

Ada County's Sheriff's Office Employee Satisfaction Survey: Incorporating employee feedback in decision-making

Major Ron Freeman, Chief Deputy and Amy Aaron, Planning & Research Supervisor Ada County Sheriff's Office, <http://www.adasheriff.org/>

Most managers claim to have an open-door policy –one that allows any employee to ask questions or voice concerns. The employees who take you up on the offer are rare. Embarrassment, lack of confidence, or fear of the reaction often keep a majority of staff from providing management with honest feedback. Recognizing the importance of gathering input from all employees – not just the naturally vocal ones – the Ada County Sheriff's Office developed a method of gathering input anonymously in a way that is invaluable to agency administrators. Our Employee Satisfaction Survey is a survey administered online each year to all ACSO staff.

Ada County Jail employees account for 44% of the 618 positions at the Sheriff's Office. We are very proud of the culture we have created in the jail and we use the Employee Satisfaction Survey as a barometer to monitor – among other things – how employees feel management is doing and employees' overall satisfaction with their jobs.

By recognizing and responding to what an employee thinks, wants, and suggests as ways to improve the agency, we are better able to define and communicate aspects that make our organization unique. We initiated the annual Employee Satisfaction Survey in 2004. The survey was designed to track cultural trends across the agency and collect employee feedback for big-picture decision making.

What does our Employee Satisfaction Survey include?

Each annual Employee Satisfaction Survey includes seven core questions about employee satisfaction, agency direction, communication, job responsibilities, decision making, evaluations, and supervision. These questions have essentially stayed the same each year, allowing us to establish a foundation for long-term monitoring. A second set of questions asks about the employees' personal experiences, professional development opportunities, and other topics of interest that change from year to year. We also provide multiple opportunities for open-ended comments. (*See example survey at the end of this article.*)

Responses are anonymous, and we ask participants to identify only their bureau, division, length of employment, commissioned status, and supervisory status so we can explore employee feedback across work groups, if needed.

The first year, fewer than half of all ACSO employees completed the survey, so we looked for ways to increase participation. In 2007, we e-mailed invitations to our employees with the option to take the survey online or request a paper copy. Adding the online option was a success, as 75% of ACSO employees completed a survey in 2007—a major increase over previous years. We have been able to maintain high participation rates of 75-83% through the online survey option.

Encouraging the participation of jail staff has been a particular challenge. Because of the nature of their work environment within the facility, most detention deputies and jail staff do not have easy access to a computer with internet access during the workday. As the survey has evolved, however, first-line supervisors have seen how management uses the employee survey to improve our agency. Now, those supervisors make sure that each of their employees is given 10 to 15 minutes of on-duty time to complete the survey if they choose. Over the past few years, the jail's participation rate has been one of the highest in our agency!

How do we use the results?

Agency managers are not necessarily concerned about the absolute “score” we receive for each question, but rather how employees’ responses change over time. The same proportion of employees consistently report that they are satisfied working for the ACSO and that they understand their job responsibilities, so, overall, we believe our basic cultural structure is sound. However, if employee responses start to trend down, that tells us we may have areas of concern that need to be addressed. We use simple statistical tests to determine which employee responses have significantly changed compared to previous years.

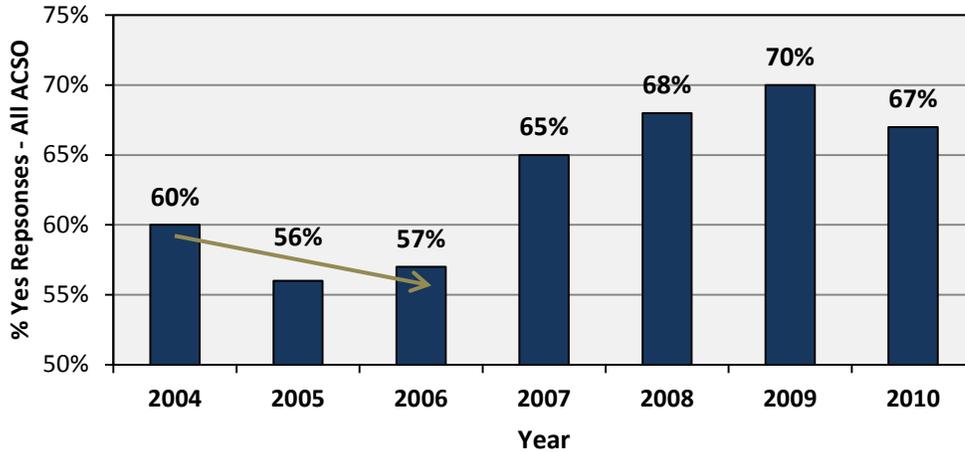
Listening to employee feedback is only half of the equation. We take great care to thoroughly evaluate employees’ opinions and suggestions expressed in the Employee Satisfaction Survey and have implemented significant changes as a direct result.

Communication

Very early on, employees told us they felt communication was inadequate within our agency (see Figure 1, below). To address this, we initiated a weekly newsletter, developed our intranet, and increased face-to-face communication between Command Staff, first-line supervisors, and other staff. As a result of those improvements, our communication score jumped 8 percentage points from 2006 to 2007, and they have not dropped again since. Interestingly, jail employees report a more positive view of agency communication than other ACSO divisions (76% jail vs. 66% or lower across other divisions in 2010). This

may be because of additional efforts such as communication boards and cross-functional briefings and supervisors’ meetings that combine staff from security, health services, and administrative staff.

Figure 1. "Do you feel communication within the ACSO is adequate?"

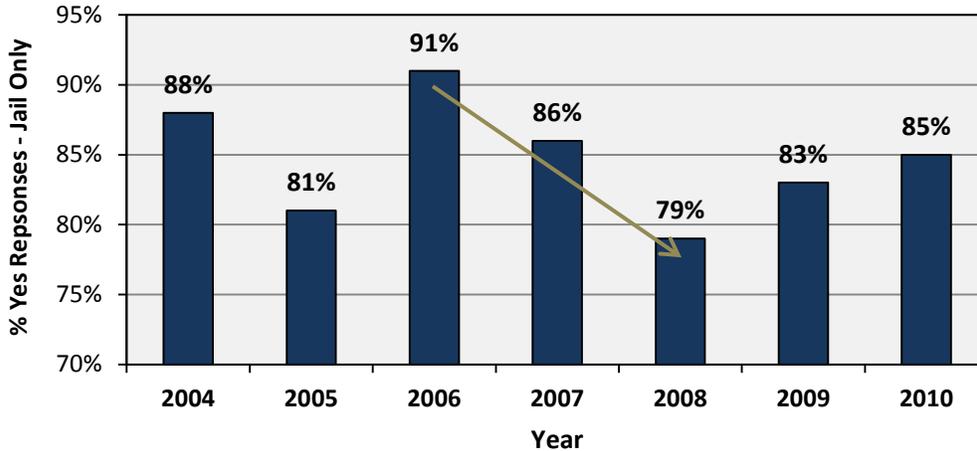


Supervision

We recognize that the first-line supervisor is one of the most important positions in our organization. It is the first-line supervisor who maintains the culture that we want through day-to-day interactions with staff. In 2007 and 2008, significantly fewer jail employees reported that their supervisor was effective (see Figure 2). This was not an agency-wide trend, which suggested that we needed to focus on what had changed for our jail employees. Many of them complained that the jail was just a training ground for sergeants who would transfer to patrol after spending a short time in the jail. Employees felt those sergeants had little “buy in” in the jail. Using the results of the survey we began to explore the effective path for a new supervisor assigned to the jail. We mentored our new sergeants, provided clear expectations, and gave them the time needed to truly learn how to be an effective leader in the jail environment.

Sergeants came to appreciate the value they brought to the jail. Because of this renewed emphasis on our jail sergeants, we saw job satisfaction increase to the point where many of the sergeants who were eligible to go back to the patrol now wanted to stay assigned to the jail instead. Although the work with the sergeants is an on-going process, employees have reported an improvement!

Figure 2. "Does your supervisor effectively solve problems for you and your co-workers when needed? "



Special Topics

Communication and supervision are just two examples of core areas we have focused on as a direct result of concerns voiced through the employee satisfaction survey. Because the survey is one of the few ways to hear a collective voice of our employees, we also use the Employee Satisfaction Survey to ask about special topics of interest. One year, we asked for employee input to help us define our agency values for strategic planning. This past year, we asked if employees felt we were doing enough to prevent complacency in our jail and what we could do to reduce it even more. When we make changes based on employee input, we make sure to communicate that those decisions are based on employee recommendations.

Why does it matter?

The annual employee survey provides an invaluable snapshot of our agency priorities, expectations, and self-image by asking those who know best if we are achieving our goals, if things are working as intended, if employees are satisfied, and if attitudes have changed over time. By listening to our staff, we get the truth about our efforts along with clear direction on where to put our emphasis in the months and years ahead. Given its proven value, we will continue relying on the information gathered to help shape the future of the ACSO and to send a clear message to our employees that our door is open and their opinions do matter.

Ada County Sheriff's Office Employee Satisfaction Survey Example

There is a range of formats and response choices you can choose for an employee satisfaction survey. You may list each topic of interest as a question and use a *Yes-No* or *Always-Often-Sometimes-Seldom-Never* type of scale, or request agreement with each as a statement. For example:

Are you satisfied working for the Ada County Sheriff's Office?

Yes No

I am satisfied working for the Ada County Sheriff's Office.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

ACSO Core Questions

- Are you satisfied working for the Ada County Sheriff's Office?
- Do you understand the direction in which the ACSO is headed?
- Do you understand your job responsibilities?
- Do you feel communication within the ACSO is adequate?
- Are you involved in decision making about your job?
- Does your supervisor effectively solve problems for you and your co-workers when needed?
- Do you feel evaluations fairly reflect your job performance?

Other Topics

- Do you feel that your job is important to the ACSO?
- Do you feel that your opinions count at the division level?
- Do you receive recognition or praise for doing good work?
- Does someone in the ACSO encourage your professional development?
- Are your co-workers committed to doing quality work?
- Does your supervisor provide you with honest feedback?
- What suggestions do you have, if any, for improving communication? (comment box)
- What suggestions do you have, if any, for improving your supervisor's performance? (comment box)
- Do you have other comments or suggestions you would like to share? (comment box)

Demographic Information

All survey responses are anonymous, but we request some demographic information to explore employee feedback across work groups, if needed.

- How long have you worked for the ACSO? (Less than 1 year, 1-5 yrs, 6-10 yrs, 11-15 yrs, 16-20 yrs, More than 20 years)
- Are you commissioned? (Yes or No)
- Do you supervise employees? (Yes or No)
- Which bureau do you work in? (Select from a list of our current bureaus)
- Which division are you currently assigned to? (Select from a list of our current divisions with the option "Choose not to Identify")

Document available at: http://community.nicic.gov/blogs/national_jail_exchange/archive/2011/04/25/employee-survey-improves-communication-and-decision-making.aspx

The National Jail Exchange is an ongoing electronic journal focusing on providing information to jails practitioners and is sponsored by the National Institute of Corrections (NIC). The contents of the articles, the points of view expressed by the authors, and comments posted in reaction to the articles do not necessarily reflect the official views or policies of the National Institute of Corrections.

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