



NATIONAL CONFERENCE *of* STATE LEGISLATURES

The Forum for America's Ideas

This briefing paper is a companion background document for NCSL's Self-Assessment Survey for Legislative Staff Organizations. The following pages provide survey takers with important context and perspective and summarize key topics covered by the survey. NCSL recommends that staff read this briefing paper prior to taking the survey.

Introduction

During the past several decades, America's state legislatures sprinted through a dynamic period of reform, renewal and professionalization. A major feature of this evolution was the expansion and development of a professional corps of career legislative staff. These employees and their staff organizations brought new capacity, energy and independence to the state legislative institution.

Today all state legislatures have well-defined staff resources and mature staff organizations. With the period of staff expansion largely past, and in an environment of limited and declining budgetary support, legislative staff managers and legislative leaders are looking within their organizations for opportunities to improve effectiveness and efficiency. This *Self-Assessment Survey* provides a unique and customized tool for assessing organizational effectiveness. It offers legislators and staff managers a way to begin the conversation about organizational performance and identify areas for improvement.

The *NCSL Self-Assessment Survey for Legislative Staff Organizations* content is based on widely accepted standards of organizational and managerial effectiveness and performance. The assessment survey questions rely heavily on benchmarks and practices presented in the Baldrige performance criteria, the research of Jim Collins (*Good to Great*), the writings of renowned management theorist Peter Drucker and legislative staff performance indicators derived over 25 years of NCSL consultation with state legislatures. Further reading on these resources is recommended and a bibliography at the end of this document offers a short reading list.

The survey is divided into the following six performance areas:

1. Leadership
2. Organizational Planning and Performance
3. Management

4. Employee and Workplace Development
5. Information Management and Process Improvement
6. Customer Focus/ Results Orientation

For the purposes of the survey, the term “staff organization” refers to a team, office, agency or other group of legislative staff that has a singular mission or purpose. This term includes non-partisan staff agencies, partisan caucus staff groups, or a member’s personal staff team.

Performance Area Descriptions

The following performance area descriptions serve as a reference for completing the survey. It is recommended that survey respondents read these descriptions prior to completing the survey.

Leadership

Most experts on organizational development agree that effective leadership is a key predictor of organizational effectiveness. This section of the *Self-Assessment Survey* focuses on critical aspects of leadership practice and behavior that experts agree are essential to organizational success. The *Self-Assessment Survey* makes a distinction between leadership and management. Management assessment criteria appear in later sections of the self-assessment.

Leadership takes many forms in the state legislative environment. Legislative leaders—the House speaker, Senate president, majority leaders and other chamber officers—constitute the board of directors of the legislative institution. In many states, the legislative leaders of both chambers sit together on a joint management committee or legislative council that is responsible for institutional oversight and decision making on broad institutional matters. Other types of legislative committees also provide oversight of staff functions. For example, many legislatures have a joint audit or program evaluation committee and some have joint technology committees. These bodies provide guidance to staff who serve the committees’ respective missions and, in the case of audit and evaluation committees, these committees typically review the work products of the staff group.

In the context of a private business, the House speaker, Senate leader or committee chairs are equivalent in many ways to chairs of a board of directors. The directors of legislative staff agencies and leaders’ chiefs of staff or chamber clerks and secretaries are the chief executive officers of the legislature or of their specific staff organization. They run the daily operations of the legislature or staff organization and have varying levels of discretion for decisions about personnel, budgets, planning and general administration.

The questions in the *Leadership* performance area of the self-assessment survey adopt the board of directors/CEO framework and ask you to assess how your legislative staff organization performs on several key leadership benchmarks.

Organizational Planning and Performance

Legislative staff organizations work in a dynamic and rapidly changing political, cultural and fiscal environment. Some level of planning and strategic thinking about the future is necessary in order to maintain peak effectiveness and responsiveness to legislators and other clients.

Management

Management guru Peter Drucker identified the following five roles as the basic work of managers:

- managers set objectives
- managers organize
- managers motivate and communicate
- managers analyze, appraise and interpret performance
- managers develop people, including themselves

NCSL, from its decades of experience as a management consultant to state legislatures, adds these complementary responsibilities to Drucker's list:

- managers embrace their manager roles
- managers engage in and promote rich and robust communication
- managers monitor, analyze and respond to change
- managers build trust

For purposes of the *Management* section of the self-assessment, the term manager includes any personnel who have supervisory responsibilities for one or more employees.

Employee and Workplace Development

Jim Collins, in his book *Good to Great*, finds that great organizations focus first on people and then on outcomes. "The executives who ignited the transformations from good to great did not first figure out where to drive the bus and then get people to take it there. No, they *first* got the right people on the bus (and the wrong people off the bus) and *then* figured out where to drive it."

Most legislative staff organizations have a fairly solid, tradition-based sense of direction, but it is no less true that the quality and talent of employees have a huge impact on organizational performance and adaptability to change. Effective organizations invest in recruitment, hiring, firing, retention and employee engagement and development with practices, policies and processes that enhance the chances of attracting and keeping great talent. Often conducted under the banner of "human resource management," these activities are more than legal preventatives designed to protect the employer. Rather, effective HR practices and policies contribute to employee satisfaction, professional growth and workplace engagement.

Information Management and Process Improvement

Over the past few decades computers, mobile technology and the internet have become integrated into almost all aspects of state legislative work. The question no longer is *does* your office use these tools, but rather *how effectively* does it apply and take advantage of developing computer innovations and applications to serve legislators, the public and other clients. In addition, computer technology provides new opportunities to generate a broad range of management information data and analyze workplace efficiency and productivity.

Customer Focus/Results Orientation

Effective organizations are characterized by their employees' unwavering, top-to-bottom dedication to the organization's core values and commitment to accomplishing its mission, or purpose. Core values and mission guide an organization through change and the adaptations required in its culture, practices, goals and strategies that help sustain optimal results.

Legislative staff organizations also achieve optimal results through close and routine contact with their legislator clients. In addition to frequent interpersonal communication, client feedback gained through legislator interviews and satisfaction surveys, focus groups, peer reviews and other devices enhance and inform staff assessments of organizational effectiveness. Heightened sensitivity to the quality and effectiveness of results helps ensure the relevance and success of a legislative staff organization.

Acknowledgments

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Additional Reading

Many of the assessment criteria used in the *Self-Assessment Survey* are derived from the following sources. Please consult them for further information on organizational performance.

- Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, *2011-2012 Criteria for Performance Excellence*. National Institute of Standards and Technology, United States Department of Commerce. Gaithersburg, Md. (2011).
- Collins, Jim. *Good to Great*. HarperCollins: New York, N.Y. (2001).
- Drucker, Peter. *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*. Harper & Row: New York, N.Y. (1974)
- Latham, J.R., & Vinyard, J. *Organizational Diagnosis, Design and Transformation: A Baldrige User's Survey*. John Wiley and Sons: Hoboken, N.J. (2011).
- Weberg, Brian. *Things We Know*. State Legislatures Magazine. National Conference of State Legislatures: Denver, Colo. (May, 2002).

Glossary of Terms

Classification and Compensation Plan—a structured system of job titles and pay ranges arranged into a hierarchy based on job content and responsibilities. Jobs with similar content and responsibilities are grouped in the same range and are compensated within the same range.

Continuous Improvement—a workplace philosophy and practice that encourages routine examination and improvement of employee skills, workplace processes and management strategies.

Culture (Organizational)—the combination of values, norms, styles and expectations shared by members of an organization that Survey behavior, interpersonal relationships and attitudes toward clients.

Diversity—an organizational condition that exists when employees represent a broad range of backgrounds that reflect society, including differences in race, ethnicity, age, religion or disability challenge.

Employee Engagement—a measure of employees' involvement, commitment and contribution to their organization's mission, goals and customer satisfaction.

Focus Group—a survey technique using a small group of people in a facilitated setting designed to extract opinions, ideas and feelings about a specific issue, product, person or trend.

Goals—specific outcome responsibilities assigned to a person, team or organization. Effective goal statements are time-specific and clearly understood by the responsible party.

Human Resource Management—the professional practice of employee and workplace development and improvement based on generally accepted and legal standards for personnel policy, compensation management, professional development and other conditions of employment.

Job Description—a statement of employee responsibilities and minimum qualifications specific to a job title.

Leadership—the practice and profession of identifying and articulating the direction and objectives for organizational development, change and results, and motivating people and the organization toward the achievement of those objectives.

Legislative Leaders—legislators elected by their colleagues to serve in key positions of institutional and political responsibility. Leadership titles typically include, but are not limited to, speaker of the house, president of the senate, majority leader and minority leader.

Management—the practice and profession of organizing people, processes and other resources to achieve specific outcomes or results.

Mission—the central purpose of an organization, or its reason for being, often presented as a mission statement.

Non-monetary Rewards—forms of employee recognition or reward outside the traditional framework of monetary compensation and benefits.

Peer Review—systematic assessment of organizational or individual performance conducted by people from a similar, or peer, organization that is based on generally accepted management and operational standards and practices.

Performance Feedback Data—objective information usually in the form of numerical data collected and analyzed to measure organizational or individual productivity, accuracy, quality or customer satisfaction.

Personnel Policies—written legal or generally accepted practices that define employee behavior, rights, conditions of employment and other workplace benefits, rules and expectations.

Staff Organization—a team, office, agency or other group of legislative staff with a singular mission or purpose.

Strategic Challenges/Issues—internal and external trends, changes, expectations or predictions that may affect the productivity and effectiveness of a legislative staff organization.

Trust—a condition that exists between two people that allows one of them to invest the other with responsibility for outcomes that affect them both.

Values—fundamental beliefs held by a person, group or culture that Survey behavior and provide a framework for interpreting and assessing the outside world. Values include concepts such as honesty, integrity, fairness and tolerance.

Vision—a perspective on the future that Surveys long-term planning. Vision statements incorporate an organization's values, purpose (mission) and environmental conditions into a strategic idea about the organization's future.

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