

# ORIGINS OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE SURVEY OF FEDERAL STATISTICAL AGENCIES

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**Abstract:** As a part of the Quality Movement, Federal agencies are employing a variety of techniques to understand the concerns and perceptions of employees in order to achieve the full potential of the workforce through teamwork and employee development. Nine Federal statistical agencies sponsored an Organizational Climate Survey conducted by the Joint Program in Survey Methodology at the University of Maryland. This paper will focus on the developmental process in the designing of the proposal and on the process of obtaining buy-in from the nine participating agencies.

Statistical agencies have more in common with other statistical agencies than with program offices within their own Department. Sister statistical agencies are generally the career path for statisticians in the agencies; therefore, these organizational climate comparisons are important. This survey will enable the Federal statistical community to understand their common problems, the concerns of their employees, and potentially work together towards improvements.

## INTRODUCTION

Approximately 3 years ago, dissatisfaction with using private sector surveys to measure public sector climate led a group of empowered Federal employees on a quest to develop a climate survey within the context of a Federal *Statistical* agency. Much of the dissatisfaction arose from the realization that the content of the private sector survey reflected only their profit-centered philosophy and not the service-centered philosophy of the public sector. Unavoidably, a sector's philosophy impacts their organizational climate. Additional dissatisfaction arose from the lack of a standard for statistical comparisons (benchmarking) because the same private sector survey was not used throughout the Federal community. Benchmarking within the Federal community has become increasingly important given the current milieu in which Federal agencies must work more closely together. Indeed, the climate survey that was developed is just one of several new collaborations presently underway among the statistical agencies as they move toward the concept of a "virtual statistical agency."

This paper describes the origins of the Organizational Climate Survey of Federal Statistical Agencies. This survey was conducted by the 1996-1997 Joint Program in Survey Methodology (JPSM) survey practicum class along with the University of Maryland's Survey Research Center (SRC). Hereafter, this survey will be referred to as the JPSM Survey. Annually, the JPSM solicits proposals from Federal statistical agencies for projects that will provide students

"real" survey-related experiences. This arrangement creates a win-win situation - the sponsoring agency gets solutions to specific issues under the supervision of an expert, while JPSM and the students build a repertoire of survey experience and form working relationships with staff of the sponsoring agency. Until recently, proposals accepted by JPSM were conducted without reimbursement from the sponsoring agency. For the JPSM Survey, sponsoring agencies equally shared the monetary costs as well as the benefit of receiving a survey that provided benchmarking specifically to the Federal statistical community. The National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) led the efforts for the JPSM Survey with the Energy Information Administration (EIA) and the U.S. Census Bureau having critical roles.

## IMPETUS

Over the last 5 years, the Federal Government has committed to changing their bureaucratic way of doing business. In 1993, the White House demonstrated its commitment through strong support of three efforts fundamental to changing bureaucratic practices. The first effort was the 1993 National Performance Review (NPR), which was a government-wide initiative to reinvent government "creating a government that works better and costs less" by cutting red tape and by empowering employees. The second effort was the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA) initiated by Congress and signed into a law which required Federal agencies to develop strategic plans for delivering high quality services and products. The third effort was the 1993 Executive Order requiring Federal agencies to conduct customer surveys to determine if customers were really getting what they needed from the government, essentially requiring that government put customers first. Of course, putting customers first connotes an understanding of employees' needs and concerns, and a removing of impediments so that excellent customer service can be provided. As a result of the efforts of 1993, Federal agencies were required to establish mission statements and core organizational values as well as performance objectives and performance metrics. These White House legislative actions motivated Federal agencies to accept the challenge to change their agency's culture from simple status quo to one of accountability at all staff and management levels.

As Federal agencies strive toward this new orientation, they are streamlining management and staff to eliminate management control and unnecessary layers of review (factors known to hinder both cultural change and employee empowerment). The philosophy is to get the best creativity and knowledge from all Federal employees and to leave the

rote mechanical work to computers, and other machines that do that best. An understanding of employees' needs, concerns, skills, and perceptions of the organization is one of the basic building blocks to making the transition to a performance-based, results-oriented Federal Government.

## ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE SURVEYS

To understand employees' needs, concerns, and perceptions, the organizational climate must be assessed. Interest in organizational climate began as early as the 1930's and has been increasing since the mid-1960's. The literary findings on organizational climate are diverse and define organizational climate as related to the following: perceived organizational support (Eisenberger and Huntington, 1986); the structure of the organization (Payne and Pugh, 1976); and, the degree of similarity between the organization's expectations and the employee's expectations (Glick, 1985). Schneider and Reichers (1983) define Organizational Climate as "an approach to understanding phenomena that rests on employee perceptions that are descriptive of organizational or subsystem events, practices and procedures that, in the aggregate, are useful in characterizing organizations or subsystems." Simply stated, assessing organizational climate requires that the unit of analysis be employees' perceptions in the aggregate, not the perceptions of the individual. Even the concept of assessing perceptions is relatively new and, according to Schneider and Reichers, provides an alternative to the once widely accepted assessment of individual employee motivations (Motivational Theory). Thus, assessing workforce perceptions in the aggregate evolved from analyzing the psychology of the individual (Schneider and Reichers, 1983). Essential to the understanding and the measurement of organizational climate is the acceptance that measuring one outcome such as service or safety requires assessing the perceptions of events, practices, and procedures related to that one outcome. Consequently, organizational climate surveys consist of several questions related to a single outcome/topic of interest. These outcomes/topics of interest must be salient to employees for the assessment of climate to be relevant.

Many Federal agencies have conducted customer surveys and climate surveys to facilitate an understanding of their organization's climate and to target opportunities for improvement. NASS conducted Organizational Climate Surveys in 1982, 1983, 1990, and 1993, primarily to assess employee perceptions of their working conditions (Beckler and Messer, 1997). Unlike many of the organizational climate surveys that were conducted at other Federal agencies, all of the NASS surveys were conducted by, for, and at NASS. Other examples of Organizational Climate Surveys in Federal statistical agencies include the Bureau of Economic Affairs' 1995 Diversity Climate Assessment Survey; the National Center for Health Statistics' 1994 Management Needs Assessment Survey; and EIA's 1994 and 1995 Organizational Climate Surveys. Additionally, EIA was at the forefront in conducting customer surveys, having

contacted customers over the past three years by telephone, mail-in response cards as well as by Internet. Both customer surveys and climate surveys provide important information for the organization in developing its strategic plan--i.e., its road map to changing the organization and most efficiently carrying out its mandated functions.

Until the development of the JPSM Survey, most Federal agencies/departments contracted with a private sector consultant to conduct their organizational climate surveys. For the Federal agencies, these consultants conducted the climate surveys developed for their private sector clients. The analysis of these private sector surveys in Federal agencies included a "benchmarking" component. A Federal agency would be benchmarked against a private sector organization that was perceived to have similar characteristics or functions. However, this benchmarking was inappropriate (except for personnel organizations, supply groups, or medical organizations). Unlike private sector organizations, which are driven and evaluated on the basis of profit, Federal agencies are driven and evaluated on the basis of service. As Denhardt (1993) has noted: "People are attracted to public organizations for many reasons, but primary among them is a desire to serve--to contribute something meaningful and significant to the world." Given the significance of benchmarking, Federal agencies should use organizational climate surveys developed specifically for their characteristics and functions.

In particular, Federal statistical agencies should conduct organizational climate surveys developed for their characteristics and functions. Benchmarking statistical agencies to their department may produce anomalies with respect to the employee's perception of the climate and how the organization treats them. For instance, a major mission of the Department of Energy (DOE) is stewardship of the Nation's defense nuclear stockpile; while, the primary mission of EIA, the independent statistical arm of DOE, is to collect statistical information on "energy." These are two very different missions. Similar circumstances exist for some of the other statistical agencies. Statistical agencies have similar products, similar types of customers, similar concerns for quality, accuracy, validity, and relevance of products as well as common needs to adhere to established time frames for report releases. Therefore, benchmarking statistical agencies to each other is more appropriate than benchmarking them to their department (Goldsamt, 1995).

Even so, agencies cited advantages to continuing the use of previous organizational climate surveys, instead of the adoption of a new one, even for the sake of appropriate benchmarking. Many of the agencies had used the results from their previous organizational climate surveys in establishing performance agreements for improvements expected over a 5 year period. Also, Federal agencies with multi-year surveys were able to benchmark to themselves, given that benchmarking can occur over a multi-year period as well over a single point in time. Both of these advantages indicated that adopting a new organizational climate survey would create a loss of data comparability to past surveys. Last but not least, contracting with the consultant was

somewhat inexpensive and took little effort on the part of agency staff and management. The monetary costs and personnel resource costs are very important as budgets are cut and most agencies are under very vigorous requirements to reduce the number of agency staff and the staff to management ratios.

### AN IDEA IN THE MAKING

Most Federal statistical agencies liked the idea of having an organizational climate survey developed specifically within the context of their characteristics and functions. The very idea of an organizational climate survey specifically for them grew out of collaborations among the Federal statistical agencies attending the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) chartered EIA group. Constant communication and sharing of ideas among agency staffs and among agency administrators in these informal settings fostered discussions about concerns related to organizational climate surveys.

During the informal discussions, EIA staff soon learned that NASS was quite involved in implementing the components of GPRA and had developed their own organizational climate survey. The NASS survey was professional and, more important, related specifically to a Federal statistical agency. Initially, EIA wanted to implement the NASS survey in EIA. However, the outcomes/topics of interest in the NASS survey were not as salient to EIA employees as they were to NASS employees. Additionally, EIA had concerns about survey implementation; confidentiality; and, particularly about benchmarking. If EIA incorporated outcomes salient to EIA employees into the NASS survey, EIA would lose the capability of benchmarking not only within EIA but also with another agency. Senior EIA management was adamant, rightly so, that any climate survey at EIA had the capability of benchmarking.

In the Spring of 1995, JPSM made its annual call for proposals for the 1995-1996 survey practicum. An empowered EIA group was very optimistic about proposing an EIA organizational climate survey. EIA sponsored the first practicum survey and was especially excited to offer this proposal based on their previous experiences with JPSM providing a quality product and a pleasant working relationship. Unfortunately, there were two initial problems. The first problem was that JPSM staff strongly implied during informal discussions with EIA that an EIA proposal would be rejected. JPSM staff explained that they preferred to have a broad range of experiences with a variety of Federal agencies (EIA sponsored the first JPSM survey practicum project). The second problem was that if the EIA proposal was accepted, benchmarking against another agency would be impossible. Nevertheless, EIA resolved to submit a proposal on organizational climate surveys for the 1995-1996 survey practicum.

Determined to find an agency to benchmark against, EIA staff discussed with NASS staff the possibility of a joint proposal. Senior management in both agencies agreed and a proposal was drafted and submitted to JPSM in 1995. The

initial proposal called for JPSM to design and implement an organizational climate survey for the statistical agencies but NASS and EIA were the only agencies mentioned in the proposal. JPSM was skeptical about trusting other agencies to buy-in once the survey was underway. Furthermore, NASS and EIA employees were experts on surveys related to either economics or demography but not on surveys related to organizational climate. Consequently, neither agency could meet the JPSM requirement that the sponsoring agency provide subject-matter experts. Not meeting this requirement meant that the learning component for the JPSM survey practicum class was not likely to occur with the organizational climate survey proposal. Even though EIA was successful in finding another agency to benchmark against, they did not fulfill the JPSM requirements of obtaining support from more agencies up front and of providing subject-matter experts for the survey practicum students.

There were several other projects submitted to JPSM that year, including one which involved occupational classifications --- a difficult, but conceptually clear issue, in terms of implementation. On the other hand, the NASS/EIA proposal with NASS as lead agency appeared difficult to JPSM due to interagency coordination constraints. That year, JPSM accepted the occupational classification proposal.

Although JPSM rejected the organizational climate proposal in 1995, NASS and EIA staff resolved to meet the JPSM requirements and then resubmit the proposal. The first steps involved obtaining up front more agency support. These steps were completed by convincing the NASS and EIA Administrators to reconfirm their support for the project and by enlisting them to seek the support of other agency heads before the proposal was resubmitted. Also, the key proponents in EIA and NASS spoke with their counterparts in several of the statistical agencies and gained support from five statistical agencies. The next steps involved providing subject-matter experts for the JPSM students. Providing expert knowledge is very important in grounding students to the overall issues and context of the survey. Don Bay, head of NASS agreed to explain the role of organizational climate surveys in the development of an agency's strategic plan; and, to review NASS's history on organizational surveys. Plans were also made for an expert from the Department of Agriculture to visit the JPSM students. In February of 1996, the proposal was placed on the agenda of the agency heads' monthly meeting and was explained by the representatives from NASS and EIA. Both NASS and EIA Administrators expressed support for the proposal and through their discussions with the other agency heads obtained the support of five more agencies.

There were two major selling points for the proposal which were iterated at the meeting. First, organizational climate data was a crucial component for strategic planning and the development of performance measures. The pressure was on for all government agencies to make a serious effort to comply with GPRA. Supporting and implementing the organizational climate survey was an "easy" way for many of the statistical agencies to begin their

compliance. Second, active agency support for and participation in this activity would be another success story in how agencies collaborated as a "virtual statistical agency," buffering the pressure for a single statistical agency.

Agency heads raised concerns about the number of meetings and amount of time the project would take--it would involve agency coordination for questionnaire development, frame development, confidentiality assurances, and survey implementation. Given the validity of their concerns, a commitment was made to have few face-to-face meetings and to use electronic mediums such as electronic mail (E-mail) and facsimile (FAX) machines as much as possible. In fact, the commitment was met and only three face-to-face meetings were held as opposed to numerous E-mail and FAX contacts and teleconference meetings.

Having met the JPSM requirements of obtaining up front agency support and of providing subject-matter experts for the class, proposal supporters were certain that JPSM would have a difficult time rejecting the proposal. Indeed, JPSM accepted the proposal with the stipulation that agencies commit to providing unyielding support and guidance. NASS, Census and EIA made that commitment and worked extensively with JPSM.

## IMPLEMENTATION

JPSM reiterated that the success of the organizational climate survey required full commitment from the sponsoring agencies. The brunt of this commitment fell on NASS, Census and EIA. Richard Schuchardt (NASS) played a critical role as coordinator of the entire project. He was primarily responsible for ensuring that the timetables and commitments to JPSM were met by the agencies. Richard worked diligently to minimize the number of face-to-face meetings. The use of weekly teleconferences, the FAX machine, and E-mail, provided an extraordinarily efficient means of keeping everyone up to date. The originators of the project, Lynda Carlson (EIA) and Cynthia Clark (first at NASS and later at Census) had major line responsibilities in their respective agencies. Day-to-day responsibility of the JPSM survey went to survey statisticians at their agencies--Nancy Bates (Census) and Emilda Rivers (EIA). [Ms. Bates and Ms. Rivers coordinated the development of the individual agency inputs, the development of agency-specific supplements, and a myriad of other considerations including agency comments, and focus group participation. Their work was crucial to the overall flow of the project.] Ms. Rivers, a graduate of the JPSM program, conveyed many of the student's concerns. The professor assigned to the survey practicum class by JPSM was Mick Couper, who had extensive experience as a survey methodologist. NASS, EIA, and, ultimately, all of the sponsoring agencies made multiple commitments to JPSM.

These commitments included:

- ◆ remaining on schedule;
- ◆ obtaining agency funding;
- ◆ providing information on organizational climate surveys;
- ◆ obtaining agency frames;
- ◆ establishing a group of agency representatives;
- ◆ being responsible for the coordination among agency representatives;
- ◆ providing staff for the focus groups and pretesting;
- ◆ managing the distribution of the questionnaire drafts;
- ◆ obtaining buy-in from the agencies on the final questionnaire draft--on schedule; and,
- ◆ handling all of the communication with the agency head's group sponsored by OMB.

To meet the commitments, several groups were formed from members of the sponsoring agencies: the advisory council, a council of agency representatives, and union representatives. The only face-to-face advisory council meeting was held in the summer of 1996 and was to assign the following responsibilities:

- ◆ conducting a literary review of organizational climate surveys to provide the class with a basic understanding of the concepts of organizational climate, and to provide for the class a package of organizational surveys previously conducted at Federal agencies;
- ◆ approaching agency heads to designate representatives to serve on a council that would provide the needed coordination within their respective agencies; and,
- ◆ coordinating the council of representatives from each sponsoring agency.

One of the three face-to-face meetings held was with the council of representatives to explain their role in coordination of survey drafts, focus groups, and frame development and testing. The advisory council stressed to the council of agency representatives the importance of publicizing the JPSM Survey in their respective agencies to ensure buy-in from agency staffs. EIA union representatives were involved with the JPSM Survey from the beginning. A face-to-face meeting was also held with union representatives who stressed the need for active union involvement, particularly in the development of the questionnaire. Getting union involvement early is paramount to a successful organizational climate survey. All three groups were aware of the need to adhere to the time constraints, which required that all of the questionnaire pretesting be completed by the end of the first semester and that data collection and data cleaning be completed by April in order for students to have data to complete their analytic papers.

A major commitment to JPSM from the sponsoring agencies was providing funding. Obtaining agency funds was not necessarily time dependent, but it was necessary to show JPSM that this was a serious commitment on the part of the sponsoring agencies. For all but one agency, providing funds was not a major problem. When that agency withdrew, costs were reallocated to the remaining agencies.

## Survey Methodology

The JPSM Survey was sponsored by nine Federal statistical agencies, administered by mail and consisted of 81 standard questions for 14 outcomes/topics of interest with 11 background questions. Two of the sponsoring agencies also had a separate supplemental survey to capture agency-specific concerns and to provide continuity with their previous surveys. Data collection for the JPSM Survey occurred from January 1997 through April 1997. All full-time employees (N=8,500) in the nine sponsoring agencies received the JPSM Survey. A split panel design of regular mail and E-mail was administered at the five largest agencies. A single method of data collection - either regular mail or E-mail - was administered at the remaining four agencies. To test and administer the E-mail questionnaire, each agency appointed technical contacts who were knowledgeable about their agencies E-mail system parameters. Unfortunately, the tests did not identify the technical difficulties that adversely impacted response rates. The overall response rate for the JPSM Survey was 57.0 percent with a 70.7 response rate for the regular mail sample and a 42.8 percent response rate for the E-mail sample.

Prior to the JPSM Survey, employees received a letter from their agency head encouraging participation and letters from SRC and JPSM explaining how the survey would be conducted. Specifically, employees received a pre-notice letter from their agency head, a pre-notice letter from JPSM, the JPSM Survey via regular mail or E-mail, a follow-up reminder, a replacement questionnaire and a telephone reminder for nonrespondents. During the final three weeks of data collection, the JPSM students called nonrespondents and simply requested that they return their questionnaire. Due to confidentiality, the JPSM students did not collect any data over the telephone. SRC did ask questions of the nonrespondents to determine their reasons for refusal. They also conducted telephone debriefings with some of the respondents to determine the following: the degree of difficulty, if any, they had with the E-mail administration; their understanding of various terms including "organizational climate;" and, other issues related to data quality (Survey Research Center, University of Maryland, 1997).

The questionnaire design process required a team effort, especially given the number of sponsoring agencies. Agency involvement began at the beginning of the questionnaire design process. Several steps were taken to ensure that expertise within the statistical agencies was consulted: the union was involved as a partner throughout the process; agency contacts were appointed to receive comments from staff and to disseminate information to staff; and messages were sent to staff welcoming their input. Staff were able to provide recommendations on questionnaire layout and content to ensure that the final questionnaire met the needs of the sponsoring agencies. Agency staff were forewarned that the reality of the survey practicum class fast track schedule meant that suggestions would be seriously considered but not necessarily implemented.

The literary review was an invaluable source of information for questionnaire development. The questionnaires and agency-specific memoranda obtained from NASS, Census, Office of Personnel Management (OPM), the Merit Protection Board, and EIA were used by the survey practicum class and SRC to develop an outline of outcomes/topics for the JPSM Survey. In addition to conducting a literary review, subject-matter experts were contacted (R. Fesco, J. Krosnick, and M. Goldsamt).

Several pretesting techniques were implemented in the development of the questionnaire. These were focus groups, subject-matter review, cognitive interviews, and conventional pretests. Focus groups were held during the work day at the Bureau of Labor Statistics. There were two focus groups with approximately eight to ten employees per group. To ensure open and candid communication these groups were divided by grade. Employees at grades GS-11 and below formed group one and employees at grades GS-12 and above, excluding the SES employees, formed group two. Within practical constraints, the groups were diverse along the dimensions of position, length of service, race, gender, and age. Five focus group participants were selected by each sponsoring agency. Based on the criteria outlined above, the survey practicum class made the final selection of focus group participants. The focus group participants identified the outcomes/topics of interest salient for employees across the sponsoring agencies.

The subject-matter review was excellent for identifying content and context inconsistencies. More important, this review allowed all of the agencies an opportunity to provide feedback on the questionnaire. The cognitive interviews provided insight into the respondent's interpretation of words and questions, as well as insight into retrieval and judgment strategies. Respondents were allowed to complete the draft JPSM Surveys and then provide any thoughts they may have had while completing the survey. In late December, SRC pretested the final questionnaire with the objective of evaluating two possible ways of designing the questions: asking for perceptions of employees about the entire agency or asking for individual employee experiences by using "I" or "My" in the questions. As a result of the SRC pretest, the questions asked for perceptions of employees about the entire agency. Unfortunately, these conventional pretests did not identify the technical difficulties mentioned above that adversely impacted the return rates.

In spite of the fact that pretests were conducted to test the technical aspects of the E-mail data collection, employees at two agencies experienced technical difficulties when responding to the JPSM Survey. The E-mail method of data collection was designed to be completed on the screen as an embodied message. E-mail system constraints on the size of the files received resulted in the conversion of the JPSM Survey to an attachment. Immediately, instructions for overcoming this obstacle were given to employees. Unfortunately, by the time instructions were provided, employees may have chosen not to respond at all. In some instances, employees responded to the agency-specific survey and not the JPSM Survey. This may have happened

because the agency-specific survey did not convert to an attachment and was, therefore, easier to complete than the JPSM Survey, which did convert to an attachment. Those directly involved with the JPSM Survey continue to debate the success of the E-mail administration (Treat, 1997). Response rates for the E-mail sample reflected the technical difficulties experienced.

### **Data Analysis and Dissemination**

A summary and analysis team was formed to eliminate the redundancy of individual agencies performing separate analyses and to increase the timeliness in presenting the results to agency management and staff. Chaired by Nancy Bates (Census) of the Advisory Council, this team consisted of four statisticians. They prepared a standard data summary and a basic comparative data analysis package. The sponsoring agencies received this analysis package as well as their agency's individual data sets.

### **CONCLUSION**

In spite of the methodological and technical difficulties, the implementation of this survey exceeded the selling points presented for the project. The JPSM Survey has already become a crucial component for strategic planning within EIA and other agencies. Most importantly, the nine sponsoring agencies collaborated as a "virtual statistical agency" by pooling their time, staff, and finances resulting in major savings and overall reduced burden for staff. Commitment from the sponsoring agencies was critical. The significance of the work performed by the advisory council, the council of representatives and the union representatives cannot be underestimated. JPSM is credited with having taken on a monumental task and for far exceeding expectations. For this survey, the employees of the sponsoring statistical agencies (survey methodology experts) were the customers and they provided positive feedback. They commented that for the Federal statistical community the JPSM Survey was more relevant than was the private

sector survey. Indeed, the JPSM Survey is a success story for Federal Statistical agencies.

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