

Enhancing Employee Engagement and Client Satisfaction and Outcomes **A Case Study of Sonoma County's Employee Survey**

MARY GREENHAM

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Workforce issues of crisis proportions, including high turnover and low morale, challenge human services agencies across the country and in California. Santa Cruz County is not immune to these workforce issues. Staff is the most important resource a human services agency has, the resource they have the most influence over, and the key factor in successful client outcomes. It is critical and necessary, therefore, to enhance staff engagement in their work. This case study will outline the process Sonoma County Human Services Department (HSD) has developed to identify the gaps between the workforce their agency has today, and the workforce the agency must have tomorrow to achieve long-term success. It also outlines how the knowledge generated thus far can benefit Santa Cruz County Human Services Department.

Sonoma County HSD produces an annual employee survey. Sonoma County HSD recognizes that the positive well-being of staff is not only in the staff's best interest, but also in the organization's and in the

community's. Their employee survey is a method of taking the pulse of the workforce and being able to distribute the results in a readable and understandable format. Plans are made and action is taken to increase staff satisfaction in the workplace based on an interpretation of the survey results. Initial results demonstrate that staff engagement and satisfaction is increasing as a result of this process. Research demonstrates that client satisfaction and outcomes will follow suit. Santa Cruz County HSD's mission is to improve outcomes for the community with the value of excellent service and practice by staff. An informal survey done by BASSC participants shows that the vast majority of staff at Sonoma County feel valued as employees and even more importantly, believe the employee survey is useful. With staff as the resource over which an organization may have the most influence, this case study recommends implementation of and outlines the steps for an annual survey process as a tool to achieve the mission and goals of Santa Cruz County HSD.

**Mary Greenham, Social Work Supervisor II,
Santa Cruz County Human Services Department**

Enhancing Employee Engagement and Client Satisfaction and Outcomes **A Case Study of Sonoma County's Employee Survey**

MARY GREENHAM

Introduction

There are many challenges posed by the current organizational context of human services practice. Many of these challenges are outside the control of management, such as when the federal or state government institutes far-reaching budget cuts; however, many of the external and internal forces that influence the organization context of work can be mediated. Human services agencies are only as good as the workforce that serves the community. Workforce issues of crisis proportions challenge human services agencies across the country and in California, including high turnover and low morale. Santa Cruz County is not immune to these workforce issues.

Managers and the board can devise strategies to improve organizational functioning, increase job retention and empower staff to do their work productively and successfully. Staff is the most important resource a human services agency has, the resource they have the most influence over, and the key factor in successful outcomes. It is critical and necessary, therefore, to enhance staff engagement in their work. This case study will outline the process Sonoma County Human Services Department (HSD) has developed to identify gaps between the workforce their agency has today and the workforce the agency must have tomorrow to achieve long term success. It also outlines how the knowledge generated thus far can benefit Santa Cruz County Human Services Department.

Santa Cruz County HSD's mission is to improve community outcomes by: protecting the vulnerable, promoting self-sufficiency, alleviating poverty, and improving quality of life; with the values of: compassion, integrity, partnerships, and effective practice on the part of staff. To that end, Santa Cruz County

Family and Children Services Division (FCS) has been working with social workers for close to two years now on areas such as casework philosophy, communication, perceptions, assumptions, feelings, and practice standards—all integral to staff satisfaction and engagement. This work began when a small group of social workers brought concerns to management, and it has grown to include quarterly work groups of social workers, supervisors, managers, union and staff development personnel, as well as in-person and SurveyMonkey polls of social work staff. Santa Cruz County FCS management is spending considerable time and resources to increase staff satisfaction and engagement. Can we find a way to do this work with workers across all work classes of the department, within all divisions? Is there a more effective way to go about achieving long-term success of our mission and meeting the needs of the organization?

Sonoma County Human Services Department is entering its fifth year of producing an annual employee survey. Jo Weber, the transformational director of Sonoma County HSD since 2006, brought forward the idea of the survey and utilized her influence to make it a tool that develops not only her management practices, but also those of her executive team. Sonoma County HSD is interested in the well-being of its employees and recognizes that the positive well-being of staff is not only in the staff's best interest, but also in that of the organization and the community. The Sonoma County HSD employee survey gauges perceptions and attitudes at a single point in time each year. It takes the pulse of the workforce and is able to distribute the results in a readable and understandable format. In addition, Jo Weber and the executive team make plans and take action to in-

crease their staff's satisfaction in the workplace based on interpretation of the survey results.

The Survey

Sonoma County HSD's first employee survey was taken in 2007. The initial survey was modeled after a Napa County employee survey that Jo Weber had the opportunity to review while at a lunch with other directors. Marla Stuart, director of Planning Research and Evaluation (PRE) for Sonoma County HSD, explained the philosophy behind the annual survey: the executive team cares to quantify how employees are feeling and thinking because the director, Jo Weber, does, and because they should. As a result, PRE evaluates the workforce annually with the survey instrument.

Initially, the survey was 39 questions in length. The survey was pared down to 23 questions in 2010.¹ Included in the 2010 version are the 12 employee survey questions Gallup validated and researched. The Gallup questions have been analyzed over several decades and are used in 114 countries in 41 languages. The questions have been shown to effectively measure employee engagement. The survey also includes demographic question, a comments section, and several questions retained from previous years to track trends. With the exception of the demographics and comment questions, the response choices use a 5-point Likert scale that ranges from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Sonoma County HSD is committed to a survey process that honors anonymity. The survey is distributed to employees for a two-week period in June or July of each year. It is available to complete online via SurveyMonkey at the office or at home. The survey is also made available in hard copy for folks to fill out and return via interoffice mail. Only three demographic questions are asked and they can be skipped, as can any question. All results are reported in aggregate. If a subgroup has less than five members, then that subgroup is not reported individually though its results would be included in the larger division

groupings. The comments section is analyzed using content analysis techniques to keep the responses anonymous. Comments are sorted into themes, and themes are reported rather than specific comments. In addition, only three employees (all in the PRE division) have access to individual responses.

Sonoma HSD aims for a 70% response rate to achieve the greatest statistical significance that the results accurately reflect the overall thoughts and feelings of employees. A response rate of 73% was achieved for the 2010 survey; this was the highest response rate yet. When a response rate of less than 50% is received on any question, the results are seen as inadequate and are not reported.

The survey responses are analyzed and interpreted by PRE division. Much work has been done to make the information gained from the survey available as soon as possible. In 2010, results and a draft report were available for the executive team three months after results were collected. The results were made available to the entire department one month later in a final report. The results, interpretations, plans and goals of management were distributed and discussed with employees on many levels: department-wide, division-wide, and within individual units. The employee survey engages all staff in problem-solving, renewal and redesign of their work environment.

Why Take An Annual Survey?

This survey is the vision of Jo Weber and directly informs her goals as director of Sonoma County HSD. This survey directly impacts Jo Weber's goal of ensuring staff feel valued, safe, and happy to work at HSD. The survey indirectly impacts the agency goals of clients feeling welcomed and getting help to meet their needs, and of the community looking to HSD as a resource and valuing human services. The driving force of this survey is Jo Weber's theoretical perspective on leadership: "know yourself." The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates is said to have said the unexamined life is not worth living. Certainly, the employee survey gives Jo Weber, the executive team, and all staff a chance to closely examine their roles,

¹ Appendix—2010 Sonoma County Employee Survey Questions.

responsibilities, successes and challenges at work. The survey is, in essence, a 360-degree evaluation. Jo Weber sees the survey as a way to ask oneself, "Who am I and what is important to me?" She believes it is very important to ask oneself this and that the more one asks the question, the more the answer becomes clear and provides focus. The survey is a tool for introspection and assessment to occur simultaneously on micro mezzo and macro levels. The process of the survey is creating positive change in Sonoma County.

Jo Weber is providing focus for her management team to ensure staff get what they need to be supported in doing human services work in the extremely challenging social, political and financial environment of today. The survey aids management in ensuring the tools and resources to do the work are provided. The survey promotes a positive work environment and happiness on the job. These are all factors that are known to affect job retention and recruitment (Champanoise 2006; Daft & Marcic 2004; Harter, Schmidt & Hayes 2002; Harter, Schmidt & Keyes 2002; Larkin 2005). Jo Weber believes that her job is to take care of the people under her and that her staff's job is to take care of the clients. When she is supporting her staff, they will be supporting their clients, who in turn, she assumes, will have better outcomes.

The research supports Jo Weber's employee survey to increase her staff's satisfaction and her belief that if she and the agency support staff, client outcomes will be better. Daft and Marcic (2004) suggest that in order to thrive within an increasingly complex environment, organizations must embrace both operational and transformational changes. The Sonoma County HSD employee survey is a way for staff to feel heard and valued. The problems that staff identify can be turned into possibilities through the response of management. Larkin (2005) states that positive work environments and a sense of personal power influence staff to carry out their work effectively. In addition, Harter, Schmidt and Keyes (2002) suggest that survey tools can be used to create meaningful change in the workplace; giving feed-

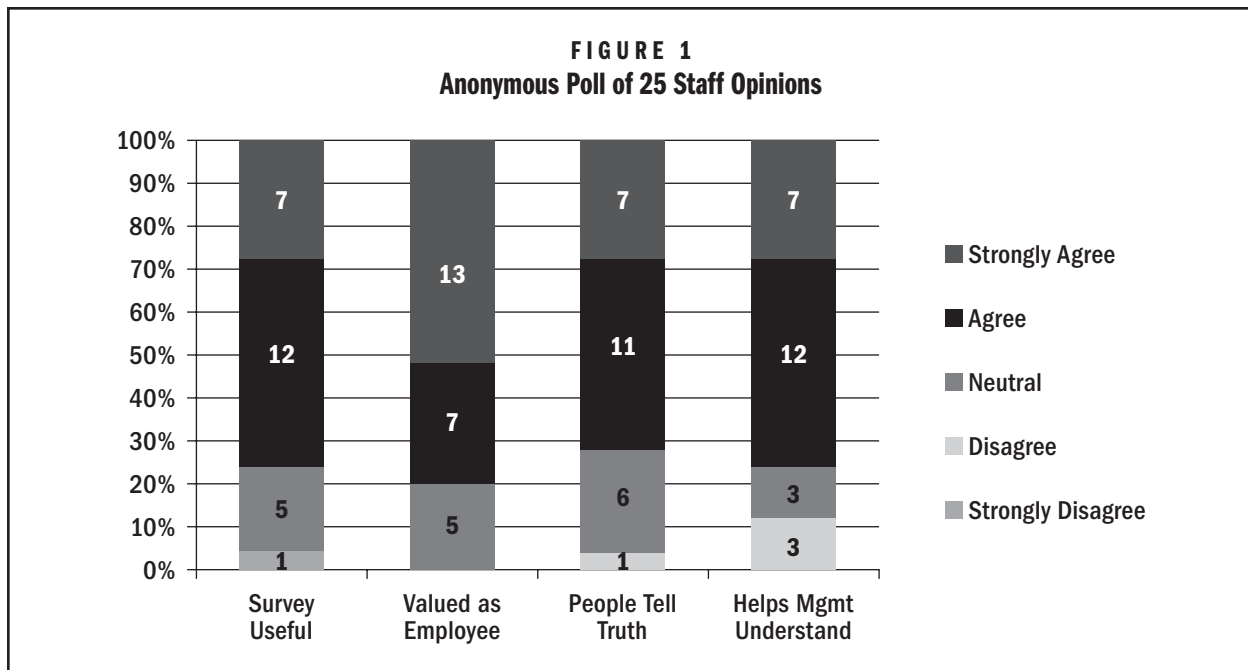
back on surveys relates to improvements in upward (direct report to supervisor) feedback scores.²

Harter, Schmidt and Keyes (2002) did a meta-analysis of the relationship between employee workplace perceptions and organizational outcomes. They concluded that the presence of positive workplace perceptions and feelings are associated with higher productivity and lower rates of turnover. Meta-analysis also revealed positive relationships between job satisfaction, particularly satisfaction with one's supervisor and one's work, and individual performance. Harter, Schmidt and Keyes (2002) suggest that more satisfied employees are more cooperative, are more helpful to their colleagues, are more punctual and time efficient, show up for more days of work, and stay with the company longer. The research also clearly links emotional well-being with work performance. Frederickson (1998) describes how positive emotions broaden the scope of attention, cognition and action, and build physical, intellectual and social resources. Positive emotions lead to more enduring thoughts and actions that then relate to successful outcomes within organizations.

Several studies (Yoo and Brooks 2005; Glisson & Hemmelgarn 1998; and Glisson & Green 2006) have studied the relationship between client outcomes and organizational variables such as workplace conditions (leadership and commitment) and worker responses (satisfaction and organization commitment). Their studies suggest that organizational climate has a direct impact on client outcomes. Harter, Schmidt and Hayes (2002) used meta-analysis to examine the relationship between employee satisfaction-engagement and organizational outcomes such as customer satisfaction, productivity, employee turnover and accident rates. They found generalizable relationships between employee satisfaction-engagement and organizational outcomes, implying that changes in management practices that increase employee satisfaction are likely to increase desired outcomes.

Helfrich states that the organizational context within which services are delivered is highly influ-

² This was a key area of positive change noted by Sonoma County HSD.



ential in determining the outcome of those services and that, by measuring and benchmarking important aspects of organizational performance (such as those indicated in the Gallup employee engagement survey), leaders can put into place specific strategies to improve practice and monitor results. This is what is occurring at Sonoma HSD.

Outcomes

The survey results give Jo Weber and the executive team an accurate understanding of what all staff are feeling and thinking, as opposed to just to a small but vocal group of outliers. This allows management to prioritize issues that are important to everyone. The survey and its process lets staff know that they are listened to. A list of suggestions is garnered from the survey results. Each suggestion is addressed, with an explanation of if it will or will not be implemented and why.

Changes that have been implemented as a result of employee input include: increased communication with all staff through e-mails and staff meetings; improved safety of lobbies; increased opportunities for staff to provide suggestions on issues (e.g. the budget); improved performance evaluation systems; and changes by individual managers and supervisors in

their divisions and units. The biggest impact, per Marla Stuart of PRE is staff reporting greater satisfaction in their relationship with their direct supervisor.

The Bay Area Social Services Consortium interns who studied the employee survey at Sonoma HSD took a small and anonymous poll of 25 staff from two offices. We had the opportunity to discuss how the survey was developed and analyzed with PRE, and to talk with executive management about their reasons for implementing the survey. This led to an interest in staff perceptions to see if they thought they were benefiting from the survey process. Four questions were asked to explore staff thoughts and feelings about the survey and to determine if the survey was achieving Jo Weber's goals. The questions were:

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

While not generalizable to HSD, the results are interesting. (See Figure 1.)

Jo Weber's goal is for staff to feel valued, happy and safe working at HSD. It appears significant that 75% of staff polled feel valued: over 50% strongly felt this way. Also, of those staff who do not feel valued, they did not feel devalued. In addition, the majority of staff polled reported they found the annual employee survey useful, believed people were telling the truth on that survey, and felt that it was helping management understand staff concerns. Staff stating they believe the truth is being told and that they are being understood indicates feelings of safety and value.

Recommendations for Santa Cruz County

Social work's priority has always been on practice in the context of the larger eco-system. This focus is critical in workforce research and change efforts, as the organizational and supervisory context influence staff satisfaction and engagement. As parallel process theory (and emerging research) predict, staff satisfaction and engagement influences client satisfaction and outcomes. Sonoma HSD uses their annual employee survey as a key part of significant system changes and department-wide improvements. A review of their results over the past 5 years reveals employee satisfaction and engagement is indeed measurably and significantly changing in a positive direction. The research indicates that client outcomes are likely to follow.³ Research in the health and human services fields demonstrates employee satisfaction has a direct positive effect on client satisfaction, and client satisfaction has a direct positive effect on compliance with treatment and services outcomes (Champnoise, 2006; Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998; Harter, Schmidt and Keyes 2002; Helfrich; Weisman & Nathanson 1985; Yoo 2002; Yoo & Brooks 2005).

Santa Cruz County could utilize the path that Sonoma County HSD has already mapped out to focus on staff engagement-satisfaction. Sonoma HSD has already developed a survey instrument with high validity and reliability through the use of the well-

researched Gallup employee engagement questions. The survey tool, SurveyMonkey, is already utilized by Santa Cruz. The following are the steps to implementation:

- Identify a planning and implementation team.
 - Santa Cruz County could utilize our Planning and Evaluation Division and Staff Development.
 - The team could network with Sonoma County PRE and utilize the Gallup 12 questions, as well as look into issues that are important to the Santa Cruz County HSD workforce.
- Identify who will conduct, analyze and interpret the survey.
 - Santa Cruz County Planning and Evaluation Division's Madeline Noya and Sherra Clinton, as well as other members of that team, have the ability and knowledge to accomplish these tasks.
- Champion the commitment. This is unlikely to be a successful endeavor or get buy-in from staff without commitment from the topmost level of the organization. The executive team and management would need to champion a commitment to an annual employee survey, to the desire to get employee feedback and increase multilevel communication, and to not only hear employee perceptions but to make changes as a result. This would be done through a multitude of media, including e-mails, meetings, and from person to person.
- Analyze results quickly. A three-month time period from survey to results is recommended. Ensure the results are available to all staff. Utilize the results to create action plans that identify interventions and measure effectiveness.
- Three months from survey, give the first reports to the executive team, who will then decide upon actions to implement immediately.
- Four months from survey, disseminate reports to all staff. These should include actions that will be taken by the executive team and reasons why certain areas are or are not being addressed.
 - Results should be disseminated by the director in department meetings and by e-mail, by

³ This research has not yet been done with Sonoma HSD's data.

the division director in division meetings, by managers in staff meetings, and by supervisors in unit meetings.

- Results and Report should be available online for all staff to read and to print out
- Santa Cruz County would benefit from committing to annual surveys for at least a three-year period to establish a baseline. It can then determine the amount of progress that is being made and ensure that the outcomes continue to warrant the survey process on an annual basis, as well as to make any necessary adjustments.

The workforce is the Human Services Department's most valuable resource, and it has the ability to effect the greatest positive change for the community the county serves. The cost of strengthening and renewing that resource via an employee engagement survey is quite reasonable. SurveyMonkey fees (about \$30 monthly) are already paid for and utilized by Santa Cruz County. The software used for analysis by Sonoma County is Statistical Package for Social Science. As mentioned previously, Santa Cruz County HSD Planning and Evaluation Division already has this software available and the knowledge to utilize it.

Although Santa Cruz County has been working with staff on some staff satisfaction and engagement issues, these tend to be from a small and vocal part of the workforce that may or may not be representative of the whole. This work is only targeting the satisfaction of one class of workers in one division of Santa

Cruz County HSD—and it is costing a lot of time and resources to look at organizational improvements for a very small section of the organization. It would be invaluable and cost-efficient to survey the workforce as a whole and quantify staff feelings, thoughts and perceptions. It would be even more worthwhile to survey staff on an annual basis and enter into a mutual process of organizational assessment that would serve not only to improve employee's satisfaction with their work, retention, productivity and the organizational environment, but also to improve client satisfaction and outcomes. It is, after all, our ultimate mission.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Roy Redlich from Sonoma County. His assistance in coordinating, setting and experiencing the BASSC internship was integral to my learning. In addition, I appreciate the time Marla Stuart and Jo Weber from Sonoma County took to share their knowledge. Sonoma County was a gracious host, and I appreciate the time I spent there. In addition, Mike Austin from UC Berkeley offered invaluable editing assistance. I also want to thank Evelyn Hengeveld-Bidmon, my home county liason; my manager, Mark Holguin; my Watsonville supervisor team of Herceg and Davis; the Forever Families Team; and the rest of FCS management—*your* support made this learning opportunity possible. I am grateful.

References

- Champnoise, C. (2006). Workforce Planning Overview. Cornerstones for Kids, CPS Human Resources. http://portal.cornerstones4kids.org/stuff/contentmgr/files/4aa62deb848823c512aa24a377522827/folder/wfp_overview_report_final.pdf.
- Daft, R. L. & Marcic, D. (2004). *Understanding Management* (4th ed.). Mason, OH: Thomson/South-Western.
- Fredrickson, B. L. (1998). What good are positive emotions? *Review of General Psychology*, 2(3), 300–319.
- Gibelman, M. & Furman, R. (2008) *Navigating Human Service Organizations* (2nd ed.) Chicago, IL: Lyceum Books, Inc.
- Glisson, C., & Green, P. (2006). The effects of organizational culture and climate on the access to mental health care in child welfare and juvenile justice systems. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 33(4), 433–448.
- Glisson, C., & Hemmelgarn, A. (1998). The effects of organizational climate and interorganizational coordination on the quality and outcomes of children's service systems. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 22(5), 401–421.
- Harter, J. K., Schmidt, F.L., & Hayes, T. L. (2002). Business-unit-level relationship between employee satisfaction, employee engagement, and business outcomes: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87(2), 268–279.
- Harter J. K. , Schmidt F. L. and Keyes C.L. (2002) Well-being in the workplace and its relationship to business outcomes: A review of the Gallup Studies. In .C.L. Keyes & J. Haidt (Eds.) *Flourishing: The Positive Person and the Good Life* (pp. 205–224). Washington D.C.:American Psychological Association.
- Helfrich, W. Does the organization matter? An examination of the link between organizational management practices and client outcomes. Federation of Child and Family Services, Research to Practice Network, <http://www.fcscbc.ca/uploads/DoesOrgMatter.pdf>.
- Kadushin, A. (2002) *Supervision in Social Work* (4th ed.) New York: Columbia University Press.
- Larkin, H. (2005) Integral management and the effective human service organization. *AQAL Journal of Integral Theory and Practice*, Fall 2005, Vol. 1, No. 3.
- Weisman, C. S. & Nathanson, C. A. (1985) Professional satisfaction and client outcomes: A comparative analysis. *Medical Care*, Vol. 23, No. 10.
- Yoo, J. (2002). The relationship between organizational variables and client outcomes: A case study in child welfare. *Administration in Social Work*, 26(2), 39–61.
- Yoo, J., & Brooks, D. (2005). The role of organizational variables in predicting service effectiveness: An analysis of a multilevel model. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 15(4), 267–277.

APPENDIX

2010 Sonoma County Employee Survey Questions

- 1 I know what is expected of me at work.
- 2 I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right.
- 3 At work I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.
- 4 In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work.
- 5 My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person.
- 6 There is someone at work who encourages my development.
- 7 In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress.
- 8 In the last year, I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow.
- 9 At work, my opinions seem to count.
- 10 I have a best friend at work.
- 11 I feel physically safe at work.
- 12 Managers and supervisors work well with employees of different backgrounds.
- 13 Staff work well with clients of different backgrounds.
- 14 In my Division, management understands that the current workload is difficult.
- 15 I have a high level of confidence in the managers of my division.
- 16 I have a high level of confidence in the HSD Director (Jo Weber).
- 17 My fellow employees are committed to doing quality work.
- 18 The mission or purpose of the Human Services Department makes me feel my job is important.
- 19 I made a difference in the lives of my clients/ customers.
- 20 For which division do you work?
- 21 In what building do you work?
- 22 What is the category of your position?
- 23 Are there any other thoughts that you want to share with the Executive Team?