ON IMPLEMENTING A WORKPLACE CULTURAL SURVEY

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In late 2015, our workplace ran a Workplace Cultural Survey. How hard could it be to ask a few questions and assess the answers? We were about to learn that unlike the Earth sciences, social science can be difficult and nuanced.

The need for a workplace survey was recognised by the academic staff in our institution, who were concerned by the very low percentage of women in our staff profile, especially compared to our nearly gender-balanced graduate student cohort. This is a common situation in many Earth science institutions worldwide, but we wanted to know why. How could we make our workplace attractive to as wide a range of people as possible? What could we do to improve both gender balance and other forms of diversity? What were, and continue to be, the barriers to equality and diversity?

It is well established that removing barriers for women and other under-represented groups improves the workplace for all. Different viewpoints spur on greater effort, and a more holistic approach, leading to improved decision making. Workplaces that are perceived to be balanced and fair have improved staff productivity, flexibility, and retention.

Our survey aimed to probe the factors contributing to imbalance in our academic staffing. We chose a survey approach for two reasons: 1) Scientists are skilled at data-driven decision-making; therefore, we expected that the data would provide a focus for informed discussion; 2) We felt that the findings from a survey would raise awareness of workplace issues and engender a common desire to see those issues resolved.

SURVEY CHALLENGES

Implementation of the survey began with the question, “If you find out something awful, what will you do?” Really awful things need to go to law enforcement, and this could mean that the survey participants might no longer remain anonymous. Because some employee groups have so few women, preserving anonymity might be impractical – how could we mitigate that? If we wanted to publish or disseminate the results, survey participants needed to be aware of this and Ethics Clearance would be required. And participation rates would have to be high enough for the results to be valid. What if the leaders in our organization denied the survey results or failed to act on them? We realised that we needed help!

Our solution was to hire a fully independent, social scientist who could remain at arms-length from those within the workplace. Participants in the survey were informed that this person would be the only one allowed to see the raw survey results and would be responsible for compiling, assessing, and interpreting the findings, making sure that anonymity was retained. The social scientist helped us to design a survey that raised awareness, and we have already put recommendations in place to move forward.

In the leadup to the survey, our equality and diversity committee found it helpful to remind ourselves, and others, that we had been asked to implement the survey of the staff by the staff. We were all in this together!

We aimed to find out what issues people in the workplace thought the survey should probe, because this would empower all to engage with the process. The committee arranged presentations on a range of topics, including on the current state of diversity and on predictions of what was needed to reach higher levels of diversity through hiring. Care was taken to include a range of presenters on these topics to avoid the “double bind” that under-represented people can find themselves in: being perceived as having self-interest if they present, yet, conversely, have their work minimized and their contributions unacknowledged if they do not present. Senior staff were involved to emphasize that even department leaders endorsed the survey.

The participants in the survey included current staff and students and those who had left the workplace in the last 3 years. We requested that participants supply demographic data (e.g. women versus men, students versus staff) to help preserve anonymity and to allow responses to be assessed by group rather than individually. The survey was accompanied by an information sheet, which included a description of the process of storing and collecting the data, how the data would be communicated, the risks for participants, plus information on counselling services. The questions that were asked related to demographics; perceptions (general and specific), experiences (discriminatory behaviour, fairness and value placed on work, equity and diversity policies, and mentoring/supervision) and why people might want to leave. Importantly, comments were encouraged and the questions were designed to be actionable shortly after the survey results were released.

LESSONS LEARNED

Our findings are not publishable because we did not arrange for the survey results to be released. But, 100% of those who completed the survey said that they enjoy the work they do. This attitude continues to make our institute a great place in which to work! That said, the survey identified significant areas for improvement. Thus, we are now closer to more fully understanding those troublesome areas, we have raised awareness, and we have already put recommendations in place to move forward.

We have learned, while implementing and analysing this survey, that diversity issues are difficult because your own behaviour is also under the microscope. We have learned phrases like, “none of us is immune to bad behaviour, but when this happens, aim to fix it as quickly as possible”. We learned that the committee needed time to digest the results of the survey so that the quiet or under-represented voices could be heard. It is easy to focus on your own employment group and forget others. We’ve also learned that we need to be up-standers rather than by-standers when we see behaviour that is not acceptable.

Would we do a workplace cultural survey again? Yes! In fact, we aim to do so in a couple of years to make sure that our workplace culture has improved.

We are happy to provide resources for your workplace cultural survey – please e-mail the lead author: penny.king@anu.edu.au

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