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**An Evaluation of the Process Used to Develop and Administer an  
Employee Culture Survey in a Public Research University**

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**AN EVALUATION OF THE PROCESS USED TO DEVELOP AND  
ADMINISTER AN EMPLOYEE CULTURE SURVEY  
IN A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY**

by

Danielle B. Allen, B.S., M.S.

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy: Industrial/Organizational Psychology

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION  
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entitled **An Evaluation of the Process Used to Develop and Administer an**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In October of 2015, AROS, a faculty-supervised, student-led consulting group affiliated with the Louisiana Tech Industrial-Organizational Psychology doctoral program ([arosconsulting.org](http://arosconsulting.org)), was contracted by the President and Vice President of a public research university to develop and administer a survey to gauge the climate, operations, and alignment of proceedings with the University's strategic objectives (Valadez, Allen, Lovell, & Toaddy, 2015). AROS conducted interviews with key stakeholders and focus groups with University members (faculty, staff, and students), wrote and refined the list of survey items, programmed the survey into the online platform, and administered the survey to all faculty, staff, and students. Results were analyzed, reported, and fed back to members of the university. Feedback sessions were held with each unit leader to discuss unit-level results and action planning efforts. The current paper discusses the scientific literature that informed the process, evaluates the process, and provides suggestions for future improvements.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **OVERARCHING PHILOSOPHY AND GUIDING FRAMEWORK**

AROS is a faculty-supervised, student-led consulting group affiliated with the Louisiana Tech Industrial-Organizational Psychology doctoral program ([arosconsulting.org](http://arosconsulting.org)). In October of 2015, AROS was approached by the President and Vice President of a public research university (hereinafter “University”). They were interested in administering a survey to gauge the climate, operation, and alignment of proceedings with the university's strategic objectives (Valadez, Allen, Lovell, & Toaddy, 2015). Due to the University’s continued growth and change, University stakeholders expressed interest in deploying a survey to gather information about how these changes affect faculty, staff, and students. It was decided that AROS would create a targeted survey administered to all faculty, staff, and students in February of 2016. The goal was to gather feedback, use it to address key issues, celebrate strengths, and advance its mission and goals.

The goal of the current dissertation is three-fold. At the heart of Industrial and Organizational Psychology is the scientist-practitioner model, which emphasizes integrating science and practice by allowing scientific research findings to shape applied work while simultaneously allowing experiences in applied work to shape future research questions. Therefore, the first goal of this dissertation is to dive deeper into the scientific literature that shaped the current work and helped inform each of the decisions made



throughout the project. Evaluation, or the process of using different techniques to make judgments about the effectiveness or quality of a program or treatment, improve its effectiveness, and inform decisions about its design, development, and implementation (National Research Council, 2010, as cited in What is Evaluation? 2019) is an important component of the scientific process. Therefore, the dissertation's second and third goals are to reflect upon and evaluate the process overall and, based upon this reflection, make suggestions for future improvements. These suggestions will be supported by empirical research and best-practice literature.

### **Process Consultation**

Process Consultation is used to refer to both a philosophy of consulting and an organizational-development intervention. The primary assumption is that the client owns the problem and is the one who knows the organization well enough to figure out the problems and the solutions to those problems (Schein, 1969). In this type of consulting, the consultants' role is to guide the organization by discovering its problems and finding appropriate solutions. Leaders and other organization members are intimately involved in the process and play an active role throughout the process's various steps.

According to Schein (1990), process consultation is just one of three models of helping, and each of these models is accompanied by a set of assumptions. The first model of helping is providing expert information, and it occurs when a consultant gives information relevant to a client's problem. This helping model assumes that the client knows the problem and has communicated the real problem to the consultant. It also assumes that the helper has the needed information and that the client has thought through the consequences of asking the questions and receiving the answers.

Playing doctor, the second model of helping, occurs when the client invites the consultant to be, essentially, a doctor — to investigate, interview, psychologically assess, run tests, make a diagnosis, and suggest a cure (Schein, 1990). This model makes several key assumptions. First, it assumes that the client has correctly identified the sick area, that the “patient” will reveal information necessary for a good diagnosis, and that the consultant has the expertise necessary to arrive at a correct diagnosis. It also assumes that the client will, metaphorically speaking, accept the diagnosis, accept the prescription, do what the doctor recommends and that the client will be able to remain healthy after the doctor leaves. According to Schein, this model often goes awry because one or more of these assumptions cannot be met.

Process consultation is the third model of helping and is also accompanied by a set of assumptions. Schein says that clients often ask for help when they are not sure what their problems are. They know something is wrong but need help figuring out exactly what that is. Once they know what the problem is, they can often figure out their solution. Second, most clients do not know what kinds of help are available or what kinds of help are relevant. Third, many human systems problems are such that clients would benefit from participation in the diagnosing process, particularly because they are often part of the problem and need to be led to this insight. Fourth, only clients know what form of intervention will work because they know what will fit their personalities and their group or organizational culture. The last assumption is that clients have “constructive intent” and will benefit from learning how to solve problems so that future problems can be dealt with more effectively.

Research has shown that there is value in allowing employees to participate in organizational changes that might impact them (Piderit, 2000) and has shown that employees are more receptive to changes when they have the opportunity to participate in their implementation (Coch & French, 1948). Additionally, Schein (1987) pointed out that solutions that come strictly from consultants with no input from members of the organization may not be the most ideal when the organization's culture is taken into account. The current project embraced a process-consultation approach, involving employees at all levels of the organization during each step of the project. Operating under this philosophy meant that AROS approached the survey with the goal of not just gathering data but also solving problems. Survey questions were based on individual and group interviews to get the organization to think diagnostically from the outset.

### **Survey as Intervention**

#### **Psychological Contracts**

“Employee surveys are in and of themselves a form of intervention” — although this seems to be a commonly accepted belief in practice (i.e., you can find several blog posts about this topic through a basic Internet search), the theoretical roots are less clear (i.e., none of these provide literature to support this view). From my perspective, this idea can be linked to four topics: psychological contracts, justice perceptions, employee voice, and feedback.

Conducting a survey implies a promise to employees that the organization will take some sort of action. This implication can be linked to the concept of psychological contracts, which are mutual beliefs, perceptions, and informal obligations between an employer and an employee (Rousseau, 1989). The psychological contract is the

employee's perception of the reciprocal obligations existing with their employer. Within this conceptualization are the employee's beliefs regarding the organization's obligations to them and beliefs about their obligations to the organization (Shore & Tetrick, 1994). It is important to note that although the contract is described as reciprocal, this does not necessarily imply that one's supervisor or other organizational members agree with or have the same understanding of the contract.

A psychological contract forms when an employer and the employee (or prospective employee) develop and refine mental maps of one another (Rousseau, 1989). The contracting process begins before employment and develops throughout employment at an organization, with the psychological contract growing as the employment relationship grows and is reinforced over time. Rousseau (1998) outlines and describes five phases of contract formation.

The contract begins forming during pre-employment when the employee's initial expectations are formed through professional norms and societal beliefs influenced by information the prospective employee gathers about the organization and how outside sources portray occupations and/or organizations, the media. The contract continues to form during the recruitment phase when the first instance of two-way communication involving promise exchanges occurs between employer and prospective employee. Suppose the organization hires the employee. In that case, promise exchanges continue to be made during early socialization when both the employee and the employer continue searching for information about one another. Although the promised exchange and search for information slows down during later experiences in the organization, changes in the psychological contract can still be introduced during this time. Lastly, the employee

experiences a time of evaluation during which the contract is evaluated and possibly revised (Rousseau, 1998).

The psychological contract is based on an interactive process by which the employee takes steps to fulfill their part of the contract and looks to the organization to fulfill its obligations (Shore & Tetrick, 1994). A breach in the contract occurs if an employee perceives that their organization has, or its agents have, failed to deliver on what they perceive was promised, or vice versa. Perceptions that one's psychological contract has been breached could arise shortly after the employee joins the company or after years of satisfactory service (Rousseau, 1998). Control theory suggests that an individual will respond to reduce the discrepancy between their present employment situation and what they feel was promised (Shore & Tetrick, 1994). The degree to which the employee focuses on the discrepancy or discrepancies will depend on the type of violation, the size of the discrepancy, and the degree to which they feel the organization is responsible.

Psychological contracts are formed from concrete (e.g., pay, working conditions) and abstract (e.g., job security) elements of the relationship between employer and employee (Guzzo, Noonan, & Elron, 1994). Not all psychological contracts are the same, as employees' psychological contracts differ (Guzzo, Noonan, & Elron, 1994). Perceptions of promises that form the basis of the psychological contract can be based on direct communication or organizational actions (Shore & Tetrick, 1994).

Much of the information that employees rely on to assess the extent to which their psychological contracts are fulfilled comes from the employer's HR practices (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994). How employees make sense of their employer's HR practices affects

their psychological contract and, ultimately, their commitment to the organization. When an organization conducts a survey, they send a signal to the organization members that they care about these topics. Additionally, conducting a survey implies that some sort of change will occur either implicitly or sometimes even explicitly. For example, the introductory text shown to participants in the current survey explicitly states that “The information obtained from this survey will be used to address issues, celebrate strengths, and advance the University’s mission and strategic goals.”

### **Justice Perceptions**

Justice refers to people’s perceptions of fairness in organizations and their associated behavioral, cognitive, and emotional reactions (Greenberg, 1987). There are three fundamental psychological features of justice perceptions. First, justice perceptions are based on social comparisons (Greenberg, 2011). According to the idea of relative deprivation, people’s feelings of satisfaction are based on the reference comparisons they make. People feel dissatisfied when they perceive that they are deprived of desirable outcomes relative to others against whom they compare themselves. This idea aligns with Festinger’s (1954) social comparison theory, which states that people evaluate themselves by comparing their opinions with others, particularly those similar to them. Although similarity is an important basis for social comparison, so are convenience factors such as proximity and accessibility (Kulik & Ambrose, 1992).

Second, injustice is more salient than justice (Greenberg, 2011). This idea is based on neuropsychological research and attribution theory. Neuropsychological research evidence reveals that people’s brains are more responsive to negative information than comparable positive information when making evaluative judgments

(Ito, Larsen, Smith, & Cacioppo, 1998). Attribution theory asserts that humans are motivated to assign causes to their actions and behaviors and that attribution is the process by which individuals do this (Jones & Davis, 1965). Following this idea, injustice may be considered salient because it reflects a violation of a normatively expected state (i.e., justice), which enhances its value as a basis for judging the underlying causes of behavior.

Third, several studies have shown that fairness perceptions are egocentric and self-serving (Greenberg, 2011). Messick, Bloom, Boldizar, and Samuelson (1985) found that people internalize the causes of their behavior when describing fair actions, taking credit for those actions. However, people externalize the causes of their behavior when describing unfair actions, dissociating themselves from those actions. Greenberg (1981) asked drivers to rate which of several gasoline rationing policies was fairest during a period of a gasoline shortage. Although no one policy emerged as fairer than the others overall, the particular policies rated fairest were whichever ones more clearly benefited that particular respondent.

Although there are three main types of justice (i.e., distributive, interactional, and procedural), procedural justice is the most relevant to employee surveys. Procedural justice refers to the perceived fairness of how outcomes are determined (Leventhal, 1980) and has its roots in research related to the legal system and dispute resolution. Thibaut and Walker (1975) compared legal systems differing concerning how much control disputants have over the procedures used to resolve disputes. They found that the procedures believed to be fairest were ones that granted them the highest degree of process control. However, control over outcomes (i.e., verdicts) was left to third parties

(i.e., judges or mediators). That is, having a voice in proceedings (i.e., the capacity to influence outcomes, although not to determine them) was what people regarded to be fair. Leventhal (1980) expanded this, suggesting that procedures are important to people in contexts beyond just legal matters and dispute resolution.

Justice perceptions play a key role in determining how employees feel about their jobs and how they perform them. Being treated unfairly tops the list of things that make people feel angriest on the job. Uninvolved parties also suffer adverse emotional reactions when merely observing others who appear to be treated unfairly (Fitness, 2000). Additionally, organizations should care about procedural justice perceptions because they impact important job outcomes, explain variance above and beyond other types of justice, and promote people's acceptance of undesirable outcomes. Research has shown that perceptions of fairness about the procedures used to determine the distribution of rewards in organizations predict outcomes independently of the effects of perceptions of the fairness of the actual distributions themselves (Greenberg, 2011). While distributive justice was the primary predictor of workers' satisfaction with their raises, procedural justice was the primary predictor of people's feelings of commitment and trust toward the organization.

Additionally, research has shown that procedural justice accounts for significantly more variance than distributive justice in people's assessments of leaders' fairness (e.g., Alexander & Ruderman, 1987; Tyler & Caine, 1981). Lastly, perceptions of procedural justice can also promote the acceptance of undesirable outcomes. However, there are some limitations to this. Hunton, Wall, and Price (1998) found that people were more satisfied with decisions in which they had any degree of voice instead of none, but more



voice did not lead to more satisfaction. Even with its limitations, procedural justice perceptions are important as they impact important outcomes and people's willingness to accept decisions. Ideally, organizations use employee survey data to inform business decisions, thus providing a means through which employees can impact how outcomes are determined, impacting justice perceptions.

### **Voice**

Employee surveys can also be seen as an intervention because they give employees a voice. The topic of voice is very closely linked to procedural justice. "Voice is informal and discretionary communication by an employee of ideas, suggestions, concerns, information about problems, or opinions about work-related issues to persons who might be able to take appropriate action, with the intent to bring about improvement or change" (Morrison, 2014, p. 174). The motivation for voice is prosocial as the primary intent is to bring about positive change or improvement and not merely complain or get a positive outcome. Research on voice during the late 1980s and these early studies showed that voice is positively associated with prior job satisfaction, job investment, and high-quality job alternatives (Rusbult et al., 1988; Withey & Cooper, 1989).

Just like justice perceptions, voice is also important due to its impact on organizational- and individual-level outcomes. Voice is associated with positive organizational outcomes such as learning, improvements in work processes, innovation, error correction, reduction of illegal or immoral behavior, and crisis prevention (Morrison, 2014). Conversely, employee silence (i.e., the opposite of voice, in which employees withhold information) has been linked to large-scale organizational failure, including disaster with the space shuttle Columbia in 2003 (Greenberg & Edwards, 2009)

and the scandal at Enron in 2001 (Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003). Voice has also been linked to individual-level outcomes such as feeling as though one has a sense of control and the feeling that one is valued, and silence has been shown to create dissatisfaction, stress, and cynicism (Morrison, 2014).

Research has shown that voice is not necessarily the default option for employees. Detert and colleagues (2010) surveyed 439 employees working in different organizations and found that 42% have withheld information when they felt they had nothing to gain or had something to lose. The information employees reported withholding was not just regarding illegal or unethical activities but also their suggestions for addressing routing problems or information that could improve the work environment. Organizational surveys such as the one in the current project allow employees to express their concerns with some degree of confidentiality, thus giving employees a voice.

### **Survey Feedback**

Simply put, surveys also allow information to be fed back to employees of the organization. Surveying in and of itself has been identified as the most widely used organization-wide intervention (Jex & Britt, 2008). A survey is administered to members of the organization in a typical survey-feedback program, and then results are analyzed and presented back to all employees. It is the feedback portion of this process that distinguishes it from many other employee opinion surveys that are conducted in organizational settings. Research has shown survey feedback to be most effective (Bowers, 1973).

However, the effectiveness of survey feedback may not be wide-reaching. Instead, survey feedback is most impactful in some situations and under certain

conditions. The process of collecting, analyzing, and using the data is an important determinant of the impact. Bowers (1975) collected data from 23 organizational sites, each of which had been subjected to a particular intervention “condition.” These conditions included survey feedback, interpersonal-process consultation, task-process consultation, laboratory training, data hand back, and no treatment. Results showed that survey feedback was the only treatment associated with large-scale positive organizational climate changes as measured by follow-up questionnaires. Although this study's methodology has been criticized, it is important because it indicates a significant difference between the effects of just handing back data on the one hand and using a systematic survey-feedback program on the other.

Klein, Kraut, and Wolfson (1971) also provided support for the use of survey feedback. Their study indicated that meetings were more effective than written reports. Employees were more satisfied when managers conducted the meetings, and satisfaction with the results was highest among those attending more than one meeting. Nadler and colleagues (1980) conducted a study with bank branches that provided further support for the idea that feedback must be done effectively to realize the positive impacts. Their study showed that the feedback system did not have the generally positive effects hypothesized, but it positively affected some workgroups, particularly where managers effectively implemented the system. The feedback system produced improvements in branches where managers and supervisors could involve tellers in control processes and produced decrements in branches where tellers were not involved.

Although it seems to be commonly accepted anecdotally among practitioners, there is no single reference to support the assertion that surveys in and of themselves are

a form of intervention. However, as argued here, surveys can be considered a form of intervention due to their impact on the psychological contracts employees have with their organizations, perceptions of justice (especially procedural justice), and perceptions of voice. Additionally, the process of feeding survey data back to members of organizations is cited as one of the most commonly used organization-wide interventions.

### **The High-Performance Cycle**

The organizational functioning model used in the current project was based on a framework of workplace motivation known as the High-Performance Cycle (HPC; Locke & Latham, 1990). Before the development of the HPC, there was not an integrated model of work motivation and satisfaction. In their seminal piece, Locke and Latham (1990) argued that motivation to work is best explained by integrating three theories: goal-setting theory, expectancy theory, and an aspect of the social-cognitive theory. Goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1990) posits that task performance is regulated directly by individuals' conscious goals as they work towards accomplishing a task. At the time of its creation, nearly 400 (mostly experimental) studies in the US and seven other countries had shown that specific, difficult goals lead to better performance than specific, easy goals; vague goals (e.g., “do your best”); or no goals at all.

It is theorized that goals impact performance because they help individuals identify what is important from the total array of information. Having goals provides them with a yardstick for determining whether the feedback they receive reveals acceptable or unacceptable performance (Locke & Latham, 1990). Research over the years has identified a few aspects that impact the effectiveness of goals. First, if goals are to impact performance, there must be a commitment to them (Erez & Zidon, 1984).

Generally, goal commitment is highest when people think the goal is attainable and values are associated with goal attainment (Locke, Latham, & Erez, 1988). Second, goal setting is more effective, and, usually, only effective, when feedback allows performance to be tracked concerning one's goals. Goal setting without feedback appears to have little long-term effect on performance (Locke & Latham, 1990). Third, for goal setting to be effective, individuals must have the ability to reach or approach the goals (Locke, 1982), and situational constraints must not inhibit goal attainment (Peters, Chassie, Lindholm, O'Connor, & Kline, 1982).

The second theory, expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), states that performance is a multiplicative function of expectancy (i.e., the belief that effort will lead to performance), instrumentality (i.e., the belief that performance will lead to rewards), and valence (i.e., the perceived value of the rewards or outcomes of performance). The theory predicts that when instrumentality and valence are held constant, expectancy will be positively associated with performance. Social cognitive theory, the third theory, holds that portions of an individual's knowledge acquisition are directly related to observing others within the context of social interactions, experiences, and outside sources such as the media (Bandura, 1982). Put simply, we learn by watching others. An important component of the theory is that repeating an observed behavior is influenced by how the learner believes in their abilities to complete the behavior correctly. In their 1987 study, Frayne and Latham found that self-efficacy was positively related to performance.

All of this culminates into the HPC, which states that specific, difficult goals lead to high performance; high performance on enriched tasks is usually rewarding for the individual; and rewards generate satisfaction that encourages commitment to the

organization (Locke & Latham, 1990). The model's theoretical significance is that it provides a comprehensive sequence of causal relationships consistent with research findings. Specific, difficult goals coupled with the personal belief that one can execute the course of action needed to complete the tasks successfully leads to high performance. The impact of goals on performance is moderated by ability, the complexity of the tasks, constraints in the environment, feedback related to the goal, and commitment to the goal. High performance on a task one perceives to be meaningful and growth facilitating, plus internal and external rewards, leads to high job satisfaction. In turn, high job satisfaction leads to a willingness to stay with the organization and accept future challenges.

Its theoretical significance is that it provides a model for creating a high-performing workforce that is also highly satisfied (Latham, Locke, & Fassin, 2002). In the current project, the HPC provided a framework that aided in selecting survey topics and item writing and influenced how organizational functioning was thought about throughout the project (see Appendix A).

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **APPROACH**

#### **Identification of the Client**

One of the first steps that must be taken before beginning a survey project such as the project at hand is to understand the organization and its stakeholders. Any helping or change process has a target or client, and the question of who that client is can be ambiguous and difficult to answer. According to Levenson (2014), effective change leadership comes from engaging the right stakeholders with the survey in the right way and at the right time. Identifying the client at the beginning of the project aids in this endeavor and helps to answer the question of who will ultimately be responsible for action and change. Operating within the process-consultation framework requires one to think simultaneously in three clients (Schein, 1990).

First is the immediate or contact client, who is the person with whom the consultant is interacting in the here and now. In the current project, the VP of Academic Affairs served as the main point of contact, assisted in the day-to-day management of the project, scheduled activities, and was a key decision-maker and advisor to the university's President. Second is the primary client, who is the real target of change and pays for the change efforts (Schein, 1990). In the current project, this was the President of the University, who served as the main strategic advisor and ultimate decision-maker.

Third is the ultimate client, or clients, who are the stakeholders that must be considered even though one might not ever interact with them directly. In the current project, this was the remainder of the University, including Deans, VPs, faculty, staff, and students. Additionally, the University Senate, an elected body of faculty and staff, served as key partners in this project. It is important to note that even though we worked daily with individuals and small groups throughout the project, our concerns were always systemic. We considered the decisions and processes in terms of their consequences for other parts of the system.

### **Identification of Survey Goals**

After identifying each of the clients mentioned above, the next step was a meeting, or series of meetings, with key stakeholders. Survey design begins with carefully defining the goals of the survey project. A survey should never be conducted without a goal in mind as measurement alone is not enough to justify a survey; a survey is just one step in a greater process of some kind of organizational initiative or sensing effort (Ingels, Keeton, & Spitzmueller, 2020) There are many potential desired outcomes for an employee survey (e.g., improve employee retention, engagement, organizational climate). You cannot have a survey that does everything for everyone while being short enough to elicit responses. Therefore, you must choose one primary purpose and stay true to that purpose when designing the survey (Levenson, 2014).

For survey content to be useful to the organization, stakeholders across the organization should articulate the writing survey project goals. To identify the purpose or goal(s) of the survey, the consultant can ask questions such as “why are you conducting a survey (i.e., what do we want to know, what do we hope to obtain),” “what are you



hoping to measure and why,” “when and how will results be communicated,” and “who will be accountable for implementing the changes driven by survey results.” It is also important to carefully consider the goal or construct of interest because the survey's content sends a message and signals to organizational members that these topics are important to key decision-makers (Kraut, 2006).

In the current project, this was accomplished in a two-prong approach. First, we held meetings with the President and VP of Academic Affairs to discuss the project's goals, establish a general understanding of roles/responsibilities, and discuss the philosophy that would guide the project. That philosophy is that conducting an employee survey is an intervention and that the end goal should be a change initiative. Second, we conducted interviews with Deans and VPs of the University to identify topics in the survey (this will be discussed in more detail in a later section). Ultimately, it was decided that the project's goal was to solicit feedback from the faculty, staff, and students regarding the university's climate. It was also agreed that the information obtained would be used to address issues, celebrate strengths, and advance the University's mission and strategic goals.

The next step in our survey design process was to define the construct of interest (i.e., organizational climate) and its underlying components (which would ultimately inform the topics chosen to be included in the survey). To do this, we first conducted a thorough literature review, reviewing the scientific literature on organizational climate to conceptualize and better understand the construct. After identifying key articles within the literature's climate body, each team member was assigned a few articles to read and summarize. Once the article summaries were done, we each read all of the summaries and

discussed them to ensure that we all understood the topic. Aside from giving us a general mental map of organizational climate and how it is, and is not, related to other concepts within organizational psychology, it also gave us a starting point for identifying topics to include in the survey and informed the list of questions we asked during interviews in the next step.

Next, we conducted interviews with University leaders and focus groups with other members of the University. The goal of these was to help ensure that the survey content was timely and relevant to what was happening within the University and begin building commitment from members of the organization (Kraut, 2006). Additionally, when done well, interviews and focus groups help establish rapport between the consultant(s) and employees (Morgan, 1997). Establishing rapport is an important step in building trust and mutual respect and is vitally important as a foundation for organizational development.

Interviews were conducted with the 13 Deans and Vice Presidents of the University who oversee each of the University's colleges and support units. Interview questions included, among others, "What issues do you think are important to the University," "What types of questions would you like to see in a survey," "Who do you think we need to speak to," "What does buy-in for you involve, and does that seem reasonable," and "Are there any potential roadblocks to change." Before beginning the interviews, we provided a brief introduction to AROS; an overview of the project purpose and goals; a description of how data from the interview would be analyzed and used to inform survey design; and a discussion of confidentiality. For the interviews, rather than following a strict script, we had a standard list of questions we wanted to ask. This

approach allowed us to achieve some consistency across interviews and allowed room for us to follow the conversation where it naturally flowed. The literature review informed the list of topics we conducted previously; in the interview, we wanted to confirm that these topics are relevant in this particular organization and also seek to uncover any topics that might be unique to the organization.

Following the completion of the interviews, data were quantified using a mixed-methods approach. First, we made a list of all of the constructs we asked about and any that we did not ask about specifically but mentioned during the interviews. To better understand the relevance of the organization's topics, each of four raters rated each construct for each stakeholder on a four-point scale (zero = did not discuss, one = University needs improvement, two = University is acceptable, three = University is excelling). Using this scale helped us quantify whether the construct was brought up in that particular interview and how that leader perceived their unit to perform in that area. This last piece was important as the intended outcome of the survey was a change initiative. Although it is important to maintain areas in which the organization is performing well, we wanted to make sure we were also asking questions about areas where the organization may not be performing so well. also Based on these ratings, we created a list that identified the top third, the middle third, and the bottom third of the constructs in terms of performance. When considering each construct, we evaluated whether the construct could be targeted with an OD initiative and its relationship to the HPC. This list of constructs informed questions that were asked during focus groups and ultimately selected the survey topics.

Next, we conducted six focus groups with a representative cross-section of faculty, staff, and students. Unit leaders were asked to solicit participation in the focus groups, focusing specifically on individuals they felt had the knowledge needed to identify important topics to the university's members. In the focus groups, we asked broad questions such as “What do you think is the biggest challenge to [University name]’s future and why,” “What does the phrase ‘The [University name] Family’ mean to you,” and “What experiences contribute to your sense of being a part of a family at [University name].” We also asked more specific questions about voice, justice, perceptions of the University’s leadership, and work-life balance.

Due to the nature of focus groups compared to interviews, there is arguably more work to plan and organize these. Unlike an interview, you must consider the group's size and composition, which can impact the session's success or failure (Cucina & Gast, 2020). Ideally, the focus group will consist of six to nine individuals (Krueger, 1994) who are alike in important respects (e.g., similar level, as having managers in with the group might impact the willingness of participants to be open and honest), able and willing to provide the desired information, and representative of the population of interest (Cucina & Gast, 2020). It would help if you also considered the physical layout of the session. Focus groups are usually conducted in a circular or semicircular formation with the facilitator and notetaker at the front of the room. This configuration provides maximum eye contact, interaction, and sharing among participants, impacting the focus group's flow and the quality of the information collected (Cucina & Gast, 2020).

While we took a less structured approach to the interviews, it is important to have a more formalized structure when conducting focus groups due to the number of

individuals seeking information from and due to time constraints. In the current project, we had a list of topics we needed to cover at the beginning of the focus groups (i.e., purpose, general structure, and confidentiality) and a list of questions we wanted to ask. Still, otherwise, the focus-group guide could have been better organized and more detailed. This assessment will be included as a suggestion for improvement later in the paper. After completing the focus groups, we conducted a thematic analysis to identify themes (i.e., patterns in the data that are important or interesting). There is no record of exactly how these were done in the current project. Still, these were conducted in congruence with the recommendations provided by Braun & Clark (2006) in their six-phase guide to conducting a thematic analysis. The goal of the first phase is to become familiar with the data. To do this, one must read and re-read the transcripts from the focus groups, making notes and jotting down early impressions. One should be very familiar with the entire body of data before moving on to the next phase. The next phase's goal is to organize the data in a meaningful and systematic way by generating initial codes. There are different ways to code, and the method used will be determined by individual preference and the research questions. As one works through the transcripts, you generate new codes and sometimes modify existing ones. It can be useful to have several different coders working simultaneously, but it is not necessary.

The goal of the next phase is to identify themes (Braun & Clark, 2006). There are no hard-and-fast rules about what makes a theme; instead, it is characterized by its significance to the research question. Next, you review the themes by gathering all the data relevant to each and reading through them while considering whether the data support the themes and if they work in the context of the entire dataset. Themes should be

coherent and distinct from each other. Things to consider during this phase include whether the themes make sense if the data support the themes, if you are trying to fit too much into a single theme, if themes overlap, if there are sub-themes (i.e., themes within the themes) and if there are any other themes within the data. Next, you should define the themes by identifying the essence of each one. Lastly, summarize in writing what you found, how you conducted the analysis and the assumptions that informed your analysis. This step is an important one that we missed in the current project. Ultimately, however, through the interviews, focus groups, and resulting thematic analysis, we identified a total of 33 constructs to include in the survey.

### **Development and Selection of Survey Items**

After identifying the constructs to be included in the survey, we chose the response scale and wrote the survey items. We elected to use a seven-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to agree with a neutral center point strongly. One could use many different response scales when conducting a survey (e.g., one that indicates the level of agreement, one that indicates frequency). The decision is usually impacted by the survey's goal, the types of questions that will be asked, and research regarding best practices (e.g., regarding the number of scale points). Likert-type scales are the most commonly used response scales in survey research. These response scales are useful because they provide information about the direction and intensity of responses (Ingels, Keeton, & Spitzmueller, 2020). In terms of direction, they allow participants to indicate their agreement or disagreement with an item. In terms of intensity, they allow participants to indicate the degree to which they either agree or disagree with an item.

Response scales with five to seven points are considered sufficient. They allow respondents to indicate the intensity of agreement or disagreement without requiring too many cognitive resources to differentiate between subtle differences (Ingels, Keeton, & Spitzmueller, 2020). Additionally, including an odd number of items allows for a neutral response option. Research has shown that not including a neutral point is not necessarily bad (Armstrong, 1987; Guy & Norvell, 1977), but there are advantages to including one. If respondents do not have an attitude in either direction, the lack of a neutral response forces them to choose agreement or disagreement, adding error variance to scores.

The current survey used a 7-point Likert scale. One concern with the 5-point scale is that it may not offer participants enough options, leaving them to pick a ‘nearby’ or ‘close’ choice (Joshi, Kale, Chandel, & Pal, 2015). Finstad (2010) conducted a study in which participants tested two software applications and then answered a survey with either a 5-point Likert scale or a 7-point Likert scale. Results showed that participants in the 5-point scale condition compared to those in the 7-point scale condition were more likely to interpolate or attempt to select a response between two discrete values presented to them. Such findings have led researchers to conclude that the 7-point scale is sensitive enough to minimize interpolations and compact enough to allow participants to respond efficiently.

Writing survey items is an important step as the choice of words or phrases is critical in expressing the question's meaning and intent. Even small wording differences can impact responses and measurement error (Cowles & Nelson, 2015). For example, a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in January 2003 found that when people were asked whether they would “favor or oppose taking military action in Iraq to end

Saddam Hussein's rule," 68% said they favored taking military action (Pew Research Center, 2020). However, when asked whether they would "favor or oppose taking military action in Iraq to end Saddam Hussein's rule even if it meant that U.S. forces might suffer thousands of casualties," only 43% said they favored taking military action. The introduction of U.S. casualties altered the question's context and influenced whether people favored or opposed military action.

When writing survey items, the goal is to write them so that every potential respondent will interpret the question the same way, respond accurately, and be willing to answer (Dillman, 2011). The first of these two refer to reliability and validity (Cowles & Nelson, 2015). In surveys, reliability can refer to several different things. Still, here we refer to the consistency in responses across different respondents in the same situations (i.e., the same question elicits the same response across similar respondents). Validity can also refer to different things, but here we refer to how the measure accurately reflects the concept being measured. Additionally, suppose participants are not motivated to answer each question. In that case, if they see no benefit from their effort, if a question is offensive or demeaning if they do not understand a question, and if they believe that answering a question will result in harm to them, it is likely, they won't answer the question (Cowles, 2015).

Unique items were written by the project team members and personalized to meet the university's needs in particular. Each person was assigned a target audience, given access to a spreadsheet that provided space to write several items for each of the identified constructs, and provided with item-writing guidelines: when writing items, team members were encouraged to consider the key elements of a good question (i.e.,



specificity, clarity, and brevity; Alreck & Settle, 1995) and to consider common question pitfalls that should be avoided.

Specificity refers to the extent to which the question addresses the content of the information being sought and how it is relevant to the survey respondent. Suppose one asks survey respondents about a topic with which they are unfamiliar. In that case, the question may appropriately tap into the construct of interest but would not do a good job of getting that information from the respondents (Alreck & Settle, 1995). Clarity refers to the extent to which the question is understandable to all respondents. The survey question's vocabulary should be tailored to the participants' level of understanding, avoid technical terms or professional jargon. It should not prohibit respondents from understanding the survey content (Alreck & Settle, 1995). The population in the current project consisted of University faculty members (many of whom hold PhDs), staff members (with varying levels of educational attainment), and students (some of which are straight out of high school and others who have been in college for several years). Because the population differs so drastically on education level and likely reading level, it would be safest to assume the average reading level in the United States, which is 7th/8th-grade level (What is readability and why should content editors care about it? 2017) and write survey items accordingly. The Brevity refers to the length and complexity of questions. Questions should be stated in as straightforward and uncomplicated as possible, using simple words and using as few words as possible.

Cowles & Nelson (2015) list five common pitfalls one should avoid when writing survey questions. First, one should avoid writing double-barreled questions or questions in which two different topics are specified. Essentially, this type of question asks the

respondent two questions in one sentence, leaving the respondent puzzled about which part of the question to answer. Second, avoid loaded or leading questions in which the question wording directs a respondent to a particular answer or position. These kinds of questions create biased responses and potentially false results. Third, avoid questions with built-in assumptions. Some questions contain assumptions that must first be considered either true or false to answer the second element of the question. The authors provide one such example: “In comparison to your last driving vacation, was your new car comfortable to ride in?”. Questions such as these may leave the respondent feeling disqualified from answering the second part of the question, which happens to be the real topic of focus. Fourth, avoid questions that contain a double negative as they can confuse the respondent and create a level of frustration that might result in nonresponse or random responses (i.e., respondents select neutral or an answer so that they can move on). Lastly, consider if certain words may be viewed as biased or offensive to some respondents as these can provoke an emotional reaction. For example, several studies have shown that respondents react differently to questions using the word “welfare” as opposed to the more generic “assistance to the poor”; there is much greater support for expanding “assistance to the poor” than for expanding “welfare” (Pew Research Center, 2020).

In the current project, each team member wrote individually. The team then met to discuss and refine the items using the key elements and common pitfalls mentioned above as criteria for evaluating and considering whether the items were actionable. Additionally, when refining items, the team ensured that multiple questions remained for each topic. This refinement allows for calculating a scale score and increases the

construct measurements' validity and accuracy (Levenson, 2014). The final list contained 133 to 149 items, varying based on the respondent's group categorization (i.e., faculty, staff, or student) organized into 30-33 categories. After the team had the initial list of refined items, a group of Subject Matter Experts (SMEs; in this case, individuals seeking a degree in Industrial and Organizational Psychology who were thus considered to have an advanced understanding of the topics areas) reviewed the items. It evaluated whether they matched the definitions of the phenomena of interest and ensured that they were written. SMEs reviewed the survey and provided any feedback to the project team via email. Any feedback provided by the SMEs was evaluated by the project team and implemented when necessary.

### **Programming and Pre-Testing Online Survey**

Once the list was finalized, incorporating any feedback received from the SMEs, the survey was prepared in the online platform, including confidentiality text and instructions. In the confidentiality text, organizations must be transparent with employees regarding who has access to their data and how they will be used. It is important to advise employees from the outset that survey responses will be reported in aggregation only and kept confidential to ensure that employees feel comfortable providing honest answers (Society for Human Resource Management, 2020). This confidentiality text is similar to the procedures commonly referred to as informed consent in research with human participants. Although the history of informed consent in research can be traced back to the 1900s and the U.S. Army Yellow Fever Commission, which is considered to be the first research group in history to use consent forms (Cutter, 2016), the infamous Milgram obedience study represents the point at which informed consent

became front and center in psychology. In that study, participants were made to believe they were delivering electric shocks to a fellow research participant who was a confederate acting as a participant (Milgram, 1963). The research participant, or teacher, was to teach the confederate, or learner, a list of word pairs. The teacher would then test the learner on this list, delivering what they thought was an electric shock for each wrong answer. If the teacher refused to deliver the electric shock, the researcher encouraged them to continue saying things such as “The experiment requires you to continue.” and “you have no other choice but to continue.” The study was criticized on ethical grounds, with people pointing out that participants were deceived (they believed they were shocking a real person) and caused to experience distress (participants showed signs of tension in the form of trembling, sweating, and stuttering, and three participants experienced uncontrollable seizures; McLeod, 2017). Following this study, a greater emphasis was placed on the completion and accuracy of informed consent (Benjamin & Simpson, 2009).

In practice, informed consent is generally understood to occur when a “professional provides information to the other individual so that he or she can make an informed decision about their participation in the professional relationship” (Bersoff, 2008). The goal of the process is to provide clients/patients the opportunity to make an informed decision about their participation. Participants must be given all relevant information, must adequately understand the information, must not be coerced or manipulated into participating, and must have the capacity to weigh the risks and benefits before deciding whether they wish to participate.

The exact guidelines for informed consent for organizational surveys are less clear. There appears to be no governing body or guiding regulations for such work in the United States (note that some states such as California have begun to implement regulations; see below). However, such regulations do exist in the European Union. On May 25th, 2018, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) went into effect, changing how personal data of/from European employees was to be handled. The regulation requires that companies inform participants about how their data will be used and the survey's purpose. It requires that survey respondents give consent before collection of any personal data. If companies fail to meet the requirements, they can face a fine.

On June 28, 2018, California enacted similar legislation as the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA). The goal is to protect the privacy rights of residents of California and requires businesses that meet certain criteria (e.g., annual gross revenue above \$25 million) to disclose to participants the personal information they have about them and what they do with that information, and allows residents the right to request that personal information be deleted. Regulations such as these guide organizations as they develop organizational surveys and make it clear that when conducting surveys, organizations must inform participants of the topics to be discussed, the risks and benefits of participation, and the manner and form in which data will be collected, and confidentiality will be maintained. Additionally, these surveys should be set up in a way that the potential participants must click on a “button” or type in a response indicating that they have read the consent information and agree to participate.

Surveys must also contain succinct and clear instructions, requiring only a small amount of the participants' focus while easily readable (Ingels, Keeton, & Spitzmueller, 2020). In many cases, respondents are likely to move to the items rather than reading lengthy instructions, so it is important to keep the survey's instructions short and to the point, including only the most pertinent information.

The survey was then pre-tested by a small group of our AROS colleagues and launched to participants. Faculty, staff, and students each received an email invitation from the President of the University with information about the initiative and a link to complete the survey. The survey was live for one week in February 2016, with one reminder email sent during that period. A total of 914 participants completed the survey for an overall response rate of 7%. Faculty obtained a response rate of 66% (N = 233), staff obtained a response rate of 39% (N = 219), and students obtained a response rate of 4% (N = 462). Although one must consider that this was the first year the organization conducted such a survey, the overall response rate is quite low. Around 11,000 of the roughly 12,000 members of the organization are students. For organizations with more than 1,000 employees, one should expect to see a response rate between 65-80% (McPherson, n.d.). Ways to improve response rates will be discussed later during the suggestions within the context of improving pre-survey communications and extending the time during which the survey is open.

### **Data Analysis and Report Creation**

Following the end of the survey-administration period, data were cleaned and analyzed, and reports were created. Before analyzing the data, any incomplete responses were removed from the dataset. When designing the report and reporting process, it is

important to tie them back to the purpose and desired outcome of the survey and to use that to make decisions about how to cascade (i.e., a process in which the results are shared starting at the top of the organizational hierarchy and continuing down to the lower levels) (Levenson, 2014). Often, survey responses are collapsed into categories (e.g., favorable, neutral, unfavorable), which allows for ease of interpretation and comparison to benchmarks, which are typically reported in terms of “percent favorable” (Long, 2014). Although responses are typically reported in this manner, it is still important to pay close attention to the full item-response distribution when analyzing the data as the conclusions reached can vary depending on the shape of the distribution, and aggregate ratings may not do justice to its constituent parts (Moye & O’Malley, 2020). For example, say there is an item that asks about perceptions related to the organization's fairness. Although most responses indicate that members of the organization feel as though they are paid fairly, almost as many indicate that they do not. These responses might indicate differences in perceptions across groups. It might be that women, as compared to men, feel that they are not paid fairly, and this is something that could be investigated with further analyses.

In the current project, the report was organized by group (i.e., faculty, staff, students). Each section began with response rates broken down by some, but not all, demographics. Data were reported as net agree (i.e., a combination of somewhat agree, agree, and strongly agree) scores for each item, and there was a narrative synopsis for each category. Additionally, more detailed findings, including the full breakdown of percentages by response-scale option and symbols to identify the majority response and warranted special attention, were presented in an appendix. Although reports of survey

results would typically not include this detailed information, it was included in this case due to the nature of most of the population (i.e., research-minded individuals) and maintaining a level of transparency. Unit-level results were also summarized and provided to unit leaders. Unit levels were chosen based on the existing University structure and included eleven colleges and support offices. Reports were created only for those units that met the minimum cutoff requirement, often responses to maintain confidentiality. There is not a concrete answer in terms of what the cutoff for survey reporting should be. Instead, consultants must consider the organization itself and best practice suggestions. When determining the cutoff, culture is one aspect that can be considered (From Who to How: How to Report & Present Employee Survey Results, 2018). If members of the organization tend to distrust leadership, one might consider using a cutoff on the higher end of the spectrum, such as 10. If the organization has a culture of open and honest feedback, a cutoff closer to three or four might be more appropriate. In the current project, we decided ten was the best option for this particular organization to protect participants' confidentiality, which was a key component of the project throughout our work. Only one unit failed to meet this cutoff.

Another important aspect of the report was the strategy matrix. As mentioned previously, one of the main goals of the survey was to gather the information that could be used to identify and inform a change initiative. Estimates show that 70% of all change initiatives fail and that this often results from efforts to implement too many initiatives at once and a corresponding lack of focus (Beer & Nohria, 2000). Too much change can be taxing, leading to change fatigue or “a perception that too much change is taking place” (Bernerth et al., 2011, p. 322). Bernerth and colleagues (2011) found that change fatigue



is positively related to exhaustion and that exhaustion is negatively related to organizational commitment and positively related to turnover intentions.

For these reasons, organizations must be strategic when prioritizing and implementing change initiatives. Benchmarks, or quantitative data points generated from a single survey item that has been aggregated across several organizations, are one method commonly used by organizations to interpret survey results and prioritize actions (McCune & Johnson, 2020). Due to constraints and a lack of access, the current project did not use benchmarks (note that benchmarks will be discussed in more detail in a later section). Without benchmarks, we had to determine another way to identify important areas of focus.

Instead of benchmarks, a strategy matrix was created to prioritize issues and subsequent organizational-change initiatives based on the survey results. The strategy matrix was based on the Action Priority Matrix (How the Priority Matrix Can Help You Focus on What Matters Most, 2020); see Appendix B), which is a simple visual tool that prioritizes a group of ideas, solutions, or actions and is commonly used in business as a way to increase efficiency. To use the matrix, one scores tasks based firstly on their impact and secondly on the effort needed to complete them. One then plots the activities into one of four quadrants using these scores. The first quadrant contains ‘Quick Wins’ (high impact, low effort) and represents the area where one should focus as much of one’s time as they can. The second quadrant contains ‘Major Projects’ (high impact, high effort) and represents where one should focus as much of their remaining time as possible. The third quadrant contains ‘Fill Ins’ (low impact, low effort) and represents where one should spend their spare time. If one does not have spare time, these tasks

should be delegated. The fourth quadrant contains ‘Thankless Tasks’ and represents tasks that should be avoided and eliminated.

The Strategy Matrix used in the current project harnessed the same concept but instead of impact and effort crossed performance by importance. By crossing performance ratings by derived importance ratings, the matrix helped identify areas of strength (i.e., areas that were important to individuals at the university and in which the University was performing well) and areas of opportunity (i.e., areas that were important to individuals at the university but in which the university was not performing as well). Performance ratings of low, moderate, and high were calculated by averaging scores for each construct (except for job satisfaction; see below) across the three target groups (i.e., faculty, staff, and students) and splitting them into thirds. Importance ratings were created by calculating bivariate correlation coefficients between each construct and job satisfaction (e.g., voice and job satisfaction). Groupings of low (0.1-0.29), medium (0.3-0.49), and high (0.5 or above) importance were created based on Cohen’s 1997 guidelines. Performance ratings and derived importance ratings were then crossed to create the three-by-three matrix (see Appendix C).

While information could be gleaned from all nine cells of the matrix, we focused on the four cells highlighted in dark blue due to their importance relative to the other cells. It should be noted that if these dark-blue cells did not happen to receive any of the constructs in the survey, we would shift focus to other cells. The three across the top were included due to all being classified as high importance (due to their relationship to job satisfaction), the first two being identified as weaknesses to improve and the third being identified as a strength to maintenance and leverage. The first box on the second row was

also included due to its moderate importance (due to its relationship to job satisfaction) and low performance. These cells helped identify priorities and areas of focus for the University. Priority one represented the primary weakness (i.e., an area that was of high importance due to their relationship to job satisfaction and in which the University had a low-performance score) that should be addressed and should be the main focus of any organizational-change initiatives. Priority two represented possible weaknesses (i.e., areas of high importance and where the University had moderate performance scores) that the University should improve. Priority three represented secondary weaknesses (i.e., areas of moderate importance and where the University had low-performance scores) that the University should consider addressing. Priority four represented primary strengths (i.e., areas of high importance and in which the University had high-performance scores) that the University should focus on maintaining and leveraging. The priority areas were used to make suggestions regarding focus areas for post-survey action planning and organizational change initiatives. It is important to note that although correlation coefficients do not reveal information about causal links, they can provide information about the nature and strength of the relationship between variables. Additionally, because we based our organizational functioning model on the HPC, an empirically based model, we had past theoretical and empirical support for these relationships.

### **Communicating and Cascading Survey Results**

Once the reports were created, and priority areas were identified, the next step was to systematically report the results back to all the people who answered the questionnaire. According to the traditional/best-practice approach, feedback occurs in

phases, starting with the organization's top team and flowing downward according to the formal hierarchy (Kraut, 2006). In this process, the CEO and their immediate group of subordinates would receive and discuss feedback from the survey first. Then, those subordinates and their respective groups of immediate subordinates would do the same. This process would continue downward until all organization members surveyed hear a summary of the results and then participate in a discussion of the meaning of the data and implications (Kraut, 2006). Each functional unit of the organization would receive general feedback about the organization overall and specific feedback regarding its group. The supervisor and their subordinates would then jointly plan action steps for improvement. In this process, a consultant would typically meet with each group to help explain the data and facilitate a group discussion to create improvement plans—the process used in the current project mostly aligned with this best practice, except for one step.

Results were first presented to the Administrative and Planning Council (APC), which is chaired by the President, including administrative representatives from all university areas. One of the main goals from the beginning of the project was to maintain a high transparency level. Therefore, after this presentation, the overall University-level report was shared with all university members via an email from the university's President. Although best practice dictates that leaders be tasked with sharing the survey results with each of their direct reports and that this process be repeated until all organization members have reviewed the data, the decision was made to stray from this to uphold the promise of transparency. We understood that it would be possible for all unit leaders to share their specific unit's overall results. Still, We were concerned about

the amount of time between the executive presentation and when this could be accomplished, and the impact that lags would have on feelings of trust. Therefore, the decision was made to first share the overall results with everyone and then proceed with the cascading.

After the report was shared with all faculty, staff, and students, the project team members held feedback sessions with each unit leader (except those whose reports did not meet cutoff) to discuss their unit-specific report and discuss the next steps. These leaders were then tasked with developing an action plan that detailed the steps they would follow to share and discuss the overall survey results and their unit-specific results with the rest of their unit. AROS provided a template to help guide the leader through creating this plan. The template included space for them to provide information such as their planned meeting format, and it asked the leader to think about their target audience, goals, and anticipated roadblocks. Additionally, the leader was asked to think through their perspective concerning the survey results and provide initial ideas for the next steps and possible interventions. It also outlined some questions the leader should be able to answer before going into the meeting (e.g., why change is needed, how members of the University will benefit from future changes).

At this point, the current project and scope stopped. However, it should be noted that the project continued into a second phase in which follow-up focus groups were conducted. These focus groups' goal was to confirm the priority areas identified in the survey and begin brainstorming potential initiatives to address the main priority. However, I will not discuss those in detail as the focus of the current work is developing, deploying, and reporting out an organization-wide employee survey.

## CHAPTER 3

### SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

The following suggestions are ordered based on ease of implementation, from easiest to implement to most difficult implementation. Note that ease here refers not only to effort on the part of the organization but also cost.

#### **Refine the Current Survey Process**

##### **Improve the Focus Group Guide**

We conducted focus groups with a representative cross-section of faculty, staff, and students to identify the survey topics. Although we had a list of topics we needed to cover at the beginning of the focus groups (i.e., purpose, general structure, and confidentiality) and a list of questions we wanted to ask, the focus-group guide could have been better organized and more detailed. In the book *Employee Surveys and Sensing* (2020), Cucina & Gast offer guidance to shape how a focus group should be organized. According to these authors, a focus group typically begins with the facilitator welcoming the group, providing an overview of the topics, and establishing the ground rules for discussion (e.g., there are no right or wrong answers, help protect others' privacy by not discussing details outside the group, respect the opinions of others even if you don't agree; Cucina & Gast, 2020).

The facilitator then kicks off the discussion with an opening question that is not research-related but is instead meant to acquaint the group members and establish trust. Typically, this is personal but appropriate such as where they work or how long they have been there. In the current project, this could have been “How long have you worked at the university?” for faculty and staff and “What is your major?” for students. The facilitator then moves into the introductory questions, which are broad questions that introduce the topic and direct the group’s attention to the central topic. The responses can help the facilitator gauge participants’ feelings about the topic and speculate where the discussion might head.

Next, the facilitator asks transition questions, which create a link between the introductory questions and the key questions. These set the stage for the key questions by asking participants for greater depth on the introductory questions' topics. Next are the key questions, which take most of the time and move participants to the heart of the discussion. These include five or six questions that focus on the major areas of concern, such as how the participants feel about a particular aspect of working at or attending the University. The facilitator then finishes out the session with the closing questions, which allow participants to reflect on the discussion and provide a sense of closure to the session. The facilitator might ask what was most important or if the participants would like to ask anything or provide a summary of the session and ask participants about its accuracy. The current project could have followed an organization like this when developing the focus group guides to help ensure consistency across groups and utilize time wisely to get the most information out of each section.

## **Streamline Survey Format, Design, and Administration**

The first suggestion for improvement is to streamline the format, design, and administration of the survey. The current survey has 133 to 149 items and 30 to 33 categories depending on the target group. The number of questions included in a survey can influence the survey's response rate. It is advised to aim for up to 75 questions and a survey that takes no longer than 20 to 30 minutes to complete, as anything beyond this is cumbersome for respondents (SHRM, 2020). Now that the current survey has been administered, the items can be further refined and reduced. When evaluating the items to identify ones for removal, there are several points to take into consideration. First, the focus should be on keeping questions essential to the survey's overall goal and understanding what employees think about their workplace (Society for Human Resource Management, 2020). Second, questions should be removed if they are too similarly worded or ask about the same general concept. Additionally, "nice to know" questions should be limited or avoided altogether to limit the survey length. Reducing the number of items would make it more respondent-friendly, potentially increase response rates, and make future results more valid.

In the current survey, demographic questions were placed at the beginning. There are advantages (e.g., potential to increase response rates; Roberson & Sundstrom, 1990) and disadvantages (e.g., respondents might quit the survey before answering the questions) to placing these at the end of the survey instead of the beginning. However, I would argue that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. There were several instances in which respondents answered most of the demographic questions and then exited the survey before answering any opinion questions. While there are advantages to



having demographic information (e.g., these data could be analyzed to determine whether respondents were writing systematically or unsystematically), I would argue that the organization's real value comes from gathering responses to opinion items that ultimately impact important business-related decisions. These responses without accompanying demographic data could still be analyzed and reported at the overall level.

Simultaneously, the alternative (i.e., responses to demographic items without accompanying responses to opinion items) results in the data being discarded altogether.

The number of demographic questions included in the survey could also be reduced. There were a total of 15 demographic questions for faculty and staff and 11 demographic questions for students. Many of these demographic questions were not used in the analyses or presented in the survey report. For future iterations, the team should consider reducing the number of demographics to only those needed for reporting (e.g., college/division, tenure) and should remove any that are not included in the report and perhaps more sensitive (e.g., salary, citizenship status).

The second suggestion is to remove category names and randomize the survey items. In the current survey, the items were organized by category, with the category name included in the text at the top of the page. That is, each page contained all items in the category and said, "For the following statements, please rate your opinion regarding the [category] at [University Name].". Particular attention should be paid to how survey questions are ordered in a questionnaire. The placement of a question can have a greater impact on the results than the particular choice of words in the question (Pew Research Center, 2020).

For close-ended questions such as the ones used in the current survey, there are two main types of effects to take into consideration (Pew Research Center, 2020). First are contrast effects in which the order of the survey items results in greater differences in responses. An experiment embedded in a December 2008 Pew Research poll found that when people were asked, “All in all, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way things are going in this country today?” immediately after having been asked, “Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling his job as president?” 88% said they were dissatisfied, compared with only 78% without the context of the prior question. Responses to presidential approval remained relatively unchanged whether national satisfaction was asked before or after it (Pew Research Center, 2020).

Second are assimilation effects, which occur when responses to two survey items are more consistent because of their placement in the questionnaire. A Pew Research poll conducted in November 2008 asked whether Republican leaders should work with Obama or stand up to him on important issues and whether Democratic leaders should work with Republican leaders or stand up to them on important issues. People were more likely to say that Republican leaders should work with Obama when the question was preceded by asking what Democratic leaders should do in working with Republican leaders (81% vs. 66%). However, when people were first asked about Republican leaders working with Obama, fewer said that Democratic leaders should work with Republican leaders (71% vs. 82%).

Randomizing survey items is a technique commonly used to reduce the impact of item-order effects. Once again, there are advantages and disadvantages to this practice. For example, research has shown that people have limited information-processing skills

(Rush, Phillips, & Lord, 1981), shifting from one unidentified issue to the next difficult than focusing on one issue (Solomon & Kopelman, 1984). Some also argue that the proximity of similar survey items should facilitate comparison among them and enhance responses' accuracy (e.g., Solomon & Kopelman, 1984).

In their 1984 study using self-report attitude measures (e.g., job and family satisfaction), Solomon & Kopelman found that internal-consistency statistics varied significantly between grouped-and-labeled (i.e., items are grouped by category and the category name is shown), grouped-and-unlabeled (i.e., items are grouped by category but the category name is not shown), and ungrouped forms of administration (i.e., items are randomized). Their results indicated that grouping items comprising a scale increased internal consistency reliability compared to randomly dispersing items. However, research has shown that this increase in internal consistency might be inflated. Wilson & Lankton (2012) conducted a study in which undergraduate students completed a survey via an online application that randomly assigned them to one of two treatments. Participants in the grouped treatment completed a survey in which all items were grouped based on category.

In contrast, participants in the randomized treatment completed a survey in which items appeared randomly. Note that the items were the same in the two surveys, with the only difference being the presentation order. Internal consistency was higher for the grouped treatment compared to the randomized treatment. Further analyses revealed that the higher reliabilities were an artifact of higher correlation among the grouped condition's error terms.

Additionally, it has long been accepted that disclosure of a questionnaire's purpose is undesirable, and randomization of items follows the standard practice used for years in personality testing (Anastasi, 1976). For these reasons, I argue that category names should be removed and items in future iterations of the survey should be randomized.

The second suggestion for improvement is to expand the pre-survey communication plan as this could help increase response rates. Deciding the method of communicating the survey depends largely on the organization's culture and the various types of communication readily available, such as staff meetings, company intranet, email, newsletters, flyers, etc. Setting up realistic expectations of the timing and communication of survey results upfront is important to the process's success (Society for Human Resource Management, 2020). It alerts members of the organization to the upcoming survey. The AROS team could work with the client to determine the best method for communicating. Still, in general, one wants to start with supervisors and managers and then cascade down to all employees (or, in this case, members of the University).

Start by preparing supervisors and managers with advanced information about the rationale for conducting the employee survey, expectations of timeliness of communicating the results, plans to follow up on results, and common questions members of the University may ask. In practice, I have seen organizations start this about a month before survey administration. This preparation allows time to send this information via email and reinforce it through other formats (e.g., meetings, intranet, etc.) during the weeks leading up to the survey. A question-and-answer packet may be an

effective way to brief managers in advance of this information (Society for Human Resource Management, 2020). Communications should then be expanded to include all university members, with the President of the University formally announcing the survey via emails, posters, etc.

In addition to expanding pre-survey communications, I suggest leaving the survey open longer and sending additional reminder emails. In practice, I have seen most organizations leave their survey open at least three weeks, with some leaving them open for four weeks. Leaving the open survey longer allows more time for respondents to participate. It is important to note here that one could argue that leaving the survey open even longer would give respondents even more time to respond. While this is true, it also delays data analysis and reporting, impacting the organization's ability to act on business metrics. Organizations must weigh the advantages and disadvantages and make a decision accordingly. Most organizations also choose to send a reminder email each week. For example, the survey could launch on Monday of week one, followed by a reminder on Monday of weeks two and three, a final reminder could be sent on Monday of week four, and then the survey could close on the Friday of week four. From my experience, most organizations choose to send reminders only to those employees who have not yet responded to the survey. While this would be ideal, it might be made difficult by the nature of confidentiality and the software used to administer the current survey. Additionally, I have seen many organizations use live response-rate tracking to encourage and increase response rates. That would be another thing to consider for future iterations of the current survey.

### **Implement a More Robust Pre-Survey Testing Process**

Another way to improve the current survey process would be to implement a more robust pre-survey testing process. Ideally, there should be two rounds of pre-survey testing. In the first round, participants are asked to go through a “talk aloud protocol” where they can share their thoughts on survey items and content as they work their way through the survey items. The survey team records these comments and alters the survey items accordingly (Ingels, Keeton, & Spitzmueller, 2020). It should be noted that this process would only be used for the first few iterations of the survey. One goal of surveys in general and this particular project is to compare performance on survey items year after year but to do this, the survey items must be the same, or very similar, each year. Therefore, once the survey was to the point that the team felt comfortable with is being more permanent, this would no longer be necessary. This process would also only be used during the first of the two rounds of survey testing; the second round includes a larger number of testers, making this procedure less practical.

In the second round, a different group of participants completes the survey in a close-to-final version and in an administration mode close to how the actual survey will be administered. A sufficient number of respondents should be included so that the item set's preliminary tests can be conducted, and major demographic cuts of interest can be examined. Following this test, a subset of these participants is interviewed to glean information from them on any remaining issues concerning the readability and interpretability of survey items (Ingels, Keeton, & Spitzmueller, 2020).

Several things should be evaluated during this robust pre-testing process (Cowles & Nelson, 2015). First is the amount of variation in the answers to each survey question.

A question without much variation in responses could indicate the presence of floor effects (i.e., clustering of scores at the lower level reported by the instrument) or ceiling effects (i.e., clustering of scores at the upper level reported by the instrument) and can call into question whether the question is accurately measuring what it is intended to measure (Resch & Isenberg, 2014). Second is the number of respondents who skip certain questions or say they do not know how to respond. These responses could indicate a problem with how the question is worded, or it could indicate that the question asks for information that respondents cannot or do not want to provide. Third is the amount of time it takes respondents to complete the survey. Understanding the expected response time can help you understand if the survey is taking longer than anticipated and can provide accurate information to respondents. All of this information can be used to refine survey items further.

### **Provide Additional Guidance for Reporting and Action Planning**

The current survey process could also be further improved by providing additional guidance for report roll-out and action planning. In the current process, AROS team members conducted a feedback meeting with each unit leader. They then asked them to develop an action plan using a template that guided them through planning to feed the results back to their units and provides a good way of working through action planning the first year (or few years) of the survey process. However, in line with the process consultation approach mentioned previously, as time goes on, the goal will be to transfer more and more of this process to the University leaders and help train them to take on most of this work independently. The process-consultation approach is based on the idea of a helping relationship in which the consultant offers the client tools and

strategies to own the problem, diagnose, and determine the best solution themselves (Schein, 1999).

To prepare managers to interpret and act on survey results, organizations should consider conducting training sessions on communication, problem-solving, and employee engagement (Levenson, 2014). Managers can also be introduced to the larger topic of diagnosing and improving organizational effectiveness, with the survey data providing one piece of the puzzle. It will also be important for the organization to be prepared to act on the university level data. To do this, organizations often establish cross-functional teams to respond to and act on survey findings (Society for Human Resource Management, 2020). Most team members are non-senior employees, but each team is supported by a senior-level champion who monitors and supports but does not manage the team. Ideally, these teams are in place within a month after the organization releases the survey results. Some organizations set up department-specific teams responsible for responding to specific issues within their particular department (Society for Human Resource Management, 2020). It will be important for the University to have a plan to quickly form teams such as these to aid in post-survey action planning.

### **Develop Clear Criteria for Removing Incomplete Responses**

In the current project, any incomplete responses were removed from the dataset; this is not necessarily wrong, but it may have removed data when they did not need to. Although there are no universal criteria for determining when data should be removed, there should be a clear list of criteria developed and used by the team to inform this decision. Data can be missing at the item level, scale level, or survey level (i.e., the



respondent did not submit any data; Moye & O'Malley, 2020). It is advisable to use all available data and report missing elements at the item level.

It is helpful to maintain a column showing the percentage of missing data for each item in a table of descriptive statistics, as this helps identify patterns of missing. If one question is frequently skipped, there may be something about the question leading respondents to pass over it (e.g., the question asks about a sensitive topic such as pay). In addition to missing data, effort should also be taken to identify instances of careless responding. Some useful criteria include survey completion times below a threshold, a lack of variance in responses (e.g., all 3s), and demographic variable combinations that are illogical or impossible (Moye & O'Malley, 2020).

### **Expand the Survey Report**

Another suggestion for improvement is to expand the survey report to include category scores and benchmarks to make the report more user-friendly and aid in tracking progress over time. To help managers more easily make sense of survey results, especially when the survey includes a relatively large number of items, it is often helpful to group responses to survey items into meaningful subscales (Moye & O'Malley, 2020). We grouped the items into categories in the current survey report, but we did not provide scale scores. The data to calculate scale scores are already present in the report, making it a rather simple task. Additionally, some readers might find these useful as they read and interpret the report. Because they are easy to add and might improve the report's readability, I suggest adding scale scores to the survey report.

Benchmarking is the process of measuring key business metrics and comparing them to other organizations' scores to understand how and where the organization needs

to change to improve performance (Moye & O'Malley, 2020). There are two types of benchmarks: internal and external. Internal benchmarks can either compare one part of the organization to another or compare the same part of the organization to itself at an earlier time. An external benchmark is a quantitative data point generated from a single survey item, such as the mean of percent favorable score, that has been aggregated across some number of organizations to serve as a point of comparison to an organization's result on the same or a similar survey item (McCune & Johnson, 2020). External benchmarks are typically organized by industry, job function, and geography.

External benchmarks allow an organization to compare their results to other organizations' results to determine whether the organization is doing better than, about the same as, or worse than those organizations and are often necessary for putting survey results into context. For example, in practice, I have seen that pay is an area in which most organizations score poorly on employee surveys. Comparing percent favorable scores in this area to those of other organizations would provide greater context and understanding. There are, however, challenges in using external benchmarks.

First, obtaining access to benchmark data requires a certain level of effort and financial investment (McCune & Johnson, 2020). Organizations must obtain access to benchmark data either through general benchmarking studies (several research organizations such as Gartner and Gallup produce studies that contain survey-based benchmarks), survey vendors, or other less common means (e.g., consortia, panels, crowdsourcing technology). Second, using external benchmarks reduces the opportunity for customization of survey items. To use these benchmarks, the organization must use

the same or similar survey items in the database. Therefore, in selecting items available for benchmarking, compromise may be necessary for the survey design.

Another downside of external benchmarks is a growing realization that processes and programs cannot simply be lifted from one organization and transplanted to another with identical success (McCune & Johnson, 2020). For example, Oracle, Microsoft, Google, IBM, and Apple are all in the tech industry and have employees who work in both hardware and software. Their cultures, Employee Value Propositions (EVPs), and internal career paths are quite distinct. Comparing the answers to similarly worded questions across these organizations without any regard for the different contexts of the employees who answered them is misguided. This methodology is why some people feel that benchmarking survey items across organizations, even within the same industry, is usually not very useful (Levenson, 2014).

Internal benchmarks of either kind can provide a more relevant, direct comparison (McCune & Johnson, 2020) and are also more economically friendly (which was an important consideration in this project). In future years, two internal comparisons could be added to the reports. In the overall report, a column could be added to compare the scores to those from the previous year. The unit reports could include an additional column that compares the unit's scores to those of the organization overall and another column that compares the unit's scores to those from the previous year. It is important to note that no single data point should make a case for resources' investment. Rather, the organization must triangulate all available data to determine an appropriate course of action (McCune & Johnson, 2020). The introduction of internal benchmarks would add

another data point and the strategy matrix and focus groups that could be used to identify areas of focus for action-planning and change initiatives.

### **Implement a Continuous-Listening Strategy**

The last suggestion for improvement is to consider implementing a continuous-listening strategy. It is important to note that this represents a more long-term goal. It is important to successfully embed a culture of listening to the organization before expanding and adding additional listening forms. More companies are starting to embrace the idea of continuous listening, which involves gathering feedback more often across the employee lifecycle (Croswell, 2020). These additional forms of listening can include surveys (e.g., onboarding, exit, team effectiveness, and targeted pulse surveys) but also in-person feedback conversations (e.g., one-on-one meetings between managers and direct reports, post-survey focus groups, and “how might we” sessions aimed at brainstorming ways to improve specific topics such as leadership effectiveness).

There are two important points to keep in mind about continuous listening. The first of these is that continuous listening should not replace the annual employee survey. Instead, the large-scale comprehensive employee-opinion survey should serve as the broader listening strategy (Willis Towers Watson, 2017). This strategy is because the annual survey provides value that other forms of listening cannot.

The first of these is inclusiveness. The annual employee survey is unique in that it includes all employees across the organization. This inclusion ensures that employees feel involved in the organizational improvement effort, which is an important prerequisite to successfully implementing change initiatives (Willis Towers Watson, 2017).

Additionally, it also means that results can be reported to almost all leaders and

managers, enabling widespread organizational improvement. The second of these is breadth. The annual employee survey includes a longer list of questions than that, which can be included in other forms of listening such as pulse surveys. This list widens the range of understanding and decreases the possibility of missing key insights (Willis Towers Watson, 2017).

Additionally, this allows an organization to identify a topic of concern and gain further insight into the issues' details. The third is momentum. The annual employee survey generates organizational momentum for change fueled largely by employee expectations (this ties back to the earlier section on the survey as intervention).

The second important point to keep in mind is that an organization should only survey as frequently as it can act on the feedback (Crowell, 2020). As mentioned previously, conducting a survey implies to those completing the survey that change will follow because of the survey's information. Asking questions without following up can be worse than not asking them at all. Additionally, collecting feedback more often across the employee lifecycle enables the organization to take more targeted action. Therefore, listening without acting would defeat the intended purpose of listening in the first place

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **CONCLUSION**

For years, professionals working in practice and scientists working in academia have complained about an information gap between science and practice. Practitioners often complain that academic research is driven more by a narrow interest in testing abstract theories or applying obscure research tools than an interest in solving real workplace dilemmas. Simultaneously, researchers say that practitioners often desire simple solutions to complex problems (Dunnette, 1990). This problem is referred to as the science-practice gap, and it is not unique to the organizational sciences; it exists in nearly all fields in which there are both researchers and practitioners (Glaser, Abelson, & Garrison, 1983). Shapiro and colleagues conducted an online survey of Academy of Management members in 2007. No matter their job, experience, location, publication record, or other defining characteristics, respondents perceived a gap between management research and practice and indicated they are somewhat concerned about it. The gap is not merely a matter of opinion; research supports the claim and shows that this gap does exist. Deadrick and Gibson conducted a study in 2007. They reviewed 4300 published articles and found support for a gap by showing that academic journals' content differs from publications aimed at practitioners. The largest gap seems to be in the area

of compensation and rewards. Articles on compensation and benefits comprised 14.3% of practitioner journals' content, but only 2% of academic ones.

There is a debate about the extent to which practice should influence science, with some authors arguing that if research is of high quality if it follows the scientific method, and if the topics studied are relevant, then it will automatically have important implications for practice (Rupp & Beal, 2007). Although some argue that research in behavioral sciences should not be burdened by a requirement to inform practice (e.g., Hulin, 2001), many agree that I-O psychologists should be trained to consume, critique, and carry out science as this is crucial for both doing good research and conducting evidence-based practice (Rupp & Beal, 2007).

During my first year of graduate school, I was introduced to Weisbord & Janoff (2004). The authors discuss a shorter, more streamlined alternative to the traditional months-long systems-redesign process. In this article, the authors describe and discuss the process they used — there were no research questions, no data collected, and no statistical tests. This article illustrates the dilemmas that we sometimes face as we apply for work in real-world organizations that are not static and simple but complex and complicated. Sometimes, we must propose novel solutions that deviate from 'best practice' or what literature tells us we should do because it makes sense for that particular organization and its culture, situation, etc.

During the current project, we had to make some of those tough decisions. One example is in the way we chose to feedback survey results to members of the organization. Earlier in the paper, I describe the 'ideal' process outlined in the literature (members of the top management team receive results first and are then tasked

with sharing that information with each of their direct reports). I discuss the actual process that we implemented (the overall results were shared with everyone, and then we proceeded with the cascading process). We chose the process we did (to maintain transparency and foster feelings of trust among the organization members). I believe that narratives such as the current dissertation contribute to the field, just as Weisbord and Janoff did. They illustrate the reality of applied work and show how I-O psychologists can use literature and best practice to guide their work while also proposing and implementing novel solutions when circumstances require them.

Although we decided to deviate from best practice, it is important to note that the HPC guided our work and empirically-based organizational functioning model, which provided a lens through which we viewed our work and a foundation on which we based our decisions. I believe that narratives such as these are useful not only to applied I-Os. They can draw from them when making decisions about carrying out their work in organizations and academics as they formulate research questions and collect data that are ultimately intended to inform practice. This narrative provides just one example of how we can close the gap between science and practice.



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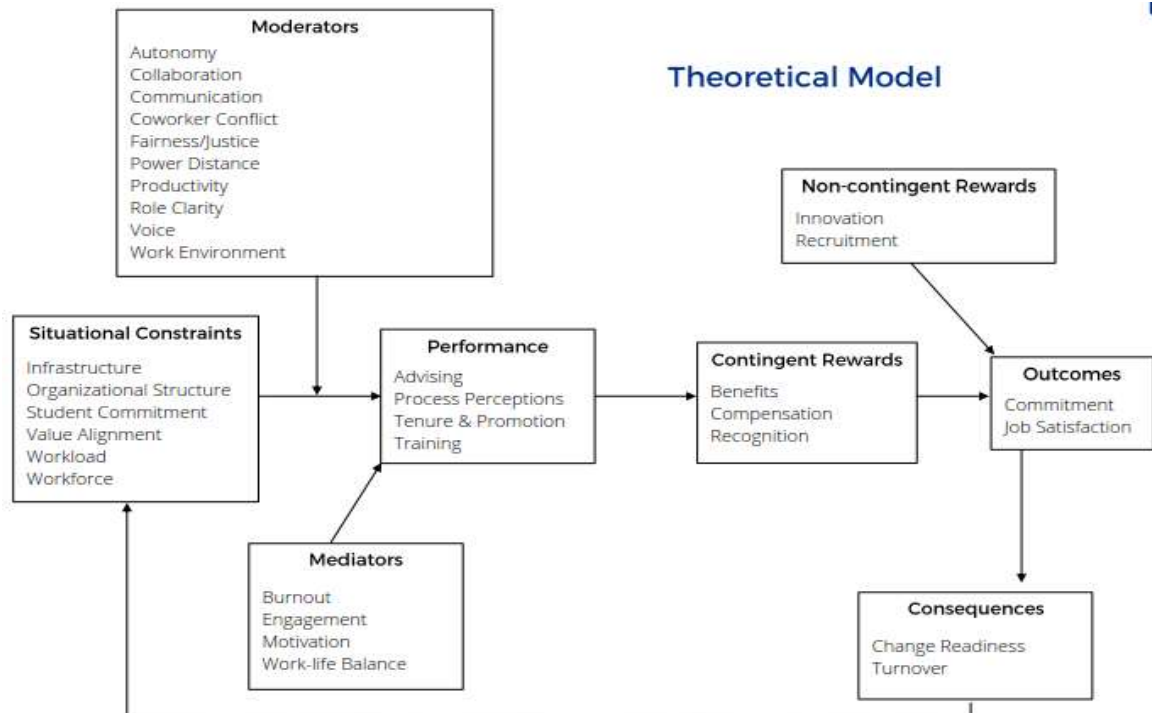
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## **APPENDIX A**

### **MODEL OF ORGANIZATIONAL FUNCTIONING**

## Model of Organizational Functioning



## **APPENDIX B**

### **ACTION PRIORITY MATRIX**

## Action Priority Matrix

EFFORT		
IMP ACT	Quick Wins	Major Projects
	Fill Ins	Thankless Tasks

## **APPENDIX C**

### **STRATEGY MATRIX**



## Strategy Matrix

		PERFORMANCE		
		Low	Moderate	High
IMPORTANCE	High	<b>Priority 1</b> <b>Primary Weakness:</b> Definitely Address	<b>Priority 2</b> <b>Possible Weakness:</b> Try to Improve	<b>Priority 4</b> <b>Primary Strength:</b> Maintain and Leverage
	Moderate	<b>Priority 3</b> <b>Secondary Weakness:</b> Consider Addressing	No Action	Maintain but Manage Costs
	Low	Ignore, Drop, and/or Phase Out	Evaluate to Consider Dropping	Potential to Cut Costs