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EMPLOYEE SURVEYS IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE: Experiences and Success Factors

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CANADIAN CENTRE FOR MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT

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A Word from CCMD

Employee surveys on a wide range of issues have become an essential tool of good management practice in many different types of organizations, especially those in the private sector. Regular surveys of employees and of internal organizational climate are just as important as regular surveys of external clients and stakeholders for well-performing organizations in both the private and public sectors. In the federal public service this practice is still evolving, and while several departments and agencies have made considerable progress in implementing employee surveys, many questions continue to be raised about the purpose of these surveys and the most effective way of carrying them out.

To provide practical guidance to public service managers planning to undertake an employee survey, CCMD asked a consultant, Dr. Paul Harwood, to prepare the following study which documents practices in employee surveys in eighteen federal agencies and departments. The result is a timely and detailed examination of the different approaches and strategies used by each organization to obtain feedback from employees. Noting that Statistics Canada has developed a "Guide to Conducting an Employee Opinion Survey in the Federal Public Service," Dr. Harwood points out that the intent of his own study is to assess the degree to which public service organizations actually follow these guidelines.

The study begins with an exploration of the reasons for doing an employee survey and compares and contrasts such surveys with research studies, focus groups and other techniques for assessing employee perceptions. Dr. Harwood then analyses the information gathered from each of the participating departments or agencies and provides an account of the "lessons learned" as reported to him by departmental representatives. He concludes by highlighting the critical success factors in carrying out an employee survey – action on results, planning, a communication strategy, questionnaire design, support from senior management and follow-up, among others.

CCMD believes this study will provide valuable guidance to public service managers and will help them to implement employee surveys as a normal and important dimension of good management practice. We are pleased to add this paper to our *Management Practices* series and would warmly welcome comments from our readers.

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Executive Summary

This study was undertaken in the fall of 1995 to elicit best practices among eighteen Canadian federal agencies and departments which have implemented employee surveys as an organizational improvement exercise. Following an initial discussion of the possible reasons for conducting an employee survey and an analysis of the various techniques available for assessing employee perceptions, the study then evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to conducting an employee survey, documents the experiences of the participating organizations and analyses some of the mistakes that were made.

Of particular value to those planning for an employee survey are a number of suggestions for improvement or "lessons learned" provided by representatives of the eighteen organizations, each of which had conducted a survey at least once. These include the following:

- controlling the size of the questionnaire and the amount of information to be gathered;
- actively promoting the survey within the organization in order to increase the response rate;
- dedicating adequate internal resources to the exercise;
- assigning responsibilities effectively;
- ensuring that senior management is fully committed to the survey and is perceived to be so by the employees;
- developing an effective communication strategy;
- making a clear connection between the survey results and the organization's mandate;
- integrating results with client service and performance measures;
- reporting on the survey results by integrating comments from participants; and
- acting on results in a focused way.

Recognizing that public service managers are becoming increasingly aware of the employee survey as one of the essential tools of good management practice, the study concludes with a summary of some of the critical success factors in designing and implementing an employee survey in the public service:

- *Undertake a census survey where possible; avoid a purely research approach.*
- *Involve external experts in the process.*
- *Give high priority to developing an effective communication strategy: this will help ensure a high level of employee participation.*
- *Determine the issues (preferably through a consultative process) and tailor the questionnaire accordingly.*
- *Ensure that the results are conveyed to employees and that full use is made of the data collected in preparing the survey report.*
- *Be committed to taking action on the results of the survey.*
- *Be prepared to undertake further surveys in order to build on past experiences.*

Acknowledgments

Mr. Ken Huffman at CCMD provided important guidance and support for this study. All departmental representatives participating were especially helpful; the author acknowledges their interest, responsiveness and collaboration. Their insights and the experiences they communicated will prove very useful to others; for this, sincere appreciation is expressed.

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I Introduction

Employee surveys have been a standard practice in the most successful and adaptive organizations for some time. Private sector enterprises especially – IBM is an example – regularly ask their staff for views on a wide range of issues. Processes have been fine-tuned until they are a regular feature of the environment, providing decision makers with an up-to-date reading of the climate as it changes. While the methodology and frequency of surveys in the federal public service are still evolving, several departments and agencies have made considerable progress. They have adopted the employee survey, in one form or another, as a best practice, a management tool with proven value.

However, potential users have many questions, some concerns and some anxiety about implementing a survey. This study in part seeks to answer their questions and address concerns by describing the experiences of those who have embarked on the initiative. The lessons these practitioners have learned need to be documented, discussed and shared. From these experiences come the critical success factors, of fundamental utility to the potential implementor of an employee survey.

Some readers may point to existing guidelines, captured very usefully in Statistics Canada's "Guide to Conducting an Employee Opinion Survey in the Federal Public Service." Prepared by the Special Surveys Group in 1992, this Guide addresses all of the operational considerations and provides very important advice. However, the present study intends to describe usage, that is, how closely those guidelines are followed, what happens when they are or are not implemented – in a word, congruence between practice and theory.

Documentation of best practices is a large part of CCMD's mandate. A practical guide which informs managers contemplating a large-scale assessment of employee views conveys this mandate. Properly conducted surveys make organizations more effective by helping them manage or facilitate organizational change. Subsequent initiatives can be tailored to survey results, and more and more agencies and departments are realizing this. But mistakes can be made when key components are missing, or misunderstood. CCMD's educative function on the topic of surveys can prevent such mistakes by promoting the sharing of experiences.

The study begins by exploring the reasons for doing an employee survey – its benefits and advantages – from a conceptual viewpoint. Since a good deal of confusion exists around the word "survey," several approaches are outlined and compared to show their significant differences. Employee surveys, research studies, opinion polls, upward feedback projects, culture studies and focus groups all have different objectives, methodologies, inputs and outputs. Each has unique properties, not always evident to the potential user.

The next part of the study moves away from conceptual and definitional issues to the realm of practice. It documents the experiences of key decision makers in organizations which have implemented employee surveys. These experiences are catalogued along ten variables, ranging from the kinds of survey tools and approaches used to feedback strategies.

Lessons learned from these experiences are then set forth, followed by a summary of the key success factors required for an effective employee survey.

II Why Do an Employee Survey?

Not to know is bad; not to wish to know is worse.

Managers often react to the idea of an employee survey with the view that it will tell them what they already know. Alternatively, they may offer the opinion that data produced may not be very favourable, creating a negative morale situation which may hinder rather than help the organization. Mature organizations realize that the diagnostic measurement function represented by a formal survey gives them the most objective picture. The feelings of senior management are not a substitute, affected as they are by particular incidents or situations which can significantly distort their perceptions. Of course, not wanting to know just how problematic issues actually are does little if anything to help resolve them. Confronting negative information requires appropriate feedback and action planning strategies; this will be discussed in more detail later.

A principal reason why organizations implement surveys is to determine the magnitude and scope of existing problems. For example, executives may have feedback that excessive workload is a major issue. The survey may indicate a) that excessive workload is primarily affecting a certain division or work group, and/or b) that a minority of employees have negative views, as opposed to a large proportion of staff. Measurement provides specificity and a standard for intelligent comparisons, which can then be followed by policy adjustments that pinpoint affected groups rather than the entire organization.

Using the "squeaky wheel" metaphor, most other arrangements for channelling opinions and grievances upwards cannot match a formal survey. These methods tend to over-represent the views of the vociferous and the articulate, and under-represent the views of others. A census survey eliminates this distortion, reveals the disaffected segments of the organization and provides critical perspective for decision makers. Surveys are corrective techniques which particularly assist managers who often overreact to, or make generalizations based on, isolated opinions.

Employee surveys are also used because they can be an effective communication tool, signalling to employees the desire to know what they think. Surveys make the organization's behaviour much more visible and observable to a wider audience. Employees gain new knowledge, which is shared equally. Done properly, the survey can also elicit not only what employees think, but how they go

Done properly, the survey can also elicit not only what employees think, but how they go about resolving problems.

about resolving problems. Moreover, when the organization *acts* on what employees see as problems and solutions, the message communicated by survey sponsors has significant power to enhance dialogue downstream. Effective organizations conduct periodic surveys because they know this.

Surveys are a classic organization improvement tool; the often-used medical check-up analogy is appropriate. Periodic assessments indicate any danger signals before they become situations past redemption. Organizations avoid repeating mistakes as well; if a survey shows damage, direct control is possible and a proactive position is preferable to constant reaction.

Perhaps the most common reason for initiating an employee survey is to manage change. Useful survey data drive more informed decisions, and enable fine-tuning of organizational activities. Surveys can show what will need to be changed, what will likely be easier or more difficult to change, where change is most needed (regions, occupational groups, and so on), and where the barriers are. Surveys facilitate targeted action; action which is targeted is likely to be more effective. Properly interpreted data offer the most credible, consensus-based rationale for new policies and initiatives (for example, upward feedback). The receptivity of these initiatives to those who will be affected is increased. The manager is better empowered to implement them as well.

Change is a fundamental feature of the public service landscape. The employee survey provides an opportunity for all who are affected by change to participate constructively:

> The current government environment of fiscal restraint and program review, coupled with the swiftness of changes in technology, public sector organizational structures and the global economy, has a significant impact on the public service. Yet it is the public service that upholds the government agenda. In these times of rapid change, *the voice of the employee can significantly contribute, in a positive manner, to the way in which an organization copes with this change* (Treasury Board Working Group on Quality Services – A Guide to Surveying Employees, August 1995, p. 2 [italics added]).

Understanding relationships between issues – even causes – enables management to influence them later. This is especially relevant when change is measured over time. Survey data serve as baseline information initially, and provide norms for the organization

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against which it can compare itself later to assess progress. Internally, the behaviour of any one group can be compared with that of other groups at any point in time.

As previously noted, managers may see the survey as a potentially damaging intervention, surfacing negative information. But surveys also disclose the "good news"– what the organization is doing well, its skills, successes and effective activities. This can be not only inspiring (morale-building), or occasionally surprising, but especially important if a reorganization has just been completed. Moreover, the organization can take steps to *maintain* these successes, ensuring that its strengths remain.

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A final advantage to employee surveys is the team-building opportunity they afford. When data feedback occurs and the information is processed – a topic covered in detail later – there is shared responsibility for resolving problems. Employees can collaborate with each other and with management to tackle the issues jointly in action-planning workshops. These problem-solving work groups generate team spirit and can be significantly cohesive experiences. This window of opportunity particularly benefits the organization about to encounter significant change.

III Some Important Differences in Approach

This section addresses three key issues in employee surveys:

- how the employee survey differs from other assessment methods, and from the research orientation in particular;
- the strengths and weaknesses of a census approach versus a sampling approach;
- the uses and limitations of “technology-driven” survey approaches.

Key Differences in Assessment Methods

In a broad sense, when an organization implements an employee survey, it is conducting a form of research into several issues, using employee opinions to draw conclusions. But the employee survey is much more than research; the organization seeks to improve itself and *needs* to know employee views to do this. Research typically focuses on what the organization may *want* to know; results may not necessarily be acted upon, and certainly the requirement for structured action is absent. As an organization development tool, the employee survey itself is only the prelude to action, not an end in itself. It is not subject to the same methodological rigour and constraints, is less concerned with process than with outcome. Techniques should be sound, for example, for data capture and analysis; but the objectives differ significantly. The Statistics Canada *Guide* is succinct: “An EOS (Employee Opinion Survey) is not a research study, but rather a tool for providing management with employee feedback” (p. 61).

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David Nadler, an acknowledged expert in the field, calls the employee survey a planned and systematic attempt to change patterns of organizational behaviour. Its goals are to make organizational functioning more effective and to improve the quality of working life experienced by individuals.

There are several approaches to achieving these objectives. Table 1 compares six approaches in terms of several characteristics. Each approach has particular uses, and therefore will provide different forms of output.

Table 1
TECHNIQUES FOR ASSESSING EMPLOYEE PERCEPTIONS

CHARACTERISTICS	EMPLOYEE SURVEY	RESEARCH STUDY	CULTURE STUDY
Main Objectives	Improve organization, e.g. manage change	Increase knowledge re issues	Understand organization's culture
Scope	Broad: *all* major issues	Often broad[7]	Values and norms
Importance of Senior Management Commitment	Critical	Not critical	Important as culture-carriers
Frequency	Every 2 years (norm)	Single event	Single event
Importance of Timing	Very important	Less important	Less important
Senior Staff Involvement[1]	High, e.g., committee	Low, specific (e.g. Audit)[8]	Moderate to high
Time Frame	Compressed (3-6 mos)	Varies; less important	Extended
Use of Consultants	Common	Can be internal	Common
Communication Strategy	Important and extensive	Less important; basic	Less important; basic
Sampling	Census or Sample	Sample or census	Sample or census
Use of Technology[2]			
1. Instrument Construction	Uncommon	Uncommon	Uncommon
2. Data Capture	Uncommon	Uncommon	Uncommon
3. Data Analysis	Always	Always	Always
Questionnaire Size	Range: 80 items	100-200^{+} items	Over 100 items
Frame[3]	Limited to key variables[6]	Extensive	Extensive
Response Rate Importance	Critical	Statistical importance	Important
Outputs[4]	Organizational Change	Knowledge	Information
Feedback Process[5]	Extensive, critical	Unnecessary	Minimal importance
Action on Results	Critical	Unnecessary or limited	N/A

Table 1 (continued)

CHARACTERISTICS	UPWARD FEEDBACK	OPINION POLLING	FOCUS GROUPS
Main Objectives	Improve management capabilities	Decide on specific issue	Assess climate; info on specific issues[12]
Scope	Extensive within area[9]	Narrow (one issue)	Narrow
Importance of Senior Management Commitment	Critical	N/A	N/A
Frequency	Repeated over time	Can be repeated	Single event
Importance of Timing	Important	Very important	Less important
Senior Staff Involvement	High, e.g., committee	N/A or minimal	N/A or minimal
Time frame	Compressed (2-3 mos)	Brief, e.g. 1 week	Brief, e.g. 1 week
Use of Consultants	Common	Common	Optional
Communication Strategy	Important and extensive	N/A or minimal	N/A or minimal
Sampling	Census or subgroup[10]	Statistical sample	Representative sample
Use of Technology			
1. Instrument Construction	Uncommon	N/A	N/A
2. Data Capture	Uncommon	Always	Optional
3. Data Analysis	Always	Always	N/A
Questionnaire Size	50-70 items	One or a few items	Limited no. of questions
Frame	N/A	N/A	N/A
Response Rate Importance	Very important	Statistical importance	N/A
Outputs	Organizational Change[11]	Information	Information
Feedback Process	Critical, extensive	N/A	N/A
Action on Results	Critical	Optional	Important

Notes to Table 1

1. Refers to opportunity costs, i.e. tasks and responsibilities of project officers and representatives from all segments of the organization (usually forming a Working Group and/or Steering Committee).

2. Refers to computers, modems, use of telephone lines to enable design of questionnaire, respond to the questionnaire, or analyze data obtained later. While rarely used in public surveys, usage is more common in the USA, military and large organizations.

3. Frame is the term for demographic variables selected; for example, gender, occupational groups, etc.

4. What the assessment technique provides as a final product.

5. How the information obtained is communicated back to those who provided it.

6. Demographic information sought is often limited by staff perception that anonymity will be lost, and/or by size of subgroups. Most experts concur that this is a key difference with the research study.

7. Most (or all) of the issues in a research study may be identical to those in an employee survey; this characteristic is not the most distinguishing feature differentiating the approaches.

8. Specific departments (such as the Audit group) may commission and conduct research.

9. Questions deal with management capabilities only, yet scope may be very extensive within this area.

10. Either all managers in the organization participate in the upward feedback project, or (commonly) most senior levels participate initially, followed by other levels. Occasionally, one department may pilot the exercise.

11. Less directly than an employee survey, and as a result of improved management practices and processes, ideally with employee involvement.

12. Highly variable usage, originating from need to determine consumer preferences for a new product (market research). Some uses: determining issues for employee survey; attitudes towards one issue (for example, career opportunities).

Table 2 describes examples of each assessment technique. There may be overlaps; for example, an upward feedback project uses employee survey technique, but it is also directed to an organizational subgroup (managers), and so requires tailored processing and reporting.

Table 2

EXAMPLES OF ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUES

Employee Survey*:* *Objective*: to know how all (or a sample of) employees feel about job satisfaction, communication, management practices, human resources issues, the organization's mandate, teamwork, service to clients, workload, stress. Results used to change (improve) organization via feedback process.

Research Study: *Objective*: to know how various types of employees (long term/short term; male/female; occupational groups) differ in their attitudes to one issue (such as telework) or several (as above). Relationships between data sets (for example, correlations, standard deviation) and statistical significance of differences are important. Results used to fine-tune policy, for example, on telework or service quality, and/or are published with broad readership in mind. Examples: Zussman study; training needs analyses; assessment of client satisfaction.

Opinion Polling: *Objective*: to gain opinion from representative sample of individuals, randomly selected, accessed by telephone. Interviewer has limited number of questions related to a single issue (such as quality of service received).

Upward Feedback Project: *Objective*: to determine attitudes of all employees to their managers. Extensive series of management competencies assessed via questionnaire technology, with significant effort and planning devoted to maintaining anonymity. Assessments of managers are carefully developed, provided to managers in written report. Managers meet with staff to discuss results and build action plans.

Focus Group: *Objective*: determine from a small group of carefully selected individuals their attitudes to one issue (typically, attributes of a new product). Sensing technique which provides limited preliminary information, and is often used as one of several methods in the *planning* stages of a survey or research study. Objective is information versus changing the organization. No feedback or processing of data.

Organizational Culture Study: *Objective*: to determine nature of organization's values, norms, beliefs: for example, how it treats newcomers; the value it places on team effort; its beliefs about quality of service to customers, etc. Another objective: show major differences between subcultures – for example, front-line service staff and policy shops. Purpose: to create mission statement; provide indication of where difficulties could be when organization is joined/merged with another, having a different culture; develop recruiting specifics for candidates; indicate need for differential application of policies. Variety of tools used: questionnaire, interviews, organizational documentation; observation; anecdotal evidence; etc.

Census or Sample?

A common question is whether to ask all employees for their views, or to select a sample which would be representative of the organization. The Statistics Canada *Guide* recommends the census approach and cites three advantages:

- the message is sent that everyone's views are important and will be considered;
- the need for developing complex procedures for sample design and estimation is eliminated;
- the census approach is recommended particularly if the survey is a first-time experience for the organization.

One might add that even when sampling techniques are developed which are sound from a research perspective, those employees left out can have reason to consider the sample's views as not their own. Anything less than total buy-in leaves open the possibility of resistance to survey results, and most organizations feel they cannot afford to risk this situation. A further consideration is cost. Small sample surveys have a higher cost per respondent as economies of scale (in the census approach) are not realized. In fact, some sources indicate cost reductions of up to 400 percent for the census survey (Rea and Parker 1992).

> Anything less than total buy-in leaves open the possibility of resistance to survey results.

Census is generally the method of choice when many questions are asked about a variety of issues, and when there is a planned, action-oriented change management process later. Sampling is more appropriate for single issue surveys (Dunham and Smith 1979). It is less effective for broader surveys; whatever the merits of methodological rigour in other (research) contexts, perceptions of respondents are of primary importance:

> Because employees frequently welcome a survey as a means of having their say in organizational affairs, they may resent a sampling procedure that fails to include them. On the other hand, those who are asked to participate as part of a sample may feel that they have been singled out for some reason and react negatively. These factors can lead to doubts about the survey's validity and can damage management's credibility (Dunham and Smith 1979:66).

Sample surveys require involved technical considerations. Even when they are finalized, employees at large may not understand or accept these (sampling) procedures. Any increase in the complexity of operations raises the probability of resistance. What works in the research model may not work outside the technical realm. Moreover, assumptions have to be made (for example, about equivalence in response patterns by respondents and non-respondents). If these assumptions are not true (or perceived as such), bias is introduced in reporting results.

Finally, the size of the organization plays a major part in the decision to sample or use a census approach. Small organizations invariably use the census approach, not only because this is easier, but because in small organizations the opinions of each individual have relatively more impact than they would in a large organization. Moreover, if a sample approach is used in a small organization, sampling error is more likely to influence the results (Henry 1990). Even large organizations do not necessarily sample, however, because of the perceptual issues discussed previously. Methodological considerations (such as sample representativeness) may be met, but the bottom line is the credibility of the process in the minds of respondents.

Table 3 provides a summary of the advantages and disadvantages of the sampling approach.

Table 3

SAMPLE SURVEYS

Advantages

- most appropriate for single issues
- can be cost effective/short time frame
- minimal communication strategy needed
- use of technology feasible (PCs, modems, telephone lines)
- enable straightforward feedback to respondents
- summation of results simple
- perceived as less disruptive than census by some users

Disadvantages

- less appropriate if organization has never conducted a census survey
- not necessarily more cost-effective than census (that is, most developmental aspects such as a questionnaire still required)
- complex sampling techniques needed; sampling error can be a problem
- may alienate/frustrate those excluded from sample; sends message that not all views will be heard
- employees sampled may feel singled out; anonymity concerns
- less direct link with organizational effectiveness
- closer to research model than organizational development
- less effective representation of organizational norms: employees at large are expected to understand and accept sampling process and acknowledge results as valid (leap of faith)
- generalizations about any subgroups in the sample may be difficult or impossible because of small cell size
- (joint) action planning on results impossible unless entire units are included in sample
- action on results restricted to top-down model (response to results from management)
- actions so implemented may not be acceptable to/supported by employees excluded from survey (majority of employees)
- opportunity for team-building via joint action planning lost, unless whole units form part of sample

"Technology-Driven" Approaches

An employee survey is much more than a simple data capture exercise. It requires a complex, comprehensive communication strategy, practical analysis, useful reporting which blends hard and soft data, and structured feedback implemented by professionals. Employee surveys involve not only technical skills, but a wide variety of consulting skills (including consultative techniques).

While automating the survey has some advantages, data capture represents only a very small fraction of the employee survey process. It is easy to forget that data capture is a means to an end, the objective being organizational improvement – where most of the effort should be placed. How the organization obtains data is important, and there are several choices. The first is the traditional mailed-out questionnaire; on its own, response rates are low, but with effective planning and communication, they can be acceptably high. A second option, generating extremely high participation rates, is administration of the questionnaire to groups of employees who are asked to attend a session for this purpose. Rates are usually over 90 percent (Dunham and Smith 1979).

> It is easy to forget that data capture is a means to an end, the objective being organizational improvement.

When employees complete the survey questionnaire in groups, they have the opportunity to ask questions if instructions or items are unclear. Managers trained to administer the survey have more ownership of the project and their endorsement is visible. Employees also have all the time they want to provide written comments to any open-ended questions. While administration may be logistically difficult or impossible for some organizations, it is a method of choice which has no risks when backed with a comprehensive communication strategy (necessary in any survey).

Technology-driven approaches use telephone lines, modems and computers to capture data. Employees key in their responses to both questionnaire items and open-ended questions. Printing costs are saved, and data entry is automatic. However, data entry with the traditional mailed-out questionnaire has little cost and is usually accomplished in minimal time once all questionnaires are returned. (Either approach usually offers employees two weeks or more to respond.) Response rates with technology-driven approaches are no better than with paper/pencil formats, and lower than they are when employees complete the questionnaire in groups.

Originated in many cases by market research firms in the United States, technology-driven approaches are often used for such purposes as evaluating television commercials or determining shoppers' attitudes to consumer products. Examples of such packages are Viewtel, Max, Quick Tally, and Preference Analyzer II. Software is sometimes even used to design the survey tool. In a formal employee survey, this usage ignores or minimizes the skills required. These skills are possessed by professionals in behavioural science who work jointly with organizational representatives. The design process has to involve broad consultation (for example, via focus groups), field-testing of drafts, and rigorous quality control. Kits with instructions and item banks do not meet these needs. Once again, an employee survey has significantly different objectives and uses than an opinion poll or research study in the world of market research.

> An employee survey has significantly different objectives and uses than an opinion poll or research study in the world of market research.

Respondents require time to collect their thoughts, especially when faced with the survey's open-ended questions. Technology-based approaches may disadvantage those who can best communicate their thoughts in writing by organizing and developing their points on paper.

Technology automates the data capture, data entry and statistical analysis process. Interpretation and meaningful reporting cannot be done effectively with software unless significant trade-offs are accepted. Raw tabulated data and transcripts of comments are the outputs. (Comments may be tabulated and coded; they are usually not integrated with statistical results, as they should be in an employee survey.) This may be appropriate for very small sample surveys (the original application), but far less for a full-scale employee survey. Using technology reduces some costs, but primarily because output is extremely limited. Organizations still need to devote significant time to designing a communication strategy, questionnaire development, interpretation of data, reporting, comprehensive feedback and action planning.

Computer-assisted surveying is often sold as a cost-saving approach; but the data entry and statistical analysis can be achieved through less costly alternatives to purchasing or leasing the hardware and software required. Speed is another selling point, but this is of importance in certain cases only (presenting results of a municipal election is one example). Response rates can easily be monitored without using the technology. Reports may be available quickly; but those “reports” are usually data dumps – statistics of various kinds.

While electronic surveying intrigues respondents, there is no research to suggest higher response rates. In fact, a certain comfort level is needed by respondents, which is not always the case (Sproull 1986).

Moreover, there are technical disadvantages. Computers are not portable, which is important if the organization has regional offices. At remote sites, contact persons are needed to prevent problems. Extensive keyboarding for open-ended questions can be an inhibitor for some people. Only one item appears on the screen at a time, and respondents do not know how many more items to expect. Some software packages have placed limitations on the length of the questionnaire, meaning important items cannot be included (hence the choice of the term "technology driven" used in this discussion). Limitations of eight or sixteen users at once on phone lines means the system is not flexible. Very sensitive issues are not appropriately surveyed using electronic methods. Complex surveys also rule out these approaches, as do those in which the questionnaire is changed each time it is used in a survey (which is usually the case).

Research suggests (and experience supports) the use of computer-assisted surveying in certain conditions:

- if the organization has the hardware and/or funding to purchase or lease the hardware and software
- if *all* staff are computer-literate and the comfort level is high (this is assessed beforehand)
- if results are needed very quickly
- if, when the survey is repeated later, no changes are made
- if the survey consists of statistical items and open-ended questions are absent or very minimal
- if respondents are in a central location or can be brought to it
- if the size of the organization is under 500 employees.

Each organization must ask first if the advantages (which are not always really advantages) do in fact add value over the paper/pencil approach, and second, if these advantages outweigh the disadvantages, especially with respect to cost. These questions need to be answered before proceeding.

IV Experiences in the Public Service

The conceptual rationale for undertaking an employee survey has been described, along with the merits of various approaches. Reference has also been made to the Statistics Canada guidelines which address each of the operational facets of the survey. However, the intent of the present study is to assess the degree to which public service organizations actually follow these guidelines, their objectives in conducting surveys, the approaches they have used, and their positive and negative experiences.

A total of eighteen agencies and departments participated in the study. In each case, the organization had recently conducted a survey, and the contact person was thoroughly exposed to all the issues. As anonymity was an important consideration in a review of this kind, particular experiences are not linked to any specific organization. It is more valuable for the potential user of surveys to understand the principles involved, and experiential outcomes, than it is to attribute an effective or ineffective strategy to a particular agency or department (the case study approach). Furthermore, there is always an understandable reluctance on the part of any organization to describe a situation or procedure which was flawed or had serious unintended consequences.

Private sector experiences are excluded from this study. In addition to being beyond its scope, there are significant differences in modus operandi, mission and organizational culture, which make any comparisons difficult, tenuous or artificial.

Several of the organizations contacted implemented employee surveys with the assistance of the author. One such organization, CIDA, agreed to be represented as a case study (see Appendix I). CIDA's experiences partly inspired the study and led to the selection of topics reviewed in the following sections. Each topic represents a core feature of survey design and implementation. Several other issues were excluded either in the interests of brevity or because they would not differentiate among the participating organizations. In some cases (such as the cost of the survey) the information would be difficult to compare and interpret since it was based on features unique to the organization and its particular work plan.

These are some of the topics investigated:

- the reasons for doing the survey, expectations about what it would accomplish, and the objectives of the survey
- how the decision to undertake the project was made
- the timing of the survey

- the communication strategy
- the survey approach chosen
- the development of data capture tools
- participation rates
- how results were reported
- how feedback was given
- how results were acted upon.

Departments and agencies participating in the study generally implemented census surveys across the entire organization. However, a few conducted the survey in a particular branch only. One large organization used a sampling approach. Research studies were done in two organizations; these projects were characterized by several distinct features which have been discussed previously. A salient feature of this research approach was the absence of any plan to act on results. (Research studies also have particular standards regarding response rates, reporting of results and feedback protocol; consequently, the two organizations which used a research approach will be considered separately when these issues are addressed later.)

The distribution of participating organizations is shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4

TYPE OF STUDY	**APPROACH**		
	Census (entire organization)	**Census (branch)**	**Sample**
Employee Survey	12	3	1
Research Study			2

Most organizations (83 percent) used a census approach; the remaining 17 percent used a sampling process. Sixteen of the eighteen organizations had a plan to act on results; two were research investigations of employee morale.

Survey Expectations and Objectives

The best reasons for doing a survey of employee opinions are to improve organizational effectiveness by acting on them, and to manage change better. A commonly held maxim is that the project should be done only if a detailed feedback plan is prepared, and the organization has a structured approach to acting on survey results, usually within a compressed time frame.

The most common reason for doing a survey cited by the organizations participating in this study was to make the organization more effective. Determination of levels of morale or employee relations in general was a frequently cited rationale. In some cases, improving service to clients was the ultimate objective; survey sponsors reasoned that investigating levels of job satisfaction among service providers was the logical place to start.

An almost equally frequent cause of the survey initiative was the organization's long-range plan. TQM frameworks and renewal exercises provide the terms of reference for the survey. In addition, 50 percent of the organizations had previously conducted census surveys and were following up on this activity, often because commitment to reassessment strategy had originally been made.

Another common reason for doing the survey (for those involved in a first experience) was to establish baseline data – benchmark information against which it would be possible to measure progress later.

Beyond these four core objectives, participating organizations offered other reasons, including:

- identification of barriers to proposed change
- a need to determine attitudes to particular issues or policies
- planned structural reorganization and a change in mandate (a need to determine staff awareness and acceptance)
- survey precedent established in one part of the organization
- a need to improve on a poorly executed previous survey
- publication of the survey report in a research forum
- the use of survey results as a means of promoting the organization.

Making the Decision

Resistance is not unusual within organizations contemplating any major change initiative, and an employee survey is a case in point. Change, or interventions which will lead to change, has been amply researched. For example, it is known that managers and employees are more likely to resist an initiative if a similar one was tried previously and failed. “Failure” can often mean that not all the expectations of all constituents were met, even though most may have been and the enterprise was considered a relative success. Resistance to the idea of conducting a survey is especially likely to occur if results from a previous survey were not acted upon, or even if this action did not satisfy some. Here, the most senior decision maker cannot expect to have unanimous endorsement. In this case, it is especially important to analyse why little or nothing was done, and to make the key distinctions between past survey efforts and the proposed survey.

The decision to proceed can be made by the person at the top of the organization, or via consensus – when this person asks senior managers for their views. In the latter case, proceeding may depend on a) a majority endorsement or b) unanimous agreement to do the survey. Organizations relying on total agreement construct a barrier which may be virtually impossible to overcome, especially if there has been any previous negative experience. Consultation is usually recommended, but final accountability often rests with the senior decision maker. How the decision is made will affect 1) support for the survey among managers (and therefore employees), and 2) how effective action planning will be later, although this is also a function of the operational steps in the survey.

In virtually all of the participating organizations, there was at least majority endorsement of the exercise. In all of the organizations, support from the most senior decision maker was present; however, in thirteen of the eighteen organizations this individual functioned as a significant driving force. His or her convictions about the merits of the survey were firm, despite opposition. Moreover, if the survey was fully implemented according to plan, it was likely due to very strong leadership at the top of the organization. In these cases, the survey initiative was supported throughout its life cycle and not abandoned part way due to changing organizational contexts.

The Question of Timing

Timing is never optimal for an employee survey. Organizations are constantly changing, so there will always be reasons to postpone or cancel in the hope that a period of stability will offer a better opportunity. But this opportunity turns out to be more and more elusive. Often cited is the view that surveys should not be done just before or after a reorganization. Yet some organizations have experienced very positive outcomes in both cases, as will be described later. Poor morale is also frequently mentioned, although this is often based on hearsay. Moreover, how will one know when morale is improved enough to begin the survey? It is also important to remember that a major determinant is the *assessment* of morale levels, in terms of both magnitude and scope. Diagnostic initiatives are usually conducted either at the onset of illness or during its course, rather than when the patient's condition has improved.

Identifying employee concerns at an early stage allows management to work toward maintaining organizational well-being, rather than firefighting later. Dunham and Smith (1979) and others advise against "crisis surveys" which respond to a critical problem. It is usually best to plan and schedule systematically, rather than wait for the right moment.

Diagnostic initiatives are usually conducted either at the onset of illness or during its course, rather than when the patient's condition has improved.

Within the public service, organizations have had varied experiences with the timing of surveys. Six of the eighteen participating organizations considered the timing for their survey to be reasonably good. But these were relative exceptions. Nine organizations knew the timing was definitely not good, but proceeded nevertheless. Four of these organizations ventured the opinion that the timing was never good, but that waiting for the opportune moment was not the answer. In two of the remaining organizations, one postponed the survey after the questionnaire had been developed, due to the PSAC strike. In the other organization, regular surveys are conducted at the discretion of branch heads, but on the advice of the Public Opinion Coordinator as to optimal timing.

It is important to note that in five of the nine organizations which had conducted earlier surveys, "negative history" had been created: the initial surveys had been flawed. Yet these same organizations repeated the exercise in order to improve the process, change staff perceptions, and re-establish a practice they obviously believed in. Survey fatigue was also acknowledged by two organizations, but was not used to shelve the exercise.

Communication Strategy

Successful employee surveys usually have comprehensive communication strategies. Nothing is taken for granted. Sponsorship and support, critical factors in surveys, are conveyed in a variety of formats: memos, advertising, discussion groups, and promoters who act throughout the survey process to monitor and guide activities. The head of the organization may also convey encouragement and endorsement.

The communication strategy can never be overdone. Particular messages, such as anonymity and data feedback, need constant emphasis. Consistency in the strategy and survey planning also augments the chances of success. Organizations normally make persons (communication experts) and time available. These individuals should be long-term, credible staff members who know the organization and can represent each of its parts. Some organizations feel there is an advantage to avoiding the automatic selection of human resource or internal audit staff for this purpose.

The communication strategy is especially important if there has been a negative history with questionnaires or surveys. Question and answer sessions can address these kinds of concerns and describe survey outcomes in practical terms. If the strategy is weak or the planning inadequate, one can expect fears that possibly threatening information will surface. These fears can discredit the survey initiative in advance. A lot of pre-emptive thinking is needed to identify concerns and deal with them. “Effective, rigorous marketing prior to implementation, and throughout the process, will increase the chances for success” (Treasury Board Working Group on Service Quality, *A Guide to Surveying Employees*, Aug. 1995:4).

The basis of the strategy is a good survey work plan. Its elements include: what is being collected and why; what will be done with it, how and when; and what the staff roles and responsibilities will be in the entire process. A key objective of the communication strategy is to manage expectations. There are several indicators of the degree to which the strategy accomplished its objectives; the relationships are summarized in the figure on the next page.

Some of the organizations participating in this study did develop effective strategies. A relatively *basic* strategy (the minimum required) would consist of memos from senior management announcing the survey, describing it, and urging participation. Newsletter notices and/or E-mail notes would also be part of this strategy.

Enhancements to this “Level 1” strategy – call it “Level 2”– would consist of active promoting (by managers, for example), arrangement of specific meetings partly or totally addressing the survey, and periodic reminders to augment participation rates. Level 1 activities would also be part of the strategy.

“Level 3” communication often involves more creative techniques in addition to the foregoing measures. One example is a Question and Answer document. Others include: specifically designated promoters; use of videotaping; posters; one-on-one educational briefings with each manager; and toll-free numbers. Of the eighteen organizations participating, ten used basic strategies, four used Level 2 strategies, and four implemented very comprehensive Level 3 activities.

Some important correlates of communication strategy are the size of the organization and previous survey experience (on the *cause* side), and response rate (on the *effect* side). Not surprisingly, Level 1 strategies were most common in the smaller organizations (or branches of large organizations which had undertaken the survey). There is less need for elaborate promotion in these cases; more homogeneity makes communication easier. Conversely, the largest organizations used Level 3 strategies.

Interestingly, those organizations conducting a survey for the first time did not necessarily employ a full Level 3 strategy. Despite the advisability of extensive communication in this situation, many also happened to be smaller organizations which could generally achieve reasonable participation without resorting to more elaborate methods.

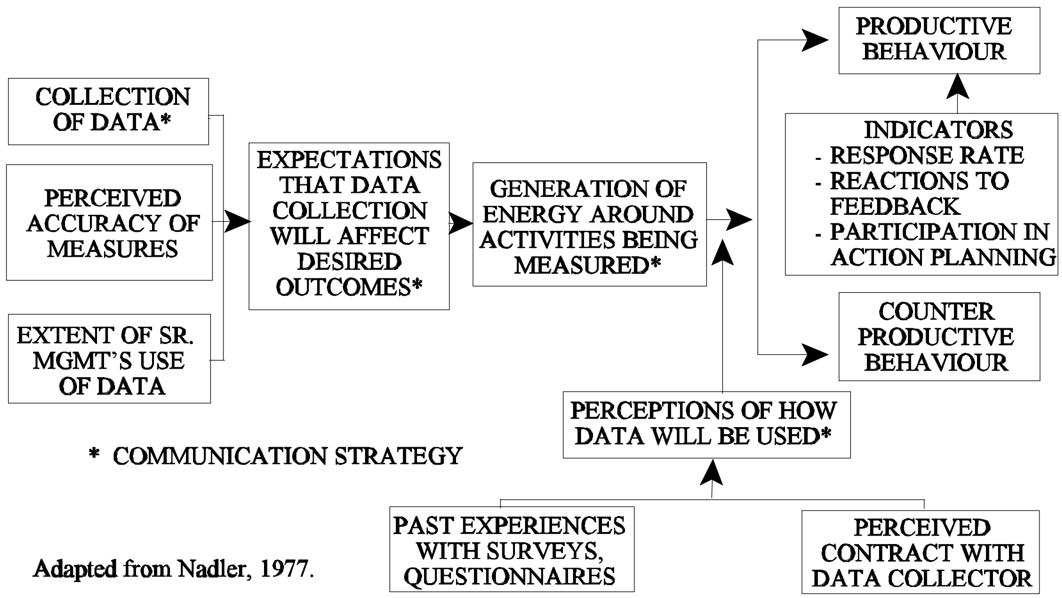
How does level of communication strategy correlate with response rate? There are many factors influencing response rate; promotion of the survey is only one, albeit perhaps the most important. Among the participating organizations, response rate was not always highest in Level 3 conditions; the size of the organization appeared to be the key variable. However, while a Level 3 strategy will not always guarantee a high response rate, a Level 1 strategy may not be enough to achieve it. Lower response rates often seem to occur in larger organizations, but this can be due to a variety of other factors – negative history with surveys, for example. These relationships will be discussed in a later section.

Tactical Considerations

Section III described various survey approaches including differences in the research model; sampling versus census; and technology-driven data capture. Effective surveys are simple, action-oriented projects typically involving all employees in completing a mailed-out questionnaire. The questionnaire is normally custom designed by an expert, working with a survey committee, and is usually based on a variety of data sources, including focus groups. Pretesting is another common step in the design process. The questionnaire is most often mailed out (occasionally administered), and collected by the consultant for data analysis.

Fourteen of the eighteen agencies and departments which had implemented surveys sent the questionnaire to employees by mail. In three cases, the questionnaire was administered to groups of employees. Two of these organizations were small enough for this to be done. In one case (a research study), the sample of respondents was telephoned by the research firm, questions were read and answers recorded, including comments. (Some respondents were disadvantaged by this approach, according to this organization's representative.)

Figure 1



Adapted from Nadler, 1977.

None of the organizations used electronic surveying techniques (employees keying in responses and typing comments on their PCs to an on-screen questionnaire.) Concerns were expressed by the participating organizations that anonymity could not be guaranteed or at least that employees would have doubts about this. “We want to see our views go out in an envelope.” One observation made was that electronic surveying would perhaps be more appropriate in an organization accustomed to using PCs extensively, that is, in a technology-oriented environment. Another opinion was that electronic surveying is impersonal.

As previously noted, three organizations used a sampling approach. Two of these are extremely large organizations, necessitating such an approach. (Both had very low response rates, however, jeopardizing the value of the data. Mortality is far less forgivable in a sample which is designed to be highly representative of the organization.) The third (medium-sized) organization used a sampling approach within a research framework. Employees asked to complete the questionnaire did not appear to be concerned about anonymity when contacted by telephone. They did not feel singled out, nor did employees who were not contacted feel excluded. However, both survey feedback and action on results were either weak or absent. In this situation, respondents likely feel they have far less to lose. Cost was also a consideration: for example, the cost of surveying on three occasions (400 employees each time) was more than a census survey would cost for 3,000 employees.

Data Capture Tools

The best type of survey questionnaire is arguably one which has been custom-designed to reflect the culture of the organization and the issues it considers important to assess. Nadler refers to these tools as "empathic." Standardized questionnaires exist, and are based on organizational models which may or may not apply as closely as they should. Such "non-empathic" questionnaires can be purchased, but are rarely if ever used without expert assistance. Respondents find it more difficult to warm up to these tools, reportedly identifying with them less than they do with a tool that has been collaboratively designed. Ownership is, after all, important psychologically. Employees can understand why certain questions are included; working group members can respond intelligently to questions from staff; and items will likely be more specific and thus more readily acted upon later – a critical advantage.

This last point bears amplifying. The organization's relevant power groups have to buy in at the front end. This enables them to attach significant importance to the data generated later, which in turn produces change. Commercially available questionnaires are similar to cameras. Companies will rent (or sell) them, and may or may not provide a manual. The user supplies film (the respondents). However, most pictures will not turn out until the user gains experience, or unless he or she already has it. Even if the "camera" is foolproof (what the vendor would have the user believe), what counts is what happens to the photos. Turnkey approaches do not address this (most critical) issue.

The same can be said for automated processes offered as legitimate ways of designing a survey questionnaire. In many cases, the value added may not compensate the user who has to recognize the cultural context of the organization. In most cases, survey questionnaires are painstakingly designed by a survey committee working with a professional expert. Special interests may surface, such as the need for several items on employment equity. Such needs are usually best handled via "one-off" surveys or even focus groups. Including the wishes of all interest groups invariably leads to a lengthy, tedious questionnaire and the project evolves into a research study.

A similar pitfall can occur with the survey frame. Asking for too much demographic data can both compromise respondent anonymity and move the focus to data analysis versus action on results (Scarpello and Vandenberg 1991). At times, both pitfalls may simply be manifestations of a reluctance to undertake organization improvement exercise with unambiguous output that will require attention.

Asking for too much demographic data can both compromise respondent anonymity and move the focus to data analysis versus action on results.

Overcomplexity can blur focus, dissipate effort, obscure accountability and lead to process burnout. Any or all of these phenomena will diminish the survey's impact.

Organizations participating in this study were asked to describe the questionnaire development process. Eighty-three percent of these organizations used an external consultant to design the questionnaire. Sixty-seven percent ended up using a questionnaire which was completely custom designed to meet their needs. The remaining 33 percent used a questionnaire provided by the consulting firm, with some customization. This customization usually did not exceed 30 percent of the existing questionnaire items.

Any survey questionnaire contains questions on a variety of issues which the organization considers important. As a first step in development, these issues need to be brought to the surface. About 47 percent of the organizations participating used focus groups of representative employees to do this. Twenty-four percent used interviews with senior managers, done by the consultant. Twenty-nine percent used neither of these consultative techniques; the survey committee or working group discussed issues they believed were important, and the questionnaire was either built (or modified) on this basis.

Virtually all organizations pretested their questionnaires carefully, in both languages. Those that did not were smaller organizations, where pretesting was not feasible.

These findings suggest that questionnaire design is carried out reasonably well in the public service. There is relatively less satisfaction with an off-the-shelf tool: for example, organizations can find it difficult to convince the questionnaire's owners to make anything beyond minor changes. If a lot of importance is placed on the database which comes with the off-the-shelf questionnaire, the organization is also reluctant to suggest changes to it. Changes jeopardize the comparability of results later and both parties realize this. As a result, the value placed on comparability of results often means a trade-off with the significant benefits of customizing the questionnaire.

In all cases, the apparently lower cost of proprietary questionnaires needs to be balanced against the relatively minor expense of customization, especially when this initial effort is amortized over several survey implementations. Higher validity and reliability is also offered as an advantage; but this may be more of a selling point for researchers. The norms which come with off-the-shelf questionnaires may not always be appropriate, and in any event the organization is best advised to use itself – rather than other organizations – as a basis for comparison (time series approach).

Participation Rates

The percentage of employees completing the survey questionnaire is one of the most telling indicators of the survey's success. It usually reflects the effectiveness of the communication strategy and the quality of the tool used. The response rate is largely dependent on anonymity – how well this was assured – and explanations about the next steps.

Highest rates are often the result of:

- an effective communication strategy
- questionnaire administration
- follow-up techniques to increase the rate
- small organization size.

Lower rates can occur when:

- results from a previous survey were not (sufficiently) acted upon
- minimum effort at communication existed
- a mail-out approach was used (Rea and Parker 1992), especially with a marginal (Level 1) communication strategy
- the organization considers the rate acceptable or endorses advice given, and does not try to increase it.

Notably absent among these factors is perceived low employee morale. Low morale will not necessarily lead to employee apathy when the time comes to complete the questionnaire. In fact, low morale can often *increase* response rate; employees have a lot to say, and seize the opportunity to do so.

What constitutes an acceptable response rate? There are no objective standards; the Statistics Canada *Guide* refers only to the consequences of low response rates, or highly variable rates across the organization, which can affect interpretation of results. In the author's view, if a minimum 75 percent of employees participate, the data can be considered reasonably valid, certainly more so than with a 50 percent rate. A very low rate may be understandable in some organizational contexts, but it still leaves concerns about interpreting results. Rates of 80 percent and higher are obtainable with powerful communication strategies, and/or in smaller organizations.

The higher the response rate, the more valid the data, and the less likely employees will reject the results. With these objectives in mind – which drive the

The higher the response rate, the more valid the data, and the less likely employees will reject the results.

effectiveness of action on results later – organizations should use every means at their disposal to assure extremely high participation. No amount of statistical weighting to compensate for a low participation rate will likely convince the average employee of the validity of the results.

Of the eighteen organizations in the study, fifteen implemented census surveys; three of these did so in one branch only, while the other twelve were organization-wide surveys. Response rates ranged from 44 to 94 percent (see Table 5), with an average of 71 percent. Not surprisingly, the average response rate for branch surveys was higher: 81 percent. In those organizations where the questionnaire was administered to groups of employees, response rates were again even higher: 82, 88 and 94 percent, with an average of 88 percent.

Table 5

TYPE OF STUDY	**RESPONSE RATE (%)**		
	Census (entire organization)	**Census (one branch)**	**Sample**
Employee Survey	77, 77, 50, 44, 62, 66, 88*, 77, 82*, 78, 50, 77	94*, 66, 83	33
Research Study			40, 95

* *Questionnaire administered to groups of employees*

The sample surveys had much lower participation rates, with one exception (95 percent – this organization used a research firm to telephone each randomly selected respondent).

The factors that influence the level of employee participation in surveys are the process for capturing data, organization size and the communication strategy used. Clearly, if alternatives to mail-out are used, substantially greater participation results. In addition, the smaller the organization, the higher the rate. Seven of the eighteen organizations were in this category; all had rates of at least 66 percent. This is understandable, as it is generally much easier to involve staff in such organizations. In those organizations which used more effective (Level 3) communication strategies, the rate was also higher (in four out of every five cases).

An organization considering an employee survey and aiming for the greatest participation would be well advised to convene groups of employees to complete the questionnaire and develop a detailed and creative communication strategy. These factors become even more important in larger organizations.

What is acceptable in a response rate is often arbitrary. Representatives in the participating organizations were asked about this. Employee survey response rates in these organizations ranged from 60 to 80 percent; the average was 70 percent. One observation made was that an employee survey response rate at the lower end could be considered acceptable as long as it is maintained in all parts of the organization. Another observation was that a participation rate under 75 percent is an indicator that many employees are alienated. Also, if an organization is doing its first survey, a lower rate could be more acceptable; subsequent surveys would be expected to have more participation. (This depends on whether negative history has occurred. In cases where the initial survey encountered serious problems, rates would be expected to decrease in later surveys, unless significant improvements were made. In several organizations in the study significant improvements were made and the rate increased.)

Reporting Results

The reporting of survey results is a critical stepping stone to acting on them. The effectiveness of this action largely depends on the quality of the reporting, which can range from mere raw data (statistics and comments – essentially a data dump) to a more value-added format. This format presents results in a digestible, more detailed and comprehensive manner, making it more useful to the organization in conveying the survey results to staff and subsequently working with staff to achieve change.

Results are usually contained in a preliminary interim report, which is followed by an extensive, final report and branch reports for each unit of the organization. Highlights of these documents are prepared for management and employee briefings. Because survey results can take on a life of their own if presented ambiguously or sparsely, great care has to be taken in the development of reports. This is particularly the case for an organization experiencing a first survey. Practitioners also continually emphasize that reports can never replace discussion groups to work with the data later. People need to *discuss* the results in the report; the report alone will not change the organization. Rare is the report that can stand alone, even after several drafts; at the very least it should be a window of opportunity to create dialogue within the organization.

Reports can never replace discussion groups to work with the data later.

Occasionally, complex statistics are used (such as sample weighting procedures, factor analysis, deviation values, composite scores). These are appropriate for research studies; but the majority of those who use the results of an employee survey tend to mistrust statistics. If the results are manipulated into formats which satisfy the researcher's needs, they are less likely to generate a comfort level for others, especially the average employee (Ramos 1991). They are less likely to be seen as useful, valid and leading to action to produce change and improve the organization. It is the responsibility of the author (consultant) to make the reports simple, understandable – and thus most likely to be implemented.

To this end, editorializing should be avoided. The report should focus on what staff propose as solutions to the problems they describe. Employee comments should be organized and integrated into statistical results. A stand-alone document of verbatim comments is far less useful, although a summary of employee comments can be helpful if the analysis is done by a professional. Analysis, thematic summation and integration of comments add more value to reports than a simple listing or verbatim appendix (Gear 1991).

Fundamental to the reporting process is the rule of thumb that the reports be written not only for senior management, but for employees (who will need to use the contents). It is helpful to have results organized into positive, negative and “to be discussed” categories. Evaluation and interpretation are important (Reeves and Harper 1991) in making information digestible; data dumps are unhelpful. The organization's results are also sometimes compared with those from other organizations. However, the basis for comparison should be clearly explained (Lees-Haley and Lees-Haley 1982). External comparisons are useful for a first survey, where reference points provide perspective. In later surveys, progress over time becomes more important; the organization uses itself as a reference.

Organizations need to ask themselves in the survey planning stage what use they wish to make of the reports. If the purpose is for information only, directed at senior managers, a research approach or sample survey may work. If the objective is organizational change in collaboration with staff (for example, as part of a renewal exercise like that of CIDA, Appendix I), then the reports have to be much more detailed. They must add value to the survey, linking the data collection steps with the work plan to act on results. In this regard, they can be powerful change management tools.

Using the foregoing criteria, survey reports from participating organizations were assessed. About three-quarters of these documents are very comprehensive final reports. The remainder offer a minimal portrayal of results, presumably to augment the likelihood of being read. The inevitable trade-off is that readers have far less information to use in action planning efforts later. Half the survey reports offer no analysis of the results; this is left to the discretion of the reader, who is given no preliminary guidelines about the meaning of levels of agreement or disagreement. About 30 percent of the reports compare the results with those in other organizations; however, the latter are often not similar enough to provide a useful comparison. This generally occurs where questionnaires have minimal customization; the organization presumably traded off the benefits of a tailored tool for the perceived advantage of being compared to a large database.

Half of the reports contain none of the suggestions for improvement typically made by employees on the survey questionnaire. Almost half contained no recommendations based on the results. These were left for the organization to develop.

Employees usually provide a great deal of commentary when responding to open-ended questions. In many of the survey reports assessed, these comments and suggestions are significantly under-utilized. Often there is minimal reference to these comments; they are analysed and sorted into themes in only half the reports and are integrated with statistical results in only 44 percent of the reports. In 31 percent of the reports, verbatim comments appear only as an appendix. In 38 percent of the participating organizations the comments received were typed as a separate exercise and were then forwarded to senior management (one individual or several). In a few cases, staff were advised that this would be the process followed; in most cases, the decision about what to do with employee comments was made only after all results were in. While the norms and values of participating organizations differ (such as on the issue of openness), it is arguable that more constructive use could be made of commentary. "Constructive use" means analysing these remarks for trends, showing how they amplify statistical results, linking key comments to branch results, publishing the more summative comments, and so on. A few organizations did in fact do so (for example, CIDA: see Appendix I) – employee comments were analysed, sorted, integrated with results and reported very comprehensively.

Feedback: What, How and Why

Conveying survey results to those who provided them is the next essential step. Feedback is a process which enables the organization as a whole to learn about itself. It facilitates system correction rather than automatically making it happen; this will occur only when employees are given the opportunity to work with results.

There are a variety of options for the practitioner here, and those selected depend in part on the organization's culture, including the behavioural norms which have been established. However, the feedback process can depart from these norms if they have not worked well enough in the past. If more openness is a goal, the organization's decision makers have a chance at this stage to move visibly and convincingly in that direction. Perhaps the least effective feedback approach is a brief note from management stating what they will do in response to survey results. While this is an important message, there is significant value added in going further.

A common (and more functional) approach is to provide employees with a summary of the survey results, including both statistics and commentary. Employees may also be given a summary of results for the branch in which they work, and access to the final report as well.

All of this is best done as soon as these documents have been finalized; otherwise, momentum and interest can diminish. Given the rapid pace of change in contemporary organizations, stale data can render the survey exercise far less powerful as a change management strategy. If several months have passed, it is likely that employees would find it difficult to identify with the survey results. Less ownership translates into less participation in the critical problem-resolution process to follow.

For the same reason, any action planning activity should occur soon after employees receive the results. This activity (discussed in more detail in the next section) requires advance planning. Once senior managers and the survey committee have been briefed on results and employees receive these same results, workshops can be scheduled to enable each manager to meet with staff and discuss them.

Any action planning activity should occur soon after employees receive the results.

An employee survey is "...a method to upgrade understanding of the organization and also to develop a collective will to alter conditions and behaviours that need improvement" (Statistics Canada, *Guide*:62). To achieve this goal, feedback needs to be timely, specific and open. Withholding any part of the results for whatever reason can have negative consequences which may not be immediately apparent, but which may surface as apathy later on (passive resistance). An employee survey is a sensitive communication exercise involving everyone; alienating even some respondents erodes the collective will needed for collaborative change. Some results will invariably be negative (statistics and comments). But the organization will initially have made a firm commitment to staff to release them. Open dialogue in a professionally facilitated workshop setting is preferable to prejudging employee reactions ("damage control").

In virtually all participating organizations, senior management was briefed on survey results, usually by the project manager or survey committee with the assistance of the consultant (or vice versa). In all organizations, staff had access to the final report (but not necessarily comments) if they wished. Where branch reports were produced, employees in the branch received copies. If an interim report was produced, all staff received it.

In about 25 percent of participating organizations, senior managers were briefed individually by the project team. In only 23 percent of organizations did managers take an active role in the feedback process; in the remaining 77 percent, they were briefed along with employees. One organization did go well beyond the norm, however, giving managers the opportunity to relay results to staff and requiring them later to develop action plans linked to their performance objectives. This feedback strategy was highly structured, visible and effective.

This kind of "cascading" feedback is rare, although well supported in the survey literature and within the most progressive organizations. Senior management is briefed as a group followed by direct briefing of each manager. These managers then brief their staff, sometimes even when there may be only five employees in the unit. Organizations participating in this study rarely went much below the most senior levels; the feedback process was more discretionary. The result is that some managers seize the opportunity; many do not. Occasionally, creativity is reflected in the feedback strategy – one organization convened all staff off-site for a briefing by both the consultant and senior management.

Acting on Results

An employee survey is only useful to the extent that there is action on results; this is a view shared by both experts (for example, Reeves and Harper 1981) and users. Moreover, the most effective organizations commit to act on results from the start. Unlike a survey research project where the formal presentation of results is considered the end of the assignment, an employee survey linked to organizational effectiveness is fundamentally concerned with what happens next. The reporting and feedback stages are the culmination of some events and the beginning of others. Unless there is upfront commitment to use the data constructively and this commitment is met, success is unlikely (Nadler 1997).

> The reporting and feedback stages are the culmination of some events, and the beginning of others.

Action on results is traditionally thought to mean management's response to them, indicating what can and cannot be done and why. While this is a start, it reflects a top-down model with one-way communication. Organizations experienced with surveys (such as Fedex) use a different model which involves joint accountability and responsibility to improve situations identified in the survey results. This approach – action planning workshops– involves simultaneous, two-way communication through dialogue between managers and employees.

Workshops are scheduled by managers; internal or external facilitators may be involved. Results are presented, prioritized and discussed. Solutions are generated by managers and employees together. Participants may choose to start with easily resolved issues, moving on to tackle those involving policy change or development. At later stages (perhaps in future encounters) complex changes can be made through creative joint efforts.

Action planning workshops can take a variety of forms. In most cases, specific action plans which document the problem and how it is to be solved are produced as tangible output.

A linkage person can participate in all workshops and collate the plans. These can later be monitored by a task force; in the majority of cases, plans are merged into the organization's short- and long-range strategic planning. The survey exercise is rarely a stand-alone initiative; its integration into a broader change strategy is a key to its effectiveness (see Appendix I).

Critical roles can be played by managers, the linkage person(s) and the consultant throughout the process. They act as the organization's corporate memory, recording events so that progress can be tracked, then assessed when the next survey occurs. Most exemplary organizations do periodic employee surveys for this reason. Demonstrable progress in managing change is a powerful motivator.

About 41 percent of participating organizations acted on their survey results, using the Fedex approach. Some of these organizations also incorporated the more traditional "management response" model, usually for corporate or organization-wide issues requiring improvement. However, two organizations did not go further than this; employees were not involved in an action-planning process.

Significantly, 41 percent of the agencies and departments did *not* act on results at all. Moreover, the survey was a first experience for most of them. A number of reasons were given:

- new changes in the organization (reorganization, downsizing, other priorities)
- a view that action planning workshops would be too disruptive
- unwillingness of senior management
- existence of ongoing efforts to tackle the issues
- action on results left to the discretion of each manager
- process burnout
- departure of the senior manager of the organization
- no central strategy for action on results
- questionnaire items that were vague and did not lead to further action.

Clearly, much can happen during the survey life cycle, making it difficult (but not impossible) to follow through later. Contingency plans have to be established. Commitments made at the start have to be met; otherwise staff become very cynical and future attempts to solicit their views are far less successful. (Survey results also become less positive.) Those organizations with effective follow-through were subject to the same changing contexts; yet they made significant moves forward – doing the right thing right.

Commitments made at the start have to be met; otherwise staff become very cynical and future attempts to solicit their views are far less successful.

V Lessons Learned

Representatives of agencies and departments contacted for this study had all implemented employee surveys at least once. They were asked what they would do differently for a subsequent survey, what processes they would improve on based on their experiences.

Several indicated they would shorten the questionnaire, making it easier to identify areas for improvement. Dealing with less information (which is often repetitious) would be easier; in addition, some felt the items had to be more easily implemented. If the survey issues were within the realm of employee control, they would be more likely to be accepted later and would thus have a better chance of being acted upon.

The response rate in most of the participants' surveys was low. Some practitioners felt this could be augmented through better promotion of the survey. (Others did not feel participation was too low, citing similar organizations with equivalent rates, or the fact that the survey was being done for the first time.)

It was recognized that there is a need for dedicated internal resources and for efficient assignment of responsibilities in conducting the survey.

While senior management was committed in most of the surveys implemented by participant organizations, in some cases more visible demonstration of support would have been helpful. This sends the message that the survey is a major priority.

The most frequent response by participants was that more attention to acting on results played a major role in the success of the survey. Organizations dissatisfied with their efforts generally indicated they would need to either a) act decisively on results or b) act with more focus, that is, use employee suggestions and recommendations in the reports.

Negative history also plays an important part: two users whose experiences were below expectations suggested they would not consider a census survey on a regular basis, but would experiment with mini-surveys. A first survey establishes a precedent. If it is not done as successfully as hoped, it is difficult (but not impossible) to repeat later. Totally abandoning the initiative is a drastic alternative, which neglects the need to manage change. Choosing less effective alternatives (such as a sample survey) may be an interim solution more manageable in the short run. However, the objective of making the organization effective by acting on results is not achieved as easily or as effectively with a sample or mini-survey approach. This is why most participants in this study did *census surveys* from the start, and acknowledge the merits of this approach.

A number of organizational representatives had observations on what they would do differently. These included:

- developing a better communication strategy
- responding better to time lines; keeping the project on track by maintaining its importance
- choosing a more appropriate consultant
- negotiating with the consultant to overcome resistance to changing the questionnaire
- reporting and integrating survey comments – or dropping open-ended questions
- integrating results with client service and performance measures
- making a better connection between survey results and the organization's mandate
- doing surveys more regularly (a successively easier task).

Despite problems encountered, *71 percent of participating organizations would implement another survey*; 11 percent would consider this, and 17 percent were unlikely to follow up.

> Seventy-one percent of participating organizations would implement another survey.

An overview of some very common errors in carrying out an employee survey appears in Table 6. Note that these pertain to census surveys of employee views on broad organizational issues, not sample or research studies.

Lessons learned can also be very positive. These are collected under the heading "Critical Success Factors" which follows next.

Table 6

EMPLOYEE SURVEYS) SOME COMMON MISTAKES
• under-commitment of internal resources (persons, time)
• confusing the survey with a research study
• expecting a sampling approach to achieve the objectives of a census survey
• insufficient involvement of senior management in initial planning and communication
• failing to adequately emphasize and assure anonymity
• asking too many questions on the questionnaire
• asking too much personal information about the respondent
• overdoing consultation in the preliminary stages of project design
• not achieving a satisfactory response rate
• overly complex statistical analysis of results
• allowing too much time to elapse between data collection and distribution of results (feedback)
• allowing too much time to elapse between feedback and action on results
• not acting on results (via workshops, for example)
• expecting only managers to be accountable for action on results
• failing to implement follow-up surveys

VI Critical Success Factors

Representatives of organizations participating in this study were asked how they would advise others interested in implementing an employee survey. They were asked to identify the most important aspects of the process, without which the survey would not accomplish its objectives.

Action on Results

The most frequently cited view was that a survey could only be considered successful if some *action on results* occurred. There was also a consensus among practitioners that intent to act on results needs to be stated up front; in other words, the organization's senior management must give their commitment to address results, no matter how negative they may be. Some practitioners expressed the opinion that employees as well as managers would need to be involved in this process. In terms of how this was to be implemented, some observations were made:

1. Focus on issues that can be acted upon. If the questionnaire is too wide-ranging, broad or vague, it is difficult to achieve a focus. Ideally, the items should be specific enough so that action is easier later, especially by staff.

2. Do not try to resolve *all* issues in the survey results. Begin with the most achievable; the process is incremental.

Practitioners stressed that following through on the survey was the deciding factor; if this could not be guaranteed, or was to be subject to prevailing changes in the organization's structure or mandate, the exercise should be reconsidered. Negative history is created when feedback and/or action planning is flawed or abandoned.

Negative history is created when feedback and/or action planning is flawed or abandoned.

(Note that lessons learned support this – those organizations which withheld part of the results, or had a loose approach to dealing with them, indirectly generated a less effective climate which will be difficult to change. Although these represent a small minority, they provide a strong case for using survey results as constructively as possible.)

Planning

Another critical success factor is *planning*. This means developing a comprehensive survey work plan for all stages, assigning tasks and responsibilities to match the skills and availability of project administrators. It also means appropriately supporting the exercise with enough personnel, time and funding. According to those who have undertaken surveys, planning also involves being very clear about what the survey is supposed to accomplish.

Communication Strategy

A third factor is the *communication strategy*. This encompasses:

- transparency and openness – telling employees everything they want to know about the survey, especially about objectives;
- establishing beyond any doubt that responses will be anonymous; emphasizing this principle and ensuring that anonymity occurs throughout the entire life cycle of the project;
- educating all managers about the survey process from the start, so that there are no surprises and misconceptions later when the results are available and need to be acted upon.

Questionnaire Design

Some aspects of the data capture process were also considered critical. The *questionnaire* must be pretested carefully and designed so that it is in fact an effective tool. (Lessons learned suggested that if the questionnaire is too long, too vague, or insufficiently tailored to the organization, several unintended consequences can occur; the organization finds it difficult to start resolving the issues identified.)

Support from senior management is also cited as a major determinant of the survey's utility and impact. Such support plays a key role in generating high participation by employees; it sets an example at the data feedback stage; and it is fundamental in the action planning process. Practitioners reporting satisfactory experiences with employee surveys credited support from the top of the organization as being the major driver of the exercise.

Follow-Up

Follow-up after the survey is also critical for many users. Since a common objective is to develop baseline data against which the organization can compare itself later, progress cannot be tracked if future assessments do not occur. Typically, this follow-up is a census survey, but some users institute sample assessments within a year or two of the original benchmark survey. Employees usually want to know what happened (or at least why it did not happen). Follow-up becomes especially crucial if in fact it formed part of the original commitment by management. In cases where it is postponed continually – or abandoned – (even for what management considers valid reasons), momentum is lost, apathy develops and resistance can grow, eroding what may have been a very effective initial survey exercise.

Other Factors

Less commonly cited success factors included:

- employee ownership – that is, involving staff in questionnaire development;
- generating a high response rate by using administration sessions, for example;
- integrating the survey into the organization's on-going activity (such as a renewal exercise);
- following up on any commitment originally made to employees;
- not being overly concerned with the probability of success at the start; there is a learning curve;
- using an external consultant, not internal resources (too much baggage, not enough objectivity, skill level).

It is interesting to note that among those elements *not* identified as critical success factors were the following:

- timing for implementing a survey;
- the quality of the report of survey results (depth, utility);
- a feedback protocol.

Although these three factors were not at the top of any user's list, they cannot be ignored. The nature of the survey reports is a case in point; the more comprehensive these reports are, the more useful they can be to the organization. This implies analyses which are simple, digestible and clear. Mining the data includes reporting valuable employee comments, suggestions and recommendations in a manageable and readable format and integrating them with statistical results. Feedback means all employees receive or have access to all data; the withholding of results places severe limitations on action planning. Few also would disagree on the critical importance of the feedback process to what happens next, that is, to the fundamental objectives of the survey.

The more comprehensive the survey reports are, the more useful they can be to the organization.

Table 7

CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS
• action on results
• survey work plan
• communication strategy: openness, anonymity
• an effective questionnaire
• support from senior management
• follow-up after the survey

VII Conclusions

This study has examined the practices some organizations have used in implementing employee surveys. While these practices were not always the best ones, significant efforts have been made by dedicated change agents to follow established models and make their projects work. Few projects could be called an unqualified success; there are learning curves involved for every aspect of survey design and implementation. However, several initiatives remain exemplary.

The vast majority of organizations undertook census surveys where possible and avoided a purely research approach; their task was to improve effectiveness using survey results. They invariably used external experts to assist them. Ample attention was given to communication strategies, which often produced high levels of employee participation. The survey was a first experience for many. Careful attention was generally given to tailoring the questionnaire once issues were decided (usually through a consultative process). Many of the organizations ended up with credible results provided by at least two-thirds of employees completing a questionnaire.

Less effective were the reporting and feedback components, suggesting room for improvement on these key processes. The quality and utility of reports, including missed opportunities to use the data gathered more fully (in a value-added format), ranged from poor to excellent. Room for improvement is apparent as well in the way results are conveyed to employees; more and better processes (such as more involvement of managers) would have added value.

Most significantly, despite the most ambitious plans, many organizations (41 percent) did not act on the results in any meaningful way. Another 18 percent left this to senior management only. The fact that over half the organizations did act on results, involving employees fully, suggests that even in difficult organizational contexts, strategies can be made to work. Those which have done so have been well satisfied with their efforts in the long run.

Encouragingly, most organizations seem not to expect perfection and realize errors will be made. This is reflected in the willingness of 71 percent of participating organizations to conduct a second or third survey. Some will do this to build on successful past experiences; others, to develop them. Public service managers are becoming increasingly aware of the employee survey as one of the essential tools of good management practice, and the importance of mastering this practice.

Appendix I - The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)

CIDA is an organization which had 1,336 employees in 1994, 9 percent in developing countries. CIDA's Renewal Plan began in 1993 and was designed to streamline its business process, implement results-based management and identify guiding management values for the CIDA of the future. The second phase of this plan, begun later in 1993, involved carrying out 25 tasks, one of which was to conduct an employee survey to provide feedback. The survey was considered as one method of achieving the expected result in the human resources management area of “ensuring transparency and involving staff.” For CIDA, its employee survey was therefore a consciously planned element of an overall change strategy.

The survey had six specific objectives:

1. Provide a foundation for a participatory process between managers and employees with concrete, results-oriented action plans to address key concerns. Responsibilities for action to include the agency level, branch level, and individual managers, depending on the nature of the responses needed.

2. Foster improved communication between managers and employees, and between different levels of the organization, in support of organization renewal.

3. Demonstrate that employee opinions are valued by giving all staff the opportunity to provide upward feedback and voice their views and suggestions.

4. Obtain information on employee perceptions, concerns and suggestions about the effectiveness of agency management practices and managerial performance, in light of the agency's vision and values, using an agency-wide, methodical and systematic process.

5. Enhance managerial awareness of their collective strengths and weaknesses – as perceived by employees – as a basis for action planning, learning and development.

6. Provide baseline measures to track the progress of management renewal at CIDA.

CIDA did not wait until 100 percent of all senior managers were in agreement with the initiative. Its President, familiar with the merits (and risks) of employee surveys, decided that timing was opportune. A survey committee was organized, with participants representing each of CIDA's major branches. It met once each week throughout the duration of the survey. One individual was designated as the project manager and she acted as a liaison with both the consultant and the survey committee.

It is important to note that CIDA carefully thought through the entire survey process. Its proposal stated that management teams would meet with employees to discuss survey results and develop and implement action plans in response to survey findings. Progress in implementing these plans would be monitored and communicated to all staff.

A comprehensive communication strategy was developed for the survey. The climate at CIDA was generally negative; morale was low principally because CIDA's mandate was under review and many employees were dissatisfied both with some proposed changes and with their own career prospects. The communication strategy was partly intended to minimize the prospect of apathy towards the survey. Intense efforts were made to answer employees' questions about it, to let them know how it would proceed and what would be done with the data later. There was evident resistance at times, some even suggesting that they would not complete the questionnaire under any circumstances.

CIDA organized the project with care. Posters were created and placed in prominent locations. Individuals were selected as ?boosters," who explained the survey to staff and handled questionnaire distribution. Memos from the President were periodically sent at each stage of the process. Issues were carefully discussed at each weekly committee meeting. The questionnaire was designed by the consultant and project manager, based on several focus groups with different groups of employees, and a detailed review of CIDA documentation. It was extensively pretested in both languages, printed by CIDA, and distributed by committee members.

Even though the survey used a mail-out approach, response rate (thanks to the communication strategy) was significantly high (89.4 percent at headquarters, 76.8 percent overall). Both interim and final reports were prepared by the consultant, with employee comments coded and integrated with statistical results. All outputs were carefully reviewed by the project manager and committee. Feedback options were thoroughly debated, with a final decision to a) brief the Executive Committee; and b) provide each employee with a bilingual interim report, the results for their branch, and access to the final report.

The consultant recommended structural action planning on the basis of the survey results and provided strategic details to both the committee and senior managers. Each branch was ultimately required to follow the approach in principle; how it would accomplish this was left to its discretion. Some branches utilized internal resources to facilitate the discussion groups; others used external resources. In all cases, there was substantial discussion, resulting in plans of action which were subsequently collated and merged into ongoing renewal initiatives.

CIDA was satisfied with the entire initiative, especially the depth and quality of the reports. It acknowledged the data as valid (given the significant participation rate) and considered the outputs of employee discussions on the results very useful. CIDA plans to implement regular employee surveys in the future.

In retrospect, CIDA would make few improvements to the process it implemented. Other renewal plan tasks created significant change after the survey was over. Even though the branches produced action plans and submitted them to the President, there was some loss of momentum in following up on these plans, due in part to these changes in the organization. Therefore, one lesson learned was that monitoring of plans and maintaining accountability do require ongoing attention and effort. Subsequent surveys would make this easier, however, as the issues will have a clearer focus as well as measurable indicators.

CIDA's survey was implemented very well, but there is always room for improvement. Administration of the project needs to be efficient and streamlined, with clear decisions ahead of time about approval processes for key communication documents. The project manager cannot be expected to handle all tasks; assistants are required and delegation of particular sets of tasks is needed. CIDA experienced a learning curve during this first survey, and those involved developed an awareness of the need for shared responsibility, patience and teamwork. If these elements are missing, project administration becomes onerous and rests on the dedication and determination of one or two persons – a relatively precarious situation for any organization.

What were the critical success factors in this project? CIDA considers them to be:

- very clear and confident leadership from the top; a real commitment from the President;
- the fact that the survey was an element of a comprehensive change management plan
- the survey approach and processes which ensured employee ownership;
- empowerment of the project manager – for example, by providing her with direct access to key decision makers;
- the project manager's knowledge of the agency's culture; both she and a key colleague used this knowledge effectively, and their integrity was trusted;
- the change management skills of the project manager and her colleague and their experience and dedication; and
- the professionalism and clarity of the consultant.

Postscript: CIDA implemented its second survey in 1996, again with the assistance of the consultant. Results were compared with core items from the 1994 survey. Again, high response rates were achieved. The 1994 survey methodology was used successfully, and CIDA is currently planning to use it for its third survey in 1998.

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