

NORTH CENTRAL STATE COLLEGE

ASSESSING THE HEARTBEAT

The Gardner Shaw Group, LLP
May 2011

Introduction

North Central State College has undertaken, again, the important task of assessing the “heartbeat” of the college to understand the work environment from the points of view of faculty and staff and to identify actionable items to maximize satisfaction, morale, productivity, and retention.

The Campus Quality Survey™ from Performance Horizons was used to gather responses to statements related to current issues and practices in the institution. The instrument adapts categories used in the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award and the Presidential Award for Quality to fit the educational environment. Using a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) the statements included 50 generic and 10 specific items related to the NCSC environment and 30 additional items (1 = poor and inadequate, 5 = excellent as it is now) related to various college programs, services, and activities.

There are two useful and distinguishing features that led to the selection of the Performance Horizons form back in 2003 with the first assessment: (1) it asks for a comparison between how respondents feel about the situations as they see them presently and how they think they should be, thus allowing for a performance gap analysis rather than merely a listing of raw mean scores and (2) it provides normative data to compare results with other two-year colleges around the country.

Survey forms were distributed to faculty and staff in January 2011. Out of the 214 that were sent out, there were 156 completed surveys returned (see Figure 1) 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 whole¹. Standard deviation rates across the board indicate a high level of agreement among respondents.

Figure 1
Survey Participants

| | 2011 | 2005 | 2003 |
|-----------------------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Faculty/Instructor | 83 | 46 | 77 |
| Department Chair | 11 | 7 | 5 |
| Administrative/Professional | 21 | 35 | 53 |
| Support/Classified | 41 | 29 | 37 |
| Blank | 0 | 1 | 5 |
| TOTAL | 156 | 118 | 177 |

The number of participants in this effort, and in 2003 and 2005, suggests that there is a keen interest in identifying the areas for improvement within the college work environment. A quick and full disclosure to the community regarding results from the survey and the action steps that will be emphasized is critical to build enthusiasm and support for the process.

Analysis

The analysis of data that follows is based primarily on survey responses. Focus groups were not conducted as they were in 2003, but the high level of participation and the employee comments and suggestions that accompanied the survey responses provide useful information on which to base conclusions and recommendations. In addition, to put a voice to some of the data, telephone interviews were conducted with the Vice President for

¹ There has been a significant decline in the number of “administrative/professional” respondents – some consideration should be given to the reason. In 2003, faculty and department heads made up 46.3% of respondents and in 2011 they made up 60.2% of respondents.

Institutional Advancement, and the facilitators of the Managers' Advisory Council, the Staff Caucus, and the Faculty Caucus.

There is a growing believe that the college is focused on important issues of quality. Among the ten smallest performance gaps (suggesting higher levels of satisfaction with these items), there are six that support this position:

- ◆ The mission, purpose and values of this institution are familiar to employees (2)
- ◆ This institution believes in continuous quality improvement (3)
- ◆ Professional development training programs are available to assist employees in improving their job performance (4)
- ◆ This institution regularly conducts surveys to evaluate the quality of its programs and services (5)
- ◆ This institution listens to its students (6)
- ◆ Quality improvement teams have been established in this institution (7)

According to the college's website, the number one strategic focus for 2011 is "Continuous Improvement" and states that this approach ensures on-going continuous improvement through a quality review process for all programs and services of the college. The survey data suggest strongly that the message has been received and internalized by the faculty and staff and that tremendous strides have been made in that direction. The final item in the survey asked respondents to indicate their overall impression of quality at NCSC. From 2003 to 2005 to 2011, there has been a significant increase in the combined percentage of excellent and good responses from 53% to 58% to 92% ("excellent" alone increased from 8% to 15% to 43%).

There are a couple of warning signs, however, that cause concern. The ninth largest performance gap is “this institution has ‘user-friendly’ computer systems to assist employees and students.” As an institution with a history as a technology college, there is a real need to ensure that all systems are up-to-date and, within the constraints of limited financial resources, as state-of-the-art as they can be. In addition, in the ranking of institutional programs, services, and activities at NCSC, “computer information systems and services” has fallen 13 places to number 29 out of 30 since 2003 and has a mean value score of 3.136 out of a possible 5.0. New and emerging technologies challenge the traditional processes of teaching and learning, and the way educational institutions are managed. The integration of information technology in the classroom (as well as in learning labs and resource centers) is a central matter in ensuring quality in the educational system. This “infrastructure” issue should be addressed carefully to ensure that computer and technology systems are fully supporting the vital tasks of teaching and learning and enabling administrators to serve students and each other effectively and efficiently.

Another important change in results from 2003 to 2011 relates to the levels of satisfaction that faculty and staff have with their jobs. In 2003, 58% of respondents indicated that they were very satisfied (10%) and satisfied (48%) with their employment at the college. In 2005, the numbers rose to 67% (very satisfied = 20%) and in 2011, fully 93% of respondents rated their job satisfaction as very satisfied (55%) and satisfied. This is a significant improvement.

A tempering result, however, that is an ongoing concern, relates to the item “morale is high at the college.” With the single lowest raw mean score in the entire survey (3.121; administrative/ professional staff = 2.524), the issue

of morale (or lack thereof) requires serious consideration. It is not clear, however, to what this is attributed. It should be noted that there has been an improvement of more than a full point in the morale raw mean score since the 2003 survey (although just a 0.583 improvement for administrative/professional staff), but it remains the second largest gap between what should be and what is. It can be risky to speculate about the discrepancy between satisfaction scores and morale scores without supporting data, so we recommend a celebration of the improvement in satisfaction scores while trying to determine its basis, seek ways to leverage those causal actions to further increase the levels of satisfaction, and investigate why there is not a parallel movement in morale. Later in this report, we will offer one point of view to explain this seeming incongruity. We believe that going forward this one item may be the best indicator of the overall success of the college's environmental improvement efforts.

While there is no single factor that consistently explains good or poor morale in an organization, it is more influenced from the top down than from the bottom up. According to Edgar Shein, a leading business thinker who investigates organizational culture, leaders have the ability to shape and influence the organizational culture through: role modeling; the way they allocate resources; how they reward employees; and by the criteria they use for recruitment, promotions, and terminations. These are critical issues facing NCSC and should be the focus of near-term improvement efforts.

In comparison to national norms, NCSC's overall *How It Is Now* ratings are significantly higher in each of the eight summary categories that Performance Horizons measures (Figure 2). The average of mean scores for NCSC across the eight categories is 3.779 and for the two-year colleges in the data base it is 3.307. This is in very sharp contrast to 2003 and 2005

when the college lagged behind the national norms in every one of the eight categories. Every category mean score now exceeds 3.6 on a five-point scale (in 2003, not a single score was higher than 2.988). This, too, is a significant improvement.

Figure 2

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 Efforts
6. Measurement and Analysis
7. Customer Focus
8. Quality Assurance

There are three other major themes that require consideration in this report and are carry-overs from 2003: Leadership, Performance Management and Communication.

Leadership

In 2003, we made the following point and it holds true still.

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. Ultimately, 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.

A climate of trust exists in an organization when leaders do what they say they are going to do and are consistent in their actions. And, leaders earn trust and improve employee morale by being accessible, authentic, and open.

There has been significant improvement in this area as reflected in the ten smallest performance gaps. With the exception of "I feel that my work makes a difference at the College," which remains as the overall smallest gap between what should be and what is, there has been a complete turnover in the items on this list. Seven of these suggest an increased confidence in college leadership (and as mentioned earlier, an improved attention to quality issues).

- ◆ The mission, purpose and values of this institution are familiar to employees (2)
- ◆ This institution believes in continuous quality improvement (3)
- ◆ This institution regularly conducts surveys to evaluate the quality of its programs and services (5)
- ◆ This institution listens to its students (6)
- ◆ Quality improvement teams have been established in this organization (7)
- ◆ This institution uses teams to solve problems (9)
- ◆ Administrators cultivate positive relationships with students (10)

In contrast, two of the largest performance gaps suggest that there is still work to do.

- ◆ Morale is high at the College as a whole (2)
- ◆ I feel that positive change will come about as a result of this survey (7)

The seemingly inconsistent results of high job satisfaction scores and low morale scores are hard to figure. It seems quite possible that faculty and staff like their jobs teaching and serving interesting and eager students, but feel that it is too hard to do it well (too much to do; too few resources with increasing institutional, local, state, and federal financial constraints; policies that restrict action; and a lack of recognition and rewards for doing good work).

The “Walking Tours” conducted by the president’s staff can be an important effort to connect the senior administration to the “troops,” but to be truly effective there needs to be a reporting mechanism by which the learning from the tours and the subsequent planned action steps are shared with the college community.

The formation of the Faculty Caucus, Staff Caucus, Managers’ Advisory Council, and the Congress was a direct response to the recommendations from the 2003 assessment efforts. They also can play a significant role in institutional leadership by providing a unified voice in college planning and decision making. The same leadership issues of transparency, openness, and communication that affect the President and his staff apply to these groups as well. They should continue to define when they are to be consultative, recommending, or legislative. There appears to be a need for ongoing work here as indicated by the survey results. For the first time, the item “I am

satisfied with the efforts of the Faculty Caucus, Staff Caucus, MAC, and the Congress to represent my views to the administration” was added to the survey. It ended up with the fifth largest performance gap. Each of the groups should continue to reach out to their constituents to gain greater levels of involvement and support to ensure they speak with a truly representative voice.

Performance Management

Performance management is a broad term for the human resources policies and practices through which (1) work is defined and reviewed, (2) individual and organizational capabilities are developed, and (3) good work is enthusiastically recognized and rewarded while work that fails to meet expectations is corrected.

Some important progress has been made in this area, based on survey results. The item “processes for selecting, orienting, training, empowering, and recognizing employees are carefully planned” had the third largest performance gap in both 2003 and 2005, but in 2011 improved to number 24 with a mean gap score of 0.721 (it was 2.371 in 2003). According to the survey designers, a performance gap score of 1.000 or higher generally represents an area needing attention.²

In a related matter, it should be noted that in the ratings for 30 college “programs, services, and activities,” Personnel/Human Resources Services improved from 11th in 2003 to 2nd in 2011 with a mean score of 4.291 on a

² Among the 50 generic questions, NCSC recorded a gap score of 1.000 or higher on five of the items (10%) versus the national two-year colleges that recorded 28 of 50 items (56%) at or above 1.000. Among the 10 NCSC specific questions, there were five more items with gap scores above 1.000.

five-point scale.³

An area that continues to require special attention is performance appraisal and recognition systems. Among the largest performance gap items, three support this position.

- ◆ In the last 6 months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress (3)
- ◆ The harder I work, the more recognition I receive (6)
- ◆ Employees are rewarded for outstanding job performance (10)

The best organizations have systems that encourage development, are highly motivating, and are equitable. They have compensation systems that reward the best performers appropriately and that motivate behaviors critical to operational success. And, they have training and development systems that provide employees with the skills they need for their current, and future, jobs within the organization. But, for faculty and staff, recognition goes well beyond compensation and training and includes a genuine sense of inclusion by being told what is “going on,” by having their ideas and opinions valued, and by receiving a sincere sign of appreciation that could be as simple as a “pat on the back” for their contributions to institutional success. In the end, the long-term viability of any organization depends on the ability of supervisors to manage and recognize performance and to develop people.

³ The five functional areas that received the highest overall ratings in 2011 are Payroll Services, Personnel/Human Resources Services, Maintenance and Custodial Services, Switchboard and Telephone Services, and Counseling and Student Advisement Services – Payroll and Switchboard Services have been in the top five for all three surveys. Of special note is the rise of Custodial Services from 25th in 2003 to 13th in 2005 to 3rd in 2011.

Communication

Effective communication is another essential leadership competency when it comes to improving low morale among employees. Real communication is an attitude and is the most interactive of all leadership and management processes. Communication that lacks clarity, focus, meaning, and important details, is too infrequent, and does not allow staff to respond and discuss their concerns can contribute directly to morale problems in the workplace. While communication regarding the college's mission and strategic initiative is greatly improved, there is still work to be done. It has been our experience that successful organizations communicate effectively up, down, and across the enterprise.

The single greatest performance gap in each of the three surveys has been "there are effective lines of communication between departments." While it is still not clear what has caused this situation, its inclusion at the top of the performance gap list calls out for special attention. Communication between departments could be addressed in a variety of ways including hosting "lunch and learn" gatherings periodically (perhaps highlight one division a month and invite interested people to an open house), posting departmental "marketing" materials on the college intranet, and highlighting departmental activities and accomplishments in institutional publicity materials.

Some suggestions for improving overall communication are outlined below. They follow a plan built around *information*, *involvement*, and *interest* and support the line of reasoning we have proposed throughout this report. Ultimately, the cornerstone of successful relationships between supervisors and employees and building workplace morale is open, honest, and direct communication.

Information

- ◆ Share freely and keep employees informed, so that everyone, in every division/department, receives the same consistent message
- ◆ Remind employees of the big picture and how it relates to their individual day-to-day responsibilities
- ◆ Explain the reasons behind important decisions

Involvement

- ◆ Discuss issues openly and collaborate on finding resolution
- ◆ Listen actively and encourage a free exchange of ideas and opinions
- ◆ Respond directly to questions and suggestions

Interest

- ◆ Keep channels of communication open by being frequently accessible
- ◆ Stay informed, and keep employees informed
- ◆ Show that employees' opinions are valued by finding out why they feel the way they do
- ◆ Offer sincere positive feedback and acknowledgment regularly

Conclusion

This is the third time that North Central State College has assessed the "heartbeat" of the institution using the Campus Quality Survey.[™] As indicated in the survey recommendations, the "results provide a snapshot of employee perceptions at a given time. The information is useful as a basis for analysis of the past. However, the data is even more valuable for charting the future of the college." It appears that the heart is growing stronger – some excellent progress has been made in a number of important

areas. With some concerted effort the heart can grow stronger still.

This is an important time in the college's history. Facing union negotiations, accreditation, and the ongoing economic turmoil in the state of Ohio as well as nationally, making purposeful strides in the areas emphasized in this report will go a long way to improving morale and further advancing performance and overall satisfaction of all employees.

Finally, we commend the college for again assessing the environment. Sharing results of the survey and the content of this report and making a commitment to taking some specific actions will validate the effort. We recommend creating a "chart" of action steps with a listing of the specific activities to be undertaken and their respective outcome measures, the person or persons responsible for spearheading each activity, and the timeline for their completion. The internal NCSC website would be a logical place to post the information, thus making it available to the entire community. When 74% of the population participates in an assessment effort such as this, they deserve to know that their input is valued.

Summary of Recommendations

In 2003, The Gardner Shaw Group, LLP offered 10 recommendations for institutional action following a series of on-campus focus groups and a review of results from The Campus Quality Survey.TM In some ways, those recommendations suggested a fundamental re-focusing of the roles and responsibilities of the college's senior leadership as well as a thorough review of human resources processes and the formation of a Faculty Assembly. In 2011, with results that show significant improvement in most measures, we are proposing more modest, but equally important, actions to improve organizational performance and work conditions.

The following is a summary of the recommendations included in this report. They are numbered according to the order in which they appear within the text of the report and do not reflect a suggestion of priority.

1. Distribute a quick and full report of survey results and an action plan for follow-up actions to the college community (p. 3).
2. Review the capability of computer information systems to fully support teaching and learning as well as administrative functions (p. 5).
3. Celebrate improvement in job satisfaction scores while continuing to investigate why morale scores remain relatively low (p. 6).
4. Continue to focus on transparency in institutional leadership (p. 9).
5. Reach out to constituents by Faculty Caucus, Staff Caucus, and Managers' Advisory Council to increase involvement and ensure that they speak with a truly representative voice (p. 10).
6. Enhance performance feedback and appraisal processes to ensure that faculty and staff at all levels are fairly evaluated and rewarded for outstanding performance (p. 11).
7. Strive to better understand the issues related to a perceived lack of communication between departments while continuing to focus on establishing broader communication channels that ensure that accurate and complete information flows up, down, and across the institution (p. 12).