuart, 2010 Emloyee Survey Reader's Guide)

One downside of the survey is the amount of time that it takes to complete. Although the survey takes just about 10 minutes to complete, the staff are busy; therefore, HSD limits the number of different surveys each year so staff will not view completing the Employee Survey as a chore. Additionally, management emphasizes the significant advantage of having a report that measures staff opinion and communicates how the staff responses influence their decisions in the department. In the end, both staff and management feel that the time invested in the survey is minor compared to the substantial benefit that is received by it.

The Analysis

What is data without proper analysis? To most, it is confusing and useless.

Thankfully, Marla gathers the raw data from the survey and creates charts, graphs, and summaries of the answers by theme. Her analysis of the data helps to pinpoint areas of opportunity that need work. Marla uses a consistent methodology for reporting the survey results and trend data. Statistics quantify the uncertainty of the findings at a specific point in time. In spite of that, HSD has adopted a significance level that identifies differences in opinion that are real for all employees at all times (Stuart, 2010 Emloyee Survey Reader's Guide 8).

Marla decided that there must be at least five responses in each building or category to post the results. Less than that, the results could be tracked to a specific person. For example, if a building has only six employees that could possibly answer the survey, and half of them do, the results would not be analyzed. At least five of the employees must answer a question to make it a truly anonymous survey.

Without the analysis of a survey, complaints from one person may seem significant, when in fact the complaints are a minority opinion. One year, Jo heard from someone who said he or she was representing a unit that their unit had a morale problem, but the survey results differed from the message that the one person had relayed. The survey identified the issue as a problem with only a few employees, and not with the entire unit as was suggested.

The total time frame from survey release to final reports is three months. To maintain objectivity within the executive team, Marla is the only executive who analyzes the results of the survey and creates the reports.

Marla primarily uses bar graphs to report the results of each question. In the bar graph, she uses a grey shaded area to highlight results that fall between 50% and 75%. This grey area helps to identify responses where the staff neither agrees nor strongly agrees with the question. Issues that fall below the bar need to be discussed with the staff to determine possible action that can deal with the issue and "improve the work environment." According to Jo, areas with responses that fall above the grey bar are "awesome."

The only open-ended question is the final question, because the answers to that question are labor-intensive to analyze. The analyst must be sure not to allow his or her own biases to play a role in reading the comments. In addition, written comments should not overwhelm the report and the bulk of the information should come from the survey questions themselves (Stuart, Promoting Staff Satisfaction).

During the comment analysis, Marla removes any hurtful or unnecessary comments. She publishes the comments in an abstract mode that identifies common themes and not personalities. The first year of the survey, the comment responses were given directly to the executives, and they were more counterproductive then helpful. Jo believes the value of the comment is lost if it can be traced back to the employee because the comment may be discounted or given too much weight. This is why it is extremely important that the survey remains anonymous.

Marla prepares the survey, analyzes the results, and creates the reports. Marla does not post each individual division's results: those results are only given to the division manager and to Jo. The total executive and PRE time for the completion of the survey process is between 200 and 250 hours; when you add the employee time of approximately 75–100 hours (depending on how many employees complete the survey), the total time used for the survey is between 275 and 350 hours.

The survey results supply management with the data needed to supply the staff with the tools and resources they need to do the best job they can. Survey results are not tied into the goals of executive management, but they are used as a tool to view the areas that need improve. They are tied, however, to Jo's contract as a department head, and she shares the results with the Board of Supervisors.

While the survey may seem costly at face value, encouraging staff input, knowing how the staff feel, and making changes to create a happy working environment can increase efficiency and produce a more productive workforce, thus reducing costs and increasingly meeting the needs of clients.

The Results

Jo feels that it is "enlightening to get the results from the survey." Even though, as she expected, there were many unhappy results in the first round of surveys, she looked forward to getting the results. She also explains that the results are somewhat dependent on the number of surveys returned, because if only a small minority of employees return the survey the results can be skewed toward either very happy or very unhappy staff members. It is important to encourage all staff to complete the survey because "each person matters." To increase the response rate, Jo emails the staff to promote the survey and relay its importance.

In general, the managers have the highest satisfaction rating, perhaps because they have more autonomy and have made a personal decision to stay with the organization (Stuart, Promoting Staff Satisfaction).

Once the final reports have been completed, Jo has a formal presentation in each building where she shares the results with the staff members. She then asks the staff to e-mail her with comments. She is honest with the staff and lets them know when she or the executive team is surprised by an answer. In addition, Jo also talks about the survey in the annual all-staff meeting. In addition to Jo's meetings, each division presents the results on their own, in their own fashion. They discuss the overall department report and their division-specific report.

Jo views the survey positively, as team results, and not as a tool to blame supervisors. When there is a positive response rate or a division with satisfied employees, she congratulates the division manager and encourages the positive feedback to flow through the division. When there is a low response rate, she makes an effort to increase communication and listen to what the staff members have to say. She uses the tool to acknowledge information and applaud the increase, but does not punish the managers when negative results are reported. By managing the survey with a positive outlook, Jo increases support from the executive team, which then trickles down to the staff.

The Changes

The executive team realizes that there may not be a shift in an opinion in one year. It may take two or more years before there is a significant change in opinion. At times, the executives feel that they do not have time to make changes before the next survey comes out.

After the first survey results were released, the most significant findings were employee safety, communication issues, and performance evaluations. Jo sat with the executives to figure out a plan to develop strategies for the following year. They chose to focus on correcting the safety issues first. Jo started a safety workgroup to identify areas of the agency in which there were safety concerns. The majority of ideas for changes came directly from the workgroup. She found out that the interview rooms and an overcrowded lobby were the main concerns. She immediately changed the procedures to ensure a safer environment. She planned facility changes as well. She removed the doors to the interview rooms and stopped using rooms that were out of sight from others. In addition, she developed a training session about mental health clients that was given by subject matter experts in the mental health field. It took a total of 18 months to finish the changes aimed at improving safety and to change the safety standards in the buildings.

Questions regarding morale also returned low scores. With Marla's help, Jo and the executive team decided to reword some of the questions relating to morale so that they could get a better understanding of the issue. They decided to ask if the staff had confidence in the directors. Jo also increased communication with staff to improve the low standard. Another question was changed from a generic, "I feel valued at work" to "I have been praised in the last seven days", which an executive said is a more difficult standard to meet.

Jo believes that an increase in communication can lead to an increase in morale; as a result, she gives reasons for tough decisions, such as layoffs, and she communicates her reasoning and feelings about her decisions. She encourages the executive team to do the same. One executive uses a group voicemail to pass along important messages to her staff. Jo attends brown bag lunches to communicate with her staff. In addition, she established an anonymous email "suggestion box". She is also a part of the Joint Labor Management Committee that includes managers, supervisors, and line staff and meets each month to discuss current issues. The communication gap has been closed and the staff members can now see the information on the internal website before it hits the newspapers.

Across the board, staff members have been unhappy with the performance evaluation process: they felt the process is not adequate because it is long and drawn out; there are not consistent standards to be measured against; and it doesn't tell them how they can grow professionally. To get additional details, Jo formed a group to talk about the issues and to gather ideas from the staff. She reevaluated the process, and she and the executive team developed a plan to make the evaluations and the performance expectations consistent.

Jo feels it is important to manage expectations on change. The executives must let their staff know that they have been heard and that changes are in process, but that some changes will take many months or even years to be fully completed. There may be physical constraints on the change, such as the budget or the age of the buildings. Periodic reminders should be sent to staff members to inform them of the work that is in progress.

When changes are made, it is important for management to relate the changes to the survey so that the staff members know that their opinion is heard and changes are being made because of their input.

The Staff Thoughts

As part of the review of the survey, my fellow BASSC participants created an informal questionnaire to ask the staff how they felt about the survey. Twenty-five employees at two locations volunteered to answer questions and give their thoughts about the annual employee survey.

The following four questions were asked:

- Overall, do you think the survey is useful?
- Do you think that you are valued as an employee here?
- Do you think that people tell the truth on the survey?
- Do you think the survey helps management to understand staff concerns?

Of the 25 responses, 19 employees agreed or strongly agreed that the survey was useful, 20 employees felt valued, 18 felt that their coworkers tell the truth, and 19 people felt that management understands staff concerns.

This may be a small unscientific questionnaire, but it can be used as a stepping stone to explore the staff feelings on the Employee Survey further. From the initial results, Sonoma County HSD is on the right track by using an annual employee survey to capture the level of its staff satisfaction.

With the response rates continuing to rise each year, and more importantly, with feedback ratings that are getting higher (so much so that the 2010 survey results indicated that all areas that were of concern are no longer a great concern), HSD can claim the use of the survey to measure and improve staff opinion is successful. Nevertheless, efforts should be continued to maintain the continuation of these opinions.

The Recommendations

Before the recommendation was finalized, other sources besides an employee survey for measuring staff satisfaction were researched. There are other methods used to determine if staff members are satisfied with their employer, but these methods don't provide the accuracy of a survey. One-on-one meetings between employers and employees is one method of determining if a staff member is satisfied; however, the disadvantage of this method is that it's only practical for very small groups. In addition, the employees would likely not feel free to express their opinions for fear it would be used against them. There would still have to be some type of method of gathering the staff concerns and drafting them into a higher-level overview so their concerns could be met. Another method of evaluation is to hold regular meetings between employees and management. An example would be an all-staff meeting; however, this type of forum usually leads to general talks as opposed to true concerns of staff. Then, there are suggestions boxes that are often useful; however, the suggestion box can also be viewed as a token effort by upper management as they wait for personnel to highlight a problem. Newsletters can also be a positive step; however, a newsletter is usually an informative one-way communication that does not allow staff to have the ability to discuss issues. Another method that can be used to measure employee satisfaction is to host meetings with small groups of employees and ask the survey questions verbally, but employees are more likely to give honest answers to a survey that they feel is anonymous. Depending on the culture of the company, any method can contribute information about employee satisfaction to managers and employees; however, valid and reliable employee surveys have been proven to produce the most accurate data to measure staff opinion.

After a thorough study of the Sonoma County HSD Employee Survey process, it is recommended that SSA implement a staff survey using the HSD 2010 staff survey as a model. Because SSA is going through a change in leadership, it will be extremely beneficial to use the survey as a tool to identify aspects that are typically measured by a staff survey such as:

- **Role-Clarity** Staff clearly understands their duties and their roles within the organization
- **Staff/Management Relations** Staff relationships with management are based on trust, cooperation, open communication, and staff belief that management is effective
- **Respect Staff** Staff are valued and feel valued by their co-workers and the organization
- **Communication Important** Information is communicated effectively, and staff believe they have a voice in the organization
- **Performance/Reward** Systems Staff performance is fairly evaluated, and they are adequately rewarded for their contributions
- **Career Development** Staff are provided with adequate training and development opportunities to improve their professional skills
- **Decision-Making/Coordination** Decision-making, delegation, and viewing the organization from different perspectives provides a rounded picture (Staffsurvey.com.au).

Given the large size of the agency, which consists of four divisions (Department of Aging and Adult Services—243 employees, Department of Family and Children's Services—624 employees, Agency Office—370 employees, and Department of Employment Benefits Services—1,337 employees) with a total of 2,564 employees, a pilot program should be used to limit the survey to the two smallest divisions in the agency. This will enable the SSA Information Systems (IS) staff to monitor the survey and grow comfortable with the analysis of the survey results and with the creation of reports before expanding it to the nearly twenty-six hundred employees in the agency.

In addition to using the small pilot, the agency should model the HSD 2010 staff survey questions. Because HSD has completed significant research in developing their employee survey over the years and it primarily uses Gallup questions, the survey can be considered a valid, reliable, and trusted product that would produce consistent results over time.

A detailed action plan is needed to implement the survey successfully. For starters, we recommend that the new director conduct a meeting with the key stakeholders in and around the agency, such as the labor organization, the executive staff, and the mid-managers in the divisions chosen to pilot the survey (DAAS and AO, the two smaller units in the agency). The director should discuss each phase of the survey, and the rationale of his/her decision to deploy the survey.

Promoting the survey is critical to obtain the desired response rate, as is discussing and maintaining the survey's anonymity. The management should meet with the staff to promote the survey and answer staff questions regarding the survey. Managers must make every effort to ensure that staff believe the survey is completely confidential and that staff should feel comfortable expressing their true opinion when answering the questions because the results are anonymous. For staff who do not feel comfortable completing an online survey, a hard copy should be made available.

The pilot should take approximately 300 hours from start to finish, which includes time for the following tasks to be completed: IS to design the survey; the director, the executive staff, and the labor organizations to review the survey for clarity; division directors and mid-managers to promote the survey; the staff to complete the survey; IS to monitor the survey, analyze the results and compile a final report within a three month time period; and finally, the executive team to create an action plan using the results and to identify the main themes to address staff concern.

To obtain trend data, the same or similar survey questions should be used each subsequent year. This will give the agency an opportunity to track the movement of staff opinion. As staff are questioned and their voices are heard, changes can be made to improve working conditions and to address their concerns. The pilot should be expanded agency-wide, after the data has been tracked for two years.

An employee survey conducted on a regular basis represents a pro-active management initiative to consult with the whole workforce on various issues. There are many elements that are involved in providing an employee with job satisfaction, from the working environment and organizational philosophy, to the benefit package a company offers. To continue to provide a satisfactory work environment in a constantly changing culture, it is essential to measure staff opinion, improve staff satisfaction by properly addressing concerns, and continue efforts to maintain a high level of staff satisfaction.

The employee survey, when used purposefully, can become a useful tool for the director and executive team for creating a working environment that will result in a more satisfied staff, more efficient work, and a high quality of services for the residents of Santa Clara County.

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