

**NORTH CENTRAL STATE COLLEGE**  
**ASSESSING THE HEARTBEAT**

**The Gardner Shaw Group**  
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## Introduction

North Central State College has undertaken an exciting project to assess the “heartbeat” of the college to truly understand the work environment for faculty and staff and to identify actionable items to maximize employee satisfaction, motivation, productivity, and retention.

Generating useful information and providing feedback to the workforce is critical to a meaningful environmental assessment effort. Three distinct means of data gathering were used: (1) focus groups with full-time and adjunct faculty and with supervisory and non-supervisory staff, (2) telephone interviews with senior staff, and (3) an off-the-shelf written survey. In addition, those who wanted to provide information outside of this formal process were invited to submit comments directly to the consultants via fax or e-mail.

The Gardner Shaw Group conducted 11 focus groups (see Figure 1) during the week of February 3, 2003.

Figure 1  
Focus Group Participants

Full-time Faculty	53
Adjunct Faculty	15
Supervisory Staff	18
Non-supervisory Staff	<u>41</u>
TOTAL	127

Telephone interviews were conducted with the President, the Vice Presidents, the Director of Human Resources, the Special Assistant to the President, and the Executive

Assistant to the President. This brought the total number of those involved in this first round of data gathering to 135.

The Campus Quality Survey™ from Performance Horizons was used to gather responses to statements regarding the college “climate, culture, and services.” Using a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) these statements included 51 generic and 11 specific items related to the North Central State environment and 30 items (1 = poor and inadequate, 5 = excellent as it is now) related to specific college “programs, services, and activities.” There were two distinguishing features that led to the selection of the Performance Horizons form: (1) it asked for a comparison between how respondents felt about the situations as they saw them presently and how they thought they should be, thus allowing for a performance gap analysis rather than merely a listing of raw mean scores and (2) it provided normative data to compare results with more than 100 other colleges around the country.

Survey forms were distributed the week of March 3, 2003, and returned by March 10, 2003. Out of a total of approximately 240 that were sent out, there were 177 completed surveys returned (see Figure 2) for a participation rate of 74%. This is an excellent return that enables us to draw conclusions that we are confident reflect the opinions of the college population as a whole.

Figure 2  
Survey Participants

Faculty/Instructor	77
Department Chair	5
Administrative/Professional	53
Support/Classified	37
Blank	<u>5</u>
TOTAL	177

The number of participants in the focus groups and respondents to the written survey suggest that there is a genuine interest in this environment assessment process. A quick declaration of the steps the institution intends to take in response to the data collected is necessary to leverage this interest and to lend credibility to the project.

## **Analysis**

The analysis of data that follows is based on focus group and survey responses taken together. Where our observations find a discrepancy between the two (or where there is no specific mention in one or the other), we note those specifically. We believe that there is a genuine fondness for the institution and that faculty and staff are committed, student-centered, and eager to serve. Among the ten smallest performance gaps in the written survey (suggesting higher levels of satisfaction with these items), there are four especially that support this position:

- I feel that my work makes a difference at the College (1)
- Faculty and staff take pride in their work (2)
- Students believe faculty care about what they think (5)
- I have a favorable overall impression of the College (10)

We believe, however, that currently this fondness is largely untapped. Three survey items provide telling data. With the lowest overall campus mean score of 2.106 and the second highest performance gap score, the responses to the statement “Morale is high at the College as a whole” indicates a general malaise that if not quickly addressed can have a devastating impact on productivity and quality. Most studies of employee satisfaction conclude that there is a positive relationship between job satisfaction and job achievement. In addition, while 58% of the respondents indicated that they were *satisfied* or better with their employment at NCSC, only 10% reported that they were *very satisfied* while 24% reported that they were *somewhat dissatisfied* (22%) and *not satisfied at all* (2%). In addition, when asked about their overall impression of quality

at the college, only 8% thought it is *excellent* and 45% thought it is *good* leaving 47% who feel that the level of quality is *average* (33%), *below average* (13%), and *inadequate* (0.58%).

In comparison to national norms, NCSC's overall *How It Is Now* ratings are significantly lower in each of the eight summary categories that Performance Horizons measures (Figure 3). The average of mean scores for two-year colleges across the eight categories is 3.199 and for NCSC is 2.791 with no individual category score higher than 2.988. Standard deviation scores across the board indicate a high level of agreement among employee responses.

Figure 3

#### Eight Main Survey Categories

(Definitions can be found on page 6 of the Interpretive Guide and Results book)

1. Top Management Leadership and Support
2. Employee Training and Recognition
3. Employee Empowerment and Teamwork
4. Strategic Quality Planning
5. Quality and Productivity Improvement Results
6. Measurement and Analysis
7. Customer Focus
8. Quality Assurance

We have identified four major themes for consideration in this report. They generated the most commentary and present the greatest areas for improvement.

- Leadership
- Performance Management
- Policy Administration
- Communication

## Leadership

Higher education institutions throughout the country are in a period of transition. They are facing enrollment issues, changing learning styles, public demands for accountability and financial constraints, to name a few of these concerns. Each institution must learn to deal with these matters while maintaining collegiality and cooperation. Each must acknowledge also that its stake holders react differently to the prospects for change – there are those who will embrace it freely, those who will resist it, and those who will observe the change and see what happens before making any type of commitment.

In the best institutions, leaders frame problems in ways that encourage and enable conversation: they ask questions before they offer answers, they encourage risk taking, and they model new behaviors. Leaders must understand that they are on stage every day. People are watching. Everything they do, everything they say, and the way they say it sends off clues to employees. These clues affect performance. But, leadership and management are different and organizations need excellence in both areas. Management is about the day-to-day functioning of the organization; that is, it is about achieving predictable results through planning and the effective allocation of resources. Leadership is more strategic and includes the articulation of a vision for the organization, aligning people with that vision, and motivating and inspiring them by giving them the self-confidence to take action. Ultimately, leadership is about “simplifying the complex and clarifying the cloudy.” Unfortunately, most organizations are over-managed and under-led.

Several respondents in the focus groups have indicated a lack of trust of the senior administration (the president and vice presidents). There is, however, some inconsistency of data regarding this issue. *Top Management Leadership and Support* ranked second highest in terms of category mean score (2.92), suggesting that this is not the greatest concern of the organizational members as a whole. We need to look more closely at the individual items that make up this category (and the others, as well)

to identify the critical issues. Among the ten largest performance gaps, there are six that we believe reflect the quality of institutional leadership (even if they are included in other categories in the Performance Horizons schema).

- Morale is high at the College as a whole (2)
- There is a spirit of teamwork and cooperation in this organization (5)
- Employee suggestions are used to improve our institution (7)
- This institution involves its employees in planning for the future (8)
- This institution plans carefully (9)
- This institution analyzes all relevant data before making decisions (10)

“Dynamic tension” can be a constructive tool for organizational development. It requires, however, a balance between advocacy and inquiry as all participants in a dialogue offer and listen to various, and often divergent, points-of-view. The goal is “mutual learning” (see Figure 4).

Figure 4  
Integrating Advocacy and Inquiry to Reach Mutual Learning

HI	<p><u>Telling</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Dictating</li> <li>■ Asserting</li> <li>■ Explaining</li> <li>■ Testing</li> </ul>	<p><b><i>Mutual Learning</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <b>Skillful Discussion</b></li> <li>■ <b>Dialogue</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Suspends assumptions</li> <li>○ Explains thinking</li> <li>○ Gives examples</li> <li>○ Seeks others views</li> <li>○ Probes thinking</li> <li>○ Encourages challenge</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Advocacy	<p><u>Observing</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Withdrawing</li> <li>■ Bystanding</li> <li>■ Sensing</li> </ul>	<p><u>Asking</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Interrogating</li> <li>■ Clarifying</li> <li>■ Interviewing</li> </ul>
LO	LO	HI
	Inquiry	

Source: The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization, Senge, et al., 1994

Interestingly, survey respondents indicated they felt empowered to express their ideas (the item “I have the freedom to express my ideas regarding things affecting my work and me” had the fourth lowest performance gap), but they did not feel that their suggestions were used to improve the institution. The president and vice presidents must be open to the ideas of others and if they choose not to implement these suggestions they need to provide feedback to the community to explain their decisions. Face-to-face, two-way communication is critical to creating a shared vision of what is important. It is through dialogue that this occurs, not through memoranda and e-mail. We will discuss this further in the Communications section below.

We recommend strongly that a “Faculty Assembly” be (re)established. What we heard during the focus groups was that the Assembly was disbanded out of frustration that its views and recommendations were not considered fully by the senior administration. We believe that a strong faculty voice in College planning is essential to ensuring that the focus of the institution remains on teaching and learning. It is critical, however, that a faculty assembly follows the same principles for communication and mutual learning that we have outlined here for the College as a whole. Its proposals for institutional action should reflect the position of the faculty as a whole.

The “Faculty Assembly” can take on a variety of organizational structures. We recommend that this be studied before constituting any such group. We have found institutions that have faculty groups, staff groups, and administrative groups. Others have “senates” consisting of representatives from each constituency (sometimes also including students). North Central State College should determine what type of structure would serve it best. Based on what we were told in the focus groups, it would be unwise to return to the old assembly, as people were frustrated at a lack of action and seeming lack of direction.

Once the structure is determined we believe it is essential that its role in the College should be agreed to and understood by all. Most that we have seen are successful



because they understand their role in dealing with particular issues – when they are to be consultative, recommending, or legislating. Lack of clarification and agreement here leads to frustration and communication problems.

We also recommend that this new structure involve as many members as possible. The establishment of a committee structure that incorporates various constituencies and provides input to the leadership of the College goes a long way in ensuring that everyone is heard. It also helps to incorporate accountability since by involving individuals in investigating and discussing important College issues, it demands responsibility for assisting in *resolving* these issues.

The role of the college president has changed drastically over the past few decades. The amount of time presidents spend off campus fund and friend raising, developing strategic alliances, lobbying state governments, and meeting with alumni has grown exponentially. In line with this, we recommend further that the President adopt a more contemporary presidential leadership role by focusing on strategy formulation and external relations and empower the vice presidents, deans, and directors to manage the daily operations of the College. To be most effective, the President should adopt an attitude toward leadership based on the following principles:

- Face reality as it is, not as it was or wish it were
- Be candid with everyone
- Don't manage, lead
- Anticipate, initiate, implement, and manage change
- Promote a debating style that people understand fertilizes ideas rather than buries them

Finally, a systematic review of the roles and responsibilities of the vice presidents should be undertaken to determine if the configuration of the senior administration is best suited for meeting the needs of the institution at this time. The whole senior administration should function as a team working together to achieve the College's

vision. This review may lead to the establishment of a Provost-type position at the College. We believe that the College may benefit from this discussion whether this position is created or not.

### Performance Management

Performance management is a set of processes that link the institutional mission (which drives everything at the College) and strategy to position descriptions, performance expectations, and the measurement of results. Key processes for implementing the mission include hiring, performance evaluation, professional development, recognition, and rewards. Without these processes working well, the organization will find itself constantly having to overcome barriers of one kind or another. The survey results here are mixed. Among the lists of both smallest and largest performance gaps are seven items that are particularly relevant to this section. From the ten smallest performance gaps list are the following:

- My supervisor helps me improve my job performance (3)
- I know what is expected of me (6)
- My department meets as a team to plan and coordinate work (7)
- The workload is divided fairly among the people in my department (9)

From the ten largest performance gaps are the following:

- Processes for selecting, orienting, training, empowering, and recognizing employees are carefully planned (3)
- Employees are rewarded for outstanding job performance (4)
- The harder I work, the more recognition I receive (6)

These responses parallel what we heard during the focus groups. Many saw job classifications and compensation structures as inconsistent and arbitrary. There was a general feeling that the compensation system, including annual pay increases, needs to

be carefully reviewed. Across-the-board increases regardless of performance and an evaluation system that only rates performance as “satisfactory” and “unsatisfactory” were seen as limiting and not motivational. We understand that the topic of “merit pay” has been discussed in the past. We think it would benefit the College to revisit this topic and seek ways to tie compensation to performance.

Generally, focus group comments regarding recognition and rewards were centered not on monetary incentives, but on inclusion, having ideas and opinions valued, feeling respected, and being acknowledged for contributing to advancing the institution. Some questioned what was actually rewarded by the institution – an innovative, new idea or an idea that matches what senior management already wanted. There was concern expressed that when good ideas are “chastised,” there is a real risk that “thinking will be stifled.” These concerns are further supported by the survey results as outlined above.

These results indicate that there is an overall satisfaction with the workings of the individual departments, but that there is a strong concern with the institution as a whole in this area.

Very specific attention needs to be paid to tightening the processes for selecting, orienting, training, empowering, and recognizing employees. These processes should be managed in an open, consistent way throughout the College. The selection process should be clarified for all so that implementation is understood and uniform. An orientation process should be developed and attended by all new employees. Ongoing training, an investment in the college community, should be offered to all to continually improve performance. Enabling employees to do their work in the best possible manner motivates them to outstanding performance. Finally, all managers should recognize employees in a regular, personal manner as well as through organized rituals.

## Policy Administration

Institutional operational policies were seen as not enabling and inconsistently applied. Some saw “different rules for different folks,” while others thought that there were “unbending rules.” Either way, many believed that ultimately there was a management problem more than a policy problem. If a “rule” is important to efficient and effective job achievement and to enhancing the institution’s image, then it should be implemented and managed. If it is not important, it should be abandoned.

We recommend that NCSC give serious consideration to creating a position of “Chief Operating Officer” to focus on reviewing, developing and implementing policies and procedures that are enabling and consistently applied. These responsibilities could be part of a Provost’s position whose role is being re-defined on a number of campuses. Along with this COO/Provost, the vice presidents should be responsible for reviewing college administrative policies and procedures and recommending changes that will support all employees in their efforts to serve their “customers.” A full range of issues should be considered from the more complicated policies related to job descriptions and hiring to the simpler regulations regarding work rules like leave policies and dress codes.

During their deliberations, we recommend that they consider the following carefully:

- Have faith that most faculty and staff want to do a good job
- Design jobs to provide worker discretion in meeting customers’ needs
- Apply technology in providing information to expand workers’ capabilities
- Concentrate budgeting on human development as well as on operations
- Regard training and development as both a means and an end
- Shift day-to-day operating decisions downward in the organization to where the (internal and/or external) customer is served
- Empower workers to do their jobs
- Abolish all “stupid rules”

Regardless of the policies that are adopted, it is essential that they be consistently implemented throughout the College.

### Communication

Real communication is an attitude. It is the most interactive of all leadership and management processes. It cannot be boilerplate, but it must be substantive and mean something. It involves more listening (inquiry) than talking (advocacy). It is a continuous process aimed at creating consensus. When a point-of-view is to be articulated, simplicity, consistency, and repetition are the key to reaching the masses, focusing organizational attention, and giving purpose and meaning to the message and thus to everyone's work.

We heard during the focus groups that frequent change has left some unsure how they can contribute to overall College expectations. They indicated that focus seems to shift; making it unclear what is coming next, where the institution is headed, and what is important. Our discussions with senior administrators told us there is an institutional vision and goals for the future. These need to be constantly communicated to the College in a way that all are aware of, knowledgeable about, and able to implement them in all aspects of College business. The senior administration must continually convey how they understand new initiatives fit into the vision, mission, and goals of the College.

Organizational communication needs to flow freely in three directions. First, there needs to be a process for sharing information from the top down to all levels. While minutes of meetings and e-mail messages are helpful, nothing takes the place of face-to-face communication. Leaders must be visible, out of their offices and "visiting the troops." This is not about micro-managing; it is about articulating the vision and hearing what others think. Second, there needs to be a process for sharing ideas and opinions from the bottom up. The directors, deans, and especially the senior

administration must be open to the points-of-view of the faculty and staff even when they are contrary to their own positions. When communication flows in this direction, there are three acceptable responses:

1. "Yes, we will do that" with credit given to those whose idea it was in the first place.
2. "No, we will not do that and here's why." At other times, other responses may be suitable, such as administrators may have to say, "I'm sorry, I can't tell you more because that would violate a confidence." In any case, a reason is given with a negative response.
3. "I don't know. I'll have to think about it. I'll get back to you." And, then they must get back to the proposers with either a "yes" or a "no" as indicated in #1 and #2 above.

The third direction critical to organizational communication is across departments. The single largest gap between what survey respondents felt was important and what they saw as reality was the item, "There are effective lines of communication between departments." It is not clear what has caused this situation, but it must be evaluated and steps taken to open the channels of communication in all directions. As indicated in the survey recommendations, "communication impacts all operating systems of an organization. It also plays an important role in the overall atmosphere and staff morale." Ultimately, the route to organizational productivity and satisfaction is to build an energized, involved, participative, and turned-on work force, where everyone plays a role and where every idea counts.

## **Conclusion**

In assessing the "heartbeat" of North Central State College, we have concluded that it is strong and shows signs of long life. People seem to genuinely like each other, the College, and their work.

However, there are a number of issues existing around the strength of the heart. None of them are inoperable. Utilizing a number of tools, we have identified the issues we

believe are hindering its greater health and growth. We have recommended a regimen of steps to ensure that the College continues to grow stronger and improve its performance. We believe that successful implementation of these recommendations will improve morale, performance and overall satisfaction of all employees.

Finally, we commend the College for taking the steps it has to assess the environment and to share the findings directly with the community. In order to monitor progress, we recommend that the survey be administered again in 2004 or 2005. Using the current survey as a baseline, leadership can mark improvement and identify new issues that may arise.

## Summary of Recommendations

The following list of recommendations is numbered in order to facilitate reference to the individual items in the report. They are listed below according to the order in which they appear within the text of the report. The numbers do not reflect any priority of recommendation.

1. Recast dynamic tension into a process for mutual learning
2. Institute a new Faculty Assembly
3. Refocus the president's attention to strategy making and external relations
4. Consider carefully the roles and responsibilities of the president and the vice presidents to ensure that they are providing the level of leadership required by the College at this time
5. Consider establishing the position of Provost/COO
6. Review institutional recognition and reward systems including compensation
7. Revamp processes for selecting, orienting, training, empowering, and recognizing employees
8. Review and modify/clarify institutional policies and procedures
9. Establish communication channels that ensure that information flows up, down, and across the organization
10. Monitor progress and administer survey again in 2004 or 2005