Workforce Data Collection Field Guide for Human Service Agencies

Practical Recommendations For Conducting:
Staff Exit Interviews
Staff Focus Groups
Employee Surveys

"The ability of a CEO to move from 'surviving to thriving' is, in large measure, determined by how open the organization is to learning and change."
--Sue Christie, APHSA

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Prepared by
Gary Cyphers
Director of Member Services

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This field guide is dedicated to the 43 states and 48 localities that responded to the Child Welfare Workforce Survey. I also thank my colleague Sue Christie, who taught me the importance of "owning your own data."

Background and Purpose

The American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) is committed to helping public human service agencies increase their leadership capacity and to achieve high performance outcomes. Over the past several years our members have identified workforce issues as extremely important challenges to their ability to deliver top-notch services to their customers. Problems with the recruitment of excellent staff, turnover among employees, and staff development and succession planning are very common among agencies, with particular urgency for child welfare agencies.

In fall 2000, APHSA joined with the Child Welfare League of America and the Alliance for Children and Families to conduct a workforce survey of state, county, and private child welfare agencies. In spring 2001, findings from the *Child Welfare Workforce Survey* were released. Those findings are available on APHSA's web site at www.aphsa.org (click on Policy and then Child Welfare). The survey confirmed the problem agencies were having with staff recruitment and turnover, particularly preventable turnover. The following two recommendations from the survey were adopted by APHSA's National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators and the APHSA Board of Directors:

- Because there are many dimensions and factors at play with staff turnovers and vacancies, considerable variations and differences can occur from state to state, and often from county to county. This challenges states and counties to **do a careful analysis of their particular situation** in order to develop strategies and approaches for responding. **One important source of information in this assessment process is the direct service workers themselves through worker surveys, focus groups, and exit interviews**.

- A lack of "magic bullets" or "quick fixes" for turnovers and vacancies challenges states and counties to **use an intentional mix of multiple, well-coordinated strategies and approaches that are customized to address the specific turnover and vacancy problems** identified during the assessment phase.

This field guide is offered as a way of assisting public human service agencies in implementing the first recommendation above. One of the more sobering findings from the child welfare workforce survey was the relatively large number of agencies that did not have sufficient data to respond to the questions. This guide is intended to be practical, and offer user-friendly resources that can enable agency staff to gather invaluable information directly from their employees. The guide distills ideas and recommendations from a large number of sources that can help agency managers move forward. References and resources used are listed at the end, and more detailed appendices offer even more practical how-to assistance. The author is available to talk with you further about any of the recommendations provided.

Staff Exit Interviews

"There is no single solution to the retention problems facing organizations, but our research has shown that properly conducted exit interviews can help organizations better focus their retention efforts on issues that matter most."
--Suzanne Logan, an organizational consultant
(quoted by the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology)

Exit interviews with departing employees are one of the easiest, but most important methods for gathering essential workforce data. Exit interviews provide an opportunity to gain valuable insight about employees' experiences with your agency. By following a few guidelines, public human service agencies can gain the maximum benefit of exit interview information.

<u>Uses of exit interviews</u>

Exit interviews are a powerful retention and problem-solving tool. While a wide array of questions can be included in an exit interview, the most common issues include getting employees' thoughts and feelings about:

- <u>most importantly</u>—why the employee is leaving
- recruitment, hiring, and orientation process
- compensation and benefits
- training, staff development, and career advancement opportunities
- caseload and workload issues
- quality of supervision received
- culture of the agency
- ideas of improving the agency

A list of possible questions for exit interviews is included in **Appendix A**.

<u>Steps for conducting effective exit interviews</u>

"Capitalizing on the Value of 'Goodbyes'," an article written by Lin Gresing-Pophal, identifies the following helpful steps for designing and conducting a process that "yields the most straightforward feedback possible and generates information that is actually used by the organization and its managers."

1. **Make sure all your employees understand that exit interviews are a key part of the agency's continuous improvement.**
    - Exit interviews should be viewed by everyone in the agency as another stage in the life cycle of employment, rather than as a "dirty phrase" or sign of failure.
    - Convey to everyone how valuable exit interviews can be for providing critical information about potential improvements your agency can make.

- Enlist the assistance of managers and employees in improving the exit interview process, while also communicating that their feedback is valued at any time during their tenure.

2. **Conduct "face-to-face" interviews.**
    - Avoid the temptation of sending the departing employee a form to complete or referring them to an online "interview." Response rates will be much higher with personal interviews.
    - Face-to-face exit interviews are much more respectful of the departing employee, and provide opportunities: to probe or explore certain questions and perspectives more deeply; 2) to observe the departing employee's non-verbal cues; and 3) to more personally thank the person, wish him/her well, and maintain ongoing rapport.
    - The interview should follow a standard format, but also should allow ample flexibility for follow-up, probes, and discussion of other issues identified by the employee.
    - If possible, schedule an interview for the employee's last day of employment, ideally as part of administrative process of finalizing benefit information, turning in keys, etc.

3. **Have a skillful, nonbiased third party conduct the interview.**
    - The employee's direct supervisor or manager should <u>not</u> conduct the exit interview.
    - Select an individual—preferably from the human resources/personnel department—who can provide a nonbiased perspective and who will not unnecessarily intimidate or influence the departing employee's responses. The person selected should set a relaxed and open tone that is conducive to candor and also be skillful in probing sensitive issues if appropriate.
    - If your agency does not have a human resources professional, the agency deputy/assistant director, or even executive director, could conduct exit interviews. This would signal how important you consider getting the views of employees who are leaving in order to continuously improve your agency.

4. **Actively listen without judging.**
    - The interviewer should actively listen to maximize the last opportunity to learn from the departing employee's viewpoints, ideas, and opinions.
    - Avoid the natural temptation to defend your agency, its managers, and culture if the employee is very negative or critical.
    - It goes without saying that the departing employee must absolutely know that he/she will not be harmed or retaliated against regardless of what is shared.
    - Perception is reality and you are trying to learn about the employee's perceptions of his/her tenure with your agency. There are no right or wrong answers.
    - Take notes, which conveys your serious interest, but don't neglect maintaining eye contact frequently and positively using your nonverbal cues.

5. **Find out why the employee is leaving.**
    - This is one of the most important pieces of information, particularly as it might guide your agency in improving employee retention.

- Many exit interviews only scratch the surface about attrition and often fail to differentiate between factors that make the new job attractive and factors that prompted the employee to consider leaving your agency. It is essential that the interviewer carefully and persuasively coax the employee to share the real reason she/he is leaving. Sometimes these are called the "dissatisfiers."
- It is also important to try to differentiate between reasons for leaving that are preventable as opposed to those that are non-preventable. Although each agency can define these terms in unique ways, APHSA considers retirement, death, marriage, parenting, a return to school or military service, or a spousal job move as non-preventable reasons. All other reasons for leaving a job are defined as preventable, and represent those conditions and issues an agency can influence and change. Identifying any preventable reasons for leaving your agency could be the most important goal of many exit interviews.
- **Appendix B** provides a list of common preventable reasons employees leave agencies, as identified by state and local human service agencies.

6. Appropriately share the feedback—we all need to own our own data.

- There is a lack of consensus in the human resources field about what information to share with whom after an exit interview. Some experts advocate for maintaining total anonymity/confidentiality with no specific feedback to supervisors and managers, while other experts believe sharing feedback is very important.
    - A middle ground is to keep the actual exit interview notes confidential, but for the interviewer to personally meet with the departing employee's supervisor and manager to discuss what can be learned from the general feedback.
    - Some of the information will be positive and some will be negative. Impress on the manager and supervisor the importance of objectively and non-defensively considering the feedback and the value that the employee's perspectives can have for improving the agency.
- Whichever policy you choose, it is important that everyone in the agency clearly know how exit interview findings will be shared and used.

7. Compile and analyze the information received.

- Develop a method for compiling the individual interview information into aggregate data that can be used to identify areas and issues that should be further investigated or possible trends that may be leading to or contributing to staff turnover.
- Depending on the size of your agency and the number of staff that leave, aggregate data should be compiled and analyzed at least semi-annually. Larger agencies might want to do this quarterly, if not monthly.

8. Put the exit interview data to work, but don't jump to conclusions.

- Negative feedback from even a single exit interview has the potential to "stir things up." While feedback from one or two interviews could point to a critical issue that needs to be addressed immediately (e.g., breakdown of supervision, ethical concerns), the aggregate data from a number of interviews indicating trends and commonalities should be the primary focus.

- Trends may occur organizationally (e.g., inadequate compensation and stressful work), or may be clustered among employees who reported to a specific supervisor/manager, or who held a certain type of position (e.g., child protective services worker).
- Aggregate exit interview data should be carefully combined with agency turnover statistics and other sources of data (e.g., staff focus groups and satisfaction surveys) to gain a full-bodied and well-balanced set of recommendations for agency improvement.

Costs of exit interviews

Of all the data sources for addressing staff turnover, exit interviews are the least expensive. The only direct costs are the time of the person preparing for and conducting the interviews, the entering specific interview information into an agency database, and the resulting time for staff analysis and action planning to best use the findings and implications. The benefit/cost ratio for exit interviews is extremely high.

Staff Focus Groups

"The focus group is one of the best data collection tools available to the HR professional. The interaction of employees in a group setting can yield rich information that provides a thorough understanding of issues and serves as a basis for action planning."
--Terry Satterfield (in an article for the Society for Human Resource Management)

Focus groups ideally involve seven to 10 individuals who discuss a particular topic under the direction of a facilitator, who promotes interaction and ensures that the discussion remains on the topic. Focus groups are used heavily in the private sector (e.g., feedback to new products), but increasingly public-sector human service agencies are adapting this methodology to gather useful information from service recipients. Conducting focus groups with staff members also is another relatively simple and inexpensive way of gathering essential workforce data. While somewhat more complicated than exit interviews, agencies only need to follow some common sense guidelines and processes in order to conduct very productive staff focus groups.

<u>Uses of focus groups</u>

Focus group research can serve a variety of purposes, including gathering feedback on pilot programs, new benefits, or the pulse of the workforce after organizational changes. The most common uses of focus groups are:

- Securing information to inform the development of a staff questionnaire prior to its implementation
- Deriving opinions and attitudes about policies, practices, and working conditions
- Testing messages designed to communicate with employees
- Identifying creative and innovative ideas related to human resource issues
- Interpreting and enriching previously obtained survey results (e.g., staff satisfaction survey)

<u>Steps for conducting effective focus groups</u>

A number of resources provide guidelines for ensuring that focus discussions yield reliable, representative, and actionable information to improve agency decisions. "Conducting Effective Focus Groups," an article by Terry Satterfield, provides a good overview.

<u>Planning for the Focus Group</u>

- **Be very clear about why you are conducting the group**.
  It is critical to create a purpose statement that should be a concise and clear rationale for conducting the session. It describes the "focus" of the focus group. Always first ask what problem or need will be addressed by the information to be gathered from the session. Identify the major objectives and specifically what you want to learn from the focus group.

An example of a good purpose statement is "to discover and clarify participants' ideas and feelings about changes the agency can make within existing resources to increase the retention of front line staff."

- **Develop excellent questions to solicit the views of participants on specific issues**.
  The key here is specificity. General questions will produce general and vague information that often wanders. Specific questions, based on your clear purpose statement and objectives, will generate specific thoughts and bring to light detail necessary to define issues in such a way that effective action can be taken. While there is no hard rule on the number of questions to use, five or six well-constructed questions (with additional flexible probing and follow-up questions) should be effective covering no more than two or three major issues. You often compromise useful quality by trying to cover too much ground in focus groups. Questions generally become increasingly specific as the discussion proceeds.

- **Select focus group participants who adequately represent your employee population.**
  As a general rule, focus groups are more effective when they consist of participants who share some of the same key characteristics (e.g., agency staff below supervisory level who have been with your agency at least one year). It is important to clearly identify what the two or three critical characteristics are before making selections. The ideal group size is between seven and 10 participants. While there is no rigid rule on how best to select the participants for a focus group, one good approach is to combine:
    - random selection of participants from the pool of all employees with those characteristics (i.e., every member of the group has an equal chance of being selected) and
    - voluntary participation in which those people randomly selected have the option of participating. Some people will not be comfortable sharing their views in a group setting and voluntary participation allows them to opt out. If you initially randomly select a larger group than you will need, you can go to the next name on the list if an employee selected earlier declines to participate.

- **Plan for all necessary logistics**.
  Like any group activity, the success or failure of a focus group often hinges on details, so it is important to adequately arrange for:
    - scheduling—Plan the activity to last 1.5 to 2 hours. Generally Tuesdays, Wednesdays, or Thursdays are better days for employee focus groups. Scheduling the group around a light lunch provided by the agency is often effective. If the group is not convening around lunch time, have modest refreshments. If participants need to arrange alternative coverage at their work site in order to participate, ensure that happens easily.
    - location—Any conference room setting, with good lighting and ventilation, can work fine. Configure chairs so that all members can see each other and with the facilitator at the end of a hollow U with flip charts.
    - recording and reporting of session—While it is common in the private sector to audio-tape focus groups (or even view them via a one-way mirror), for employee focus groups, this is not recommended. The ideal approach is to have another

objective person (e.g., outside the agency) serve as flip chart recorder during the session, which allows the facilitator to direct full attention to the process. During this planning stage also determine what type and extent of final report you want from the facilitator following the focus group.

Preparing for Excellent Facilitation

- **Use an experienced focus group facilitator.**
  The facilitator (also referred to as the moderator) plays the key role in a focus group and is responsible for the ultimate success of the session. While it can be tempting to ask someone within the agency to perform this role, most guides for focus groups recommend using someone with professional training and considerable expertise in actually facilitating focus groups. Bringing in such an objective person from outside your agency generally will increase the candor and open sharing of views by the group participants. In most communities, there are organizations of such trained facilitators from which a facilitator can be committed. If resources are not available for paying a facilitator, try to use an experienced "in-kind" facilitator from another part of your state or county government (e.g., mental health agency or local community college).

- **Meet with the facilitator.**
  Good preparatory communication with the facilitator is very important. To be successful, the facilitator must have as much information as possible about the agency's needs, concerns, and expectations for the focus group. Also review the process to be used by facilitator, including how the following key tasks will be handled during the group:
  - Gate-keeping—The facilitator invites (and limits, as appropriate) input to ensure that varying views are given an opportunity to be expressed. The goal of balanced participation can be achieved by establishing a "norm of participation," in which the facilitator invites participation in a non-threatening manner.
  - Process guarding—The facilitator must ensure that the focus group operates within its purpose and that the ground rules are followed. The facilitator pays attention to process while allowing the participants to generate the content—their views and opinions. The facilitator's charge is to keep the group focused, maintain momentum, and reach closure. Participants who share their views, listen to one another, and reflect on one another's comments make for the most productive focus groups. The following ground rules of participation encourage this type of interaction:
    - Facilitator is neutral—objectivity is very important and a good facilitator simply refuses to give opinions or steer the group in any one way
    - Everyone participates
    - Listening is as important as talking
    - Disagreement and differences of opinion are good
    - Common courtesy is exhibited at all times
  - Interviewing—Effectively asking the preset questions is the most important task of the facilitator. A skilled facilitator knows when to follow-up with related questions to foster reflection and insight. Sensitivity to the participants also is important,

including being aware of when a participant's comment was perhaps misunderstood or when a participant does not seem to be saying what is on his/her mind. Some probing questions (e.g., what, why, when) are useful, as is the technique of paraphrasing and repeating specific comments or emerging themes so they may be clarified and validated.
- Being open to serendipity—While focus groups need to be carefully planned, allowing for flexibility is also important. Frequently serendipitous information emerges to provide added richness, including getting into more depth and detail, finding deeper motivation, and verifying the information offered. An experienced facilitator will be very comfortable with identifying and incorporating such flexibility.
- Recording—Either the facilitator or recorder should record comments as participants respond to the facilitator and each other. Listing comments on flip charts in the front of the room is productive as it provides reinforcement of the progress the group is making and allows participants to calibrate their thoughts with comments already made.

Conducting the Focus Group Session

- **If you have planned carefully and enlisted and prepared an experienced facilitator, the actual conducting of the group should proceed smoothly using the suggested agenda**:
  - welcome and self-introduction of facilitator
  - introduction of participants
  - review of purpose and goals for focus group
  - review of agenda
  - warm-up activity—has objective of making participants comfortable and stimulating thought on the topic at hand (e.g., "If you could make one point today about how the agency could better retain staff, what would it be?"). Have the group break into pairs to share their views on this warm-up question.
  - ground rules
  - discussion
    - presentation of question
    - brief silent period (two minutes) for individual reflection before each new question is discussed
    - facilitated discussion (with round-robin sharing as an option)
  - closing and wrap-up –tell participants they will receive a copy of the report (if appropriate) generated from their comments and thank them for participating.

Follow-up tasks

- **Immediately**:
  - Clean-up written recording—clarify any scratching or notes that don't make sense and ensure all pages are numbered.
  - Write down any observations made during the session—the nature of the participation in the group; and surprises during the session.
  - Write a brief thank you note to each participant.

- **As soon as possible**:
    - Review the recorded notes and synthesize participant comments into a formal report (as previously negotiated with the agency). Reports are essentially debriefing summaries of the discussion with a goal of arriving at themes—perspectives on the topic that were shared by members of the group and are consistently reflected in the recorded comments. These themes may have been stated plainly or they may emerge as several seemingly unrelated comments are reviewed. Some focus group reports are very short and include only highlights of the discussion. Others are far more detailed and provide lengthy quotations from participants.

Cost of focus groups?

The primary cost for focus groups is payment of an excellent facilitator. An estimated charge of $150 an hour for a facilitator can serve as a general guide, but this can vary, including use of "in-kind" expertise from other state and local agencies. In addition to actually facilitating the group, the facilitator will need to be involved in the initial planning and report writing, but the host agency may be able to handle the sampling and recruitment of participants, logistics, and other support activities (and thus not need to pay the facilitator). Other costs that need to be covered include any paid coverage of their regular duties while staff are participating in the focus group; lunches or refreshments; and copying and distribution of the report.

Employee Surveys

"No organization should miss an opportunity to survey staff. It's the only sure-fire way to peer into the minds of employees and take the pulse of the company as a whole. Surveys ensure a happier, more productive and loyal staff…Asking them what they think and acting on their advice makes them partners with management in determining direction"
--Andrea Poe (article for
the Society for Human Resources Management)

One of the most important workforce applications of social research is the employee survey. Human service agencies use survey research methods frequently to gather demographic data, evaluate new programs, and assess customer opinions. Although more complex than exit interviews and focus groups, employee surveys can provide invaluable information about an organization's workforce strengths and weaknesses. Since it is widely agreed that any agency is only as good as its employees, it is critical to get direct, honest feedback from those employees on their workforce needs, perceptions, ideas, and suggestions. Many human service agencies are committed to high performance concepts, including encouraging employee participation and creating more responsive organizations. Employee surveys offer a powerful tool for helping actualize these goals.

Uses of employee surveys

Survey research is a method for collecting self-reported information from people about themselves and their organization. This information can be descriptive, behavioral, or preferential (opinions). Employee surveys emphasize preferential data, but they can explore a broad range of issues. Employee surveys (the generic term used by the author) can be called several different names, including:

- **Climate surveys**, which gauge the general work environment and are designed to address broad-reaching issues like large-scale change in the agency.
- **Employee satisfaction surveys**, which dig a little deeper than climate surveys and probe employees' views on topics at the more local or specific level, like the supervision, management, or training in their department.
- **Attitude surveys**, which attempt to determine employee perceptions of their working environment, like compensation and benefits or safety and health concerns.

In the context of this field guide addressing workforce challenges, the primary use of employee surveys is to obtain the views and perceptions of agency staff on how to improve employee recruitment and retention, enhance staff development and succession planning, enhance customer services, improve productivity, increase morale and job satisfaction, address other areas needing improvement, and capitalize on workforce successes.

Steps for conducting effective employee surveys

Employee surveys need to be as carefully and intentionally developed and delivered as any other survey application. The fact that internal customers are being surveyed, rather than service recipients for example, does not diminish the preparation and care necessary. By implementing some concrete applications of accepted survey research methods and specific conditions for success, public human service agencies can benefit from invaluable feedback from their human resources. Employee surveys are best viewed as having three main phases—the survey itself, feedback to employees, and management's action planning from the findings. One of the best books the author has found on survey research is *Designing and Conducting Survey Research: A Comprehensive Guide,* by Rea and Parker. The eight steps that follow are adapted from that book, with additional ideas and enhancements from articles in the human resources field.

1. **Have a very clear foundation and commitment for the employee survey**.
   As with any research effort, initial planning is critical, including thoroughly answering the following questions:
   - Why are we collecting this information?
   - What type of information is to be gathered?
   - How will it be used?
   - From whom is information to be solicited?
   - How is the information to be collected (e.g., written or web-based)?

   The answers to these core planning questions must be driven by the unique objectives and needs of each agency. There are no hard and fast rules. The extent to which the survey project will be successful, however, is heavily dependent upon clear, consensus-based responses to these questions. Two early conditions for success are:

   - **Management is fully committed to the survey.** Such a survey implicitly represents a contract with the employees and sets an expectation that there will be a legitimate effort to fully explain the results of the survey with the employees and to take constructive steps where possible to eliminate, or at least mitigate, any conditions or circumstances that are causing discontent or problems. A critical preliminary question agency management must answer is whether they are serious about the survey. If there will be widespread hesitation or reluctance to use the findings for positive change, it is best not to even begin the survey process.

   - **All employees in the organization are surveyed, rather than only a sample of them**. While large organizations may conduct employee surveys as subsets of the larger organization (e.g., division, field office), include everyone in that part of the organization in the survey. Survey everyone—you never know from where great ideas will come.

2. **Identify and commit the resources necessary to conduct the survey**.
   Depending on the agency's human resources or research staff capabilities, employee surveys can be done strictly in-house or through a consultant or vendor. If in-house resources are used, sufficient time and funding need to be dedicated to the project from design to reporting.

The employee survey should be built into work plans and timelines so that it is not neglected or easily discounted in light of other "higher priority projects." If a consultant or vendor is to be used, a requests for proposals process may be needed to select the best organization within the budget to conduct the survey. Don't overlook "no cost/low cost" options like local universities and colleges. The increasing use of web-based surveys is an attractive alternative that can save time and money. **Appendix C** provides information on two such electronic survey options. Regardless of whether the survey is to be done in-house or by a consultant, a lead staff person with the agency should be responsible for the project, including working with a team of representative employees who will help guide the project.

3. **Establish the information base for the employee survey**.
   To use a common maxim—"don't reinvent the wheel." There is considerable existing and accessible information about human service workforce issues from which to draw in developing an employee survey. Staff recruitment, retention, and development issues are increasingly on the radar screens of both public and private human service agencies. One source of information is the *Report from the Child Welfare Workforce Survey: State and County Data and Findings* (May 2001), which is on APHSA's web site www.aphsa.org (click on Policy and then Child Welfare).

   Another very helpful resource is the book, *First Break All the Rules* (mentioned in the chapter on exit interviews and **Appendix A**). Authors Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman identify 12 questions that best measure the strength of any workplace—the core elements needed to attract, focus, and keep the most talented people. The authors recommend that you seriously consider these 12 questions for inclusion in an employee survey your agency might conduct. APHSA conducted an agency climate survey with its staff in early 2002, and the questions asked are listed in **Appendix D**. Another source of excellent information, including examples of actual employee surveys, is the Society for Human Resource Management at http://www.shrm.org (membership is required for some online materials).

4. **Design the survey questionnaire with great care**.
   The goal at this stage is to devise a series of valid, well-structured questions to systematically obtain information from employees. If the first three steps were done well, drafting new questions, or adopting or adapting existing questions, should proceed naturally. If these prior steps were not done well, the resulting lack of direction, clarity, and commitment can turn developing questions into a quicksand bog. It is helpful to start with the end in mind by asking, "How will we use the responses to these questions?" Prior staff focus groups can be a source of survey questions. This field guide cannot address all the details of formulating questions, but there is a great deal of useful information on the mechanics of designing survey questions, including chapters in most social research textbooks. Some of the most important issues involved in drafting questions are:

   - Closed-ended or open-ended formats—Most questions should be closed-ended with a list of alternative responses. Open-ended questions take a lot of work to analyze but they often produce a richness of nuance that is unmatched by pre-set responses. This is particularly true when inquiring about personal and often emotional workforce issues (e.g., satisfaction with supervision, salary, and professional growth opportunities). It is helpful to build some open-ended questions on how things are working; trouble spots emerging; and improvements we can make. At a minimum, the survey should allow plenty of space for employees to expand on their responses and tell the agency anything else felt to be important.

- Use of scales. Questions about preferences, opinions, and attitudes usually lend themselves to scaled questions (e.g., "on a five-point scale, how important is each of the following issues for you?"). Scaled responses allow a level of nuance and statistical richness that can be very helpful in determining the relative value of a number of workforce issues and problems. There are some real tricks to developing scaled questions. An excellent article in the *Harvard Business Review*, on "Getting the Truth into Workplace Surveys," is summarized in **Appendix E**).

- Sequencing of questions. It is usually better to start with more general questions and then get more specific. Particularly sensitive questions are better placed later in the questionnaire. Related questions (e.g., about compensation and benefits) should be grouped together in a logical ordering.

- Length of questionnaire. The general rule of thumb is that the instrument should be as concise as possible while covering the necessary range of subject matter required by the survey. This usually involves the balancing of more questions with their impact on the response rate. It is a truism in survey research that long and cumbersome questionnaires reduce the response rate. The agency managers can strongly encourage employees to complete the survey (requiring completion is not recommended), including completing it on work time. The survey stills need to be of a reasonable length or the quality of attention given to it by employees will erode.

5. **Without fail—pretest the questionnaire**.
One of the biggest mistakes organizations make is to not pretest or pilot draft questionnaires, usually due to time crunches or a false sense of confidence. Two conditions for success at this stage are humility and a commitment to continuous improvement—both of which are fostered by pretesting your questions. The goal of a pretest is to improve the overall quality of the questionnaire construction—both content and design. For an employee survey, this means asking a relatively small number of employees (six to eight) to actually respond to the draft questions and also to provide feedback on all aspects of the questionnaire, including:
   - Clarity. Questions understood? Response choices and codes clear? Directions clear?
   - Comprehensiveness. Questions and response options cover range of alternatives? Any irrelevant, incomplete, or redundant questions?
   - Acceptability. Length? Tone? Confidentiality?
   - Specific feedback. What questions to add or drop?

If the survey will be web-based, the pretest also needs to include the Internet or intranet links and all technical aspects of how employees will be asked to use the electronic features. While web-based surveying brings many wonderful assets to employee surveys, we all know that there are also a host of technology features and "gremlins" that can cause problems (e.g., not getting through firewall; invalid passwords) and these need to be carefully pretested and corrected if needed.

6. **Strategically implement the employee survey**.
Once improvements have been made based on pretest feedback, the survey is ready to launch. At this stage, timing becomes very important. Try to pick a time to release the survey that is relatively less hectic for your agency (e.g., not during budget crunch or the start of a major new program). Also allow enough, but not too much, time for employees to complete the survey. For a multipage survey, generally two weeks is sufficient time, but remember that some employees may be on vacation, out sick, or in the field and may need additional time to complete it.

   One of the most important conditions for success is that employees be able to respond to the surveys **confidentially** (i.e., the completed questionnaire is only seen by authorized persons and the identity of the respondent is closely guarded). Most organizations go even farther and ask employees to respond **anonymously** (i.e., not provide their names). The author recommends anonymous surveying of employees in order to encourage candor, honesty, and as true a "real world view" as possible. Be vigilant about anything that is <u>or can be perceived to be</u> a contradiction or threat to confidentiality and anonymity, like employee descriptive data on the survey (e.g., age, work unit, tenure) that might unintentionally reveal the identity of a specific employee. Web-based surveys can include actual and perceived violations of anonymity (e.g., electronic back-ups, managers' access to e-mails) that need to be carefully anticipated and addressed. APHSA has used and offers a web-based survey tool called 2020 Feedback that addresses such potential barriers.

7. **Expedite the data analysis and reporting of findings**.
Depending on the resources of the agency, either the in-house staff or consultant/vendor needs to develop a database for the entry of responses from all the completed surveys. Many software products are available (SPSS is still the author's personal favorite) for database development, data entry, and statistical analysis. It is wise to develop the PC-based database concurrently during the "down time" when the employees are completing the survey so that when the surveys are returned no time is lost preparing the database. Factor in that open-ended questions will require additional coding and summarizing of findings, generally into a word processing software. The key to the analysis of findings is to look for themes and subthemes by mapping out what has been reported by the greatest number of employees. If scaled questions are used, data analysis is somewhat more complicated but also more productive. Look for consistencies and inconsistencies among questions and where the findings may indicate the need for additional data (through a focus group, for example)

   This important step of data analysis and reporting requires balancing the timely turnaround of findings and excellent analysis. A reasonable goal for most employee surveys is to have findings available to share with employees within three or four weeks. Most analyses of findings will be at the descriptive level (e.g., averages, medians, ranges) rather than requiring sophisticated significance and correlation statistics. The author has found it very useful to prepare reports that include easily grasped findings (e.g., heavy use of bullets), clear graphics (e.g., pie charts and bar graphs), and always a one-page executive summary. Additional details can be provided in appendices or attachments. Generally it is more advantageous to report initial findings expeditiously, even if they are not fully "fleshed-out," than it is to wait much longer in order to fully massage the findings. Discussions with employees and managers usually identify additional analyses that will be helpful and welcome, and the human resources or research staff always can continue to tweak survey nuances after the initial findings are released. Particularly with employee surveys, expeditiously sharing the primary findings with staff is a better guideline than waiting to produce a voluminous and highly polished research report. A timely sharing with staff what they told the agency also is respectful and communicates that the agency cares about their opinions.

8. **Put the survey findings to work**.
   As stated earlier, the third critical phase of employee surveys is action planning based on the survey findings. One common feature every employee completing a survey shares is a desire to see some positive action results from their response to the survey. Determining and gaining consensus about the most important actions to take may be challenging. It is important, however, to remember an initial condition for success—that senior managers welcome upward communication from employees. This commitment entails listening to what employees have to say; addressing their concerns and ideas openly and honestly; and making changes based on the survey results. Once employees have been asked for their opinion, it is absolutely critical to share finding with them and to take appropriate action.

Cost of employee surveys

Costs for conducting an employee survey can vary. If agency staff and resources are used, the costs can generally be subsumed in existing budgets. The most significant resource needed is staff time for the survey design and analysis. If a consultant or vendor is retained, costs can be many thousands of dollars depending on how much of the project is contracted out. With the availability of many online resources to guide a human services agency in developing an employee survey, major costs are not necessary. For example, APHSA has a flexible contract with a web-based survey provider in Virginia and is able to offer very reasonable rates for the development, implementation, analysis, and reporting of employee surveys (See **Appendix C**). If your agency would be interested in exploring that option, please contact Gary Cyphers at 202-682-0100 or gcyphers@aphsa.org.

Conclusion

As public human service agencies continue to respond to challenges in their workforces, making decisions and implementing strategies based on good data will become increasingly important. While general or national information can help inform the discussion at the state and local levels, agency specific data are essential. For example, a national annual turnover rate of 22% for child protective service workers is helpful information. However, if that rate is 38% (or 4%) in your agency, the range and types of needed interventions may be very different. Most importantly, human resource administrative data (e.g., vacancy rates, tenure of staff) will only become truly useful for decision-making when careful and intentional efforts are made to gather information directly from employees in the agency. This field guide has hopefully provided some practical recommendations that can assist your agency in effectively using exit interviews, focus groups, and surveys as three powerful ways of gathering such information from your employees.

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Appendix A

Possible Questions for a Staff Exit Interview

In addition to the standard set of questions agencies have regarding compensation, benefits, and working conditions, here are some possibilities from which to select those that work for you:

- What did you enjoy most about working with us?
- What frustrations did you feel in your position? Why?
- What will you miss most about working here?
- What could we do to make your replacement's tenure with us more satisfying?
- What are the three (or more) most important changes you would recommend for your department/this organization to make it better?
- Would you recommend our agency to friends or relatives looking for a job? Why or why not?
- <u>The extent to which supervision</u>:
  - Provided recognition on the job
  - Developed cooperation and teamwork
  - Encouraged and listened to suggestions
  - Resolved complaints and problems
  - Followed policies and practices
  - Met my needs for coaching and mentoring
  - Provided helpful feedback and performance evaluations

Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman, authors of the best selling book *First Break All the Rules(What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently),*identify 12 questions that best measure the strength of any workplace. They measure the core elements needed to attract, focus, and keep the most talented employees. Adaptations of some of these questions could be helpful to ask departing employees in order to assess where core elements can improve. (I have put them into second person, past tense)

1. Did you know what was expected of you at work?
2. Did you have the materials and equipment to do what you did best every day?
3. At work, did you have the opportunity to do what you do best every day?
4. In a typical week, did you receive recognition or praise for doing good work?
5. Did your supervisor, or someone at work, seem to care about you as a person?
6. Was there someone at work who encouraged your development?
7. At work, did your opinions seem to count?
8. Did the mission/purpose of your agency make you feel your job was important?
9. Were your co-workers committed to doing quality work?
10. Did you have a best friend at work?
11. In the last six months, has someone at work talked to you about your progress?
12. This last year, have you had opportunities at work to learn and grow?

Appendix B

Common Preventable Turnover Problems

The following preventable turnover problems were identified in the *Child Welfare Workforce Survey* done collaboratively by APHSA, the Child Welfare League of America, and the Alliance for Children and Families in fall 2000. While the respondents to this survey were public and private child welfare agencies, these are relevant causes for employees leaving all types of human service organizations. The problems are listed below in descending order of frequency from the state and county child welfare data.

- Workloads are too high and/or demanding (e.g., stress, burnout, or being overwhelmed).
- Caseloads are too high.
- Too much time is spent on travel/transport, paperwork, court appearances, and/or meetings.
- Salaries are too low.
- Workers do not feel valued by the agency.
- Supervision is problematic (amount and/or quality).
- There are insufficient service resources for families and children.
- There are insufficient opportunities for promotion and career advancement in the agency.
- Worker concerns about physical safety are a problem.
- Working conditions are poor (e.g., rundown/overcrowded plant, lack of needed supplies).
- There are agency management problems (e.g., high manager turnover).
- There is inadequate training (amount and/or quality).
- There is a lack of professional development opportunities (e.g., conference attendance).
- Benefits are inadequate.

Appendix C

Information on Web-Based Survey Options

With the geometric explosion of resources becoming available on and through the Internet, public human service agencies now have access to a wide array of choices and alternatives for conducting web-based surveys. The two briefly described below were selected because APHSA has used them and found them to be effective and economical.

APHSA's Contract with Performance Support Systems, Inc.

In early 2002, APHSA conducted its own organizational staff climate survey and 360° feedback evaluations for its executive staff. Also as part of APHSA's leadership and practice training and consulting with states and localities, employee surveys and feedback evaluations frequently are included as part of the contract. The organization APHSA works with is Performance Support Systems in Virginia, which has a web-based survey/assessment platform (Microsoft Office Suite), protocols, and templates that are called *20/20 Insight.* The program is particularly powerful for soliciting employee feedback, perceptions, and opinions on questions that are scaled. Two examples of these types of question are:

- On a five-point scale with 1 = rarely and 5 = almost always, how frequently do your job assignments help you grow and develop?
- Rate how problematic the following areas are for you, with 0 = not problematic, 1 = somewhat problematic, and 2 = highly problematic:
    - High caseloads
    - Lack of professional development opportunities
    - Supervision

The *20/20 Insight* program has a resource library of organizational variables and rating scales, and it also can be completely customized for any given agency. The program produces a quick-turnaround and user-friendly summary report of the aggregate findings once all responses are transmitted. Because employees complete the questionnaires electronically on a server in Tidewater, VA, concerns they might have about confidentiality are greatly reduced compared to doing such an employee survey in-house. The costs are very reasonable. For example, an agency with 100 staff could conduct an employee survey for under $350, including the final report.

Zoomerang

A colleague here recently discovered and started successfully using a web-based survey service called "Zommerang," which offers two packages: 1) a free limited use package, and 2) a package costing $600 for an expanded array of services. While this program has the capacity of collecting as many as 10,000 responses, it is also effective much smaller projects. In the expanded package, some of the features include: up to 30 questions per survey; cross tabulation of responses; results in spreadsheet format; and use of over 100 survey templates from which to customize your survey. If you want to administer your own survey, this could be a good option. For more information, check it out by taking a tour at www.zoomerang.com. .

Appendix D

Questions Used in APHSA's
2002 Employee Survey

In early 2002, APHSA surveyed all of its employees as part of the Performance Excellence Project and called it an organizational assessment survey. The survey utilized the web-based resources of the 20/20 Insight software briefly described in Appendix C. Each employee responded from their own pc into the server at the consultant based in Virginia. The questionnaire asked "to what extent is each statement true at APHSA?," using a six-point scale with 1 = never and 7 = always. Each question also included a narrative box for any comments or additional details.

APHSA used both the library resources of 20/20 Insight and other available information to construct the questionnaire. The questions were grouped into 13 areas. The questions are listed below only as examples of the range and types of feedback that employee surveys can invite. You will note that a small number of questions are worded in the negative in order to reduce patterned responses and to check internal validity. APHSA is using the survey findings to guide its continuing growth and development as an organization and to address workforce issues identified.

Vision, Mission, and Goals

- APHSA's mission is clearly defined**.**
- I understand how I contribute to APHSA's mission through my work.
- Goals and objectives for my work are clearly defined, realistic, and achievable.
- We measure our progress toward achieving our goals.

Member Focus and Commitment

- APHSA makes member satisfaction its top priority.
- We ask our members for feedback about our performance.
- We try to resolve all member complaints.
- We do not strive to continuously improve member satisfaction.
- We make it easy for our members to do business with us.

Leadership

- We are moving in the right direction as an organization.
- I have confidence in APHSA's leadership.
- Top management does not balance the needs of customers and employees.
- My manager provides good leadership for my area.

Management and Support

- I do not have the time and resources I need to do my job.
- My manager treats me with respect.
- My manager values my ideas and suggestions.

- My manager encourages me to do high quality work.
- Management follows through on its commitments.
- I can approach my manger with problems and concerns.
- May manager responds to my requests for help.
- My manager encourages teamwork and collaboration.

Performance Management
- Performance standards are clearly defined and understood.
- Performance measures are documented.
- Management emphasizes high quality standards.
- I am held accountable for my performance.
- My performance is measured against my goals.
- I do not get regular feedback on my performance.
- My performance evaluations are fair.
- The performance management system is effective.
- APHSA's processes and procedures ensure that work can be done right the first time.
- My performance evaluations are timely.
- Documents and resources needed for job performance are readily accessible.

Work Relations
- There is good cooperation between departments and work units.
- All departments and work units do not work together to get the job done.
- There is good communication between departments and work units.
- Management encourages all departments and work units to coordinate their efforts.

Rewards and Recognitions
- I am compensated fairly for my work.
- I am satisfied with the benefits I receive.
- I am recognized when I do good work.
- Rewards are based on performance and results.
- I am recognized or rewarded for taking appropriate risks.
- People are not recognized for finding better ways to do their jobs.
- I am rewarded for performing beyond my job requirements.

Training and Development
- I have the skills I need to do my job.
- People are encouraged to learn new skills.
- APHSA provides adequate training opportunities.
- Job assignments do not help people grow and develop.
- The training and development program effectively supports my needs.

Employee Involvement
- I am involved in solving problems that affect me.
- I am involved in making decisions that affect me.

- I am empowered to solve problems and make decisions.
- I am not encouraged to get more involved in APHSA projects and activities.

Diversity
- Diversity is encouraged throughout the organization.
- Diversity is treated as a strength in this organization.
- People of diverse backgrounds are given equal opportunity.
- APHSA makes use of the diverse talents of people who work here.

Work Processes and Procedures
- Work processes are clearly defined and well organized.
- Operating procedures are documented and understood.
- Changes in operating procedures are planned and explained.
- Work processes and procedures are not continuously improved.
- Management provides clear plans to get work done with clearly defined priorities.
- I participate in the planning and scheduling of my work.
- The planning process is effective in this organization.
- Meetings are useful and constructive with appropriate decisions being made.
- Problems are identified and clearly defined, analyzed, and solved in a timely and effective fashion.

Organizational Communication
- Communication is open in this organization.
- There is good top-down communication in this organization.
- There is good bottom-up communication in this organization.
- I am encouraged to speak up and communicate freely.
- I do not get the information I need to do my job.

Job Satisfaction
- I am optimistic about my future with APHSA.
- APHSA is a good place to work.
- I am satisfied with my job.
- Employees are respected and appreciated here.
- My work is interesting and challenging.

Appendix E

Key Points from Article
"Getting the Truth into Workplace Surveys"
by Palmer Morrel-Samuels*
(in *Harvard Business Review* (February 2002, pp. 111-118)

- Organizations can definitely benefit from workplace surveys and questionnaires (what the field guide calls "employee surveys"), but not all surveys produce useful information.

- A careful and informed design makes the difference between a good and bad survey. The practice of survey research has advanced significantly in the last decade and these improved practices need to be incorporated to employee surveys.

- The author's 16 guidelines fall into five areas. They are just stated below, but you are strongly encouraged to fully read the article before initiating an employee survey. The guidelines for measurement are particularly important for designing scaled questions.

  Guidelines for Content:
  1. Ask questions about observable behavior rather than thoughts or motives.
  2. Include some items that can be independently verified.
  3. Measure only behaviors that have a recognized link to your company's performance.

  Guidelines for Format:
  4. Keep sections of the survey unlabeled and uninterrupted by page breaks.
  5. Design sections to contain a similar number of items, and questions a similar number of words.
  6. Place questions about respondent demographics last in employee surveys but first in performance appraisals.

  Guidelines for Language:
  7. Avoid terms that have strong associations.
  8. Change the wording in about one-third of questions so that the desired answer is negative.
  9. Avoid merging tow disconnected topics into one question.

  Guidelines for Measurement:
  10. Create a response scale with numbers at regularly spaced intervals and words at each end.
  11. If possible, use a response scale that asks respondents to estimate a frequency.
  12. Use only one response scale that offers and odd number of options.
  13. Avoid questions that require rankings.

Guidelines for Administration:

14. Make workplace surveys individually anonymous and demonstrate that they remain so.
15. In large organizations, make the department the primary unit of analysis for company surveys.
16. Make sure that employees can complete the survey in about 20 minutes.

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* Palmer Morrel-Samuels is a research psychologist, taught at the University of Michigan, and currently is president of Employee Motivation and Performance Assessment.