



USING THE STAFF PERCEPTION REPORT: AN INTERVIEW WITH DOUG KRIDLER, CEO OF THE COLUMBUS FOUNDATION



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Staff members at almost any organization are often reluctant to share candid feedback about their workplace with upper management. Yet many leaders are eager to learn what their staff really thinks. Doug Kridler, CEO of the Columbus Foundation is one such leader. Earlier this year, he engaged CEP's Staff Perception Report (SPR) for the first time. The SPR allows foundation staff members to share their perceptions of foundation effectiveness and job

satisfaction anonymously. The final report provides foundation leaders with comparative data that show how their staff members' perceptions compare with those of their peers at other foundations.

Judith Ross, CEP's senior research writer recently asked Kridler about the experience.

JR: Why did you decide to engage the SPR?

DK: There were four main reasons: To get the absolute rating so that we know what areas to target for improvement; to see how we compare with others so that we can learn from our fellow foundations; for the exercise itself which helps create co-ownership on building a better workplace; and finally, to make an investment in the field of foundations by helping to populate the comparative data set.

So we saw it not only as a value to us but a value to the field. It is an investment in the field that we are proud to make through CEP.

JR: Had you surveyed your staff before?

DK: Yes. Years ago we developed a strategy map with a learning and growth component where we list goals to help us build a great organization. Among those goals is a priority to foster a work environment that

encourages organizational learning and initiative, that instills accountability for organizational growth and improvement, and that directs us to recruit, develop, and retain top performers. One of the ways that we evaluated progress against that priority was to survey our staff to tally the number of people who rated the Columbus Foundation as a highly effective organization. We found that answers to that simple question, while helpful to us, only created more questions. A large number of staff rated us as a highly performing organization, but we realized that there was so much more that we needed to know. And if we were to be serious about targeting areas for improvement, for example, we realized that a more robust survey, such as the one that CEP has developed, would provide a state-of-the-art assessment of the organization.

JR: What were some of the questions raised by the single-question assessment process?

DK: For instance we didn't define the dimensions of high performing; allowing everybody to bring a different and therefore limited and unshared universe of metrics or parameters for what defines a high-performing organization. The CEP survey indirectly defines the array of dimensions of what it means to be a high-performing culture and organization.

JR: What value did you hope to gain by engaging the SPR?

DK: That it would help us improve our effectiveness as an organization. We also saw a value to support staff. In most organizations, there is a natural skepticism about whether upper management values support staff's sense of the reality of the organization and the ways suggestions about it can improve. Engaging a survey like this one creates a compact among all levels of the organization, but particularly between upper management and support staff. It demonstrates that leadership has both the humility and the willingness to listen and to heed. It shows the respect that management has for those who make the organization

work effectively day in, day out, minute in, minute out. And it provides support staff with a level playing field on which they can provide input and advice, eliminating the strict verticality of an organizational chart. It empowers them and builds trust. Ultimately that's a real gift, a wonderful opportunity that comes out of a study like this that few other tools give you.

JR: What was the process like for you?

DK: Any CEO would love for the results of this survey to indicate that they have the highest performing foundation in the world and that there is complete agreement on every aspect of the work – but that's not reality. So while I certainly enjoy reading the areas where we are in the top quartile, I am also thankful for the opportunity to learn where our relative weaknesses are and to know where we can efficiently focus our efforts to improve.

That feedback might be threatening if you aren't willing to listen and change, but in our case, we committed up front to act upon the findings wherever we could, and to be thoughtful in those responses. That will be the test for me as CEO and for department heads – how do we respond to those areas where we agree we need to improve?

JR: What did your staff think of the process?

DK: It came at a particularly busy time. It may have been a challenge for the staff to fit in at this particular moment of peak activity on other initiatives, but I didn't hear any complaints about fitting it in. I think the value of being listened to overcame the time that was consumed by filling out the survey.

JR: How do you expect the information garnered from the report will help you make decisions going forward?

DK: We have a very clear action plan for each dimension of areas for improvement, with time tables associated with each. I will be recommending that my performance review take delivery of those into account.

JR: Can you share any details about what you learned from the SPR?

DK: Over the last five years, we've been making a lot of changes and moving rapidly in a number of directions. As CEO, one of the things that I took away from the SPR is that as teams are working on key initiatives, it is crucial that the leader of those initiatives and I define the goal and make sure that it's commonly understood up front, so that we don't have mission creep or a misunderstanding of goals. The SPR also alerted me to the need for more frequent and earlier check-ins with initiative leaders to prevent teams from going too far down the road before an adjustment is needed. The net result of waiting too long for that weigh-in is that if the course changes, team members become discouraged about their involvement and the work that they've done to date. By communicating with each other more frequently, we can lessen the chances of that happening and prevent unnecessary frustration.

JR: Do you have any suggestions for others thinking about engaging in this process?

DK: I highly recommend it for building a strong work culture and a clear roadmap for improvement. Foundations should also consider doing it as an investment in enhancing the performance of foundations across the country that can benefit from the anonymous data we share.

Doug Kridler is a member of CEP's advisory board. His foundation also has engaged CEP's Grantee Perception Report® and Applicant Perception Report.

