

OK

re:Work

NYC Department of Education: Understanding learning using surveys

Challenge



The teams that support employee development weren't themselves getting development.

Action



A survey was launched to understand how learning and career opportunities were perceived.

Results



A new set of development, learning, and retention programs were launched based on employee feedback.

Challenge

Over the years, the New York City Department of Education (DOE) has invested heavily in organizational development - overhauling educator performance reviews, developing teachers and principals, and restructuring the organization to better support student achievement goals. Despite these dedicated efforts, in 2013 DOE leadership recognized a gap in their work: they lacked a comprehensive strategy for assessing and addressing development needs of central office employees.

Central office employees, approximately 5,000 strong, are individuals based outside the school setting in positions that support the educational system by managing education policy, human resources, information technology, and finance.

Central office employees play a critical role in developing and supporting in-school staff, but development opportunities for the central office employees themselves were inconsistently offered and prioritized across divisions and many did not have access at all. As a result, the degree of professional development support that central office employees might receive — as well as the quality of that support — varied significantly.

In 2014, the DOE's Organizational Development Unit (ODU) began to develop a systematic strategy to address the needs of central office staff. The first step in this process was to gather input from employees and establish a baseline to better understand their development and engagement needs. This data would then inform program selection, design, funding, coordination, and help measure effectiveness over time.

Action

ODU drew on lessons learned from a previous employee survey which had led to actionable insights around employee development. The team began by outlining the survey's objectives: gather baseline data to better understand employee development needs, levels of engagement, workplace perceptions, and morale.

Once the survey objectives were set, ODU worked with the DOE's Research & Policy Support Group and the Employee Engagement and Development Advisory Committee to begin developing the survey. The Advisory Committee serves as a venue for stakeholders to collaborate and provide feedback on ODU's work on employee engagement. As a result of these discussions, ODU was able to benefit from the experience of staff in other divisions who had previously conducted similar surveys. This cross-functional team also agreed on confidentiality rules (i.e., who would have access to the raw and aggregated data) that met the DOE Institutional Review Board's standards, and clearly communicated them to survey respondents. These confidentiality measures helped to encourage honest, candid answers. The survey did include a handful of background questions (e.g., location, demographics, levels) that allowed ODU to segment results.

Finally, the team developed and implemented a detailed communication plan that leveraged senior DOE leadership to introduce and promote the survey.

ODU launched the survey in December 2014; it remained open for just over two weeks. The survey took about ten minutes to complete and had a 42% response rate.

A core theme that emerged from the research was that central office employees were hungry for career development opportunities within the organization. In particular, central employees expressed strong interest in:

- More management training and transparent leadership development opportunities
- Improved clarity regarding the DOE's organizational structure
- More opportunities to develop professional and technical skills

In March 2015, ODU hosted eight focus groups, involving 50 central office employees, managers, and senior leaders, to further explore respondents' thoughts on management training and leadership development. ODU also worked with the Advisory Committee to gather insights from other divisions engaged in employee development to identify best practices on content and implementation.

Results

ODU used the survey and focus group findings to inform the development of a number of new programs for central employees, including manager training, leadership development, mentoring, technical skills training, and an onboarding program. The team also identified an acute need to highlight career pathways for central employees, managers, and leaders, and to commit to employee development as a key component of their retention strategy.

The survey also had structural and financial implications. Drawing on survey data, ODU secured funding for central office learning initiatives, and created a new funding model allowing them to share costs and distribute funds across divisions. This helped to distribute investment across the entire organization, solidify the commitment of each division to develop its employees, and boost participation in development opportunities.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the team has begun to build trust among central employees by establishing a channel for employee feedback and a reputation for acting on that feedback. ODU will be able to conduct new surveys annually and to assess progress and their impact over time.