

Sonoma County Human Services Department's Employee Survey: Implications for the Alameda County Social Services Agency

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study outlines the implementation and success of Sonoma County Human Services Department's Employee Survey, including its background, history, and results. Further, this case study recommends that Alameda County Social Services Agency also consider conducting an employee survey.

Employee surveys improve employee engagement, increase communication, and allow organizations to gain a deeper understanding of their employees' needs. Sonoma County Human Services Department has proven that employee surveys are a key for success.

In this report, I will share the tools and methodology used in Sonoma County Human Services Department's survey. Additionally, I will explore the analysis, results, and subsequent actions from three of its surveys that were conducted in 2007, 2008 and 2009. I will also describe plans to conduct the annual Employee Survey in the summer of 2010.

Sonoma County HSD has successfully instituted a variety of other surveys that have helped facilitate

communication and engage its workforce in various aspects of the organization's needs. Jo Weber, Sonoma County HSD Director, has made a conscientious effort to communicate with her employees on a regular basis. This promotes the department's goal of wanting staff to feel valued, safe, and happy. This was a major finding from the surveys administered in Sonoma County. The annual Employee Survey measures how well the Department is meeting its goals, and it helps promote their values of integrity, teamwork and leadership. The annual Employee Survey also measures the HSD staff's perceptions of how they make a difference in the lives of the people they serve.

Engaging the employees of Alameda County Social Services Agency (SSA) in an employee survey would solicit feedback, help employees feel valued, and demonstrate that employees' opinions matter. The SSA would benefit from an employee survey because the survey would measure improvements in levels of productivity; therefore, the commitment needed to promote the agency's mission could be achieved.

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Introduction

Why do we use surveys? What do surveys tell us? How can surveys help an organization? How will an employee survey conducted in the Alameda County Social Services Agency help the agency achieve its core values and mission? These are the questions I will attempt to answer in this case study.

Employee surveys provide excellent feedback on an employee's lifecycle, and they can be used as the foundation for organizational change and ongoing success. Employee surveys provide agencies with the ability to accurately measure employee opinions, engagement, behaviors, and organizational values in order to improve business outcomes. Measurement improves performance. An employee survey is also a way to gain a deeper understanding of employee needs across an organization; it allows management to respond appropriately and further establish the organization as a great place to work. Some employees may be reluctant to participate and wary of how the survey will benefit them.

Employee surveys send a strong message of cooperation and collaboration, and act as a basis for promoting communication. It can help guide organizations in the right direction and allows employers to measure and understand the attitudes, opinions, motivation, and general satisfaction of their employees.

Employee satisfaction describes the extent to which employees are happy and content, and if their desires and needs are fulfilled at work. Many measures purport that employee satisfaction affects employee motivation, employee goals and achievements, and positive employee morale in the workplace.

Factors that contribute to employee satisfaction include treating employees with respect, providing regular employee recognition, and empowering em-

ployees. Employee surveys gauge employee satisfaction with areas such as management, understanding the agency's mission and vision, empowerment, teamwork, communication, and co-worker interactions.

Sonoma County Human Services Department has conducted employee surveys for the past three years in an effort to measure feedback, engage with its staff, and achieve the department's goal of making staff feel valued, safe, and happy. The annual employee surveys that have been conducted have helped the HSD Director and her executive team to identify areas where the agency can improve so it can meet its goal. Based on the identified areas for improvement and with the help of staff, action plans were developed to positively impact the greatest number of HSD employees.

History/Methodology

Sonoma County HSD is a medium-sized CalWIN county with a workforce of approximately 644 employees. With budget restraints and huge caseload growth, Sonoma County has not been without challenges. Jo Webber was appointed as the Director of Sonoma County Human Services Department in late 2006. She was interested in the perceptions of staff members. In alignment with HSD's mission and vision, Jo Webber and her executive team made the decision to create a staff satisfaction survey in early 2007. HSD's mission is to meet the needs of its community and empower its clients through accessible and responsive services, while protecting vulnerable children and adults and promoting maximum independence and wellbeing for individuals and families. The HSD survey was based on the employee survey model created in Napa County.

Several months of planning went into the development of the survey. Preparation activities included identifying the planning team, developing the survey questions, determining the demographics for the survey, and composing the first survey. The executive team was involved in the initial design phase of the survey. The survey reflects the department's mission statement. The HSD used survey tools from the Gallup® Institute, a global company that provides market research and consulting services, as the basis for its initial 12 questions. The remaining 27 questions were modeled after Napa County's Employee Survey. Survey Monkey,® an online tool, was utilized as the forum for the staff survey; a hard copy was provided for those who did not wish to use the on-line tool. After the survey was developed, the Director, Jo Webber, hired a Planning, Research and Evaluation Director, Marla Stuart. A Planning, Research and Evaluation Unit was created to carry out the survey, analyze the data, and deliver the results. This unit includes Roy Redlich, Program Development Manager, who I worked closely with in preparing this case study.

In the summer of 2007, the first survey consisting of 39 closed-ended questions was given to staff via the on-line Survey Monkey tool and as hard copy. The answer categories ranged from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*, with an option for *Neither Disagree or Agree* and an option for *No Answer*. The survey was divided into four domains: The Job, The Supervisor, The Division, and The Department. The survey also allowed staff to provide information about their demographics (e.g., the division they worked in, the building they worked in, the category of their position as manager, supervisor or staff, and job status of either permanent, extra-help or temporary). Staff had the ability to write in comments, and the comments were then clustered into topic areas (e.g., Leadership, Appreciations, Workload, Performance Evaluations, Benefits).

Staff were allowed to skip questions throughout the survey. However, the process did not allow participants to come back and complete any skipped questions once the survey was completed and submitted. The survey was submitted anonymously, and

employees had the ability to complete the survey from home, particularly if there was concern that responses could be tracked. The survey information was gathered and analyzed qualitatively using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). SPSS is the most powerful tool available for developing statistical analysis. The SPSS tool has the ability to provide annual results and comparisons. Further, it has the capability of comparing yearly results by division, building, job category, and by content analysis of comments. The comment questions are analyzed qualitatively using content analysis and coded back into SPSS for quantitative analysis.

The Planning, Research and Evaluation Division produced a draft statistical report that included graphs, and the outcome of the report was shared with the executive team. The report was subsequently provided to various divisions and staff. Based on the data that were gathered, action plans were developed by the executive team, the divisions, and focus groups to address the concerns and needs of employees and the agency.

The first surveys yielded a total department response rate of 57%. In *Research Methods for Social Work* by Allen Ruby and Earl Babbie (1993), the following rule of thumb about response rate is suggested: "A response rate of at least 50 percent is usually considered *adequate* for analysis and reporting. A response rate of at least 60 percent is *good*. And a response rate of 70 percent is *very good*." Therefore, the goal was to have 70% of the staff complete the survey.

Two subsequent staff surveys, one in 2008 and one in 2009, have been administered. The survey has been revised by the executive team: a few questions have been eliminated, some have been reworded. The 2009 survey was the same as 2008, with the addition of one question. The title of the survey was changed from Employee Satisfaction Survey to Employee Survey, as the survey is not necessarily about employee satisfaction but rather about employees' experiences. The executive team determined that they could not deliver results based on satisfaction. The first survey was more of a baseline. In 2008, there was a department response rate of 72%, ("*very good*" per SPSS).

In 2009, the department response rate was 69%, which is considered to be “good.” Although the response rate was slightly lower in 2009 than it had been 2008, it was an increase over the 2007 response rate. The responses and the data analysis showed that staff felt more satisfied as a result of the commitment of management. The results of the surveys have been used to make improvements requested by staff thereby making them feel valued.

Each year, the employee survey represents a sample of employees' opinions at a given point in time. The HSD Human Resources Division provided the number of employees that were available to take the survey during the two-week period and after the survey closed. Within a specified two-week period, the HSD employees who were surveyed included permanent and temporary employees, including supervisors and managers. The majority of the staff who completed the survey used the on-line tool, while others submitted a hard copy through the intra-office mail. Employees who were on leave for the entire two-week period were excluded. The executive team was also excluded from the survey, as they play an integral part in the planning and developing of the department's strategic plan.

Results

The results of the survey were prepared by the Planning, Research and Evaluation Division and were disclosed to staff within a three-month timeframe. The results have been displayed in several different manners, including: by department, division and building; broken down by the job, the supervisor, the division or the department; and according to percentage weights based on the surveyed questions. The results were also shown by the average ratings per year and by domain. Employees have had the opportunity to review the department results, as well as their individual division results. For confidentiality purposes, any unit or division that is composed of fewer than five people was not represented. The division director presented the results to each division through road shows that had question and answer sessions and through postings on their department's Intranet.

The survey also showed areas where improvement was needed. The executive team reviews the results and picks 3 to 5 department-wide areas each year that it will address. The various divisions also engage in the same process. In 2007, one of the areas in the survey showed that staff were dissatisfied with performance evaluations. As a result, a workgroup consisting of managers, supervisors and line staff was established because the executive team could not determine whether the dissatisfaction in that area was related to the verbal or written evaluation. The workgroup's efforts resulted in the development of a set of recommendations and timelines.

Safety was also identified as an area that staff were dissatisfied in. The feeling of safety in the work environment was addressed through various meetings within the different divisions. They spent approximately 1½ years working on this area and resulted in the appointment of a Safety Officer and the implementation of other various safety measures.

Another area of dissatisfaction revealed in the survey was the desire for opportunities for staff to provide input and for timely receipt of information. As a result, more e-mails and surveys have been sent out from the director, soliciting ideas on various subjects (e.g., the county budget). The director invites questions and generally responds to individual e-mails directly, unless the response necessitates the attention of the division director as well. The director exhibits a very “hands on” approach, displayed through such actions as sending out emails about the survey, checking-in throughout the process, providing feedback, and conducting “All Staff” meetings throughout the divisions at least twice per year. This is the expectation for the division directors, as well. In one of the divisions, the division director held 2 to 3 meetings following the survey, particularly around “Input”. A blog was developed on their division's intranet site to allow on-going communication.

Since the 2007 survey, there have been improvements in employee opinions on all three of the areas mentioned. In 2009, the report showed that 90% of the staff that took the survey believed that staff cared about the people they served, that the department

provided quality services, and that they made a difference in the lives of their customers.

The Employee Survey is administered every year as a way of checking-in and communicating the department's values.

Findings/Recommendations

To prepare employee survey instruments, the following steps should be considered:

- Identify a planning team that will determine what you want to know and what's important, and that will tie it to the agency's strategic plan, goals and mission.
- Determine who will conduct the survey and what the appropriate timeframe is to conduct it in.
- Conduct the survey with closed-ended questions that allow for confidentiality using a web-based survey site, such as Survey Monkey. Also provide the ability to conduct the survey in a hard-copy format.
- Complete the analysis within a three-month time period to allow time between surveys.
- Distribute the results to all staff members and allow for feedback.
- Use the results to create an action plan for identified interventions and measure the effectiveness of the action plan.

The cost of conducting an employee survey is reasonable, considering the benefits of the subsequent outcomes. For example, The Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) is priced at \$5,900 per license, with a maintenance fee of \$1,475 per year. Sonoma County has approximately five licenses. The Survey Monkey maintenance fee is \$30 per month. The Human Resources Department in the Alameda County Social Services Agency currently utilizes a software program called Prospera that has the ability to create surveys and survey questions; the program

could be used to assist and develop an appropriate employee survey.

Employee surveys are useful for helping to promote employee satisfaction, to evaluate employees' experiences, and to demonstrate a concern about employee issues and opinions. Employee surveys also serve as a key source of suggestions for cost-savings and process improvements that can better serve customers and increase efficiency and productivity during a time when improvements are needed. Sonoma County HSD has been successful in implementing its annual employee survey, which has assisted them in various aspects of their business. The employee survey fosters morale and communication, and it engages employees in efforts to create interventions.

I recommend implementing a carefully-structured employee survey in Alameda County Social Services Agency that focuses on the agency's mission and on staff perceptions of how well the agency is doing. Given the size of Alameda County SSA and its demographics, an employee survey is an efficient and effective way to solicit staff input and engage staff in efforts to achieve its mission and its goals.

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