

# Staff Focus Group Report

**Staff Advisory Council**  
School of Public Health  
UC Berkeley  
March 2007

## Executive Summary

The goal of the Staff Advisory Council focus group project was to identify ways to improve work culture, increase job satisfaction, empower staff, and create an ideal work community at the School of Public Health. The project was endorsed and funded by Assistant Dean John Kaso and planned and implemented by the Staff Advisory Council.

Staff members representing all levels of employees, from across the School, were invited to participate in the focus groups. Over a two week period in February 2007, nine focus groups were held in which sixty-one employees participated.

The focus group participants were asked five questions:

1. Describe what you envision to be an ideal work environment at the school.
2. What's already in place that helps create this ideal environment?
3. What gets in the way of your being able to do your best work possible?
4. Describe some actionable items, things that can be done by the school/your area that would empower/enable to do your best possible work.
5. What can you do to help create the ideal work environment you described earlier?

Among the highlights of the responses were positive and supportive supervisory/management practices – such as trust, flexibility, and managers who encouraged work-life balance. Also mentioned frequently as positive factors were many activities hosted by the School – coffee hours, luncheons, symposia, a craft fair – and it was felt widely that the School made a concerted effort to bring people together.

Among the concerns expressed were severe resource constraints that kept people from doing the quality and quantity of work they wanted to perform. The constraints included lack of adequate staffing and the poor physical condition and cleanliness of work areas. Also mentioned often was the need to streamline business processes and the desire to create more efficient ways of working.

On the following pages the participants' responses to the questions are grouped into themes under each question. The themes represent the responses that were mentioned most frequently.

## **1. PLEASE DESCRIBE WHAT YOU ENVISION TO BE AN IDEAL WORK ENVIRONMENT AT THE SCHOOL.**

### **Theme A – Strategic, streamlined business processes**

Most participants envision a work environment in which there are clear and straightforward business processes, and that these processes are widely communicated and accessible to those who need to follow them. People also envision having balanced and clearly defined responsibilities.

### **Theme B – Access to information, orientation and learning, training**

Employees want a work culture where it is an organizational priority to provide people with the information, orientation and training they need in order to be successful at their jobs. They see information that is accessible and freely shared regardless of who one's supervisor is.

### **Theme C – Supportive, healthy physical environment and work conditions**

A centrally housed school, a clean and well-maintained physical workplace, and a culture of physical health and safety were the most frequently mentioned factors in this theme. Proximity to colleagues and resources is viewed as a time saver that could reduce redundant efforts and build a sense of community in the school. Employees want clean and adequate work spaces where there is regular maintenance and attention to health/safety concerns, and where there are places for people to gather to eat lunch and get to know each other.

### **Theme D – Leadership**

People envision strong, engaged and transparent leadership at all levels of the school; leaders who champion a civil and safe work environment, where the contributions of all members of the school are valued. People want leaders who get things done – things that communicate the value of staff to the school. For example, leaders who advocate for an informal mentoring program because it promotes staff development and helps strengthen the school's infrastructure. Or, leaders who find ways to get small repairs made in work spaces because it is important that people work in safe, presentable conditions.

### **Theme E – Culture of respect and inclusion**

Employees want to work in a place where they are recognized for their skills, experiences and talents, and are treated as fellow professionals. They would like to have input into decisions that affect them, such as configuring office spaces in new buildings for maximum efficiency. This culture also includes employees taking ownership of their positions and results, and working in partnership with faculty.

## **2. WHAT'S ALREADY IN PLACE AT THE SCHOOL THAT HELPS CREATE THIS IDEAL ENVIRONMENT?**

### **Theme A – Supervision and management**

Employees mentioned frequently that they are fortunate to work with supervisors/managers who are extremely supportive and experienced. These managers create positive work settings by trusting employees, offering guidance without micromanaging work, supporting flexible work schedules and understanding the importance of maintaining work-life balance. These managers also encourage professional development and learning, and often make the time to teach and mentor employees.

It is a comfortable place to work where there is room for individual expression.

### **Theme B – Sense of community and involvement**

There is widespread appreciation for the efforts that the school puts into bringing people together. People like the variety of activities and there is an overall feeling that these activities are fun and build a spirit of community. The most frequently mentioned activities were the coffee hours, luncheons, craft fair, and symposia.

The staff committees were mentioned frequently as being extremely effective. They are seen as vehicles for change, and as ways of getting involved or being represented on important issues.

There is pride in school's mission and work, and in the public good that comes from the research, teaching, and community projects led by the school.

### **Theme C – Colleagues**

There is great appreciation for colleagues at the school. Many employees described a spirit of sharing and support, a willingness to help others succeed, and professionalism and competence in accomplishing the work of the school.

### **Theme D – Opportunities to learn, communicate**

Many opportunities to learn and communicate exist throughout the school. Employees are interested in the symposia because they learn more about faculty and their research. The symposia give them a better understanding of the scope of the school's expertise and how they as employees fit into the picture.

The all school meetings and recent training sessions are seen as helpful and informative, and employees use the information they've learned. Other vehicles for communication are the SPHD letter, monthly meetings and floor meetings.

### **3. WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF YOUR BEING ABLE TO DO YOUR BEST WORK POSSIBLE?**

#### **Theme A – Budget/resource constraints**

The most frequently mentioned responses are about budget constraints and working conditions. It is widely felt that there are not enough staff to do the core administrative work of the school. Workloads are continually increasing with no commensurate increase in resources and staff; nothing gets taken away. For example, new grants come without provisions for administrative overhead and the additional work is absorbed into existing workloads.

The staffing and resource constraints show up in a number of ways, including, the lack of time to orient new people to their jobs, the inability to perform the desired quality of work because of workload, lack of clarity about priorities, lack of clarity in job responsibilities, the inability to take advantage of benefits such as flexible work schedules, and no sense of accomplishment.

The results of this budget/resource situation are a sink-or-swim culture where people are thrown into new positions without training and resources, a lack of written documentation and institutional knowledge, and decreasing morale.

Many employees feel that they have succeeded in their jobs through sheer tenacity. They would have preferred a systematic, explicit process in which they were provided with tools and resources.

#### **Theme B – Physical working conditions**

Physical work conditions were raised repeatedly as affecting the productivity, morale and safety of employees. Especially noted are dirty and dusty facilities, peeling/old paint, falling ceiling tiles, grimy desks and floors, and no regular custodial services. The run down conditions create environmental, recruiting and morale issues.

Also notable to employees is the lack of dedicated spaces where people can eat lunch, relax, take a break and meet others. Many people have no place to eat their lunches, especially in inclement weather, or no place to go for a quick break.

#### **Theme C – Structure and processes**

Many work processes and systems need to be streamlined and get in the way of people being able to work efficiently. Duplication of effort is seen as the result of having a decentralized school with both decentralized and centralized systems and confusion about what's what, old and non-user friendly systems, limited documentation and limited coordination among units.

Some policies and procedures were cited as blocking staff's ability to be responsive, especially to unexpected, spontaneous requests. For example, parking permits must be requested more than 24 hours in advance, however, this information is not always known 24 hours in advance.

#### **Theme D – Leadership and accountability**

It is generally felt that issues are not dealt with because no one "owns" them. For example, who is responsible for improving the physical work conditions? Who is responsible for training? Who is responsible for streamlining processes and functions? Who is responsible for holding people accountable for their behavior?

People also want more visible, proactive, customer service oriented leadership at the top. Many employees said that they do not know the Dean, don't see him at school functions, and don't know what his priorities are.

A lack of information from leaders about changes going on at the school causes constant stress and uncertainty. For example, what is the future of the buildings, the moves - which units/groups go to which buildings and why?

There a desire to hold people accountable for not adapting to new ways of working, for not using mandated tools which then affect others negatively. For example, some employees use calculators to add columns on Excel spreadsheets rather than creating formulas that automatically calculate columns.

### **Theme E – Staff-faculty working relationships**

There is a general understanding of the academic culture and the “place” that faculty and staff have within that culture. However, some staff feel that their efforts and expertise are not valued by faculty, and that treatment of staff by some faculty is not respectful. It would be helpful to receive clearer priorities from faculty, and for faculty to understand that staff doesn't always have the tools, resources and authority to do what's being requested of them.

### **Theme F – Campus-wide, UC-wide issues**

There are many complex systems and issues that affect staff that are largely beyond the purview of the school. They include the job classification and reclassification systems, salary administration, merit and performance appraisal systems, and the efficacy of some central campus units. It is thought, however, that the process of administering these systems and the way in which these processes are communicated are the responsibility of the school's leadership.

#### **4. WHAT ARE SOME ACTIONABLE ITEMS THAT THE SCHOOL/YOUR AREA CAN DO THAT WOULD ENABLE YOU TO DO YOUR BEST WORK?**

##### **Theme A – Leadership and accountability**

Actionable items related to leadership and accountability include:

- Create cross-disciplinary and cross-classification working groups that can address these actionable items; go across silos, make the groups meaningful and empower them to effect change
- Have the Dean's office staff the school-wide committees
- Have the Dean be more visible and accessible to staff
- Discuss and fix the merit process before this year's process and avoid the problems it caused last year. Involve people in making the repairs; don't do it in isolation.
- Delegate authority to division managers
- Address on-going frustrations, e.g., program managers frustration during admissions (Student Services are overworked, not available, can't get information from them)
- Create a school work-life committee that would have responsibility and ability to make changes
- Have leaders take ownership for addressing training issues

##### **Theme B – Information and business processes**

Actionable items related to on-line information:

- Create up-to-date, inviting websites with useful information
- Develop FAQs for commonly used business and central services
- Provide contact lists for different issues, processes
- Provide information summary sheets of what divisions do
- Create division directory, school directory
- Establish list serve of people who are willing to help others
- Develop manuals for business processes and procedures
- Build in automatic updates to website lists when someone is hired

Actionable items regarding processes:

- Identify school-wide subject matter experts and best practices; hold information sessions
- Provide guidance on contracts and grants, HR, data security
- Have Dean's office establish guidelines, procedures, suggestions for implementation when initiatives/policies come from campus, then disseminate to divisions
- Be creative about addressing issues – use work study students to do a lot of computer, on-line work, training, helping, support
- Give people the tools they need to do their jobs. For example, giving some people cordless phones would allow them to do tasks that are away from the desk and still provide customer service.

### **Theme C – Facilities, working conditions**

Actionable items in this theme include:

- Put someone in charge of overseeing working conditions
  
- Make small repairs that make a difference - tiles falling from ceilings, broken window in 714 conference room, peeling/old paint in many locations
- Provide regular custodial service
- Create dedicated spaces where people can eat lunch, relax, take a break, and meet others
- Ensure that every staff member has basics of a work station – desk, chair, computer, phone, phone directory, garbage can

### **Theme D – Orientation, mentoring and training**

Actionable items regarding new employee orientation:

- Put ownership for the program with the Dean's/Assistant Dean's offices
- Create on-line orientation program/packets (on common drive)
- Create orientation with presentations by designated division representatives
- Hold orientation on a regular schedule
- Require new staff and faculty to attend within specified period of time

Actionable items regarding mentoring:

- Create an informal program to help with job and career path
- Establish scheduled and structured shadowing
- Offer incentives to mentors

Actionable items related to training:

- Offer training on business services re: processes, information, timeframe
- Bring back training committee and provide it with staff support and authority
- After training, create/provide resources to keep momentum and learning going (e.g., work groups, tools)
- Make some training required; offer refreshers after a certain period of time
- Create training certification in some areas – BFS, HR, accounting

### **Theme E – Community and inclusion**

Actionable items in this theme include:

- Seek school-wide input on planning of new building – include staff needs as well
- Have more informal groups that are open to everyone, like the hiking group
- Continue the school coffees and gatherings but hold in larger spaces
- Give people name tags at coffee hours and other activities
- Create a place/group where researchers can gather, get to know each other, find out about other research, learn about new research practices
- Provide forums for non-scientific research to be presented - interesting and meaningful work is being done in that realm
- Host staff retreats, perhaps bi-annually, at a nice location

## **WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP CREATE THE IDEAL WORK ENVIRONMENT YOU DESCRIBED EARLIER?**

### **Theme A – Provide service**

There is willingness to build a stronger culture of service – by making contact with people to discover their needs, taking a few extra minutes to help, understanding the pressures that others have, responding more quickly and thoroughly to requests for information, using the skills learned in training.

### **Theme B – Streamline processes**

Most staff mentioned a willingness to examine their work processes, make more information available on-line and see where the bottlenecks exist in their areas.

### **Theme C – Involvement, training**

Most employees see the existing staff committees as vehicles for becoming involved. Many volunteered to work in partnership with the Dean's/Assistant Dean's offices to sponsor new employee orientation, more staff training, and an informal mentoring program.

### **Theme E – Change behavior and attitude**

The suggestions in this area include making a commitment to being part of the solution, not the problem; giving honest constructive feedback and asking for same; taking initiative to find out what's out going on around campus and in the school; helping create a culture of efficiency; being adaptable; making an effort to get to know new people at school activities.

## **APPENDICES**

## **Focus Group Protocol**

### **Welcome and Introductions**

- facilitator
- participants
- SAC sponsor distributes thank you coffee cards

### **Purpose**

Involve staff in identifying ways to:

- improve work culture,
- increase job satisfaction
- create an ideal work environment

### **Background**

Next five years, SPH community challenges:

- baby boomer retirements
- loss of Warren Hall
- continuing dispersal of staff, faculty, students

Take action to build strong community now and during future transitions

### **How information will be used**

- responses clustered into themes of actionable recommendations and given to SAC
- assessed for implementation
- publicized to gain increased participation

### **Guidelines**

- confidentiality among participants in room
- anonymity in data (nothing traceable to individual, circumstances)
- only focus group facilitator will see/hear raw data
- will ask 5 questions – ideal if each person responded
- some questions might prompt follow-up questions
- ask if you'd like clarification

### **Questions**

1. Please describe what you envision to be an ideal work environment at the school.
2. What's already in place that helps create this ideal environment?
3. What gets in the way of your being able to do your best work possible?
4. Describe some actionable items, things that can be done by the School/your area that would empower/enable to do your best possible work.
5. What can you do to help create the ideal work environment you described earlier?

## Project Sequence

### Project Goals

The goal of the Staff Advisory Council focus group project was to identify ways to:

- Improve work culture
- Increase job satisfaction
- Empower staff
- Create an ideal work environment
- Promote community



### Process

The following process was followed:

- Develop focus group questions that were aligned with project goals
- Identify target participants – all levels, across the school
- Invited employees to participate (randomly selected)
- Held nine focus groups



### Data Analysis

Upon finishing the focus groups:

- Review responses given for each question
- Organize responses into key themes, using words of participants
- Establish themes of actionable items



### Use of Data

The Staff Advisory Council will:

- Review report
- Meet with Asst Dean and Dean to discuss results (end March)
- Present results at all school meeting (April)