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The “Heard” Mentality Is a Good Thing: Using Employee Surveys to Listen and Improve*

Thomas I. Miller, Ph.D.

Imagine waiting to board your flight to Cancun when you hear the chief flight attendant complain to the copilot about unreturned e-mails asking for a better schedule. Then, the pilot joins in to say the company isn't paying enough of his health insurance. Another flight attendant adds that training has all but shut down and her supervisor couldn't care less. You reluctantly board the plane when called, praying that the mechanics have a more sanguine view of the airline.

As managers, we generally aren't privy to such water cooler conversation at our own organizations and even less often are our clients able to listen in. Moreover, no manager wants to let things get so bad that the office buzz is all about failed communication, insufficient benefits, and lack of mentoring or poor supervision. Maybe the buzz won't always be about honey, but savvy

How to Sign Up for The National Citizen Survey™

Enrolling in The NCS is easy. 1) You can get all the details including an enrollment form and a comprehensive calendar by visiting icma.org/ncs. 2) Once you complete the enrollment form, you send it to National Research Center, Inc along with a check for \$5,900, which is a portion of the Basic Service fee (\$9,900). Your check initiates The NCS process. 3) You will be added to the next available class of participants, unless you specify a different class. NRC will email a packet of information containing FAQ sheets, background information on The NCS, your timeline, and a Worksheet Packet. The Worksheet Packet will guide you through the steps to customize your survey, write policy questions, and choose add-on options where needed.

For more information send us an email at ncs@icma.org or call us at 202-289-ICMA. If you have specific questions about the survey or invoices, contact [damema@n-r-c.com](mailto:damea@n-r-c.com) or call 303-444-7863 x118.

The National Citizen Survey™ (The NCS) is a cost-effective system for conducting comprehensive surveys of local residents and an important benchmarking tool that allows

managers must open the lines of communication early and broadly to keep problems as small as possible—and even prevent some from arising.

Especially in this tough economy, local governments are being asked to do a lot more with a lot less, so we can't afford to let disaffection impede quality. If residents overhear your employees talking about working at your city, the message better not leave residents wondering if your ship can fly. Not only do smart managers listen to employees, they make sure that employees know they are heard.

Call it the “heard” mentality—the notion that it is important to provide regular opportunities for employees to voice their opinions about their work environment knowing that top managers are listening and willing to make better what can be reasonably improved.

No workplace is perfect, but every organization can be enhanced. To help managers listen to employees before water cooler buzz turns to rumbles (or even if it already has), ICMA and National Research Center, Inc. offer a new, inexpensive, low-burden survey of employees that not only captures candid opinions of your staff on 10 dimensions of their employment, but also offers comparison perspectives from thousands of other local government staff who have responded to the same questions. The National Employee Survey™, constructed for local government, also gathers opinions about the quality of internal department services so that you and internal service employees can target areas for improvement and celebrate successes.

For more information about The National Employee Survey™, contact Laurie Urban at nes@n-r-c.com.

*Previously published in *Performance Matters*, November 2009

comparison among communities. The NCS begins with a customizable survey with core questions relevant to your community. It comes to you from the National Research Center, Inc. (NRC) and ICMA.

National Research Center, Inc. (NRC) is one of the leading survey research and performance measurement teams in the United States, focusing on the information needs of the public sector.

The principals of NRC have authored several articles about citizen survey research methods as well as a book on the methods of citizen surveying *Citizen Surveys for Local Government: A Comprehensive Guide to Making Them Matter* published by the International City/County Management Association in 2009.

Click [here](#) to learn more about the NCS team.

New Discovery! Mail is the Chicken Soup of Survey Methods

Thomas I. Miller, Ph.D.

Remember when moms prescribed chicken soup for colds—only to be derided by scientists who proclaimed the remedy as useful as raw meat on a shiner? Well, scientists have recanted their defamation of Mom's fowl tonic to admit that chicken soup, in fact, has demonstrable palliative effects. So, after all, chicken soup has been proven "good for what ails you."

Similarly, there is growing consensus among public opinion survey researchers that mailed surveys, once supplanted by the faster-paced telephone interview, may provide the solution to the issues plaguing today's phone surveys.

Not only are phone surveys suffering from lower response rates generally, the number of households with landlines (traditionally used for telephone interviewing), has dropped to levels not seen since the 1970s. Cell-only households have climbed to more than 16 percent of all households in the U. S. Moreover, when you take into account the preference many adults have to take all of their calls on their mobile phones, traditional random-digit dial surveys of landlines can miss 40 percent of the population, according to some researchers.

Some local governments are well-accustomed to phone surveying and remain committed to it. After all, we all know it as the source of data for so many polls reported in the media. And, new ways of serving phone-committed clients will keep that data collection method serviceable for a limited time. But, in this world of email, instant messaging, and mobile communication, postal mail is the "new" technology in surveying.

Since 2001, National Research Center, Inc. researchers have used mailed surveys as the primary data collection mode used for The National Citizen Survey™. This is because they have concluded that compared to traditional telephone sampling methods, mailed surveys are less expensive, provide more candid responses, offer better response rates, and don't annoy potential respondents at dinner. They also help to include those with only cell phones.

In the future, even researchers who do not compromise quality telephone methodologies will be challenged to recommend phone surveys to clients. As Link and others have stated (2008, AAPOR) "While it would likely be a mistake to declare that the sun has set completely on landline RDD [random digit dialing] methodologies, it is clear that the approach has serious seemingly non-recoverable problems in terms of coverage and declining response rate."

Some researchers still seek to use mailed surveys strictly as a supplement to data collected by phone. But NRC researchers as well as many others (Dillman, Fahimi and others) note that responses to questions asked by a telephone interviewer are less candid than those provided in self-administered written surveys. Thus, it is not okay simply to add together phone answers with mailed answers (something called a mixed mode approach), because results may be misleading. Another problem with mixing phone and mail modes is that if surveyors intend to use the telephone only to bug people to send back their mailed survey, it should be known that over 40 percent of mailing addresses will

have undiscoverable phone numbers—meaning that not all recipients can be bugged by phone. So this too can result in misleading results.

The use of mail data collection for scientific surveys must be undertaken carefully. Skilled research professionals pay great attention to probability sampling, questionnaire construction and design, appropriate communication and graphics as well as a multiple contact plan, geo coding, selection of a household participant, data entry, analysis, reporting and more. Done well, mailed surveys are finally proving their quality to skeptics who once relied on the old USPS for most communication, but then concluded mail was not the medium for polling. The long and the short of it is that mailed surveys are in ascendance, “rediscovered” by survey researchers who relied on the telephone but have been compelled by the advantages of mail—fast becoming the chicken soup of survey methods.

The National Employee Survey™: Your Questions Answered

Q: What kinds of questions or topics are covered on The National Employee Survey (The NES)?

A: The NES is a low-cost, comprehensive survey of employees that covers 10 dimensions of employee experience. The survey contains more than 70 questions covering: job satisfaction, work group performance, supervisor relationship, performance evaluation, employee development, wages and benefits, communication and decision-making, organizational climate, physical work environment, and performance of support services.

Q: Why is an employee survey important?

A: Local government staff—the front line to service delivery in a community—will make or break public trust. Research from the private sector has shown a link between happy and satisfied employees and high customer service ratings. A periodic sounding of employee opinion about critical work climate issues offers management, staff and elected officials an opportunity to identify challenges, plan for and evaluate improvements, and promote organizational effectiveness for long-term success.

Q: Can all my employees participate in The NES?

A: All employees (i.e., full time, part time, and seasonal) are eligible to participate. However, you may choose to include only certain groups.

Q: How are the data collected?

A: The NES is administered via a web-based application. All employees can receive a postcard mailed to their home addresses that contains a link to the online survey. Employees with jurisdiction email addresses will be sent an email invitation that contains the survey link, as well as one reminder email.

Q: What if some employees don't have email addresses?

A: We'll work with you to see which notification option works best for you so that all employees can participate.

Q: Some employees don't have access to the Internet at work or at home—can they still take the survey?

A: NRC advises that its clients make workstations or computers available for employees who don't

have access to the Internet on a daily basis. Also, we encourage jurisdictions to allow employees to complete the survey during business hours, particularly those employees with limited or no Internet access, so that employees know that the executive staff want their participation.

Q: If I also participate in The National Citizen Survey™ (The NCS) do I get a discount?

A: Participants of The NCS and members of the ICMA Center for Performance Measurement (CPM) receive a discounted rate of \$1,500 for The NES Basic Service. The price for those who don't participate in The NCS or aren't CPM members is \$3,000 for the Basic Service.

Q: I'm a CPM member and want to submit to them survey data about internal support services. Are there questions on The NES about internal support services?

A: The NES contains two questions about different internal support services, designed in collaboration with CPM staff so that the survey questions mirror those required by CPM. If a jurisdiction conducts The NES and is a CPM member, NRC will provide these Internal Services Survey™ (ISS) data to CPM in their required format at no additional charge. For jurisdictions who want only the questions about internal services and don't need to do The NES, NRC also offers these two questions as a separate stand-alone Internal Services Survey™ (ISS). The NCS participants and CPM members receive a discounted rate of \$895 for the ISS; the regular price is \$1,295.

Q: Are comparisons to other jurisdictions available?

A: The NES Basic Service includes comparative benchmarks from thousands of local government employees across the United States.

Q: Can I get more detailed reporting of my results, including comparisons of different employee groups.

A: Yes. Though we've kept The NES Basic Service simple and affordable, we have a number of add-ons available, including crosstabulations, comprehensive reporting, and consultation on interpreting and taking action on your results.

Q: How do we get started with The NES?

A: Enrolling is easy—and we can conduct the survey whenever is most convenient for you. To enroll or to learn more about The NES please contact The NES Director, Laurie Urban at 303-444-7863, x117 or Laurie@n-r-c.com.

The NCS Info Corner

Here is a calendar for new NCS classes scheduled February through May 2010.

Class	Enrollment Deadline	Data Collection	Draft Reports	Completion
February	February 1	Mar 22–Apr 19	May 10	June 1, 2010
March	March 1	Apr 19–May 17	June 7	June 28, 2010
April	April 5	May 24–Jun 21	July 12	August 2, 2010
May	May 3	Jun 21–Jul 19	August 9	August 30, 2010

The NCS offers classes or groups of participants beginning at the start of each month. In order to be considered for a certain class, The NCS needs to receive an enrollment form and payment check approximately two weeks prior to the start date. It will consider late arrivals contingent on space available in each class. It is happy to work with an individual's schedule as much as possible.

