Creating Favorable Work Life Conditions to Improve Employee Satisfaction

Custom Research Brief • August 10, 2011

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II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project Challenge:
Leadership at a member institution approached the Roundtable with the following questions:

- What strategies do contact institutions employ to boost or maintain employee morale? Do strategies differ across different employee ranks (e.g., teaching faculty v. administrative staff)?
- Have contact institutions found particular success with innovative non-monetary strategies to improve work life quality?
- Apart from recent budget cuts, what other factors motivate institutions to employ new strategies to promote work life quality? Have certain strategies been established as a result of employee feedback?
- Which programs or strategies have contact institutions found to be most successful? Which strategies have seen limited success? What are the indicators of success?
- What challenges have contact institutions faced in creating quality work life conditions for employees? How have contact institutions mitigated these challenges?

Project Sources:
- Education Advisory Board's internal and online (www.educationadvisoryboard.com) research libraries

Research Parameters:
The roundtable interviewed human resource directors and work life directors at institutions identified as the best places to work in higher education by the Chronicle of Higher Education, as well as other institutions with comprehensive employee award programs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Enrollment (Total/Undergraduate)</th>
<th>Classification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University A</td>
<td>Northeast Small City</td>
<td>5,200 (3,000)</td>
<td>Master's Colleges and Universities (larger programs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University B</td>
<td>South Distant Town</td>
<td>16,300 (14,000)</td>
<td>Master's Colleges and Universities (larger programs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University C</td>
<td>Mid-Atlantic Large Suburb</td>
<td>32,100 (19,700)</td>
<td>Research Universities (high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University D</td>
<td>South Large Suburb</td>
<td>17,100 (all undergraduate)</td>
<td>Associate's--Public Rural-serving Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University E</td>
<td>Northeast Midsize City</td>
<td>10,400 (4,200)</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University F</td>
<td>Midwest Midsize City</td>
<td>41,700 (26,200)</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University G</td>
<td>Midwest Small City</td>
<td>29,000 (20,600)</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Center for Education Statistics
II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key Observations:

- Administrators employ a number of strategies to promote high levels of staff satisfaction at contact institutions that typically fall into three categories: strategies that promote a healthy work life balance, initiatives to encourage staff engagement, and programs to build a culture of appreciation and recognition across institutions. Contacts report that these programs and initiatives are typically offered to employees across staff ranks.

- One of the primary obstacles that contact institutions face when implementing strategies to improve staff morale is the lack of adequate financial resources to fund these programs. Other than limiting the scope of work life programs, administrators plan several innovative programs that do not require significant financial investment but still positively affect employee morale. Additionally, contacts report that prior financial planning helps institutions prioritize staff compensation and awards despite economic conditions.

- Contacts report that actively involving staff members in important institution-wide decisions or initiatives improves staff engagement in programs aimed at promoting favorable work conditions. When staff members feel their opinions are valued by an institution, they are typically more engaged and open to changes.

- Administrators at contact institutions periodically assess staff satisfaction through climate surveys conducted every few years. At some institutions, employee responses gathered from these surveys fuel the initiatives and changes that administrators establish to boost staff morale.
III. STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION

Administrators across contact institutions employ multiple strategies to promote a favorable work environment for employees. Contacts report that these strategies fall into three primary categories: programs that promote a healthy work-life balance, strategies to encourage staff engagement, and initiatives that create a culture of appreciation for excellent staff performance. Contacts emphasize the importance of consistently investing time and resources into building a culture and work environment that encourages employee satisfaction, indicating that staff members are more tolerant to impacts of a financial downturn on their compensation if they find that genuine efforts are made to prioritize their needs.

Work-Life Balance Programs

Programs that provide support to staff in areas of their personal life express an institution’s commitment to the general health and satisfaction of its employees—a commitment to which contacts observe staff members respond positively. Across contact institutions, administrators develop work life programs that assist employees in childcare and eldercare, provide flexible work schedules for employees with family commitments, and promote healthy lifestyles among employees.

Child and Elderly Care

Most contacts report that providing child and elderly care assistance to employees significantly improves employee satisfaction. Unfortunately, investing in comprehensive childcare facilities on campus and providing consultants to advise employees on the care of their elderly family requires significant financial investment that is difficult to maintain when budgets dwindle. For example, administrators at the University F had to eliminate the permanent elderly care specialist position and transition their childcare referral program from a staff manager to an online program.

However, some institutions have found affordable ways to provide childcare services to their employees. For example, Sitter City.com, a corporate childcare company, provides complimentary access to faculty, staff and graduate students to its database of caregivers in exchange for a fee from University C. University F also operates an internal domestic help matching program for its employees that incurred no additional cost to the institution, after the initial cost of building the web database, as described below:

The Family Helpers Program

In response to repeated requests from administrative staff, faculty, and adult students for a student domestic-help service, the work life resource center at the University F facilitates an online service for students who are interested in providing child-care, yard work, tutoring, housekeeping, and pet sitting for a small fee and matches them with staff, faculty, and adult students seeking these services.

The online database includes student profiles describing their qualifications and interests, allowing faculty and staff to contact students with expertise that they require. For example, contacts observe that students in the school of nursing and education tend to be especially popular among families who have children with special needs. In the future, administrators plan to expand the Family Helpers program to include emergency childcare support in response to requests from medical residents with young children, who often need childcare services at short notice.

To avoid legal repercussions, the program’s website includes a disclaimer stating that any hiring relationships formed as a result of the listing are not officially endorsed by the university.
III. STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION

Flexible Work Schedules
Contacts across institutions recommend providing employees with flexible work schedules to improve employee satisfaction, especially when monetary incentives are not affordable alternatives. Flexible work schedules help staff with significant family or other personal responsibilities to achieve a healthy balance between work and life. Contacts at University C stress that a flexible work schedule may also be used as an effective retention tool; the institution has retained several competent staff members that may have been lost to relocation if no remote working arrangements were available.

At most institutions, flexible work schedule policies are determined at the department level. However, administrators at the University F work-life resource center offer consultative advice to departments about how to develop fair policies that govern flexible work scheduling; they provide online training toolkits to supervisors about the benefits of remote working arrangements for employees.

Consequently, contacts report that managers are encouraged to be more thoughtful and objective when considering flexible work requests, building an institutional culture that accepts flexible work hours or remote working arrangements as viable alternatives to employee work schedules. The office also provides assistance to employees who request special work arrangements by providing sample proposals for employees to aid their preparation of a request for a more flexible work schedule.

In order to further encourage a healthy work life balance, the University F has also instituted an award for supervisors who are especially sensitive to the work life quality of employees:

Champion Work-Life Supervisor Award

The Champion Work-life Supervisor Award is presented to the top supervisors at University F who encourage work-life balance by adopting a progressive approach to flexible work schedules and other related policies. Staff members across the institution recommend several supervisors for this award. This year, the review team selected ten finalists from a pool of 150 nominations. Finalists are typically awarded at a work-life conference held in the fall and are also recognized by their host departments through a casual social gathering.

Staff Assistance Programs
Contacts note that establishing staff assistance programs that offer employees additional financial or emotional support during difficult personal situations help to build a supportive environment and express the institution’s concern for staff well-being beyond their performance in core tasks. Contacts at the College A emphasize that although their financial assistance program requires significant funding, helping staff in genuine need is worth the investment because it creates a high level of satisfaction.

Similarly, the University F offers a comprehensive faculty assistance program that targets the emotional well-being of employees. The program offers confidential and professional assistance in the following
III. STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION

areas: marriage and family counseling, psychological disorders, grief counseling, stress management, interpersonal communication, and substance abuse. Contacts report that offering non-work related support is highly prized by employees and these services are very well patronized.

Wellness Programs

Most contact institutions actively operate wellness programs. These programs are typically collaborative and promote a collegial and familial environment in addition to healthy lifestyles. At University C the Parking and Transportation department in conjunction with the Office of Sustainability organized a bike-to-work campaign to encourage employees to maintain active lifestyles and be environmentally friendly.

Similarly, administrators at University B developed a wellness champions program featuring wellness representatives in each department; since, employees have successfully participated in a weight loss competition. Contacts across institutions encourage human resource administrators to encourage employees to participate by soliciting wellness programs ideas from employees. Contacts find that when an institution targets the holistic well-being of its employees, employee satisfaction increases steadily.
III. STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION

Encouraging Staff Engagement

All contacts stress the importance of encouraging active staff engagement to support efforts to increase employee morale. Reporting that staff members are happier at institutions where their opinions are valued, administrators prioritize strategies that encourage active staff involvement in three primary ways: shared leadership; transparent leadership; and collaborative, institution-wide events or initiatives.

Employee Councils: Contacts across institutions note that it is crucial to seek staff input about all major institution-wide initiatives and to offer staff members an opportunity to voice their opinions publicly in order to secure staff support and promote staff satisfaction. At University B and University C, both staff and faculty convene a council to which staff members may address issues of importance.

Participation in Strategic Planning: Similarly, at the College A, faculty and staff are enlisted to actively participate in the institution's annual discussions about the strategic plan. Senior leadership hosts several open forums, incorporating staff contributions into revisions of the strategic plan. Contacts report that this practice encourages staff members to take ownership of institution-wide projects and embrace the changes inspired by the strategic plan.

Responsiveness to Staff Suggestions: At University C, contacts report that administrators exhibit their commitment to shared leadership responding to staff innovations and suggestions. For example, the school's leadership actively supports a working mother's support group and has instituted regular orientations for more tenured staff and faculty to understand administrative, policy, and technological changes at the institutions; both initiatives began as staff ideas.

Voices of the Staff at the University F

In seeking to continue active staff involvement in university leadership, the University F operates an innovative, volunteer-based program called Voices of the Staff; the program offers staff an opportunity to share ideas and define campus community issues that they prioritize. Members of the various groups that comprise Voices of the Staff are selected from a pool of applicants who represent the University F staff community with respect to demographics, gender, work areas, ethnicity, and union representation. As its name suggests, the six-year old initiative provides the staff at University F an opportunity to voice their opinions about several institution-wide issues concerning working climate, rewards and recognition, diversity, parking and transportation, benefits and employee health and well-being, faculty-staff communication, among others. The nomination and selection process for the Champion Work-Life Supervisor Awards is also managed by Voices of the Staff.
III. STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION

Contacts at the College A stress that it especially important for leadership to maintain transparency during tough economic times in order to build trust even when staff compensation is stagnant or reduced. Contacts at the College A report that during the recent economic recession, leadership at the college informed employees about the college’s financial status through quarterly financial reports from the president. Contacts observe that this transparency promotes a more tolerant staff even when financial compensation is negatively affected.

Contacts suggest that institutions may promote greater employee satisfaction by building a collegial atmosphere through frequent staff interaction. Rallying employees behind institution-wide events or goals typically promotes staff solidarity for the institution.

Annual Health and Fitness Exposition: At University C administrators unite staff regularly behind health initiatives, typically at an annual health and fitness exposition. Contacts report that regularly gathering employees for social interaction and encouraging collaboration across employee ranks builds employee morale and institution identity.

Institutional Climate Survey: Administrators at University D find that unifying employees behind a common goal also positively affects staff morale at an institution. At College D, faculty and staff have been working together over the past decade to improve issues of concern raised during an institutional climate survey. Led by the president, several teams of employees, and other institutional stakeholders, the institution launched a campaign called ‘In Dedication to Students;’ the participants met regularly to target specific goals such as efficient communication, defining the institution’s purpose, improving outreach to future students, and creating a conducive learning environment. Contacts at College D attribute the institution’s success to their unified mission and the leadership’s wherewithal to accept honest feedback and respond positively to criticism from employees.

“Establishing a culture where employees know each other creates a sense of community and knowledge sharing that contributes to a great work life environment.”

-Roundtable Interview

“Change is not for the faint hearted. It’s important to seek feedback and be prepared for it to be negative. Aim to build a good institutional culture, no matter what it takes.”

-Roundtable Interview
III. STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION

Building a Culture of Appreciation

Contacts across institutions report that building a culture of appreciation by recognizing staff for outstanding performance is a vital tool to increasing staff satisfaction. Several contact institutions have established policies and procedures to ensure that staff members are properly recognized for excellent performance and appreciated for their dedication to the institution. Contacts advise that staff be awarded for a variety of achievements to ensure that various skills and traits are given adequate recognition.

"The most important recognition that any employee can get is to be in a work environment where there is regular feedback and regular appreciation. If you don't have that on a daily basis, formal, periodic recognition doesn't have the impact that you would want it to have."

-Roundtable Interview

Presenting Awards to Deserving Employees

Several contact institutions organize award ceremonies on an annual basis at the institution level and within departments to award staff members for a variety of achievements:

The Improving Our Workplace Award

The University G has instituted an award called the Improving Our Workplace Award (IOWA) which aims to not only recognize staff excellence but encourage staff engagement in process improvement projects across campus. The award is presented to both teams and individuals twice a year after a review committee of employees from various ranks and departments has evaluated proposals for specific projects or initiatives aimed at improving processes within departments across campus. Candidates are evaluated against the following criteria:

| Initiative | Recognizing the opportunity for improvement and acting upon it. |
| Innovation | Developing a creative or unique solution to solve the problem |
| Results | Proposing a solution that produces measurable results |
| Impact | Instituting sustainable changes that become part of how business is done at the university |

Contacts report that the IOWA offers employees personal ownership over the success of the institution because they realize that their contributions are valued and will be given adequate recognition.
III. STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION

University E Excellence Award

In an effort to demonstrate appreciation for employee contributions to the success of the university and to unite all campus stakeholders around a campus-wide event, the University E organizes a large award ceremony annually to recognize employees who display leadership or exceed performance expectations in six primary areas:

- **Greening University E**: Recognizing employees who promote initiatives to adopt environmentally friendly practices at the institution.
- **Fostering Diversity and Inclusion**: Recognizing employees who organize programs and adopt strategies to make University E more welcoming to minority populations.
- **Innovative Solutions**: Recognizing employees who collaborate with other employees and community stakeholders on projects that target process improvement.
- **Bring out the Best**: Recognizing employees who exhibit sterling leadership skills throughout University E.
- **Serving the Client**: Recognizing employees who provide consistent and exceptional service to external and internal constituents.
- **Unsung Hero**: Recognizing employees who work diligently behind the scenes to ensure the success of their respective departments or teams.

Individual recipients of the awards receive $2,000 each, while teams receive up to $10,000. Cash awards are considered additional pay and are subject to payroll taxes before issuance. Contacts report that this ceremony draws participation from all employees at University E and their families.

Infinite Mile Award

Contacts at University E report that although the institution-wide award ceremony is popular among employees, providing individual departments some autonomy in recognizing employee achievements is essential to accommodate differences in culture across departments. Contacts report that departments celebrate staff achievement differently; some host annual formal award celebrations while others throw casual gatherings for award recipients. Several departments award individuals by focusing on their performance regarding a specific departmental or topical goal, while others evaluate employees meeting the same criteria each year.

Prioritizing Employee Recognition and Compensation

Contacts report that administrators at institutions often pre-assign funds to employee awards. At University C, staff recognition is highly prioritized, with administrators assigning $65,000 per year to staff awards. Contacts stress that the institution dedicates this amount to awards irrespective of external economic conditions. Similarly, contacts at the College A highlight the importance of prioritizing staff awards and compensation irrespective of the economic situation. Contacts stress that staff satisfaction is closely correlated with an institution’s ability to ensure compensation security. Once employees are unsure about an institution’s dedication to their compensation, staff satisfaction plummets despite an institution’s efforts to boost work life conditions through various other initiatives and projects.
III. STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION

Institutions face a number of obstacles when attempting to create work life conditions that promote employee satisfaction. Contacts report that limited resources pose the greatest difficulty to institutions that are seeking to establish innovative programs and a culture that engenders employee satisfaction. Contact institutions also struggle with engaging employees in new programs and initiatives aimed at improving work life conditions, as well as increasing staff satisfaction across a diverse, multi-faceted staff body.

Trim the Budget
At most contact institutions, human resource administrators have been forced to trim expenditures on work-life programs or initiatives in order to efficiently operate with a more modest budget. At the University F administrators transitioned the child-care referral program online, thought it was formally managed by a staff member. Similarly the University F also eliminated the permanent position for an eldercare consultant, referring employees with questions about eldercare to external experts.

Prioritize Staff Compensation and Awards
Administrators at contact institutions assert that effective financial planning that allocates pre-determined funds to staff compensation, benefits, and awards prevents staff compensation from being significantly affected during difficult economic times. Consequently, institutions are typically able to maintain high levels of staff satisfaction despite economic constraints.

Innovate
Contacts across institutions maintain that having large financial resources is not a prerequisite for providing favorable working conditions for staff members at an institution. Contacts at the College A and University C encourage innovative thinking in creating supportive programming for staff members; both partner with local businesses to provide a variety of retail discounts for staff members. These discounts provide helpful financial assistance to staff members, especially when an institution has reduced or cannot afford to increase staff compensation, often without any additional cost to the institution.

Similarly, the University F Family Helpers program is a reportedly beneficial service for staff members who require domestic help, but does not require additional costs to operate.
IV. OVERCOMING OBSTACLES TO CREATING FAVORABLE WORK LIFE QUESTIONS

Encouraging Staff Participation
Contacts note that achieving high staff participation rates with initiatives and programs designed to enhance work life conditions can be challenging. Administrators have adopted strategies to increase participation among staff members.

Actively Involve Staff in Decision Making Processes
Contacts across institutions observe that staff members are more likely to actively participate in institution wide-initiatives aimed at improving work life conditions if they feel personally invested in new initiatives or strategies. At the College A administrators involve staff members by convening groups of employees annually to make amendments to the institutional strategic plan. At College D, staff members are involved in efforts to gradually improve the institution's culture over a ten-year period. Contacts indicate that the more involved staff members are in campus-wide decision making processes, the less likely they are to resist changes and the more satisfied they are with their general work conditions.

Manage Resistance Effectively
Contacts at College D report that it is common to face resistance from staff members when administrators try to implement new policies or strategies—even when policies are aimed at improving work-life conditions for staff and faculty. Contacts recommend transparent leadership and open communication in order to keep staff members well informed and involved with any major changes that an institution might undertake. Nevertheless, contacts indicate that certain factions of the faculty and staff will consistently remain opposed to new ideas. Administrators are advised to work with the majority of staff members who are willing to engage rather than allow small resistant groups to hinder progress toward positive cultural change at an institution.

Satisfying a Diverse Staff
Maintaining employee satisfaction across an institution proves especially challenging at large institutions, where employees have a plethora of needs and interests.

Contacts across institutions recommend periodic assessments or climate surveys to gauge the satisfaction and to meet diversified employee needs. For example, at the University F, an assessment of their Family Helpers program revealed the need to include an emergency component that would cater to medical residents, who often request domestic help at the last minute. Because they are unable to do so under the present program, the institution plans to expand the program’s services to include students who are able to respond to requests at short notice.
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