

Monitoring the Pulse of Employees

The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) commitment to quality is so well ingrained at every level of the organization that employees believe it is the “only way to do business.” Since the program began with quality circle programs almost 20 years ago, PennDOT has since embraced the Baldrige Award criteria as the measure of its organizational performance. Part of that measure includes ongoing internal surveys designed to maintain open lines of communication, improve operational efficiency, continually evaluate the organizational climate, monitor employee morale, and reduce employee turnover. The results remain impressive.

Monitoring the pulse of an organization with more than 12,000 employees may seem like a daunting task, but it’s not as difficult as one might imagine. The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) prides itself on being a customer-focused organization and it assigns full-time quality coordinators in each of its eleven engineering districts to ensure open lines of communication with its County and District employees. There is also a part-time Quality Coordinator in every Central Office Bureau. Additionally, the Department created the Center for Performance Excellence, an internal business consulting organization that focuses on organization and employee development, knowledge sharing, and process improvement.

PennDOT began using regular surveys as its primary information-gathering tool in 1992. Over the ensuing decade, new instruments have been introduced to ensure accurate interpretation of results for Departmental surveys and to provide a better sense of PennDOT’s relationship with its employees. An agreement with the Penn State University Center for Applied Behavioral Sciences has expedited results because managers are now able to craft surveys that elicit responses about specific workplace issues and employees can complete the survey online. More importantly, all survey results are available online to employees and managers.

Survey results, however, don’t stop with a report. PennDOT trains each of its managers to interpret survey results and requires them to conduct feedback sessions with their employees to identify ways to improve operations.

This innovative practice considers three survey instruments developed by PennDOT to monitor organizational effectiveness, assess employee morale, and analyze information collected from employees who leave the Department.

Organizational Climate Survey

Initiated in 1994, the Organizational Climate Survey (OCS) plays a key role in the Department’s Baldrige Award process quality improvement efforts.

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Administered annually to all PennDOT employees, the survey includes 100 questions that assess employees' perceptions in 17 different areas addressing topics such as communication, outlook for change, recognition, teamwork, and job satisfaction. Survey results are segmented by organization and the feedback reports generated are distributed to each unit within PennDOT. But that's not where the OCS value lies. The OCS gives the organization a good sense of how it's functioning, but each manager is then required to conduct feedback sessions within the work unit to further clarify issues for resolution and to develop action plans to address them (see sidebar).

Each manager receives an OCS Feedback Manual, which provides detailed steps about interpreting OCS survey results and conducting follow-up meetings with employees. As an example, suppose a construction unit has a lower than average score in Job Satisfaction, a declining score for Quality of Supervision, or

a score with numerous 'neutral' responses about Team Work. During the unit's feedback session, the manager uses traditional quality tools and techniques such as brainstorming, force-field analysis, and cause-and-effect diagrams to further define and refine the problem.

Based on OCS information and feedback meeting results, the unit will create decision-making teams that use survey results as their starting point. The teams routinely include employees from multiple job classifications to ensure a broad perspective on issues. The Department stresses that the survey results are the source of team discussions, not the discussion itself.

According to Jacob Simonton, Director of the PennDOT Bureau of Human Resources, "We treat the OCS as a bottom-up situation. The OCS isn't just a method of identifying problems," he says, "it is also an opportunity for employees to suggest solutions and solve the problems."

As an example of the process, Jake Simonton cites the example of one annual OCS survey where employees cited the need for more staff as an issue affecting their ability to meet job demands. "The first thing we had to address," recalls Jake, "was that everyone needed to understand that hiring additional staff simply wasn't possible. So we challenged our employees to help us find ways to use staff better, more efficiently—to continuously reassess what we do and how we do it."

Another OCS survey identified employee concern about the open-space work environment in the new Bureau of Human Resources office. Survey results indicated that many employees felt a lack of privacy affected their work. To remedy the situation, teams identified the need for separate, quiet spaces that employees could use and which could also accommodate other personnel activities that required privacy.

The OCS survey has changed over the years. The first several years sampled 33 percent of employees; it then went to 50 percent for several years, and in 2000, the Department went to a 100 percent sample. The survey questions have been 'tweaked' over the years. Some are intentionally retained so that PennDOT can track response trends. Overall the survey provides a valuable historical view of the Department and the role employees play in improving processes and job performance.

A cooperative agreement with Penn State University now makes the OCS survey available online.

Steps for Using Feedback from the Organizational Climate Survey

- Review the survey overview and report.
- Analyze the results to identify key issues and goals.
- Prepare for the feedback meeting to ensure that it stays on track and remains productive.
- Conduct a feedback meeting with employees in your work unit to clarify issues and develop action plans.
- Implement the action plans and follow up on their progress. Modify or update the plans as necessary.

The PennDOT Employee Morale Survey

While the OCS is designed to monitor the pulse of the overall organization, the PennDOT Morale Survey (MS) focuses on local work units and measures employees' opinions about changes resulting from local or Department-wide initiatives. PennDOT officials believe that increasing morale leads to a more productive workforce, thus units are encouraged to use the MS before and after implementing an initiative so the effect of any change can be tracked. Jake Simonton notes that the Morale Survey doesn't just measure morale. "The survey doesn't measure morale. It is also an instrument to gauge opinions on how the organization operates, how well work is being done, and how well we communicate with each other," he observes.

The MS is a direct outgrowth of the Organizational Climate Survey, and survey items are selected from the OCS item pool. For MS instruments designed to assess employee opinions, those administering the survey can also select one special topic from a list of 16, such as Teamwork or Quality of Supervision. If a special topic is not included in the list of 16, a specific request can be made for its inclusion on future surveys.

While the OCS is an annual survey, the Morale Survey can be given any time to evaluate any initiative in the work unit. Because the survey is available online, an MS can be created, administered, and results reported within one to two weeks. The

report is available to the manager initiating the survey and to any employee who took it. The results convey a current comparison of the work unit's morale to the same unit as measured by the last OSC. Additionally, results can be compared to PennDOT overall benchmarks derived from the previous OCS. Managers can

use these comparisons to determine the degree of change from year to year and to determine whether the unit's employee morale is better or worse than PennDOT employees overall.

Bob Piel is the Quality Coordinator in PennDOT District 1-0, six counties in northwestern Pennsylvania. He's

Quality at Work

When I joined PennDOT as a draftsman trainee in 1970, I figured I'd spend my career working in Highway Engineering. Then our quality initiative began in 1982, and in 1984 I applied to work with that program. Except for a break in the mid-90s, I've been part of a remarkable initiative that has transformed the way this organization and its employees relate to each other and to PennDOT's mission.

What began with efforts to build Quality Circles has matured through Quality Breakthrough Teams, the Quality Training Committee, our Strategic Quality Plan, the Customer Surveys, Process Reengineering and Internal Benchmarking. In 1997, we moved to embrace the Baldrige Criteria. Along the journey, we've become a quality organization whose employees believe that communication and group problem solving are the only ways to do business. All our managers have been through many Quality programs, and their response to issues is often to break employees into groups and conduct brainstorming sessions.

As an example, I recently was asked to conduct an "After Action Review" (AAR) of one of our many processes. I expected about 30 employees, but when I arrived there were more than 50. At an earlier time I would have had to cancel the session and reschedule it when another facilitator would be available to help me. Not now. I asked one of the administrative managers if she had some time to conduct a session. I knew she was busy, but she knew it was important, so we broke the group into two teams and she facilitated one. It's teamwork, and it's a commitment to quality at all levels.

Bob Piel
Quality Coordinator
PennDOT District 1-0

been part of PennDOT's quality initiative since its beginning. In his opinion, the OCS provides an excellent review of the Department's operations, but in a sense, it's a 'lagging' indicator because the results aren't available until some months after it's administered. The Morale Survey, however, "is a better indicator," Bob notes, "because of the speed with which the survey can be developed, administered, and results produced."

As an example, Bob Piel points to a recent situation where OCS results for one unit indicated poor communication between a manager and unit crews. The manager, however, felt that he'd made major improvements in that area. Bob Piel worked with the manager to administer an MS six months after the OCS. The MS confirmed that the manager's efforts were worthwhile; unit employees reported a positive change in the level of communication.

The Exit Information Program

Most organizations use some form of exit interview. PennDOT recently developed the Exit Information Program (EIP) to collect and analyze information from exiting employees to identify reasons for leaving the agency and employees' level of satisfaction within a variety of work factors.

To ensure that a departing employee's response is as thoughtful as possible, the Department uses a form mailed to the former employee's home and includes a postage-paid return envelope. This approach ensures

confidentiality of the response and allows PennDOT to monitor reasons for leaving, which can help spot trends or other problem areas in the organization that should be addressed. PennDOT maintains a database of the responses to help identify those trends.

A Communication Environment

PennDOT's commitment to being a quality organization is evidenced by its extensive use of internal and external communication. The agency has 11 engineering districts, 57 maintenance organizations, "and a whole spectrum of culture." Each unit has some type of information-sharing mechanism and employees throughout the Department have access to information through newsletters and unit meetings, in addition to information from the surveys. As initiatives prove useful, results are shared among employees and organizational units. Additionally, PennDOT has made a commitment to communication technology to ensure that exchange of information.

The Quality Commitment

One result of the quality initiative at PennDOT is the conviction that every employee IS PennDOT. Employees take pride in being able to respond to constituents and to each other. One quality coordinator observed that the Department's absolute best ambassadors are the maintenance crews who work at PennDOT. These are the people who operate the dump trucks and mow the grass, but they are also the most

visible PennDOT employees, and the most customer oriented.

Concludes Jake Simonton, "PennDOT is serious about our employees, they are our voice in the community and with each other. The quality initiative and our use of surveys to monitor how well our organization operates indicate that PennDOT teams take charge of their own destinies. They work together to improve conditions, they talk about their expectations, and they are committed to their ability to make a difference."

For more information:

Richard Harris
Director
Center for Performance
Excellence
Pennsylvania Department of
Transportation
P.O. Box 3057
Harrisburg, PA 17105-3057
harrisr@dot.state.pa.us

Jacob S. Simonton
Director
Bureau of Human Resources
Pennsylvania Department of
Transportation
P.O. Box 3147
Harrisburg, PA 17105-3147
simonto@dot.state.pa.us

The Pennsylvania State
University
Center for Applied Behavioral
Sciences
PennDOT OCS Online
<http://pub.la.psu.edu/pennidot>