

# Promoting Staff Satisfaction in the Sonoma County Human Services Department

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Through the years, social service agencies have gone through tremendous changes and recognized that through shrinking financial resources and increasing workloads, there is also an increasing demand to provide a more efficient means of social service delivery. Every day, employees interact with consumers, and their attitudes and delivery of service speak volumes about an organization's mission and goals. Both Sonoma County Human Services Department (HSD) and San Francisco Human Services Agency (SF-HSA) executive teams and managers recognize the need for employee surveys as part of a larger strategic planning and review process. In Sonoma County, executive team members and managers want to ensure that employees have the resources and satisfaction necessary to meet the needs of the community, as well as articulate the desired organizational vision.

In 2007, the HSD executive team implemented a rigorous methodology to measure employee satisfaction and implemented interventions to address identified areas of concern. The purpose of this case study is to explore the design, analysis and reporting of the Sonoma County Human Services Department's satisfaction survey and the outcome of the continuing efforts of executive team members and managers to implement interventions following the staff satisfaction survey.

### **Findings**

The conclusions of this case study are that in the context of a strategic planning process, a well-planned and designed survey, along with effective management communications, assisted the agency in managing the change process, measuring the effectiveness of the changes, delivering messages to staff and gathering valuable feedback throughout the change

process and that together those efforts resulted in higher levels of job satisfaction. For Sonoma County HSD, assuring staff satisfaction means a workforce that is motivated, supported and equipped to ask the question: "How can we help?"

### **Recommendations for SF-HSA**

The findings of this case study are likely to enhance the SF-HSA attainment of its goal of using data and best practices to improve performance. It is recommended that the agency conducts a follow-up survey that would apply best practices in monitoring and evaluating the effects of organizational change that would include:

- Reviewing of survey questions or contents by the executive team in order to refine them in terms of characteristics of specific situation
- Comparing findings with other findings from the previous survey
- Monitoring and maximizing the response rates
- Presenting survey results immediately after survey analysis and discussion with the executive team and managers
- Implementing interventions that would assertively enhance communication across levels of staff
- Collaborating with Sonoma County HSD in learning and demonstrating innovative approaches to the development of suitable survey instrument. Such collaborative relationships would greatly enrich both agencies knowledge in the process

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## Introduction

In much of the research published on job satisfaction, the concept of staff satisfaction remains controversial and debatable. The word satisfaction is normally used in psychology to denote the state of being created when needs are fulfilled. From the late 1950s through the 1980s, job satisfaction was generally conceptualized as a pleasurable emotional state associated with one's job or an attainment of values that were comparable with one's needs (Locke 1969 and Cameron, 1973). Some researchers disputed this definition, since human needs vary from one person to another, and job characteristics that bring satisfaction to one may not elicit the same satisfaction to the next person. Yet given the massive output of literature and interest in job satisfaction, it is increasingly evident in this coherent body of research a link exists between job satisfaction and a variety of organizational needs and outcomes. The growing body of research supporting the tangible ways in which promoting staff satisfaction benefits an organization. These benefits include a reduction in complaints and grievances, decreased absenteeism, lower staff turnover and terminations and improved employee punctuality and worker morale.

Why measure staff satisfaction at all? It is important because knowing employees is critical to the success of any organization. Measuring job satisfaction in the context of strategic planning in local government agencies can be used to enhance government performance and accountability. Surveys that provide a thorough understanding of staff attitudes and perceptions are the first and essential step in developing strategies to assess and promote staff satisfaction.

Surveys can indicate the areas in which levels of satisfaction are high or low. A job satisfaction survey is useful in determining needs in the area of leadership, supervision and human relations.

For some staff members, a survey may serve as a safety valve, a chance to get things off their chests or as an emotional outlet. For others, the survey is interpreted as a concrete expression of the management's interest in their welfare.

The information collected in this case study is intended to explore the design, analysis and reporting of the Sonoma County Human Services Department's (HSD) satisfaction survey and the outcome of the continuing efforts of its executive team members and managers to implement interventions following a staff satisfaction survey.

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

Since 2000 the San Francisco Human Services Agency (SF-HSA) has undergone major changes in response to a variety of factors including welfare reform, the merging of two departments into one agency, new legislative mandates, and a significant downturn in local, state and national economy. The impact of these factors has resulted in changes to HSA's organizational structure and service community. The changes taking place in the agency were also in part due to shifts that were occurring in the city's demographics. These trends have had a significant impact on the agency's services. As a result of these shifts, the SF-HSA executive team reviewed the agency's performance and direction and took initial steps to update the agency's vision, mission, and strategic goals.

In addition, the agency's executive management team attempted to align strategic goals with performance measures and core values. To gauge performance in the context of these changes, the agency conducted a strategic review that consisted of four parts:

- 1 An intensive analysis of census and administrative data;
- 2 Key stakeholder interviews with leaders in other city departments and community-based organizations;
- 3 Focus groups with clients; and
- 4 A staff survey.

The SF-HSA 2008 staff survey was done in the context of evaluating the agency's performance and identifying challenges and strategies. The executive director's goal is for SF-HSA to become a "learning organization" that develops and analyzes information to learn lessons and improve its performance. In planning and designing the survey, the SF-HSA Planning Unit used the Gallup organization's research approach as a frame work for the survey. They also looked at other surveys from Sonoma and Napa Counties. The instrument was pilot-tested, and results from previous surveys were used as a baseline for the 2008 staff survey. In March 2008, the SF-HSA Planning Unit conducted an all-staff-survey. Respondents were asked questions related to work engagement, job satisfaction, organizational communication, decision-making and culture. Each of the 1,885 SF-HSA staff were directed, via e-mail, to an on-line survey, with a request to complete the survey within a week. A total of 871 staff completed the survey, a response rate of 46%. The survey findings established that SF-HSA is a learning organization that is innovative. Staff felt engaged with their work and were positive about job expectations, access to training, and opportunities for growth as well as willingness to continue working for the agency. Similarly, staff expressed areas of concern. In response to the survey findings and strategic review, the SF-HSA executive team will be convening workgroups to develop specific initial recommendations for improvements in organizational culture, workplace safety, commu-

nication and strategies for working with other partners. Their work will be incorporated into a strategic plan that will assign responsibility for specific objectives and action steps.

### **History of the Development of the Program and Process in Sonoma County**

In October 2006, the Sonoma County Human Services Department (HSD) executive team underwent a major transition. Seven of the nine executive members, including the director and assistant director, changed in a very short period. The executive team made sweeping strategic changes that would not only create a new organizational culture but also refine the organizational vision in order to best meet the diverse needs of Sonoma County community. Some specific strategies used to accomplish this goal included: utilizing a strengths-based approach, refining the agency's mission, vision, goals and priorities; and measuring staff satisfaction.

In terms of measuring staff satisfaction, the new Sonoma County HSD director wanted to know: "How can we help?" It was important to her that the community of Sonoma County look to the agency as a resource. In order to achieve the HSD's vision of meeting the needs of the community through accessible and responsive services, the executive team wanted to ensure that Sonoma County line staff and supervisors have the resources and satisfaction needed to promote and achieve this vision.

In 2007, in order to collect baseline information on "how the staff is feeling," the executive team conducted an all-staff survey designed to solicit opinions about leadership, working relationships, communication, professional development, diversity, and quality of HSD services. The HSD used the Gallup Organization's research framework as the base for the survey and it was modeled on the 2007 Napa County Human Services staff survey. It was pilot tested with 25 HSD staff and later implemented with all HSD staff via an on-line survey from June 20 to July 13, 2007.

In the following year, the newly formed Planning, Research, and Evaluation (PRE) division implemented a rigorous methodology designed to measure

and promote staff satisfaction. The PRE director and manager, both of whom have expertise in conducting organizational surveys, designed a survey inventory that would cover several domains of work demands on the employees at Sonoma County HSD. The inventory of items were drawn from:

- looking at last year's questions;
- addressing bias and wording questions;
- engaging executive managers to discuss questions; and
- determining whether questions would be revised or new ones added.

Moreover, they addressed how response alternatives would be presented in order to enhance the quality of responses. They determined that format should incorporate mostly closed-ended with one open-ended question, asking respondents for their comments.

The implementation of the survey was administered through two modes: one on-line survey, using Survey Monkey and another with hard copy. Completed paper surveys were then converted to Survey Monkey. Furthermore, prior to survey administration, the PRE survey team added these important factors: an introduction to the survey; assurance of anonymity and confidentiality, and monitoring the response rate. The Sonoma County HSD director introduced the survey by sending out electronic message to all HSD staff, supervisors and managers. Timing was considered in ensuring that all potential respondents could be contacted. The PRE survey team explained that HSD's Human Resource Department had been consulted to determine the denominator or the total number of possible respondents during the survey period. The PRE director took steps in addressing distrust of anonymity and confidentiality by informing respondents that the information they provided would be clustered with other responses and would not be associated with any single staff. In order to maximize response rate, a follow-up e-mail from the HSD director was sent out to all staff. They explained that a low response rate would undermine confidence in the results of the study. From June 2nd to 13th, 2008, a total of 580 Sonoma County

HSD staff, out of 666, completed the survey, thereby producing a 72% response rate, which is considered excellent.

The PRE survey team analyzed the data and interpreted the results. A descriptive analysis was done to determine the number of percentages of people who chose each response for each item. The PRE survey team recognized that the importance of handling negative survey information that surfaced in answers to the open-ended question. They acknowledged that "it is human nature" to be inherently drawn to negative comments and express intense emotions. Therefore, in analyzing and interpreting narratives from the open-ended question, the survey team developed a system for categorizing the information and formatted the comments to topics that were consistent with the closed-ended questions and themes expressed in each comment.

The PRE survey team presented findings to maximize comprehension. In designing both oral and written presentations, the PRE survey team emphasized the importance of "telling a story" to present the facts and facilitate comprehension of the findings. The PRE manager cited Edward Tufte's book, *Beautiful Evidence*, where the author demonstrated the importance of good design when communicating information and study results. He explained that an effective visual presentation should not be "busy" and should be able to communicate information directly, quickly, and also "connect" with the audience. In flipping through pages of the 2007 and 2008 staff surveys, it is evident that aforementioned factors were integrated in communicating the survey results. Even though the survey contained vast information, the write-up of the results transitions through different sections were smooth and easy to follow. The results were presented with easy-to-read fonts, colored charts and graphs, pictures of HSD staff who participated in the survey as well as a picture of the director and names of the executive team who provided initial response. The PRE manager confirmed the importance of preserving the integrity of the information gathered. He explained, "The pictures of HSD staff communicated the core message of the survey;

when we asked the staff how they feel about their job, this is what they told us.”

### Promoting Satisfaction Survey Outcomes

The implementation of Sonoma County HSD staff satisfaction survey appeared to be most effective when the results were integrated into a larger context, such as responding to changes, refining and committing to a new vision, mission, goals and priorities, assertively working to improve conditions. Additionally, Sonoma County was successful in augmenting the results of the initial survey with other survey techniques.

Linking survey results to actions resulted in this implementation of numerous interventions. After sharing the 2007 results with HSD staff, the following initial responses were implemented: a drill down survey for follow-up was conducted; new committees established, and a follow-up all-staff meeting convened. Some of the activities that resulted from staff satisfaction survey are:

- Flexible work arrangements;
- Flexible work benefits;
- Opportunities for training and professional growth;
- Opportunities for staff to provide input through individual and group meetings;
- Opportunities for staff to use talents and skills;
- Opportunities to take responsibility and direct one's work through participation in workgroups and committees that focused on improving workload distribution, leadership development, performance evaluation and safety;
- Opportunities to promote health and stress reduction.

Furthermore, the data obtained from the follow-up survey were used to monitor the results of major interventions as well as used to refine interventions. The 2008 survey results indicated that there were improvements in the areas of safety and employee input. Efforts were also made to continue making improvements in workload management, performance evaluations and planning changes.

### Implications for SF-HSA and Conclusion

Now more than before, it is crucial to conduct a follow-up staff satisfaction survey in order to gather additional information on employee needs, attitudes, morale, motivation and information about work duties. Additionally, this will serve to improve communication and evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed plan of actions following the 2008 SF-HSA all-staff survey. However, this topic should be discussed by the SF-HSA executive team members and managers in order to assess the agency's inclination to implement a survey designed to promote staff satisfaction.. It is important to review concerns and questions when developing a follow-up survey that focuses on promoting staff satisfaction, given that the existing body of research has differing opinions as to what job satisfaction “is”. Moreover, given the current financial crisis, the SF-HSA executive team and managers may have concerns regarding the timing of a follow-up survey in terms of other factors, such as reduction in workforce, increased staff turnover, increased workload and shrinking resources, all of which may impact staff satisfaction. However, as demonstrated by Sonoma County HSD, a staff satisfaction survey can be a valuable tool to improve communication between various levels of staff by establishing a communication link between employees and managers as well as between managers and the executive team. One Sonoma HSD Division director explained that it is important to create a culture that is responsive to staff concerns by establishing a number of ways that would promote open and two-way communication channels between management and staff.

The findings of this case study are likely to help the SF-HSA fulfill its mission by applying best practices to monitoring and evaluating the effects of organizational change. Specific approaches that are likely to enhance a follow-up survey are:

- Reviewing survey questions or contents by the executive team in order to refine them in terms of characteristics of specific situation
- Comparing findings with other findings from the previous survey
- Monitoring and maximizing the response rates

- Presenting survey results immediately after survey analysis and discussion with the executive team and managers

Moreover, although it is important to design an instrument that is specific to its setting, the instrument designed by the Sonoma County HSD can be applied to SF-HSA setting, since both counties have almost identical departments integrated in to their respective agencies. Both agencies can collaborate in learning and demonstrating innovative approaches to the development of a suitable survey instrument. Such collaborative relationships would greatly enrich both agencies' knowledge in the process.

Another consideration not often addressed is cost. Direct labor and supply costs in the development, administration, analysis and presentation phases of the survey process are already in existence. More importantly, the SF-HSA Planning Unit has personnel with expertise in survey instrument development, sampling and analysis. Given the potential benefits of a well-crafted satisfaction survey (e.g., decreased turnover, reduced absenteeism, and improved morale), these administrative costs are relatively minimal.

As previously mentioned, the implementation of the Sonoma County HSD job satisfaction survey appeared to be most effective when the results of the staff survey were integrated into a larger context and responded to change. The impact of HSD's orientation to promoting staff satisfaction and creating and promoting a vision has been evident throughout the organization. This case study finds that in the context of a strategic planning process, a well-planned and designed survey, along with effective management communication, assisted the agency in managing the change process, measuring the effectiveness of the changes, delivering messages to staff, and gathering valuable feedback throughout the change process that resulted in higher levels of job satisfaction. The end results ultimately connected staff, facilitated information sharing and improved abilities to engage in complex and creative problem-solving. From the beginning, the PRE director explained that the goal was promoting staff satisfaction; therefore,

this was taken into account when designing and implementing the staff satisfaction survey. Meeting the needs of the staff is the prerequisite to meeting and satisfying the needs of a consumer. For the Sonoma County HSD, achieving a goal of staff satisfaction requires a work force that is motivated, supported and equipped to ask the question, "How can we help?"

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