Using Federal Human Capital Survey Data

To Address Key Problems Employees Identify

Summary of Proceedings

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SUMMARY
Transforming the Organization: How To Use Data From the Federal Human Capital Survey To Address the Key Problems Employees Identified Most Effectively?


The forum was conducted by American University’s Institute for the Study of Public Policy Implementation (ISPPI) and sponsored by Kenexa Government Solutions. Participants included federal human capital personnel from a variety of federal agencies.
The Federal Human Capital Survey measures employees' perceptions of whether, and to what extent, conditions characterizing successful organizations are present in their agencies. (The results of the latest survey are available at www.fhcs2006.opm.gov.)

The Survey provides general indicators of how well the Federal Government is running its human resources management systems; serves as a tool for OPM to assess individual agencies and their progress toward "green" status on Strategic Management of Human Capital under the President's Management Agenda; and gives senior managers critical information to answer the question: What can I do to make my agency work better?

The Kenexa forum was introduced by Robert M. Tobias, director of ISPPI and of American University’s Public Sector Executive Education Program. Tobias noted that public policy implementation is the stepchild to the creation of that policy, usually receiving little attention. Yet after bills are signed into law and souvenir pens handed out -- after regulations have been promulgated -- the question remains, “how do we organize an agency to implement the new policy, maximize federal employee contribution, install new technology and achieve organizational goals and results?”

How, in short, how do we effect transformational change?
Noting that Starwood Corporation owns, manages or franchises 850 properties and 145,000 associates, Mariangela Battista, Starwood’s V.P. of Organizational Culture & Effectiveness, described the corporations’ efforts to transform Starwood by distinguishing one property from another – by branding them.

“A brand is an idea,” she stated; “great brands are clear about value, and create an emotional connection.” (That federal agencies are aware of this can be seen in Department of Defense television ads, for example, and in the local post office, which sells teddy bears dressed like letter carriers.)

To measure its success engaging its workforce, Starwood does an annual associate survey. In the past year, the organization had a 91 percent response rate or 125,819 respondents. The entire survey was web-based; it was offered in 40 languages and, for illiterates, in an audio voice-over.

The survey results were consistent with some of the findings in the human capital survey – to wit, the drivers of associate engagement were emotional connection with other associates, and supervisor effectiveness.

After the results were in, Starwood interviewed 60 of the best-in-class managers in depth. Those managers “weren’t
doing anything extraordinary, but were genuinely showing leadership,” she reported. For example, in the “most engaged” properties, associates show up for birthday celebrations on their days off. In the least effective organizations, even the general manager does not show up.

“It comes down to leadership,” she said, and to teach that leadership, Starwood has established an online site where managers can go to learn the best practices for engaging associates.

Tobias asked if Starwood works with unions in organized workplaces. “We are unionized,” Battista conceded, and “it’s challenging. But we have not had any issues with our associates.” Tobias commented that “when I hear that response, what goes through my mind is, if I’m behaving in a way that responds to your values as a human being, there’s no dispute” between us.

The second speaker, Jeffrey Saltzman, described the implication of transformational change as “NOT how do we set a goal and improve results; rather, how do we modify everything we’re about to improve performance?”

Although organizations are empty shells, they do not like change. Organizations have their own unique characteristics, Saltzman explained – perhaps a hierarchical structure;
certain knowledge, skills and abilities; a distinct culture -- but the organization has no native ability. “Any ability an organization has is coming completely from the individuals employed there.”

Saltzman listed some ways organizations seek to transform themselves when they’re riding a dead horse: “buy a stronger whip, change riders, insist that this is how we’ve always ridden this horse, hire a consultant to ride the dead horse, form a committee, harness several dead horses together for increased speed, or promote the dead horse to an executive positions.”

Surprisingly, none of these tactics works. “Transformation requires radical thinking,” he insisted. “If the goal is transformation, the organization has to be able to look at the processes and procedures and figure out which are dead.”

Transformational principles are manage for the present, selectively forget the past; and strategize for the future.

What do employees want in a transforming organization? They want the same things they have always wanted, Saltzman said -- fundamentals that cut across organizations, culture, gender, ethnicity, positions, geography and generations.
When he hears people say such things as, “This generation is different; they no longer care about” (whatever it may be – loyalty, stability, consistency) Saltzman says he finds “those making this statement are confusing underlying needs and equity with how those needs are being met.” For example, if I say my underlying need is fairness, or being treated with respect, how I experience equity might take different forms in Wisconsin and India because of economic conditions, “but not because of underlying differences. Workers in general want to get out of an organization what they put in,” he asserted.

Saltzman debunked various prevalent myths about employees. For example, he hears people say that “the younger generation doesn’t care about security, they job-hop.” But perhaps that is because of the way the organization treats them, not because of any innate difference between generations?

The most engaged employees are those just hired (71 percent engaged). After 18 months on the job, engagement deteriorates. The least engaged (57 percent) have been on the job from three to five years At 16-20 years, the percentage of those engaged rises again, to 66 percent.

Is this innate, is the grass greener, or do these data result from the experiences these employees are having?
Noting that disillusioned employees show attitude decline especially in message (consistency of policy and communications); performance (organizational effectiveness and efficiency); frustration that they can’t get the job done; wanting to do a good job; and future rewards and recognition (especially pay) and considerate treatment, Saltzman concluded that the data result from “organizational experience rather than [the employees’] innate qualities.”

“When we look at the world of work,” Saltzman emphasized, “we find that people are uniform in terms of what they hope the employer to provide. This is true regardless of differences in gender, geography, ethnicity, cultural or other differences.” And, he emphasized, “it’s also true during transformational change.”

As an example, he contrasted two organizational responses to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Some managers were told, “Come in and get the organization back up and running.” Others were told, “We have no building. Go home, we’ll call you when we need you; you won’t lose any pay.”

Those involved in getting their companies up and running had a sense of efficacy, and their survey results were sky-high. Those who were sent home felt helpless, not part of solving the problem, and their survey results tanked.
It is the effective use of the employee survey data that helps managers debunk myths and take action to increase the employee engagement that is critical to increased organizational productivity.