

Need a Barometer for Assessing the Climate of Your Center?

by Soni Werner, Ph.D.

When a director has a hunch that there is grumbling among the early childhood center staff, what are her options? Perhaps she might open up a discussion at a staff meeting, but most likely only a few will disclose their real feelings in that group setting. She might arrange for a staff training session on conflict resolution, but it may be hard to schedule time for the entire staff to get away from the center in order to attend. She could just ignore the grumbling because she's too busy, but then the concerns may fester and have a negative effect on the staff's relationship with sensitive children. This can lead to dissatisfied parents who may withdraw their children from the center or foster high turnover among the staff.

Tool

There is another option. The director could conduct a *climate survey* — a tool designed to measure staff morale — which includes motivation, commitment, satisfaction/dissatisfaction, responsibility, concerns, and so forth. One could think of it as a barometer which measures the changing weather because this instrument can measure the chang-

ing climate of the early childhood center.

A climate survey is not an end in itself — it is actually a means to an end. When a survey is carefully designed and administered, the results can provide the level for helping the center staff focus their energies on their most urgent areas of concern — what might be called the *vital few*. The beauty is that

everyone gets heard in a short amount of time, and the ideas can be summarized in a confidential and non-blameful way. This makes it much easier for a director to understand the full picture of the organization's climate compared to picking up stray comments from the grapevine.

Cycle

Think of the process as a cycle that might take a couple of months or a year. The cycle includes many steps:



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- Design the survey
- Administer the survey
- Summarize data by outside person
- Communicate the summary to staff
- Select *vital few* concerns
- Staff plan to improve the environment
- Implement action steps
- Communicate to staff about completed actions
- Survey again to measure change the next year

Key Players

Initially, the director announces that a climate survey will be conducted and that the staff can have input into the final design of the instru-

identify the handwriting of the written comments. The staff should be informed who this person will be from the beginning to reassure them of confidentiality. (See Early Childhood Center Staff Surveys, in **Resources**, and Jorde-Bloom, 1991, in **References**.)

Questions

There are many topics that you can include in a climate survey, so being selective is one of the biggest challenges (Neugebauer, 1981)! It is important to zero in on the critical aspects of a working climate so you don't end up with lots of useless data at the end. Large corporations have been refining the survey process for 20 years, and they recommend that a survey include between 30 and 80 questions.

It is best if most of the questions are actually affirmative statements that the staff member reads and then responds to be indicating a number on a scale of 1 to 5. Try to avoid

intend to continue working here" — is really better divided up into two statements — "I like the kind of work I do" and "I intend to continue working here." The first one is measuring job satisfaction but the second one is measuring retention.

The range of responses could be:

1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree (used most often)

1 = Never; 5 = Always

1 = Dissatisfied; 5 = Satisfied

1 = Ineffective; 5 = Very Effective

1 = Poor Quality; 5 = Outstanding

It is common practice to have 1 and 2 represent the *unfavorable* responses and 4 and 5 represent the *favorable* responses. Neutral responses are usually a 3. For example, a statement might read "Trying out new ideas is encouraged." Then the staff member could indicate that they strongly agree with that statement by circling a 5 on the survey form.

Again, there should be about 30 to 80 survey items. A well designed survey has several items for each category. Categories might include Job Satisfaction, Intention to Stay, Commitment to the Team/Staff Group, Training Effectiveness, and so forth. This makes up the quantitative data for the survey.

To complement this, a survey needs to include a few open-ended questions that will encourage staff members to write comments. A typical example is "What are some ways that the center could be improved?" (Jorde-Bloom, 1991). The results of these questions are considered qualitative data. They should be typed up, but with no word changes, to hide the handwriting and protect anonymity.

A climate survey can be used like a barometer to measure the changing climate of an early childhood program.

ment. Perhaps a small task force could be asked to lead the effort of selecting the appropriate questions from a professionally developed survey and maybe even adding a few more, unique to that center.

At the beginning, an outside person should be hired who will tabulate the results and summarize the data. It is imperative that this be someone from outside the center because no one inside should be permitted to

statements with a negative word in them — not, neither, none, etc.

In addition the survey is less confusing if each statement only refers to one subject at a time. For example, if "and" is in the statement, watch out! You will be asking the staff member to consider two topics and you won't know which one they had in mind when they responded. So this statement — "I like the kind of work I do and I

Categories

Each category might have three to six statements/questions/items in it. You can feel more confident that you are getting valid data if you measure the same broad category with several specific questions. Categories such as Leadership, Human Resources Practices, Commitment, and Quality Standards (e.g. NAEYC accreditation) are particularly useful because they cover the arena of actual behaviors and practices that the director and staff might be able to change if warranted. These tend to be the most tangible categories.

Another type of category gives an indication of the organization's culture as perceived by the staff: Innovativeness, Values, Inclusion, and Diversity. It is particularly useful to see if there is consensus among the various sub-groups on how the culture is perceived. Although these categories are more abstract, the culture can make the difference between a staff member staying or quitting.

The third major type of categories are the results or outcomes. Examples of these categories include Satisfaction with the Physical Environment, Satisfaction with Pay and Benefits, Satisfaction with Rewards, Retention, Training Effectiveness, Work/Life Balance, Stress, and Job Security.

There is a trend among larger organizations to ask fewer questions about satisfaction than they did in the past because they may raise unrealistic expectations about what the director can do to fix the situation. Clearly, the movement is towards making the lion's share of the questions/items be from the first two types of categories.

Summarize

Once the data is tabulated and summarized by the experienced, outside person, it is time to have a series of staff meetings. The director and task force members could divide up the responsibility of presenting the summarized data, usually in terms of categories of questions, not every single question.

It is most useful if the summary indicates the categories that had the highest percent of *favorable* responses to indicate the environment's strong points. Likewise, the summary should include the categories that had the highest percent of *unfavorable* responses to indicate the areas of greatest concern among the staff as a whole. The summary might say: "Seventy-five percent of the staff were favorable about the effectiveness of their training. This was the most positive response." If the center is large enough, it is possible to do some demographic cuts to compare sub-groups of staff. Even though individual names are never indicated on the survey, you can ask:

- **Job level** — head teacher, assistant teacher, student intern.
- **Level of education** — high school graduate, CDA, community college graduate.
- **Years of experience** in early childhood settings — 1 year, 2-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-20 years.
- **Race or ethnic background** — African-American, Caucasian, Asian.
- **Age group of class room** — staff for infants, toddlers, preschoolers.
- **Job location** — east wing, west wing.

It is recommended that the summary of data by these sub-groups

should only give results if there are at least five people in each one. For instance, if there are only four student interns, they shouldn't be in a separate sub-group — include them with the assistants or aides. The fewer the number of people there are in a sub-group, the more possible it is for someone to guess who gave what response, and that undermines the whole process of a confidential climate survey. Therefore, only use demographic cuts if the organization is large enough (more than 30 staff members) and you plan to focus action plans for targeted sub-groups.

Vital Few

Of all the results of the climate survey, what data really matter? To make the organization as vital and healthy as possible, it is best to sustain the positive areas and focus attention on just a few areas of concern. Naturally, these will be the categories with the highest percentage of unfavorable responses. Even if the director and staff only focus on three categories for that year, and actively try to improve those areas, the morale is likely to improve overall.

The reason is hope. If you've ever worked for an organization where complaints are ignored, you know it can be depressing beyond words! But if the director verbally acknowledges the vital few concerns and builds a consensus of what everyone will do about them, then she's just turned lemons into lemonade.

Example

One of the best examples I have seen is where a large organization's survey results indicated a vital few concern was that the middle-level staff felt they were not adequately informed when jobs were open.

The culture was secretive and information was not usually shared.

As a result, staff felt they did not have the opportunity to apply for more interesting jobs. The result was job dissatisfaction, low retention, and high stress. The comments also indicated that they felt the management was making decisions for them instead of empowering them to make their own career decisions. It was time for a change in this culture!

After committing to open up the job placement process, the managers created a system of describing each job opening in a place that every employee could access. They also trained everyone on how to fill out applications, update their resumes, and include their latest performance evaluation. This change in a human resource practice improved the following year's results on the climate survey in many significant areas. In addition, a wider range of people were being considered for each job than in the past, and the culture became more open overall.

Pitfalls

Avoid the following pitfalls when conducting a climate survey:

- **There is no work time for filling out the survey.** Since the survey is work related, staff should be paid for the time it takes to fill it out — usually a half hour. The survey results are more valid if 100% of the staff are involved, but they are less likely to do so if you expect them to

do it at home.

- **The survey is too short.** In an effort to do a quick and simple measure of staff morale, the survey might be too brief — less than 25 questions. It is doubtful that a survey this short can be a reliable, valid measure.

- **The director allows the process to go too slowly.** If it takes longer than 90 days from the day the survey is filled out by the staff to the day they hear the summarized results, it is likely that staff will feel cynical and wonder why they bothered to respond to the survey.

- **The director sounds defensive about the results.** The director is only partly responsible for the work environment — every staff member contributes to it. When the results are summarized and communicated at a meeting, it is important for the director to be neutral when acknowledging the results, and seek consensus on the vital few concerns.

- **There is no action-planning session to plan change.** If the ball gets dropped after the data is collected and summarized, and there is no effort to focus on the vital few areas of concern, no improvements will

happen. The staff will remember this, and morale may worsen.

Resources

Even if an early childhood center is in a small town, with no climate survey expert down the street, it is

easy for a director to find the resources needed to conduct a useful climate survey by mail, FAX, or overnight express delivery. There are several survey experts that have developed processes for large organizations:

Genesee Survey Services,
Rochester, NY, (716) 272-9944

Integrity Surveys, Syracuse, NY,
(315) 637-4261

Personnel Research Associates,
Chicago, IL, (708) 640-8820

Because early childhood education centers are often small agencies with different dynamics than large corporations, there is a new survey service being developed just for them:

Early Childhood Education Center Staff Surveys, Corning, NY,
(607) 562-8458

Directors can call these resources to get quotes on the tasks of helping to design the survey, process the results, write an executive summary, and plan the staff meeting for choosing the vital few concerns to act upon. It is worth the investment so you can improve morale and possibly reduce turnover among staff, and we all know how important it is to the children to have happy staff who don't leave.

References

Jorde-Bloom, Paula. *Blueprint for Action: Achieving Center-Based Change Through Staff Development*. Mt. Rainier, MD: Gryphon House, 1991.

Jorde-Bloom, Paula. *Measuring Work Attitudes: Technical Manual for the Early Childhood Job Satisfaction Survey and the Early Childhood Work Environment Survey*. Brandon, VT:

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Sample of Part of a Climate Survey for a Children's Center Staff

	Strongly Disagree			Strongly Agree	
1. I have the necessary resources to do my work.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I am encouraged to come up with new ideas.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I have input into decisions that effect my work.	1	2	3	4	5
4. The quality of our child care services has improved in the past 12 months.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I feel free to challenge the ideas of our director.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I am recognized for good work in ways that I personally value.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I understand how my work fits into the center's goals.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I am able to apply the training I receive on the job.	1	2	3	4	5

Psychology Press.

Neugebauer, Roger. "Do You Have a Healthy Organization?" *Child Care Information Exchange*, November 1981.