

Promoting Organizational Communication with a Staff Survey

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Staff surveys are a powerful tool for improving organizational communication. Employee surveys provide staff with a venue to appraise their needs, perceptions, ideas, and suggestions within the organization. Surveys also communicate a nonverbal cue between a worker and an organization: upon collection of the survey results, the organization is bound to make a legitimate effort to explain and respond to the findings. If it does not, the worker loses confidence in the organization.

Sonoma County Human Services Department instituted an annual all-employee survey that evaluates staff opinions in relationship to the organization. Not only does their survey methodology respond to staff concerns, but it also promotes worker confidence and helps to establish a culture of active reciprocal communication.

The purpose of this case study was to research methods for improving organizational communication using the all staff survey and to observe if the recession played a role in the level of employee confidence in the organization.

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Improving organizational communication with staff is one of the core operating principles that both San Francisco Human Services Agency (SF-HSA) and Sonoma County Human Services Department (Sonoma-HSD) share. Both counties recognize the importance of having open and honest dialogue between staff and organization. A common social research application that many human services agencies use to improve interactive communication between the organization and its workforce is an employee survey.

Sonoma County Human Services Department instituted an annual all-employee survey that evaluates staff opinions in relationship to the organization. After executive management reviewed the survey results, several areas of staff concern were identified. These areas were prioritized with improvement plans in order to improve HSD staff confidence in the organization.

When organizations administer and respond to staff surveys with outcome-based strategies to improve the agency, they:

- Enable employees to report on their working experience in the agency
- Help to identify, qualify and quantify staff's concerns
- Provide a means to communicate and manage informational flow within the agency

Organizations know that more than a single communication style is needed to bring a large group of employees to a point of real understanding, particularly in a bad economy. Thus, internal communication needs to be simple, concrete, and repetitive.

The purpose of this case study is to research methods for improving organizational communication using an all-staff survey and to observe if the recession played has been a factor in shaping employee confidence in the organization.

Background of Interest in the Process (Home County: SF-HSA)

San Francisco Human Services Agency (HSA) continually strives to be a learning organization that is responsive to its employees. It encourages continuous organizational improvement by looking at how achieved outcomes meet the agency's goals; and it takes action when changes need to be made. One measure of this commitment can be seen in the organization's commitment to continually improve communication.

In 2000, in consultation with SolutionsWest, HSA examined the role of its organizational culture, outlining the importance of reviewing communication, allocating resources, and making decisions. Subsequently, the agency conducted a close-ended survey of a sample of 686 employees on the importance of communication and on the types of communication utilized within the agency. In March 2001, an organizational culture team was created to make a concentrated effort to improve communication and the distribution of information within the agency.

Under the guidance of the Strategic Planning Oversight Council, a communication workgroup was convened in 2003 that worked to improve the agency's ability to communicate effectively both ver-

tically and laterally within the organization. Consequently, HSA began increasing the range of communication methods used with employees, including creating a centralized e-mail system, offering a series of free informational brown bag lectures for staff to learn about agency infrastructure, personnel tests, and opportunities for staff to schedule and attend open-door meetings with deputy directors. In addition, HSA worked to develop an agency intranet site that stored program information centrally so it could be accessed by the entire organization.

In early 2008, San Francisco HSA implemented an all-staff online survey comprised of 35 questions on organizational communication, decision-making, and culture. The All-Staff Survey Report released in January 2009 was based on a 47% overall response rate to the online survey. The report found that employees continued to stress the need for better communication. Thus, a communication workgroup composed of two deputy directors and a cross-section of staff immediately examined reasons for the communication deficits; the workgroup also developed a strategic plan for communication that determined goal tasks, delegated individual or department responsibilities, and established timelines for implementation.

History of Development of Program and Process in Sonoma County

In 2006, Sonoma County Human Services Department (HSD) underwent a dramatic change in management with the introduction of seven new executive members and a new executive director. With the goal of evaluating the organization and developing operational priorities, the executive team required a systematic method for collecting information from their employees about their daily experience in the current work environment. Implementing an all-staff survey provided employees with a forum to communicate their concerns about the agency and enabled the executive team to inventory and diagnose the organization's strengths and weaknesses.

Employees were given the option of completing the survey online or in print. The survey consisted of

35 questions measured on a Likert scale to gauge the relative value of employee opinion on topics ranging from the quality of HSD services, communication, leadership, performance evaluation process, workload distribution, and personal fulfillment. Executive management reviewed the findings and developed responsive initiatives intended to provide the best possible work environment.

Upon the second anniversary of the employee survey, HSD identified the need to continue to collect empirical data about staff experiences, but also to incorporate meta-data analysis with the goal of facilitating decision-making for Sonoma County's executive management on how to develop organizational outcome strategies. In response, the Planning, Research, and Evaluation (PRE) division was created to extrapolate the findings and transform the data to action.

To ensure a representative employee pool was sampled, PRE developed a strategy to increase employee participation in the all-staff survey. A major deterrent for staff was the fear that their participation would not be confidential and anonymous. As PRE was the division responsible for collecting and analyzing information for the HSD, they were authorized to be the sole entity to view raw data. PRE, in conjunction with the Executive Director, e-mailed staff to reiterate that demographic information collected would be kept to be a bare minimum so that a respondent's identity could not be discovered. As a result, HSD has consistently yielded a participation rate exceeding 55 percent.

Staff Survey: An Opportunity for Organizational Decision Mapping

According to Michael Genest, the Director of the California Department of Finance, the year of 2009 marked a dramatic decline in general fund allocation as a result of the current international crisis and the state's persistent structural budget deficit. Sonoma County Human Services Department, like most agencies, was not unscathed. With the possibility of a reduction of services, resources, and job security, employees were anxious about the organization's

operational infrastructure. To alleviate and promote HSD employee confidence, PRE administered an open-ended survey where all staff members were asked to submit their ideas and suggestions on how to address the county's budget deficit.

The responses gathered were reviewed, then qualified, and quantified into recurrent themes of salaries and benefits, staff costs, organizational structure, operating expenses, client services and benefits, generic business practices, and funding strategies. The executive team, in conjunction with the PRE Division, decided to not only acknowledge and share the suggestions they collected, but to also use this opportunity to educate their staff on the rationale used for decision-making within the organization.

A Staff Budget Input Report was generated that includes summaries of the suggestions made, a response from the Executive Team (the entity responsible for decision-making), and a description of the feasibility of implementing the ideas. Proposed ideas and suggestions were responded to with one of the following possible rationales:

- The idea could be escalated for county-wide consideration; however, implementation may not be within the department's control.
- The idea is already implemented either within a program or throughout the agency.
- The idea is under consideration for implementation department-wide or within a section or division.
- The idea is not feasible at this time, and there are no current plans for implementation.

Additionally, the report included suggestions, samples for each suggestion, the rationale behind decisions, and HSD commentary clarifying underlying circumstances affecting decisions that staff may not have been aware of previously. For example, when looking at reducing operational expenses, there was a suggestion to consolidate all programs under one building or location, such as a campus. The report stated the idea was considered unfeasible at the time, but commentary was included sharing that they had explored the idea several years ago and found that it was financially difficult because it included locat-

ing a facility and coordinating or breaking all existing leases. At the time of the report, HSD was in the process of identifying how to effectively partner with other departments to provide services to clients who reside in other parts of the county.

Staff Survey and Implications for San Francisco Human Services Agency (SF-HSA)

During this economic recession, many counties have been forced to re-organize and downsize operations. Consequently, decisions are being strongly influenced by finances rather than being balanced with an organization's needs. As a result, operational practices and resources must adapt; however, if those changes are implemented without communication to staff about the underlying rationale, employee's confidence in the organization degrades. HSD's Staff Budget Survey Report provided employees with the opportunity to make suggestions about the environment they are a part of and incorporated them into the organization's decision-making process.

After successfully administering its most recent all-staff survey, San Francisco Human Services Agency began to work on improving its organizational communication by creating a coherent structure that disseminates consistent messages. Implementing organizational communication changes requires an acculturation period; in response, HSA has developed strategies to improve communication within a three-year timeline. This plan incorporates expanding and standardizing current practices, such as:

- Offering annual town hall meetings by executive management and program managers
- Offering communication trainings specifically catered to supervisors on best practices for improving communication within their units
- Reorganizing the agency's intranet page to make it easier to locate agency and program information
- Creating an intranet-based newsletter about the agency

Although staff surveys help organizations take a barometer of employee's experiences, it is premature to incorporate this practice at HSA until the agency

has had an opportunity to establish the initiatives mentioned above. In spite of this, considering the current economic environment, it may be advantageous for HSA to review and incorporate HSD's Staff Budget Survey as a part of its overall strategic plan for communication improvement.

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