

Feedback is a Gift: An Overview of Sonoma County's Employee Satisfaction Survey

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“What gets measured, gets managed,” are the infamous words shared by all counties that share the common goal of improving services for clients and having positive outcomes. In order to make this effort successful, they realize that staff is our most precious resource and we must find ways to show staff that we appreciate and value their time, talents and abilities by assuring that staff has the tools and resources they need to do their jobs effectively. One way to achieve this goal is to listen to what staff has to say and make the necessary changes.

This case study will provide an outline of how the Sonoma County Human Service Agency used a Staff Satisfaction Survey to do a needs assessment

on the needs of their line and supervisory staff and identify gaps in tools and resources needed to effectively serve their client population. The case study will focus on the vision that led to the creation of the survey, the development of the survey instrument, how the survey was distributed to staff, the analytical data, how the results of the survey were displayed and distributed, and a summary of the survey outcomes.

The case study will also suggest recommendations that Alameda County Social Services Agency could adopt by administering a Staff Satisfaction Survey. The study will also outline steps needed to achieve positive outcomes in using this instrument.

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Introduction

There is a similar theme in most social service mission statements that seems to ring out among the majority of directors and that is the need to provide quality services, promote self-sufficiency, economic well-being and improve outcomes. Although the mission, vision, and value statements may be worded differently, the ultimate goal is for clients to feel welcome and to be treated with customer service excellence while getting the help they need. However, none of the above can be accomplished without starting with our most valuable resource employees. Research has shown and few have disputed that “employees are the cornerstone of a strong, healthy company. Not only do they perform duties relating to the day to day operations of the business, but they also contribute to the overall success of your company. Therefore, maintaining a high level of employee morale is essential to ensuring the survival of your company” (Moultry-Belcher, 2011).

Jo Weber and Lori Jones are two directors from two different counties during two different time periods, who both realized early in their appointments as new directors that effective communication with staff was critical to their agency's success. They both realized that staff was a valuable resource and the best way to utilize them was to find creative ways to communicate with staff. The directors believed that by allowing staff to give feedback about how to make improvements within their respective agencies that in turn service outcomes would improve. No matter what position a person holds, if staff do not feel that the work they do and their contribution to the agency is valued, then morale becomes an issue.

Therefore, it is important that managers make a concerted effort to check in with staff about their feelings around their job, their management and agency. Peter Drucker said it best in his 1954 book, *The Practice of Management*: “What gets measured, gets managed.” By surveying staff, management will have an overall snapshot of the areas where better communication is needed in order to enhance staff satisfaction and raise the bar of excellence.

There is a considerable amount of well-established research that shows the importance of management's ongoing communication with line staff and how this ultimately equates to high rates of job satisfaction and increased morale which translates into enhanced performance and positive customer service outcomes (Soonhee, 2002; Perry, Mesch and Paarlberg, 2006). On the other hand, there is equally compelling data to support the effects of disengaged employees or those that don't feel valued by their managers. The Gallup Company provided the following statistics: Business units with many actively disengaged workers experience 31% to 51% more turnover than those with many engaged employees. Also, in a typical 10,000 person company, absenteeism from disengagement costs the business about 5,000 lost days, or \$600,000 annually (Gallup, 2008). The purpose of this case study is to explore how Sonoma County Human Services Department managed to implement a staff satisfaction survey over a period of four years and show how the results of the survey led the executive team to do an overhaul of their agency and implement programmatic changes that proved to be successful.

History

In 2006, the now retired Ms. Jo Weber was the newly appointed director of Sonoma County's Human Services Department (SCHSD). Not only was she new, but the majority of her executive team was as well. To be exact seven of nine executive managers were either newly hired or promoted. Like any new leader, one of the first things Jo Weber did was to gather her executive cabinet and share her vision for moving the agency forward. One key area was valuing staff. In sharing her philosophy of a strengths-based approach, the new director communicated her belief that one way to engage staff was to assure that "staff feel valued, safe and are happy to work at SCHSD." Weber also believed that there was a direct correlation between staff satisfaction and customer satisfaction, and if employees felt good about their jobs, this attitude would directly affect how clients were treated. Her priority was to pay attention to staff in the following areas: morale, safety, communication, inclusion, leadership, professional development, and innovation. However, Weber had to figure out how she would accomplish this goal so it would not appear that her words would appear to be null and void. One day while having lunch with some peers from other counties, she discovered that Napa County had administered a staff satisfaction survey to their employees, which is where the idea of surveying staff originated. In 2007, the department hired division director, Marla Stuart, to lead the Program, Planning, and Evaluation Division (PRE), and through this process, the Sonoma County Staff Satisfaction Survey was born.

With Stuart's expertise in research and evaluation, Sonoma County designed a survey that would measure the pulse of where the agency was as it pertained to work satisfaction. HSD chose to use survey questions from the Gallup Company due its extensive research and expertise on staff engagement. "Gallup's employee engagement work is based on more than 30 years of in-depth behavioral economic research involving more than 17 million employees . . . Through rigorous research, we have identified

12 core elements—the Q12—that link powerfully to key business outcomes. These 12 statements emerged as those that best predict employee and workgroup performance" (Gallup 2012).

The staff satisfaction survey was developed using Survey Monkey and administered online and via hard copy. In the month of June, HSD staff were notified via county email sent out by Director Weber, and she invited all HSD employees were invited to complete the survey over a three week period. Reminder emails were also sent during this time to remind staff of the coming deadline and urging staff to complete the survey if they had not done so.

The survey design was comprised of multiple choice and closed-ended questions, and one comment section for written remarks. Over the four-year period (2007-2010) the survey questions have been revised, and the number of questions have ranged anywhere from 23-39. The participants are asked to answer questions by choosing from a range of Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree with an option for Neither Disagree nor Agree, or No Answer. The three (3) closed-ended questions are demographic questions and are used to determine the employee's position, department and building location. Once the survey information is compiled, the results of the survey are shared with all staff in an Adobe pdf complete with charts and graphs. The written comments or qualitative results are entitled "suggestions for change" and are summarized by common themes, e.g. management, supervision, recognition, develop and promotion, communication and input, workload, impact of budget, and comments about the survey. These comments are only recorded if at least three or more staff comment in a particular theme. The exact written comments of what individuals actually wrote are only shared with the executive management team. Once these comments are reviewed and discussed among the team, a Q&A email is provided to staff addressing each area, and management provides responses by informing staff of each action step taken or not taken and the reasons why.

Challenges

With any organizational change there are always challenges, and in conversations and interviews with executive staff, they were very transparent that implementing this survey was no easy feat. The initial assumption was that they would have conflict with labor unions, but this was not an issue because the survey was voluntary and labor was agreeable to the implementation. Current Interim Human Service Agency Director, Jerry Dunn and, Deputy Director, Marla Stuart, shared that one of the barriers to getting staff to participate was that line staff were initially apprehensive about completing the survey because they did not believe that the survey was anonymous and that there were ways that management could track individuals through their computer log-on identification numbers. Staff also believed that if they shared their true feelings, they would be reprimanded or they would face retaliation. Sonoma's Executive Management Team had to convince staff that neither of the aforementioned was true, and, to dispel any further fears, management also provided hard copies of the survey that staff could return via county courier services.

In addition to line and supervisory staff having reservations about the survey, executive and senior managers were also uncomfortable with the survey being initiated because the results would reveal how staff felt about management. Management also believed that initiating such a survey would be a set up for staff having false expectations about what changes management could effect, and that the survey would feed into staff's negativity toward management. However, Director Weber believed in the gift of feedback and was adamant about her vision to involve staff in a strengths-based manner she explained to managers that they should stop trying to control the information that would be revealed and that executives would need to address the concerns of staff. Managers were also concerned about how biases would be controlled, and that the survey needed to weed out low responses. This concern was addressed and documented in Sonoma County's

2010 Reader's Guide. The Reader's Guide was presented to staff along with the survey results and provided the following information: the design of the survey, table of comparison from the previous survey year to the next, explanation of the Gallup questions, methodology, response rates graphs from every year the survey was administered, statistical significance, and interpretation considerations. The guide also clarified how response rates would be monitored by using the adopted rule of thumb from *Research Methods of Social Work*, by Allen Rubin and Earl Babbie, which states that "A response rate of at least 50 percent is usually considered adequate for analysis and reporting, 60 percent is good, and 70% is very good." They also considered the Gallup Organization's median response of 85% as required for their surveys (SCRG 2010). HSD concluded that 70% was a fair response rate for determining the validity of a response.

In 2010 Sonoma County had its highest participation rate. Out of 671 permanent and temporary employees, 406 (73%) completed the survey using Survey Monkey and 83 (20%) chose to complete a handwritten copy through inter-office mail.

There were also some major trends found in the survey that revealed:

- Child welfare staff had the lowest response rate by division;
- Senior managers and supervisors responded to the surveys more than line staff; and
- A huge gap existed between how management, supervisors and staff viewed satisfaction. For example, managers "Strongly Agreed" at a rate of 75% and higher in most areas of the survey with the exception of three categories: best friend at work, praise in the last seven days, and talked to about their progress.

Program Evaluation (Successes & Obstacles)

In interviews with members of Sonoma County's Executive Management Team, there seems to be a general consensus that the survey was a positive experience and based on the feedback from staff through

the surveys, the following organizational changes have been implemented:

- Increased communication agency-wide through email, director's blog and all-staff meetings;
- Participatory management: various workgroups were developed that brought about changes in the agency, (e.g. safety conditions in the agency have been addressed to provide safer working conditions for staff). For example, a safety glass was put up in the lobby area of the Family & Children's Department;
- Each department and building has implemented ways to acknowledge staff, (e.g. Employee perks, peer to peer appreciation and bulletin board posts); and
- Staff Performance Evaluation was refined and supervisors have received special training around performance and evaluation writing to make the process more effective by establishing expectations for different positions.

With a great level of success achieved, the last staff satisfaction survey was distributed to staff in 2010 as the department decided to take a hiatus for two reasons: (1) The Gallup Organization denied SCHSD permission to use their questions, and (2) management decided that after four years of implementing the survey, they would take a break for a period of time.

Recommendations for Alameda County Social Services Department

Alameda County Social Services Agency has shown great commitment with trying to find creative ways to communicate with staff as a gesture of valuing their input, especially those in non-management positions who do not have a platform to be heard. The county has already implemented several avenues where information is disseminated to staff, but none of these tools used give employees an opportunity to anonymously evaluate management.

The following are some examples of ways Alameda County currently communicates with staff:

- **A State of the Agency** address is an annual floor meeting where the agency director meets with staff in all social service buildings and shares the strategic vision with staff. Assistant agency directors, division directors and even some program managers have also followed suit with similar types of floor meetings. However, the challenge with these types of forums is that these meetings are usually large in number and very public, and employees may feel uncomfortable sharing their ideas and feedback in front of others. In addition, these meetings are set by the directors, and some staff may not be able to attend based on their job priorities or other reasons.
- **The Suggestion Slot** is an email address created by the agency director to serve as another way for staff to share ideas and opinions on ways to improve SSA services and operations. These emails are read directly by the director, but this method also has barriers that prevent staff from sharing their thoughts regarding management. The established ground rules for using this email system do not afford staff the opportunity to provide feedback on how they view management. Additionally, staff have voiced reservations about using this method because some do not believe that their comments will be kept confidential, even though there is language that states that confidentiality is an option if an employee makes this request.
- **Other methods** of staff communication that deserve honorable mention is the agency's Facebook page and the soon-to-come redesigned agency website; however, neither of these methods are vehicles for staff to evaluate management.

If Alameda County executive management is to consider taking the next step in doing an internal evaluation of receiving feedback from their employees. It is recommended that they adopt a similar version of Sonoma County's Annual Staff Satisfaction Survey (the Gallup Company has denied HSD permission to use their survey questions) by taking the following actions toward implementing the following:

- **Pilot:** Administer the survey in one or two of the smaller departments by mimicking Sonoma County's version of using an online questionnaire via Survey Monkey and provide an additional option for staff who may feel apprehensive about using the computer to submit their survey per the aforementioned concerns regarding anonymity.
- **Staffing:** Due to the sensitive nature of the survey and information in the open comment section, one executive manager should be identified who will administer, analyze and disseminate the information. This person must be skilled in research and data analysis and have the ability to control biases. This person would be required to drive this process to make sure this survey receives the time and attention needed.
- **Budget:** The cost to implement such a survey instrument would be low if the county chooses to use Survey Monkey, and since Alameda County already has a user account, the monthly fee is \$65 for a platinum membership. The larger cost would come from an additional staff member needed for the project or through changes that will be implemented as a result of feedback received from the survey. For example, Sonoma County restructured their client waiting room area by installing a safety glass between the clientele and staffing areas.
- **Commitment:** One Sonoma County Director said it best, "If you ask, they will tell you." However, the caution in asking is that employees are owed an explanation. The Gallup poll stated that one of fastest ways to destroy workplace morale is to ask employees their opinions about it and then ignore their answers. Far too many companies make this error when they conduct employee engagement surveys. When employees are asked for their opinions about their workplace, they can reasonably expect to receive a response from management on the results. If they wait in vain for that response, they can just as reasonably assume their feelings, opinions, and solutions

have been dismissed. But that is not always the case. Sometimes management simply does not know what to do with the survey results.

- **Stakeholders:** Just like any other law or program change, staff needs to see that managers are invested in the process. Staff must become stakeholders in this process, and managers will need to be in constant communication as well as be transparent with staff in regards to analyzing and providing survey results when promised, including having staff in workgroups, updating staff regarding action steps and the implementation of changes, and making sure they have the resources and tools needed.

By implementing an annual survey or ranking system, this will help managers gain insight on how it is doing as an agency. This may not be a fix-all, but it is a step in the right direction.

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