

# **IS THE PUBLIC SECTOR AN EMPLOYER OF CHOICE? — THE CHALLENGE OF DESIGNING AN ORGANISATIONAL CLIMATE SURVEY FOR A DIVERSE PUBLIC SECTOR**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Public sector agencies in NSW have traditionally utilised equal employment opportunity (EEO) surveys to identify equity issues. The New South Wales Office of the Director of Equal Opportunity (ODEOPE), the central agency with the mandate for promoting EEO across the public sector, was aware this approach tended to separate EEO from other management tools being used to improve the quality of working life within the sector.

One strategy decided upon by ODEOPE to address this issue, was to develop a workplace climate survey that would include EEO related questions and be freely available across the public sector. This was done in conjunction with ARTD Research Consultants.

This paper describes the considerable challenges involved in developing and marketing this new evaluation tool, including ongoing consultation with the many stakeholders, designing a modular survey and implementation kit, piloting the survey in a variety of agencies and designing an effective marketing strategy. The work is still in progress.

## **Workplace Climate Surveys**

The main reasons for conducting climate surveys are to measure staff perceptions of workplace culture and practices, to assist management in identifying and responding to issues of concern to staff, and thereby to improve organisational performance and service delivery.

The issues commonly addressed by climate surveys include management, teamwork, communication, reward and recognition, training and development and customer service.

By providing management with an overall picture of an organisation, climate surveys may create a trigger for evaluations of specific programs and strategies, particularly in areas such as staff development, customer service, management training and human resource policies and practices. In the absence of any credible evidence of problems senior management might otherwise simply stick with the “business as usual” approach.

By engaging in the climate survey process, agencies are – whether they know it or not – taking steps along the path of ‘continuous improvement’. In gathering information in a structured way to identify strengths and weaknesses, and then using this as the basis for developing appropriate change strategies, agencies become capable of learning and growing. Periodic resurveying provides one mechanism (among others) for measuring the effectiveness of change strategies. Directly involving managers and other staff in evaluating organisational processes helps to build a reflexive and change-oriented organisation in which the practice of evaluation is valued.

The success of any climate survey depends on the value it provides in improving people’s working environment. It is argued that an important component of any workplace environment is the degree to which equal employment opportunity is provided in that workplace.

## **EEO as Part of the Broader Workplace Climate**

Many people think about EEO only in terms of affirmative action strategies, which seek to redress the social disadvantage experienced by particular groups in society because of past and present discrimination. From this perspective, affirmative action strategies are often seen as marginal to an organisation’s core business — as additional resources required to make up for “deficits” in the skills, knowledge and work experience of EEO groups. This perception accounts for the marginal status which EEO programs often have in organisations.

However, EEO is equally concerned with mainstream human resource management reform and organisational culture change — with promoting excellence in people management and creating inclusive, supportive and productive workplaces. Many organisations and most organisational climate surveys fail to recognise the links between employment equity and organisational climate and performance.

Similarly, evaluations of EEO programs often treat “the program” simply as the sum of its affirmative action strategies (as described, for example, in an EEO Management Plan) and in isolation from the norms, rules, values, behaviours, and processes which make up organisational culture. If EEO is also considered as an aspect of good people management, embedded in the everyday practices and decision making processes of the organisation, then these processes should be a primary focus in evaluating the organisation’s performance in achieving equity outcomes. The strength of a well-designed climate survey is that the links between issues, which have previously been considered in isolation, and have therefore been approached in a programmatic way, may become more explicit. These may then be addressed in a more holistic way through organisational reform and business planning processes.

## **The Limitations of EEO Surveys**

The mistake often made in so-called ‘EEO surveys’ is to focus narrowly on experiences of direct discrimination. This approach emphasises individual behaviour while neglecting structural and systemic problems arising from organisational processes and culture. The ODEOPE workplace climate survey takes the approach of embedding equity considerations throughout the survey. Issues such as skills development, access to career opportunities, participation in decision making, ethics and organisational culture affect all staff. At the same time, different groups may have markedly different experiences of these different aspects of workplace culture.

EEO group membership is a core element of the demographic information collected as part of the workplace climate survey and is used to analyse responses to each question for differential impacts on particular groups of staff. Such differences, if found, may point to inequities in the way the organisation goes about its core business. These inequalities create unnecessary barriers, are indirectly discriminatory, or have unintended negative consequences for some groups of staff. This is a mainstream human resource management issue and should be addressed as such.

## **DEVELOPING A NEW WORKPLACE CLIMATE SURVEY FOR THE NSW PUBLIC SECTOR**

ODEOPE was aware that existing organisational climate surveys lacked questions about equity in the workplace and sufficient detail for an analysis of the data by EEO target groups. Some 15 workplace climate surveys from Australia and overseas were reviewed though very few of these surveys sought any detailed information about equal employment opportunities and only one attempted to address issues of discrimination and harassment in the workplace.

Hence, there was a need to develop a new survey that would be inclusive of EEO and suit the particular needs of the NSW public sector. It was clear at the outset that a single generic survey was not an option because of the enormous diversity amongst public sector agencies in terms of their core business, size, workplace cultures, and employee demographics.

Having gleaned the structure and contents of other surveys, it was time to consult with the sector about the type of workplace climate survey it wanted to see developed.

### **Considering the Needs of the Sector**

The purpose of consultation with the end users — public sector agencies — was to find out what they wanted included in a climate survey. To do this, ODEOPE invited representatives from 56 NSW government agencies to attend a half-day consultation. The consultation process helped draw out a number of important issues and provided a map for the development, piloting and marketing of the survey.

### *Key Issues Arising From the Consultation*

- The need to define the limits of the survey. A wide range of issues important to participants were identified, many more than could be included in a climate survey. All NSW public sector agencies have been involved in the implementation of quality

initiatives since 1996. All have been required to undertake guided self-assessments and to develop and implement quality improvement strategies.

A large number of agencies are also currently involved in benchmarking processes using the Australian Quality Council model. The ODEOPE Workplace Climate Survey is designed around the quality framework and is intended to complement existing quality measurement tools by providing a clear recognition of the importance of employment equity in achieving organisational best practice.

- A climate survey cannot exist alone, there needs to be a strong set of guidelines that outline the necessary steps involved in preparing for, implementing and analysing a survey – the vital role these guidelines play was highlighted later in the process of piloting the survey.

In addition to the survey instrument itself, agencies using the workplace climate survey developed by ODEOPE will be provided with detailed guidelines on the use of the survey. The guidelines stress that the survey is designed to be used as a change management tool and requires a commitment on the part of senior management to respond appropriately to the results.

The guidelines seek to provide agencies with the information to use the climate survey effectively as a measurement tool for the analysis of workplace climate and the evaluation of subsequent change strategies. They also advocate the use of a range of evaluation methods, where appropriate, and discourage over-reliance on the survey as the sole research/evaluation tool. Conducting a survey does not in itself constitute an evaluation. However, if embedded in a continuous improvement process, climate surveys can be extremely useful in the formative evaluation of organisational change strategies.

- Only agencies ready to take on a survey should. Readiness included a commitment by senior management to a transparent process and to reporting the results regardless of what they had to say. A common mistake in climate surveys is that there is a failure to act on the results. An agency in crisis or one that had experienced enormous change was not viewed as the sort of agency that should be involved;
- Benchmarking versus customising. The opportunity to benchmark agencies across the sector was thought to be an attractive selling point. However, many participants expressed concerns about benchmarking, particularly in relation to the fairness of making comparisons between dissimilar agencies (there was a strong view that the agencies within the sector are more different than similar). It was seen as important that agencies have a say in how, and with whom, they are compared. Moreover, benchmarking was considered of less value than the opportunity to customise the survey to meet the individual needs of agencies and to be able to benchmark their own performance over time.
- Confidentiality is vital at all stages. This issue is discussed in depth later in the paper.

## **Piloting the Workplace Climate Survey**

A draft survey and set of guidelines were developed by ODEOPE and ARTD. The draft survey was constructed in modular form to allow greater flexibility of use and to assist agencies to integrate the survey (or parts of it) with existing climate surveys, if necessary. Each module included some core questions, a set of supplementary questions that agencies could choose from and space for agencies to include additional questions that reflected their own particular needs.

Originally, it was intended the survey would be piloted in one agency, followed by a sector-wide survey based on a sample of staff from each agency. This survey was intended to provide sector level data to assist agencies in benchmarking their own results. However, as outlined above, benchmarking was considered of far less value to agencies than being able to customise a survey to meet their specific needs.

Not conducting a sector-wide survey freed up resources, providing the opportunity for a series of pilots in agencies across the sector. Three pilots allowed a far more action research approach to the development of the survey. Run sequentially, each pilot could provide the opportunity for comments on the instrument, the guidelines for using the survey, the process of implementing the survey and the analysis and use of the results. An added benefit built into the piloting was to conduct feedback sessions with agency staff to hear back from them about the survey and how it was received by staff.

There were also considerable advantages for marketing the survey to be gained from conducting three pilots. The three pilots would be with three diverse public sector agencies and, if successful, these agencies would be expected to communicate with other similar agencies advocating the value of this particular survey — word of mouth being one of the most powerful marketing strategies of all.

There were certain criteria that needed to be fulfilled for agencies to be selected for the pilot (several agencies had volunteered to be a part of the pilot). Of critical importance was that the agency be ready for the pilot and committed to following through the results

of the survey. The department selected as the first pilot agency not only met the selection criteria, but is seen as having a leadership role by other public sector agencies. ODEOPE and ARTD worked with the department to adapt the survey to meet their particular needs including the development of several additional questions related to their performance management procedures.

## **Outcomes of the First Pilot**

The first pilot of the workplace climate survey was held over a two-week period in July 1999. Surveys were distributed through the internal mail and returned using a pre-addressed envelope to ARTD for data entry and analysis. A 60% response rate was achieved with an even distribution across significant demographic variables. This is a reasonable response rate in terms of general survey responses but low compared to other workplace climate survey responses.

There are a number of possible explanations for the relatively low response rate. Some possible reasons, revealed from the survey itself and from staff feedback sessions, included: overworked staff — this emerged as a major issue from staff responses to the open-ended questions in the survey; not providing clear information about procedures to guarantee confidentiality (see below); and, the timing of the survey — it is vital there be sufficient lead-up time before the survey is distributed to staff, the survey should be distributed at a time when most staff will be available and at an appropriate time in the organisations 'planning cycle'.

The focus of the pilot was evaluating the processes used by the pilot agency to interpret and respond to the survey results. ARTD and ODEOPE staff also worked with management to interpret the survey results, sat in as observers on Management Board meetings, monitored management communications with staff, and observed any management/staff consultative groups set up to develop responses to the survey findings. At the time of writing, this process was in its very early stages, making it premature to comment on the effectiveness of this evaluation strategy.

## **Lessons Learnt**

A number of issues arose throughout the first pilot including:

- protecting confidentiality
- linking with existing change management processes
- appropriate timing both within the business cycle and the calendar year
- defining the 'workplace'

### *Protecting confidentiality*

Protecting the confidentiality of individual staff completing the climate survey was paramount. However, with the benefit of hindsight, it appears that not all those involved in the pilot survey were assured that their confidentiality was protected.

A confidentiality protocol had been developed including that no personal information (name and home address) about staff would be collected, all surveys being mailed in a self addressed envelope to ARTD and no data being reported where there were so few responses that individuals could be directly or indirectly identified. Moreover, the protocol ensured that all surveys would be subsequently destroyed and any databases would not contain data that could be used to identify an individual staff member.

Some of those involved in the pilot (who attended the discussion group) identified inadequate communication from senior management about how they would ensure confidentiality. Moreover, it appears the confidentiality protocol was eventually disseminated to staff, but not before concerns were raised by individuals that they could be potentially identified in the survey.

Employee concerns were compounded by the absence of detailed information about management's reasons for wanting to conduct a survey and how management intended to use the results. It became clear that management and key informants within the agency had not done enough 'on the ground' work to communicate with staff on these issues including how the survey linked in with change management processes.

### *Linking in with existing change management processes*

As far as possible, link the survey in with existing planning and change management processes. The area in which climate surveys most often fail is when management is unable or unwilling to act on the results. This is the most challenging step of all, particularly where an agency has no existing processes to manage change. As an absolute minimum, these should at least be planned before embarking on a climate survey so that the difficulties of responding to what may sometimes be surprising and challenging results are not compounded by inadequate or non-existent change management processes.

It is also important to communicate to staff clearly about the role of the climate survey in guiding changes, the methods by which this will be achieved, and how this fits in with other change strategies. Staff need to know what to expect and to have confidence that management is committed to, and capable of, developing appropriate actions arising from the survey results.

### *Appropriate timing*

The pilot organisation had been planning a climate survey for some time and held off until the ODEOPE survey had been developed. However, with one thing and another delaying the survey being finalised, the organisation had had to put in place its annual business plan which meant the results of the survey would not be included in the planning until the following year. This too may have impacted negatively on staff enthusiasm to complete the survey, especially those at senior management.

Similarly, the timing of the survey in the calendar year is important — do not conduct it at a time when many staff will be on leave or when other major events are occurring within the workforce.

### *Defining the ‘workplace’*

In an attempt to measure the organisational climate, the ODEOPE pilot survey sought staff perceptions on a range of issues at three distinct ‘levels’ — the ‘I’ level, as in *‘I have the equipment I need to do my job’*, the work unit level, as in *‘In my work unit, we have regular meetings to discuss our work’* and at the organisational wide level, as in, *‘Staff in the department are consulted about proposed changes that will affect their work’*.

Feedback from participants revealed that they had difficulty responding to questions that were beyond their own personal experience, that is beyond the ‘I’ or ‘my workplace’. While it may on the one hand seem reasonable to ask only ‘I’ and ‘my workplace’ questions, is a measure of the climate solely the aggregated data of individual experiences (a sum of the parts) or does a good measure also require respondents to consider the organisation as a whole?

The ODEOPE workplace climate survey has another two pilots before it is complete. It is expected that each of these pilots will provide as rich an opportunity for refining the instrument and the processes involved in conducting a climate survey for the public sector as this first pilot has. At the time of writing, the results of the first pilot are being analysed. The next step for ODEOPE and ARTD is to assist the pilot agency in developing its response to issues arising from the results of the survey especially issues related to EEO.