

The Intangibles of Success **Measuring Staff Satisfaction**

GREGORY KATS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Sonoma County Human Services Department (SCHSD) and the San Francisco Human Services Agency (SFHSA) share a common focus on promoting personal and professional satisfaction among their staff. Both organizations seek to create an atmosphere for staff where they feel valued and engaged in their jobs.

To this end, SCHSD has developed a sophisticated survey methodology to measure staff satisfaction with their immediate working environment and with their organization as a whole. The key to effectively utilizing the employee survey process lies in establishing a clear line of communication between staff and management. Through the survey process, the agency solicits staff input and feedback regarding

organizational issues. In response, management is held accountable for responding to the issues raised through the survey in an appropriate and timely manner. This process positively impacts overall job satisfaction among SCHSD employees and benefits the agency by improving morale and increasing staff investment in the success of the agency.

This case study evaluates how SCHSD uses a staff satisfaction survey to measure and track staff satisfaction rates. It examines the outcomes that result from this process and identifies the key issues associated with this endeavor. This study also identifies some of the issues that SFHSA would need to consider before applying elements of this process in the City and County of San Francisco.

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Introduction: A Tale of Two Counties

From the Sonoma County Human Services Department's Guiding Principles:

Value Staff—Pay attention to morale, safety, communication, inclusion, leadership, professional development and innovation.

From the San Francisco Human Services Agency's Mission, Vision & Core Values Statement:

Partnership—We work as partners with co-workers, community and public agencies, individuals and families.

Continuous improvement—We do our best, evaluate our outcomes and recognize change and innovation as a means to achieve excellence.

These admirable goals demonstrate that the Sonoma County Human Services Department (SCHSD) and the San Francisco Human Services Agency (SFHSA) share a common focus on promoting personal and professional satisfaction among their staff. By communicating with staff and creating an atmosphere where staff feel valued and invested in their jobs, the two agencies seek to increase staff morale and engagement with the ultimate goal of improving agency outcomes, from staff retention to job safety to service delivery.

In this regard, staff surveys can be an effective tool for assessing and tracking staff satisfaction data and for using that data to initiate organizational improvements. The Sonoma County Human Services Department utilizes a comprehensive and sophisticated survey methodology to measure staff satisfaction with their immediate working environment and with their organization as a whole.

This research paper evaluates how the SCHSD uses their employee survey process to measure and promote those goals, and it examines the outcomes and key issues associated with this survey process. This paper also identifies some issues that the SFHSA would need to consider before applying elements of this process in the City and County of San Francisco.

Overview of the Sonoma County Staff Satisfaction Process

BACKGROUND

With the acquisition of their new Executive Director Jo Weber and seven new Executive Team members in 2006, the Sonoma County Human Services Department underwent a dramatic shift in its organizational culture and structure. Among the unique perspectives that Ms. Weber brought to the agency was the adoption of her own personal "Director's Goals" as a subset of the agency's greater Guiding Principles. Among the director's goals was Ms. Weber's intention to ensure that "staff feel valued, safe and are happy to work at HSD" as part of the agency's broader mission statement.

In order to re-evaluate their organizational priorities and craft new operational processes that would facilitate the advancement of those priorities, SCHSD decided to survey their staff to collect information regarding their daily experience within HSD. The survey was designed to identify both areas of concern and areas where there is a high level of satisfaction, with the goal of establishing a methodology for internally benchmarking survey outputs on an annual basis. This would allow the agency to gauge areas of concern and identify best practices that could be replicated throughout the agency. Ultimately, this

process was designed to enable the Executive Team to inventory and assess the organization's strengths and weaknesses so they could promote continuous improvement throughout the organization.

The specific goals of the employee survey, as communicated to SCHSD staff, were to:

- Gather input from employees.
- Serve as a regular check-in regarding staff opinions.
- Give all employees an opportunity to provide input and feedback about the same issues.
- Demonstrate the Executive Team's commitment to the Director's Goals and SCHSD Guiding Principles.
- Compare opinions to previous year(s) and measure progress.
- Use employee input to inform department-wide and division-specific decisions.

METHODOLOGY

The original version of the SCHSD Employee Survey was modeled after a survey utilized by Napa County and was adapted with additional input from the agency's managers and line staff. In 2010 the SCHSD Division of Planning, Research and Evaluation (PRE), in conjunction with the Executive Team, revised the survey to consist of 23 questions. This includes 12 questions developed by the Gallup Organization, which have been used in 114 countries in 41 different languages and have been shown to effectively measure employee engagement.

The survey is administered on an annual basis and uses five answer choices ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree," with options for "Neither Agree or Disagree" and "No Answer." The survey includes three closed-ended employee demographic questions and one opportunity for employees to write comments.

PRE utilizes an analytical tool called the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to conduct extensive quantitative analysis of the survey data, to identify significant trends, and to measure the extent of data variances over time. This allows PRE to accurately assess whether changes in staff satisfac-

tion rates are significant or if they are the product of marginal variations in response rates or feedback. This enables the organization to set accurate priorities and identify salient trends. When the data is reported to management and staff, it is grouped in a variety of categories and sorted by division, position and building, as well as in groupings that compare the progression of the data over time.

The comment question is analyzed qualitatively, using content analysis. The content analysis process first consists of coding and tabulating the occurrence of individual themes from the written answers provided by the respondents. Then, the coded feedback is entered into SPSS for quantitative analysis. To accomplish the coding process, the comments are typed, printed, and cut into separate slips of paper, one for each comment. The slips are read and separated into stacks of similar comments. These stacks are sorted and re-sorted until the two PRE analysts conducting the process agree that each stack represents a unique theme. These themes are cross-referenced to the survey questions, to provide more context and detail regarding the answers to the survey questions, and are presented in thematically-structured categories.

CONCERNS

One of the most persistent concerns that SCHSD staff had regarding the survey was the fear that their responses would not remain confidential or anonymous. To ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents, the SCHSD takes the following steps:

- No staff identifiers are entered into the survey tool. The surveys are completely anonymous.
- Employees are invited to complete the survey using SurveyMonkey, an online survey tool. While this site can document the IP address of the person completing the survey, SCHSD Internet activity is randomly directed through nine Internet portals, each with its own address: it would be impossible to trace an individual respondent who fills out a particular survey.
- Employees who are not comfortable using SurveyMonkey are invited to complete the survey man-

ually and return it directly to the agency's Executive Director, Jo Weber.

- The survey includes only three demographic questions. All of the questions on the survey are optional and if an employee is concerned about the demographic questions, he/she can skip them.
- Individual answers to survey questions are not reported. All of the answers to the survey are reported using aggregate data. If a particular subgroup has less than five members, that subgroup is not reported.
- Only a few PRE employees have access to the individual survey responses.

Another key concern, especially for the Executive Team, was honesty. In order to maintain the integrity of the survey process and to yield accurate outputs, respondents must provide honest answers when they complete the survey and they must only fill out one survey per employee. While it is impossible to ensure honesty in a survey, PRE does screen the survey results for unlikely answer patterns. Thus far, they have not deleted any survey because it had unlikely answer patterns. Aside from that specific precaution, the agency must trust that their staff wants to provide honest and thoughtful input.

The Executive Team has also chosen not to compare their survey results with those of other counties. Since every county's work environment and corporate culture is different and unique, this type of inter-agency benchmarking would not be particularly useful and may lead to misleading conclusions that do not account for environmental variances among otherwise comparable organizations. Consequently, the survey is exclusively intended to identify and respond to issues within SCHSD.

Employee Survey Findings and Outcomes

Since the SCHSD Employee Survey began in 2007, it has identified several key trends that the agency considers to be significant findings:

- A desire for increased communication within the agency, particularly related to informing staff and providing them with opportunities to contribute their input.

- A desire for improvements in the performance evaluation process.
- A desire for improvement of safety conditions.

Based on this feedback, the Executive Team has taken considerable steps to address these issues. In some of the buildings, the client lobby area and interview rooms have been remodeled to provide greater safety and accessibility for both staff and clients. The agency's performance evaluation process is undergoing procedural improvements to make it more meaningful and effective. Of particular improvement, communication within the agency has greatly increased as a result of the survey. The Executive Director and the rest of the Executive Team frequently communicate directly with their staff through e-mails and staff meetings, and even through the Executive Director's personal blog.

These concrete outcomes not only serve to boost morale, they are clearly beneficial to the agency's overall efficiency and effectiveness. These varied and important improvements to the agency's personnel, safety and communications processes were made possible as a result of the input that staff provided to management through the employee survey.

Conclusion: Recommendations for the San Francisco Human Services Agency

Would a large-scale and data-driven annual survey methodology, similar to that of SCHSD, aid SFHSA in further identifying and implementing solutions that promote increased staff satisfaction? Any county considering use of the same model and methodology as that of SCHSD should consider the following factors:

- 1 **Resources** In the current statewide budget situation, both fiscal and staff resources are highly utilized and at maximum capacity. To ensure that the issues identified through a highly-invested staff survey process are addressed in a timely and effective manner, SFHSA would need to have the necessary resources available and in place before implementing a large-scale Employee Survey process. It should be noted that SCHSD staff allocate approximately 275–300 hours per year exclusively to the survey process.

- 2 Planning** It would take an extensive amount of planning to ensure that a comprehensive employee survey process is approached in a strategic and thoughtful manner. SFHSA would need to allocate ample resources during the project-planning phase to ensure a smooth and efficient implementation process. Gaining buy-in from staff, management and their unions will be a crucial element of the planning process for this project. It will also be important to develop a clear set of goals and associated outcome measures for the survey process to determine if those goals are being met.
- 3 Expertise** One staffing resource that would prove indispensable in implementing a data-heavy and analytically-complex project, like this survey, is the technical expertise to compile and analyze the statistical data that is gathered. Without the available expertise to decipher and assess this information using a sophisticated analytical tool like SPSS, the time and effort invested in this project would not be worthwhile.
- 4 Commitment** Implementing this type of survey process inherently implies a commitment to staff that issues raised as a result of the survey will be carefully considered and adequately addressed by agency management. It also implies that agency management will be accountable for offering an appropriate and timely response to the information provided.
- 5 Climate** Timing is key when initiating this type of effort. The current budget climate may serve to skew the survey findings in a disproportionately negative direction, which may not reflect prevailing opinions among the majority of SFHSA staff during a more stable economic phase.
- 6 Start Small** An initial pilot targeting one HSA division would be preferable, before initiating this type of survey on a wider scale.

Acknowledgments

I would like to extend my appreciation and gratitude to the entire Sonoma County Human Services Department and especially to Jo Weber, Executive Director; Marla Stuart, PRE Division Director; and Roy Redlich, Program Development Manager of the Planning, Research, and Development Division. Finally, I would like to thank my fellow BASSC participants for making this a unique and inspiring opportunity for professional growth and learning.

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APPENDIX

BASSC Survey—The Survey of the Survey

The BASSC participants researching the Sonoma County HSD Employee Survey developed their own survey for the agency's staff, using a "small sample" format (25 questionnaires were completed). The BASSC survey posed a few basic questions to HSD staff regarding their opinions on the Employee Survey and their overall level of staff satisfaction (as indicated by how valued they felt as an agency employee).

BASSC Survey Questions and Results

(See Table A-1 and Figure A-1.)

Question A Overall do you think the survey is useful?

Question B Do you think you are valued as an employee here?

Question C Do you think people tell the truth on the survey?

Question D Do you think the survey helps management to understand staff concerns?

Rate of Agreement For questions A, C and D the response from the survey group indicates a rate of agreement ranging from 44% to 48 %. The satisfaction rate is even higher with Question B, which identifies overall staff satisfaction rather than focusing on staff feedback regarding the survey. In this category, the BASSC survey indicated strong agreement at a rate of 52 %.

Average Score The scores for each category indicate that, on average, the respondents agree with each of the four questions asked in the survey. As an overall indicator, this suggests a generally high level of staff satisfaction regarding the topics surveyed.

Survey Comments Five separate respondents to the BASSC survey also provided comments along with their answers to the four survey questions. Two out of twenty-five respondents (8%) provided comments indicating concern regarding the anonymity of the Employee Survey.

**TABLE A-1
BASSC Survey Results**

Answer Type	Score	Question A	%	Question B	%	Question C	%	Question D	%
Strongly Disagree	1	1	4	0	0	0	0	0	0
Disagree	2	0	0	0	0	1	4	3	12
Neither Disagree nor Agree	3	5	10	5	20	6	24	3	1
Agree	4	12	48	7	28	11	44	12	48
Strongly Agree	5	7	28	13	52	7	28	8	28
Average Score		3.96		4.32		3.96		3.92	

Total surveys completed: 25

**FIGURE A-1
BASSC Survey**

