Learning from Staff to Share Knowledge and Inform Decision-Making: The Contra Costa County Experience

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Learning from Staff to Share Knowledge and Inform Decision-Making: The Contra Costa County Experience

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In an effort to increase staff engagement and opportunities for greater two-way communication between managers and staff, a strategic plan was developed involving administration of an agency-wide staff satisfaction survey. A comprehensive survey was administered to nearly 1700 employees throughout the agency, which encompasses several diverse bureaus ranging from child and family services, aging and adult services, and a workforce investment board. The online survey included 36 questions aimed at gathering staff perspectives on job satisfaction, work expectations, supervision, and information sharing within the agency. 825 employees responded to the survey, and findings were analyzed and shared agency-wide. Results of the survey have been used to inform ongoing agency change and to facilitate continued engagement of staff in organizational goals and initiatives.

KEYWORDS   Surveying staff, informed decision-making, online surveys

In January of 2008, the Contra Costa Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD) distributed an agency wide staff satisfaction survey to nearly 1,700 employees. With 36 questions total, on topics ranging from position expectations to job satisfaction, the survey reflected agency leaderships attempt to provide opportunities for two-way communication between staff and managers. A total of 825 staff members responded (49%), including 500 individual comments, indicating that for many, this was a welcome oppor-

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tunity to give feedback. Subsequently, the agency publicized the findings of the survey, made attempts to address certain issues that were mentioned by many, as well as continued to look for ways to engage with staff. The following describes this process in detail.

The decision to conduct a formal agency-wide survey can be traced back to early 2007. At this point, the EHSD, with a relatively new management team, began a strategic planning process to build and increase collaboration across its bureaus—including Children and Family Services, Community Services, Aging and Adult Services, Workforce Services, Workforce Investment Board, and the Administrative Services. Historically, the bureaus were not well integrated and there was very little collaboration across bureaus. In response the agencys executive team settled on three main department-wide goals to be enacted over the course of the next couple of years.

The first goal was to attract and maintain a qualified workforce through improving and streamlining the hiring process agency-wide. The second initiative was to improve integration between programs with a customer focus. Lastly, the third initiative was to increase engagement and sense of ownership among staff in goals and values for providing quality service.

It was this latter goal that directly related to the staff satisfaction survey. In drafting the strategic plan, the executive team wrote the following outcome: "Outcome 3.1—Increase opportunities for two-way information sharing between staff and managers." The first milestone to be completed in achieving this objective was to "conduct an annual staff opinion survey, publish results, and evaluate areas for improvement." Various department directors were paired up to lead workgroups that would work on each initiative. The workgroup for engaging staff was jointly led by 3 of the bureau directors.

One of the first tasks of the workgroup was to develop the survey questions. While the team drew upon the staff satisfaction survey created years earlier under different agency leadership and posted on the agencys intranet site, there was no process in place to ensure that staff would respond to the survey. There was also no way to ensure a representative set of responses across departments. Furthermore, when asked about the earlier survey, staff at all levels could recall its existence but could not remember when it was introduced or how the results were shared or used.

The survey workgroup ultimately decided to expand the previous survey along with items from the Federal Office of Personnel Management. In addition, questions related to certain issues identified in the strategic plan were added, including those pertaining to supervisory structure, information sharing within the agency, and satisfaction with their ability to affect decisions. (see Appendix A). While most of the questions were close-ended, the survey also included one open-ended question where respondents were asked, "What one thing would help improve your job satisfaction with

EHSD?'' Once the survey questions were prepared, the agency decided to administer the survey through Zoomerang, an Internet-based survey software that allows companies to create customized online surveys and then collects the responses to ensure respondent anonymity. Zoomerang was chosen for several reasons: (a) a fairly easy to understand user interface, (b) the software would only allow people to respond once, and (c) quick turnaround on tabulating and presenting results in different formats. For $325, EHSD was able to purchase a Zoomerang license that allowed for multiple uses.

A memo announcing the survey and the importance of two-way communication was sent out by the agency director in late January (see Appendix B). Employees were given approximately three weeks to submit the survey and responses were sent to Zoomerang so as to ensure respondents anonymity. Once the deadline for completing the survey had passed, the agency director and survey workgroup were able to compile the results in about a weeks time.

In reviewing responses, the director of administrative services and his assistant analyzed responses to each question, including comparing the responses to the 11 questions also used for the previous survey in order to identify key themes among responses. For the repeated questions from the previous survey, the January 2008 survey indicated that overall the agency had moved in a positive direction. For example, in the latest survey, 90% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I know what is expected of me at work," as opposed to 80% of respondents from the earlier survey. Significant differences (up 20% or more) were also noted in the following questions: #2 regarding the possession of the necessary materials to do ones job (80% agreeing or strongly agreeing as opposed to 57%); #3, receiving recognition or praise from a supervisor (71% vs. 42%); and #8, having a close friend at work (72%, up from 43%).

As far as the other questions in the survey, the findings again were for the most part positive. Of the remaining close-ended questions, there were only four where the neutral and/or negative responses outweighed the positive. The topics of these questions related to promotions being based on merit (#18), dealing with poor performers (#19), sharing information across bureaus (#24), and overall satisfaction with pay (#32). In addition, and of some concern to the survey team, was the finding that only 53% of staffers had received a performance evaluation within the last year. Many of these topics relate to the issues that are currently being addressed by the agencys strategic plan.

In order to report out on the responses to the open-ended question, the survey workgroup took these responses and grouped them into themes, given the impossibility of reporting every comment offered. The following list represents the most frequently mentioned topics: (a) pay and benefits; (b) promotional opportunities; (c) feedback to employees from supervisors;

(d) facilities; (e) equipment and supplies; (f) computer systems; (g) training; (h) educational opportunities; (i) testing; (j) work hours; (k) communications; (l) work processes; (m) employee relations; (n) commute; (o) security; (p) hiring; and (q) job satisfaction.

Perhaps the most frequent comment was the desire for more pay and for the agency to review pay and benefits county-wide. In addition, the employee open-ended responses reflected the objectives in such areas as streamlining and promoting greater transparency in the hiring process and establishing a communication pathway between staff, supervisors, and managers.

Once the results had been tabulated and open-ended responses were grouped into themes, the agency director and survey workgroup utilized several formats in order to disseminate the findings. For agency leadership, a presentation was made at the monthly executive team meeting. For staff at all levels, the results were presented at individual district meetings, described in the staff newsletter, and published on the agency intranet. In addition the agency used the themes as discussion prompts for an offsite meeting of middle level managers.

For agency leadership and staff members who responded to the survey, the staff satisfaction survey was considered a successful means of opening a two-way communication channel. Most of those who did not respond were staff whose positions consisted almost entirely of direct service and who generally do not spend much time in front of a computer, (e.g., pre-school teachers at EHSDs Head Start locations). Given the substantial response rate of nearly 50%, the executive team felt confident that they captured opinions from a fairly diverse cross-section of the agency.

Given this good response to the job satisfaction survey, a second survey was sent out in March 2008 to gather perceptions and suggestions related to the anticipated budget crisis. With the knowledge that nearly $6.7 million would need to be cut out of the 2008/2009 budget, staff were asked to suggest areas that might be cut. Although there was a lower response rate of (12%; 200 responses) this round, staff drew attention to the expenses being made on agency publications. Management took this suggestion and made reductions in allocations for printing in the next budget year.

In addition to the staff satisfaction survey, Contra Costa County is also engaged in other strategies aimed at increasing the amount of two-way communication between staff and managers. At the end of 2007, the agency director established a small group of managers from different bureaus and IT and other Administrative staff as the Knowledge Management Steering Committee with the following objectives:

- Create a knowledge management "wiki" site as a part of the departments intranet for staff to interact and exchange ideas;

- Revamping of intranet site to be more user-friendly and maintain consistent format across bureaus;
- Creation of a user-friendly, searchable document library (current system has thousands of documents that can only be searched by title or document number, not by keyword).

The first objective, the creation of a "wiki" or a "collaboratively edited web page that allows users to edit or add content," is yet another measure aimed at getting feedback from agency staff at all levels. The all staff wiki would also provide a way for knowledge to be shared and transferred across departments while also creating an online record of that transfer, thereby cutting down on agency costs. For example, there may be two separate bureaus or offices that have common functions and providers, but who currently are not sharing resources. If a staffer from one bureau posts a question about where to refer a client and someone from the second bureau responds, the original staffer receives knowledge of an additional resource in a timely manner and staff from both departments (and perhaps agency-wide) can now view the record of the exchange and benefit from the knowledge sharing. In this way, the wiki also works to "flatten" the organization, or allow information to be shared by staff at all levels, not just maintained by those who have been in their positions for some time and/or those who are in supervisory or management positions.

In June of 2008, the steering committee decided to pilot the knowledge management wiki. A survey was sent out via the intranet to all staff with a list of 7–8 categories that the committee felt might present useful topics for a forum. Staff members were asked to vote on which topics that they feel are most important/useful and the top two or three topics will each receive a wiki page. Then, they are encouraged to log in and share ideas via the wiki and the steering committee will evaluate the viability of this medium for EHSD (see Appendix C).

The knowledge management team described the process of revising the EHSD intranet and creating an agency document library as part of a more fully integrated and stylistically consistent platform for EHSD staff. While EHSD employees make regular use of both the intranet and an online document library, more user-friendly access was needed in the form of keyword searching. By revamping/creating all three components at the same time (intranet, library, and wiki), the knowledge management team can ensure that all three will have a similar format and potentially reduce the amount of training needed to bring employees up to speed.

The agency has continued to use Microsoft Office SharePoint software to create each component. SharePoint is a server program that is geared toward facilitating collaboration and has several content management features that organizations can use to store and share information. The intention of the

Agree	397	48%
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	86	10%
Disagree	71	9%
Strongly Disagree	7	1%
Total	826	100%

3. I have received recognition or praise for doing good work from my supervisor.

Strongly Agree	265	32%
Agree	320	39%
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	118	14%
Disagree	83	10%
Strongly Disagree	39	5%
Total	825	100%

4. Someone at work encourages my development.

Strongly Agree	211	26%
Agree	271	33%
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	175	21%
Disagree	119	14%
Strongly Disagree	48	6%
Total	824	100%

5. At work, my opinions seem to count.

Strongly Agree	123	15%
Agree	344	42%
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	201	24%
Disagree	102	12%
Strongly Disagree	53	6%
Total	823	100%

6. The mission or purpose of EHSD helps me feel that my job is important.

Strongly Agree	245	30%
Agree	332	40%
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	165	20%
Disagree	55	7%
Strongly Disagree	27	3%
Total	824	100%

7. My coworkers are committed to doing quality work.

Strongly Agree	197	24%
Agree	375	45%
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	171	21%
Disagree	62	8%
Strongly Disagree	20	2%
Total	825	100%

8. I have a close friend or friends at work.

Strongly Agree	234	28%
Agree	355	43%

Neither Agree Nor Disagree	163	20%
Disagree	61	7%
Strongly Disagree	10	1%
Total	823	100%

9. In the past year, someone at work talked to me about my progress.

Strongly Agree	167	20%
Agree	336	41%
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	147	18%
Disagree	128	16%
Strongly Disagree	44	5%
Total	822	100%

10. This past year, I have had opportunities to learn and grow professionally.

Strongly Agree	209	25%
Agree	354	43%
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	138	17%
Disagree	81	10%
Strongly Disagree	39	5%
Total	821	100%

11. The work I do makes a significant contribution to the community.

Strongly Agree	343	42%
Agree	343	42%
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	103	13%
Disagree	24	3%
Strongly Disagree	10	1%
Total	823	100%

12. The people I work with cooperate to get the job done.

Strongly Agree	226	27%
Agree	410	50%
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	126	15%
Disagree	44	5%
Strongly Disagree	16	2%
Total	822	100%

13. I like the kind of work I do.

Strongly Agree	407	49%
Agree	327	40%
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	67	8%
Disagree	16	2%
Strongly Disagree	8	1%
Total	825	100%

14. I have trust and confidence in my supervisor.

Strongly Agree	311	38%
Agree	266	32%
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	135	16%
Disagree	58	7%

Strongly Disagree	52	6%
Total	822	100%

15. My work unit is able to recruit people with appropriate skills.

Strongly Agree	85	10%
Agree	359	44%
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	264	32%
Disagree	86	10%
Strongly Disagree	28	3%
Total	822	100%

16. I know how my work relates to the agency's goals and priorities.

Strongly Agree	315	38%
Agree	395	48%
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	83	10%
Disagree	24	3%
Strongly Disagree	7	1%
Total	824	100%

17. Physical conditions (for example: noise level, temperature, lighting, cleanliness in the workplace) allow employees to perform their jobs well.

Strongly Agree	177	22%
Agree	279	34%
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	155	19%
Disagree	157	19%
Strongly Disagree	55	7%
Total	823	100%

18. Promotions in my work unit are based on merit.

Strongly Agree	54	7%
Agree	175	21%
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	321	39%
Disagree	153	19%
Strongly Disagree	113	14%
Total	816	100%

19. In my work unit, steps are taken to deal with poor performers who cannot or will not improve.

Strongly Agree	64	8%
Agree	221	27%
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	292	36%
Disagree	155	19%
Strongly Disagree	87	11%
Total	819	100%

20. Discussions with my supervisor/team leader about my performance are worthwhile and accurate.

Strongly Agree	179	22%
Agree	351	43%

Neither Agree Nor Disagree	196	24%
Disagree	55	7%
Strongly Disagree	42	5%
Total	823	100%

21. Managers/supervisors/team leaders work well with employees of different backgrounds.

Strongly Agree	167	20%
Agree	376	46%
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	180	22%
Disagree	65	8%
Strongly Disagree	34	4%
Total	822	100%

22. My workload is reasonable.

Strongly Agree	80	11%
Agree	295	41%
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	143	20%
Disagree	130	18%
Strongly Disagree	74	10%
Total	722	100%

23. I regularly share information with my peers who have different work functions within my bureau.

Strongly Agree	148	18%
Agree	349	43%
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	206	25%
Disagree	98	12%
Strongly Disagree	18	2%
Total	819	100%

24. I regularly share information with my EHSD peers who have different work functions and are employed in a different bureau from my own.

Strongly Agree	74	9%
Agree	241	29%
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	271	33%
Disagree	193	24%
Strongly Disagree	41	5%
Total	820	100%

25. THE FOLLOWING QUESTION REQUIRES A YES OR NO ANSWER:
Have you had an official performance appraisal in the past year?

Yes	437	53%
No	388	47%
Total	825	100%

26. THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS HAVE A DIFFERENT SET OF RESPONSES:
How satisfied are you with the information you receive from management about what's going on in your organization?

Very Satisfied	82	11%

Satisfied	279	38%
Neither Satisfied Nor Dissatisfied	200	27%
Dissatisfied	136	19%
Very Dissatisfied	37	5%
Total	734	100%

27. How satisfied are you with your involvement in the decisions that affect your work?

Very Satisfied	61	8%
Satisfied	230	31%
Neither Satisfied Nor Dissatisfied	204	28%
Dissatisfied	165	22%
Very Dissatisfied	74	10%
Total	734	100%

28. How satisfied are you with your opportunity for advancement in your organization?

Very Satisfied	61	8%
Satisfied	232	32%
Neither Satisfied Nor Dissatisfied	195	27%
Dissatisfied	150	21%
Very Dissatisfied	93	13%
Total	731	100%

29. How satisfied are you with the recognition you receive for doing a good job?

Very Satisfied	104	14%
Satisfied	245	33%
Neither Satisfied Nor Dissatisfied	204	28%
Dissatisfied	122	17%
Very Dissatisfied	59	8%
Total	734	100%

30. How satisfied are you with the training you receive for your present job?

Very Satisfied	102	14%
Satisfied	278	38%
Neither Satisfied Nor Dissatisfied	192	26%
Dissatisfied	116	16%
Very Dissatisfied	40	5%
Total	728	100%

31. Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job?

Very Satisfied	162	22%
Satisfied	393	54%
Neither Satisfied Nor Dissatisfied	112	15%
Dissatisfied	50	7%
Very Dissatisfied	15	2%
Total	732	100%

32. Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your pay?

Very Satisfied	32	4%
Satisfied	250	34%
Neither Satisfied Nor Dissatisfied	189	26%
Dissatisfied	203	28%
Very Dissatisfied	62	8%
Total	736	100%

33. What is your supervisory status? (Check one)

Non supervisor: You do not supervise other employees.	499	67%
Team-leader: You are not an official supervisor; you provide employees with day-to-day guidance in work projects, but do not have supervisory responsibilities or conduct performance appraisals.	90	12%
Supervisor: You are responsible for employee's performance appraisals and approval of their leave, but you do not supervise other supervisors.	109	15%
Manager: You are in a management position and supervise one or more supervisors, or one or more management employees (non supervisors).	46	6%
Total	744	100%

34. Which Bureau do you work for? (Check one)

Administrative Services Bureau	74	10%
Aging and Adult Services Bureau	169	23%
Children and Family Services Bureau	187	25%
Community Services Bureau	116	16%
Workforce Services Bureau	186	25%
Workforce Development Board	12	2%
Total	744	100%

35. Primary building you work in: (Check one)

920 Susana St., Martinez	2	0%
1330 Arnold Dr., #143, Martinez	2	0%
1470 Enea Circle, #1500, Concord	10	1%
1875 Arnold Dr., #200, Martinez	1	0%
2377 Stanwell Dr., Concord	3	0%
2425 Bisso Lane, #100, Concord	19	3%
2425 Bisso Lane, 110, Concord	19	3%
2500 Alhambra Ave., Martinez	1	0%
2530 Arnold Dr., #200, Martinez	60	8%
2530 Arnold Dr., #300, Martinez	32	4%
30 Muir Rd., Martinez	63	8%
3755 Alhambra Ave., Martinez	1	0%
40 Douglas Dr., Martinez	72	10%
40 Muir Rd., Martinez	34	5%

4071 Port Chicago Hwy. 250, Concord	6	1%
1203 West 10th St., Antioch	2	0%
1650 Cavallo Rd., Antioch	65	9%
227 Pacifica Ave., Bay Point	0	0%
240 Las Dunas, Oakley	0	0%
281 Pine Street, Brentwood	2	0%
7251 Brentwood Blvd., Brentwood	1	0%
3068 Grant St., Concord	8	1%
2430 Willow Pass Rd., Bldg. 111, Bay Point	2	0%
3103 Willow Pass Rd., Bay Point (Head Start)	0	0%
3105 Willow Pass Rd., Bay Point (SIT)	3	0%
321 Orchard Dr., Brentwood	1	0%
415 Railroad Ave., Pittsburg	3	0%
4545 Delta Fair Blvd., Antioch	89	12%
4549 Delta Fair Blvd., Antioch	39	5%
94 1/2 Medanos Ave., Bay Point	2	0%
1001 South 57th St., Richmond	17	2%
1275A Hall Ave., Richmond	48	6%
1305 Macdonald Ave., Richmond	32	4%
135 West Grove, Richmond	2	0%
151 Linus Pauling, Hercules	46	6%
1535 D Third St., Richmond	3	0%
2 California St., Rodeo	7	1%
2000 Giaramita Ave., Richmond	3	0%
2300 El Portal Dr., Suite A, San Pablo	0	0%
2300 El Portal Dr., Suite B, San Pablo	0	0%
2600 Mission Bell Dr., San Pablo	6	1%
2700 12th St., San Pablo	2	0%
300 South 27th St., Richmond	12	2%
5050 Hartnett Ave., Richmond	0	0%
847 B Brookside Dr., Richmond	24	3%
Total	744	100%

36. What one thing would help improve your job satisfaction with EHSD

APPENDIX B: MEMO ANNOUNCING SURVEY

**EMPLOYMENT AND HUMAN SERVICES
CONTRA COSTA COUNTY**

DATE: January 23, 2008
TO: Code 2A, All Staff
FROM: Joe Valentine, Director
SUBJECT: Employee Survey

One of our strategic goals includes determining how well we are providing opportunities for two-way communications between staff and managers. To help us in assessing how we are doing we have prepared the attached survey. It is being sent to all employees electronically. I hope you will take a few minutes to fill it out and submit it.

We would like your candid responses to all questions including any narrative comments you may wish to include. YOUR REPLY TO THIS SURVEY IS ANONYMOUS. All responses come back to a mailbox maintained by the Zoomerang vendor and cannot be used to identify individual responses. The information will be used collectively so we can assess how well our communications and other efforts are meeting the needs of our employees. We will post the overall results of the survey once they have been tabulated.

The survey is in two pages. Page one has questions 1–25 and page two has questions 26–36. After completing page one, hit the submit button to get to page 2. Questions 33–35 are mandatory and you will not be able to submit the survey until they are completed. There is also a space for a narrative comment. After you have completed all questions hit the submit button to submit your completed survey. Your input to this survey is important to us. Please complete and return the survey by no later than February 15, 2008.

*For staff with their own PC at work, please press Control and Click on the following link:
http://www.zoomerang.com/survey.zgi?p=WEB227CHP2TVT4
**For staff who share a PC at work, please press Control and Click on the following link:
http://www.zoomerang.com/survey.zgi?p=WEB227DWPMPDDK

APPENDIX C: KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT SURVEY

EHSD Knowledge Management   This Site: EHSD Knowledge Ma

EHSD Knowledge Management > KM Survey > View Response #1

KM Survey: View Response #1

New Response | Edit Response | ✖ Delete Response | Manage Permissions | Alert Me

		Not Interested 1	2	Sorta Interested 3	4	Super Interested 5
Budget (Get the latest information, including local news articles...)	Budget	○	○	◉	○	○
Cost Saving Ideas (post your ideas and comment on others)	Cost Saving Ideas	○	○	◉	○	○
Feedback on Dept. Policies (what's working and what's not)	Feedback on Dept. Policies	○	○	◉	○	○
Facilities Information (get the latest on your building and EHSD plans)	Facilities Information	○	◉	○	○	○
New Initiatives & Programs (check out new initiatives)	New Initiatives & Programs	○	◉	○	○	○
Bureau Reports and Data (Learn about what's happening in your bureau)	Bureau Reports and Data	○	○	◉	○	○
Client Resources (need something for a client, know of a resource)	Client Resources	○	◉	○	○	○
Training (share what you learned, learn what you missed, lots of info and links)	Training	○	○	◉	○	○
General questions and comments (a place to share your thoughts on what's working well and what we could do to improve any aspect of your work at EHSD)	General questions and comments	○	○	◉	○	○

Source. Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Department (2008).

APPENDIX D: SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Interviews

Stephen Baiter, Staff, Contra Costa County Department of Employment and Human Services, CA

Paul Buddenhagen, Staff, Contra Costa County Department of Employment and Human Services, CA

Dave Eisenlohr, Staff, Contra Costa County Department of Employment and Human Services, CA

Jackie Johnston, Staff, Contra Costa County Department of Employment and Human Services, CA

Andy Muno, Staff, Contra Costa County Department of Employment and Human Services, CA

Mike Roetzer, Staff, Contra Costa County Department of Employment and Human Services, CA

Joe Valentine, Director, Contra Costa County Department of Employment and Human Services, CA