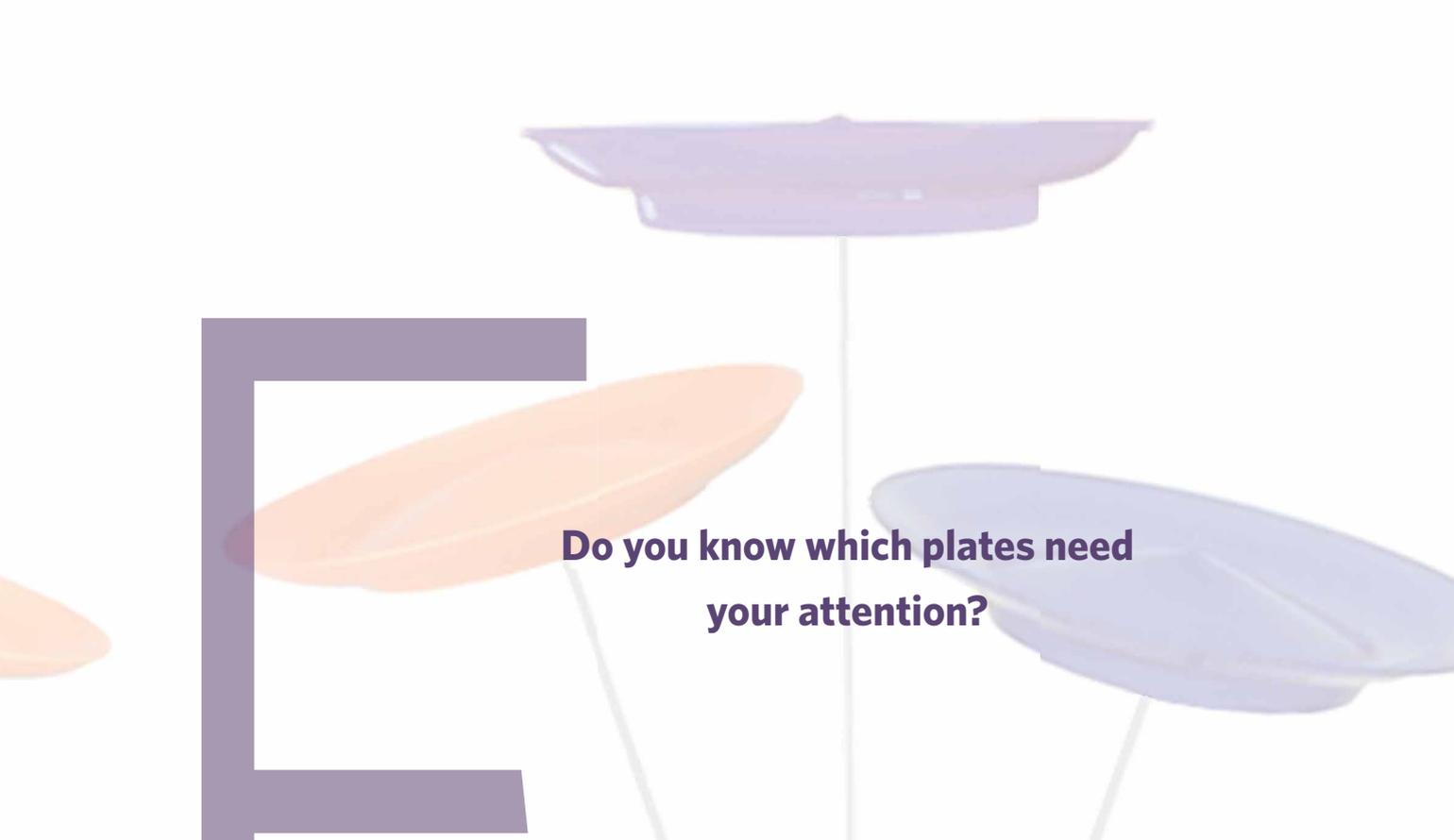




# Leaders as Circus Performers

Using Survey Feedback to  
Keep the Plates Spinning

*Fred Jones ■ Doug McCallum ■ Chris Sargent*



## Do you know which plates need your attention?

Effective leaders know how to get and act upon information from their organization and subsequently effect positive change. Quantum Research International Inc. has conducted numerous surveys in support of government organizations, and this article is written based on our interpretations of those surveys. Typically, the surveys have been for acquisition, technology, and logistics organizations that generally have a matrixed, high-tech workforce. After implementing dozens of surveys with thousands of participants, we have found significant differences in how organizations used survey results. Those organizations that implemented, analyzed, and developed action plans from survey feedback improved organizational performance. Organizations that relegated their survey to the “library shelf” showed no subsequent improvement.

We’ll be talking about two kinds of leaders: direct leaders that lead small groups face to face, and indirect leaders that manage larger organizations through subordinate leaders. How these different kinds of leaders use surveys as a tool for building high-performance teams can be illustrated in an analogy using circus performers—a juggler versus a plate spinner.

The direct leader in this analogy is the juggler. He has to constantly apply energy and individual attention to each ball in the air. Direct leadership involves leadership through direct contact, usually by junior leaders, with a relatively small number of team members. Those leaders generally experience more certainty and less complexity in executing their jobs.

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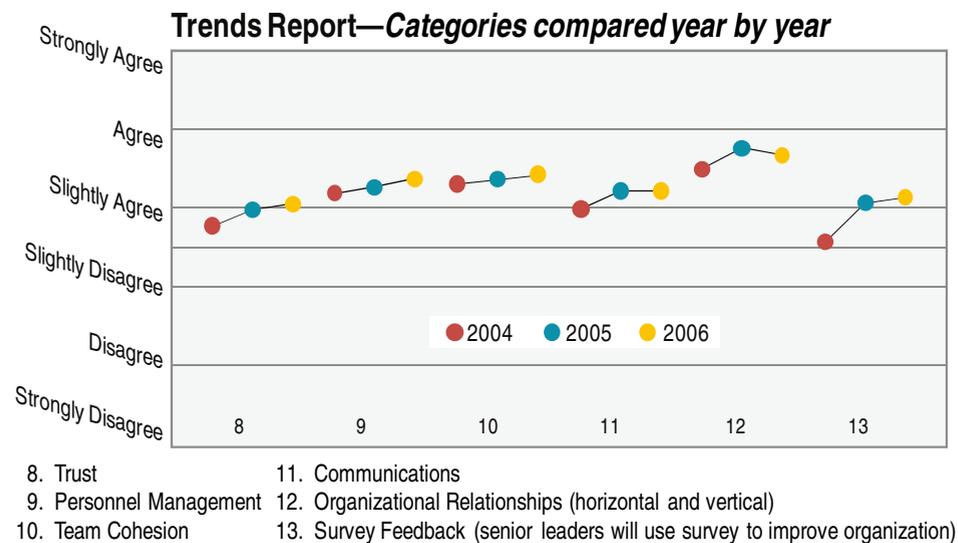
The plate spinner is the indirect leader. Indirect leaders have too many subordinates to maintain a one-on-one controlling relationship with every worker. Like the plate spinner who uses sticks to control the plates without actually touching them, indirect leaders have to develop skills that allow them to provide guidance and control to an organization through sub-leaders. They must learn how to influence rather than directly control, and they use different leadership techniques to communicate, plan, make decisions, motivate, and get results. This article provides some tips for both the direct leader and indirect leader to manage and respond to surveys.

In our analogy, the indirect leader must learn how to spin a higher number of plates than the number of balls the juggler can keep in the air. That is because indirect leaders, by their very nature, must control larger, more complex organizations, which requires the use of more control and feedback systems. It's the situation in which you're promoted from manager of the 10-person shop to manager of the 45-person section. Now your span of control forces you to look at different ways to be as effective as you were before. Many leaders face a tough transition when they move from a position of direct leadership to a position of indirect leadership. That is often a by-product of fast-moving organizations that can't afford to send leaders away for leader development. If you're an indirect leader, what can you do to remain effective? How can you keep your hand on the pulse of the organization? One solution for indirect leaders is to use surveys to identify the organization's strengths and challenges, and to enact focused improvements that continuously enhance organizational performance. The larger your organization, the more useful such feedback can be. And what follows doesn't apply just to the indirect leaders. Leaders of smaller teams can use even smaller, focused surveys to great benefit.

### Benefits of Surveys

Keeping your organization operating at optimal performance requires feedback. There are many ways leaders can gain useful feedback about their organization's performance, but we'll focus on surveys to limit the discussion and because they are very effective. A survey is a highly useful feedback method that promotes understanding of an organization, and helps determine methods and metrics leading to measurable organizational improvements such as increased job satisfaction (thereby reducing turnover), improved communications, increased trust between leaders and subordinates, and early

## An Organization's Improvement Trends Based On Follow-Up to Survey Feedback



warning of festering issues. Surveys, if designed properly, can support a follow-on strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat analysis. Surveys can also include tailored questions that help generate metrics for performance. The Office of Personnel Management understands the usefulness of surveys, as reflected by its use of survey results in metrics measuring organizational goals.

Leaders gain insight about their organizational strengths and weaknesses, which can be used to develop an action plan to improve their team's performance. The figure shows an extract of a report of an organization that has been conducting surveys since 2004. The organization's leader knows what his workforce is telling him, has identified key issues and developed annual action plans, has involved the workforce in developing solutions, and has communicated those efforts throughout the organization. Subsequent surveys have shown a marked increase in organizational performance—the organization consistently improved over the years in almost every category. The organization has developed a reputation as an employer of choice in a locale that suffers a shortage of skilled labor, which is an attribute that gives the organization a clear competitive advantage. The leader used the surveys to better understand how his plates were spinning and to identify ways to improve organizational performance.

Some leaders are biased against using surveys. We have found three main reasons leaders do not use this tool for feedback:

Many leaders have not been exposed to the value of a survey. That is especially true of younger direct leaders who have recently moved to indirect leadership positions. They may have seen survey results, but do not have the experience to understand the necessary follow-up actions to use

the survey information to subsequently improve organizational performance.

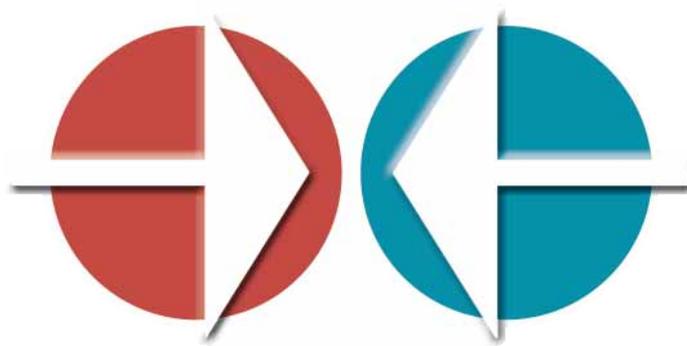
Leaders are afraid that negative feedback from a survey will make them look bad. Those leaders may seem overly risk-averse, but they are actually accepting far more risk by not embracing surveys as a tool for continuous improvement. Without some sort of feedback mechanism, they remain unaware of issues and concerns of their workforce. The leaders fail to embrace the adage of “facing the brutal truth,” as quoted from the book *Good to Great* by Jim Collins. The book emphasizes the importance of understanding the organization’s true environment—no matter how negative.

Some leaders believe surveys won’t provide them useful information. Our experience reveals that survey results never fail to provide feedback that surprises organizational leaders to some degree. A leader who does not have some sort of system to gain feedback usually does not have a good baseline from which to improve the organization. One leader recently told us, “I don’t believe in surveys because they all say the same thing: ‘We need to communicate better.’” Further questioning revealed that although that leader knew that poor communications was one of the most common obstacles in improving performance, he did not understand the importance of following through and, therefore, made no effort to improve communications within his organization.

What follows are trends we see in many acquisition, technology, and logistics-related organizations. Although many organizations scored well in some areas, we consistently found organizations struggling to improve workforce feedback in the areas of roles and missions, trust, and communications.

### Roles and Missions

Senior workers often scored their organization lowest in clear definitions of roles and missions. Comments reinforced confusion about roles, missions, and lines of responsibility. It’s usually a learning experience when the managers within a team formally define the products and processes for which they are responsible, as well as to whom they are accountable. Clearly defining roles and missions as well as lines of authority is a tedious job; however, the clarity of purpose and the understanding of roles and boundaries are critical to high-performing organizations. That is especially important when team members are not located together as well as



## Keeping your organization operating at optimal performance requires feedback.

metrics enable an understanding of the performance levels of the organization so leaders can focus their improvement efforts. The survey statement “Performance metrics are clear and concise” consistently receives “Slightly Disagree” or “Disagree” scores. Written comments indicate a lack of knowledge concerning metrics from many personnel. Metrics need to be well-understood, meaningful, and communicated across the organization.

*“The metrics used are only looked at by upper management. There needs to be metrics all the way down to the lowest level.”*  
–Survey respondent

A subset of roles and missions is the integration of matrixed personnel. The concept of matrix management, with essentially two chains of command, can cause friction if not carefully supervised by all leaders. Helping matrixed employees feel like they are full members of the team requires constant attention through well-defined appraisal chains, with leaders emphasizing adequate rewards, a one-team mentality, and the value of matrixed workers. For new leaders, an awareness of the importance of managing matrixed employees may not be obvious and should be part of their training. The lack of role clarity and integration of matrixed personnel has resulted in lower scores from matrixed personnel, which results in personal and professional frustration, thus reducing team cohesion, leading employees to question their leaders’ abilities, and ultimately lowering organizational performance. Confusion over lines of authority as well as outdated or non-existent policies and procedures in a matrixed workforce lead to unclear quality standards. The following comment is representative of issues reflected in roles and missions survey results: “At times, there is a lot of friction and conflict with who is responsible for what, and who is in charge of whom. Recommend the PM and functional organization resolve this conflict where everyone knows whom they work for and how the functional fits into the PM shop.”

when matrixed personnel from other organizations are integrated into one team.

*“In some respects, our organization has confused who to go to for some missions and who is responsible. There are overlaps and duplication of efforts that waste time.”*  
–Survey respondent

Once roles and responsibilities are defined, key metrics can be established at each level of the organization. Data collected on those



## **A survey can be the most effective tool to gain organizational awareness, to set and maintain high-quality standards, and to become a learning organization.**

Government leaders score low on integrating contractors into a coherent team. Contractors provide the government an invaluable, skilled, and flexible workforce to meet requirements. They generally have significant amounts of experience beneficial to their team, but often, they are seen as lesser persons. That leads many government leaders to neglect contractors in team activities. Some government leaders would espouse inclusiveness, but then contradict their words with actions, e.g., not including contractors in town hall meetings or award ceremonies.

### **Trust**

Trust is frequently the lowest scoring category in surveys. Statements such as “There is a willingness to accept responsibility for failure” and “I feel free to openly speak my mind” generally score below average. Workers who are matrixed and collocated, for example, to a program management office consistently score lower than those assigned to their parent functional office. The two largest groups that typically provide lower scores in the trust category are employees who have been with an organization longer than five years and employees who are in the mid-level grades. Comments often reflect frustration over professional growth or a perceived lack of appreciation of their contributions to the organization (lack of a recognition/awards program).

### **Unfair Promotion Process**

By far, the most written comments received concerning trust relate to the fair administration of promotion opportunities. Survey scores are accompanied by numerous supporting comments indicating a strong perception that many people are pre-selected for job openings. Often, leaders and human resources representatives are surprised by this, saying they emphasize fairness in promotions, but it is a consistent finding in most surveys. That perception can negatively affect loyalty to the organization and can result in increased turnover rates as well as diminished work performance. One leader who was caught off guard when it came up on his

survey results for the second year in a row told us he was surprised because he had sent out a memo after the first survey to address fairness in hiring and promotion practices. Effectively addressing that perception with the workforce requires far more than an annual memo. Indeed, some studies suggest workers need to hear new guidance up to 13 times before they get it. Be creative in your solutions. Would forming a small group (a tiger team) to brainstorm solutions and outline a plan help? How about having all hands meetings at lower levels on your team (all-inclusive meetings tend to stifle suggestions)?

*“No matter how well you do on the Selection Board, the position is already picked.”*

–Survey respondent

### **Honorary Award System**

There are still leaders within the government who are not well-versed with the civilian honorary award system, nor do they take the time to recognize their employees. Recognition is a very effective tool, but it is apparently not well understood. Maintaining a good recognition program is an effort well spent. One way to respond to this is to adopt the control measures the military has adopted with awards—they require the number and type of awards be used as a metric in staff meetings. Through such techniques, the military has built a culture of recognition.

*“Unless an employee is retiring or moving, individual recognition is rare.”*

–Survey respondent

### **Impact of Paypool System**

Many comments addressed the shortfalls of the Office of Personnel and Management’s new pay banding system, with some indicating the overall impact was to take away previous levels of incentives for the workforce. Others question the equitable administration of the pay pool process. While changing the pay pool process is beyond the level of authority of most leaders, they at least must ensure that any monetary award standards and actions are as transparent as possible.

*“Artificial ‘glass ceilings’ should not be put in place to keep an employee’s salary low within a band.”*

–Survey respondent

### **Communications**

Often the lowest-scoring survey responses are related to organizational communication. That includes vertical and lateral information flow, collecting and disseminating lessons learned, and interaction between core and functional/matrixed organizations. A subset of communications is the use of standardized processes and procedures that support systemic communications and workflow across the organization. The organizations that analyze and decipher survey results to improve communications have seen significant

## Today, 56 of the world's top 100 defense companies (by revenue) and three of the top 10 companies are foreign-based and are producing quality products.

improvement. There are three areas in which many organizations focus their effort to improve communications—training leaders in interpersonal skills; matching the organization's information/communication requirements with the appropriate communications medium (e.g., e-mail, face-to-face, portals, meeting rhythms, workflow tools, net-based meetings); and including the workforce in the problem-solving process (to include developing processes that address workflow improvements). If you want to see leaders (and their subordinates) improve organizational communications, you have to provide the need for change, the value of changing, and a path forward to improving communications. Consider workshops focused on the leadership team. Such workshops have proven highly effective in the joint development of communications skills and processes (public speaking, counseling, building communication/information management systems, staff coordination, etc.).

*"I rarely have communication with my supervisor. We don't have staff meetings. We mainly communicate via e-mail. If he comes in my area, he generally only speaks to the person he has an issue or concern with at that time."*

—Survey respondent

### Keep the Plates Spinning

Developing mid-level and senior leaders have a challenge to keep the plates spinning. They must understand how to build and oversee control systems (output control, behavior control, and cultural control systems) along with the feedback tools that tell them when the control systems are not working at peak efficiency. A climate survey is a principal feedback tool that can help you understand when the plates need energy and attention, thereby improving your team's performance.

Do you know which plates need your attention? If you do decide to use a survey as a feedback tool, it should be tailored to include not just numerical scores but also several opportunities to generate anonymous comments in text boxes from which you can learn your organizational strengths and challenges. Once you have identified your organizational weaknesses, develop a plan to fix them. Strategically communicating your intentions after the survey is critical. Some successful techniques we have seen include holding a town hall meeting to brief the results and announce that teams (to include Lean Six Sigma/process teams) have been formed to deal with the survey issues. Those teams should provide frequent action plan feedback to the senior leaders as well as to the workforce. Organizations that use such techniques have found improved workforce motivation and significant organizational improvement.

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tal requirements. Marines train with a Foreign Comparative Testing Program—tested 40mm practice round that produces an orange flash but leaves no energetic material. Future trucks will likely have environmental control units using a carbon dioxide refrigerant instead of environmentally harmful synthetic refrigerants, thanks to the Defense Acquisition Challenge Program. And in 2009, a United Kingdom-developed disposal system that thermally destroys 90 percent of waste and uses the resulting gases to generate electricity will undergo foreign comparative testing for the Army's forward operating bases.

### Significant Value

The CTO programs—the Foreign Comparative Testing Program and the Defense Acquisition Challenge Program—quickly provide U.S. war-fighters the equipment they need to fight asymmetrical wars while saving the taxpayers dollars in the process, but here's their greatest value: they save lives. It's common to say that about a piece of gear. But it's not folks in Washington, D.C., saying it—it's the warfighters. Here are just a few comments warfighters have made:

- "Catching the bad guys equates to saving lives," said users of the gunfire detection system, tested by the Defense Acquisition Challenge Program.
- "We appreciate the help and, truthfully, the lives you probably saved," said a medevac commander referring to MobiMat landing pad, tested by the Foreign Comparative Testing Program.
- "That giant armored beast is no doubt saving lives," said a user of the mine-clearing Buffalo, tested by the Foreign Comparative Testing Program.

And therein lies the most significant reason for considering the Defense Acquisition Challenge and Foreign Comparative Testing programs in your program management office.

For more information, please visit the Advanced Systems and Concepts Web page at [www.acq.osd.mil/asc/](http://www.acq.osd.mil/asc/).

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