

WHAT DO YOUR PEOPLE THINK? WHAT DO THEY NEED?

Recommendations for Sound Assessment

I HAVE HEARD MANY advancement leaders voice assumptions about what makes his people feel valued, or what types of rewards she thinks motivates her people most effectively. I have heard senior management teams make assumptions about why their people are leaving.

Assuming is pretty much guessing. Why not simply ask instead?

The fact is that stunningly few organizations ask important questions before they jump to this inference or that. Be honest, now. When was the last time you asked someone you manage:

“What am I doing that makes you feel valued?”

“Are there any things I do that make you feel under-valued?”

And when is the last time your manager asked you about your long-term goals? Have you ever been asked to complete a division-specific satisfaction survey?

The first step in figuring out what your people think or feel is simply to ask.

Organizations that ask their members for feedback, for their opinions, their thoughts, and their ideas are typically organizations that exhibit greater staff satisfaction. And when employees are satisfied, when they feel valued, they work harder and they are more efficient. Want to get the most out of your staff? Start asking questions.

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CREATING A COMMUNICATIVE ENVIRONMENT

But asking questions is not always enough. Creating an environment or culture in which giving tough answers to tough questions is acceptable is difficult for some organizations. Employees may worry that the information they share will hurt them or slow their progress in the organization. As a manager, you have the opportunity to set a tone and create a rapport with your staff that gives them the confidence to provide honest feedback.

The first step toward building this kind of environment is to ensure that you yourself give honest feedback to your staff on a regular basis. Creating trust requires leading by example. Those I have managed have often told me that they appreciate always knowing where they stood with me in terms of what they produce and how they perform. When a staff member achieves something special, I let her know. If someone falls short or if a lesson can be learned from something done or not done, I point it out. I try always to create an environment in which making mistakes is seen as an opportunity. I learned long ago that there are no mistakes, just lessons to be learned. What better way to learn than not to do something perfectly the first time?

The first step toward building this kind of environment is to ensure that you yourself give honest feedback to your staff on a regular basis. Creating trust requires leading by example.

As you routinely provide honest, useful feedback to your staff, and you tell them that you expect the same responsiveness in return, you will be surprised at how much everyone begins to open up. At first, people may be hesitant, but continue to repeat the message that you want feedback and that you cannot be the best manager if you do not understand what each staff member wants, and you will eventually elicit useful feedback.

It is important to think of each staff member as an individual. Avoid assuming that one management style fits everyone all the time. For example, I once asked a staff member what made him feel under-valued. He replied that my e-mailing his assignments made him feel under-valued. At first I was taken aback, thinking to myself, that's the way I make assignments; that's my style. But I held this instinctive response in check and explored the issue further with the staffer. After a little more conversation, it became apparent that what he really wanted was more face-to-face interaction with me. So I suggested that I come to his office cubicle and talk with him—face-to-face.

Now, this may seem like a trivial response to a trivial issue, but my making a subtle change in my management style with regard to this one person made an enormous difference in his work life, in our working relationship together, and, therefore, in the productivity of our department. A little change on my part produced an enormous change in his work. If I had never asked the question, not only would our department have been deprived

of increased productivity, the small issue we identified together might have mushroomed into a greater resentment in the future.

There are many ways to create an open and honest dialogue with your staff. We will talk about some of the most effective tactics throughout this chapter.

THE LARGE-SCALE ASSESSMENT

When you conduct large-scale assessments or assessments that involve more than just your own team, you may find that some managers encourage feedback while others do not. This may distort the results you receive unless people who are sensitive to all possible management styles lead the large-scale assessment. Senior leadership, preferably the leader of the division or department, must communicate assessment plans to subordinate managers. When senior leadership endorses—or, better yet, initiates—an assessment, everyone within the division knows that the leadership cares enough about them to ask their opinion. Endorsement from the top also encourages full participation and frankness, since respondents are made to feel that, by being responsive and honest, they may bring about genuine change. We all know that the ultimate authority for any change lies with a vice president; therefore, messages relating to assessments should come from the vice president.

When senior leadership endorses—or, better yet, initiates—an assessment, everyone within the division knows that the leadership cares enough about them to ask their opinion.

Many different assessment tools are available, but three types of large-scale employee feedback methods are most useful for assessing your advancement program's human capital needs:

1. Individual interviews
2. Surveys
3. Focus groups

It is not necessary to use all three methods in a large-scale assessment, and the methods need not be applied in any particular order; however, the most comprehensive assessments use these three tools at different times in the assessment process.

Throughout the book, as I make recommendations on innovating new programs, I will suggest where each assessment tool is most helpful. For now, let's briefly discuss each of the tools and how they can be most helpful to you and your organization.

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

I have often been asked to assess the state of an organization and to identify the issues of greatest concern.

- Some managers have suggested that I complete SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analyses. This is a reasonably sound strategic planning approach, but it is not so much a strong assessment method, as it is a method of organizing discoveries that result from the assessment.

In my experience, the individual interview has proven to be the most powerful tool. Typically, it has enabled me to determine what the organization is struggling with and what its people are struggling with. It has helped identify the strengths of the organization as well as how to capitalize on them. The interview also tends to reveal opportunities for improvement within the organization.

Because organizations are made up of people, you must start by asking people what they think. Conducting individual interviews is hard work if you do it the right way, which is to sit down with every member of an organization, at every level within the organization, from the administrative assistants to the middle managers to the senior-most leadership. To exclude a certain group of staff is to make a statement, whether deliberately or not, that the opinion of the excluded group doesn't matter. Furthermore, you cannot obtain a representative assessment if you exclude personnel. Fundamental and serious organizational issues occur at all levels in any organization.

Establishing Credibility

Good assessment starts with establishing trust and credibility. It is therefore important to explain to the group the goal of the assessment, what you hope to gain from the interviews, and what you plan to do with the information after it is gathered. Moreover, it is critical that you deliver on whatever plan you present.

- Choose a trustworthy person to conduct the interviews.
- It is often advantageous to choose a person new to the organization or from outside of the organization. Such people are perceived as having no hidden agendas or vested interests.

Whoever you choose to conduct the interviews, the interviewees must trust his good intentions. They must be convinced that the information that they share will be used in a positive way. One way I get people to trust me to follow through on my promise of confidentiality. In large-scale assessments, one can preserve anonymity and still deliver powerful qualitative data; therefore, after establishing rapport with the interviewee, I explain that the information they give me will indeed be used, but their specific comments will not be attached to their name in any way.

Regardless of what you do to establish trust and credibility, you will find that some people will talk to you for no more than a few minutes. Such reticence may be based on past experiences or may be because some people are more suspicious than others. In contrast, some interviewees will give you a lot of rich data and talk to you for longer than you had anticipated. Both types of interviewees provide useful information.

Getting the Most Out of an Interview

To get the most out of an interview, take these steps:

1. Establish rapport.
2. Begin by asking open-ended questions about the interviewee's professional life; show empathy and understanding by "mirroring"—repeating key facts to demonstrate your understanding of and interest in the person's story.
3. Move into open-ended questions about how the interviewee feels or does not feel valued.
4. Lead into more probing questions relating to the issues of concern to the particular employee.

You will find an interview template in the *Human Capital Toolkit A* in Part Two of this book. The template and the following sample interview will help you get started, but remember that it is important to create a questionnaire and conduct an interview that are appropriate for your line of questioning and for your organization.

SAMPLE HUMAN CAPITAL INVESTMENT INTERVIEW

Introduction and Establishing Rapport

Thank you for coming to talk with me today about the division of university advancement and helping me to get a good picture of what is going well and how we can capitalize on our strengths. In addition, you are going to be very helpful in allowing me to understand some areas for improvement and how we can make the division better. The information you give me today will be extremely helpful, and you need to know that your name will not appear in any of my materials that I prepare for analysis. Does this sound okay to you?

Open-Ended Organizational Context and Background Questions: Building Trust

Tell me about yourself. (Your position here, past professional experience, areas of academic or professional interest)

I've worked here for about three years as an advancement officer with program responsibilities. I originally came to work with prospects on the West Coast, but after a year, they decided to create a parents fundraising program. Because I had already developed a program at my former institution, it seemed like a perfect fit. For the past couple years, I have worked with the associate director to create a fundraising program focused on both the annual and major gift areas.

Tell me about how you came to university advancement. (What brought you here)

I was in the middle of a job search when one of my references suggested I consider this program. I came to interview and was impressed by the people I met and the opportunity to work for a research institution with such great leadership. Everyone seemed very committed to the institution and the goals for the next campaign. While I didn't expect to choose this office, it seemed like a great fit and an once-in-a-lifetime experience to be part of such an ambitious program.

Tell me about your job, your workday in university advancement. (What do you do, day-to-day operations)

Right now, my work is divided between running the fundraising program and prospect work. For the parents program, I spend a lot of time working with other advancement officers to help with prospect strategy and keeping track of the top-rated prospects. I also work with other departments to make sure we collaborate on events and communication with parents. Part of my job is also dedicated to overseeing the parent volunteer committee, a fundraising group that helps with our annual giving activities.

In my prospect work, I focus on parents and alumni in key regions. After three years, I have developed a pattern of trip planning and follow-up that helps direct my day-to-day activities. I am usually making calls or e-mails to set up a future appointment in the morning, and then spend the afternoon working on follow-up from previous trips and cultivation strategies. Of course, there are always the typical staff meetings and training sessions that keep me informed on the campaign priorities and key information I need to share with donors.

Tell me about your experience in advancement. (Positive, negative, how long have you been here).

Overall, it's been a great experience. I have learned so much from the donors I work with and I have been part of a few great gifts. I find the people I meet with so fascinating. When I'm in the office, sometimes I get discouraged because there's always a group of people jockeying for position in the office. I wish people would spend more time focused on their work instead of wondering about office politics. I know there have been key changes in leadership roles since I joined the team, but I feel that it's more important to do the work.

In this section, the interviewer was able to get a sense of the employee's reasons for joining the organization and the typical daily routine. These questions also help build rapport and ease the employee into opening up about her work and experiences within the division. So far, we can see that the employee chose to join the organization because of the people on staff and for the potential to learn the profession during a period of growth for the organization. The employee was able to advance quickly based on her previous experience and she now combines programmatic responsibilities with prospect work. This employee is less interested in office politics and seems more focused on growing professionally through developing more experience.

Open-Ended People-Value Questions: Do the People of the Organization Feel Valued?

Are there things about advancement or your manager that enhance your work experience?

If so, how? If no, why not?

I really appreciate the quarterly divisional meetings because the leadership takes the time to share information from the trustee meetings and gives us a sense of what's ahead. Having time to ask the vice president of university advancement and the leadership team questions helps keep the entire division working together toward our goals.

As for my manager, I really appreciate the time he takes to share information—both in our scheduled meetings and as things come up. I feel well-informed as I go out to meet donors because he makes a point of sharing new information and priorities.

Are there things that university advancement or your manager does to make you feel particularly valued? If so, what are they? If no, why not?

I appreciate the way my manager communicates with me. A large part of my job is self-directed, but he helps me determine my key priorities and strategies to be successful. He is available by e-mail but he also makes a point of coming to talk with me directly about larger projects or proposals. We also have great informal strategy conversations after each trip. I know he's available and seems interested in hearing about my work and helping me become more successful.

I think one thing that makes me feel less valued is when I'm asked to participate in a committee and then the recommendations are not implemented or even discussed. A group of us spent six weeks working on recommendations for traveling more efficiently, and the director of development hasn't said anything about the project for over three months. She hasn't taken the time to let us know the status of the project, so we don't know why it's being held up. Any information, even if it was news that our recommendations were not practical, would be better than this uncertainty. I'm less likely to volunteer to work on a committee again because I don't know if she really values our input.

Are there things that university advancement or your manager does that make you feel underappreciated or undervalued as an employee? If so, what? If no, why not?

This may seem small, but there are times when I feel like the advancement officer team is not trusted to do our jobs effectively and efficiently. I'm not sure if it's because there have been a couple of people who may step out of line, but sometimes it feels like the managers are making new policies that impact everyone instead of dealing with the employee who is having problems. For example, most of us are very good about keeping our expenses in check while traveling. We understand that the money we spend is not our own. When there was a spending issue with one or two employees, the managers implemented a spending policy where every purchase is reviewed. While I think it is good to be accountable for our actions, it felt like the whole group of advancement officers was punished because of the misbehavior of a few individuals. I want to be trusted to do my job well and feel confident that my manager will come to me if he has a problem with my work.

Is there anything that university advancement or your manager could do to make working in advancement a more fulfilling professional experience? If so, what? If no, why not?

There are a number of us who joined the advancement office as one of the transitions in our careers. We all come from different institutions and coming here was an opportunity to grow in our careers. It would be more fulfilling if we had time to learn from the more senior advancement officers and principal advancement officers in the organization. Actually, it could be anyone who has worked for the university for more than five years. This type of mentoring from more senior staff members would help me understand the typical career path at the university and have another person to talk with as questions come up.

I would also appreciate the chance to work on additional projects with short-term timelines. I enjoy being part of groups that are charged with handling a specific task and then overseeing the implementation of the plan. It gives people the chance to work together and build a more positive team environment.

Personally, the tuition benefit is a great incentive to stay with this organization. I feel like the university is investing in my professional success by allowing me to take classes. This is a rare opportunity compared to other workplaces and it makes me want to stay here to implement the new skills for this university.

Are you satisfied with working in advancement? If so, why? If not, why?

Overall, I'd say I am satisfied working in advancement. I know our group has experienced growing pains, but every workplace has its own issues. I feel that I can learn a lot in this environment and I think it's important to stay positive and help make things better. I feel that the leadership team wants things to be better, and when I stay focused on what really matters, the donors and the students, I feel quite privileged to work here.

The answers in this section tell us a lot about what motivates this employee and how the organization motivates and de-motivates her through its actions. This employee highlighted communication as a major area. Both senior leadership and the manager were sharing information in a timely manner, and the manager shared new information as it related to the employee's work. Accessibility to the manager was also important, because the employee felt there was additional support available outside of a regular meeting time.

The employee highlighted two areas of concern: a lack of trust and issues of accountability. We learned that the employees feel that managers do not trust them to be accountable for their time and use of resources. This is something that the employee felt could be solved if the manager would deal directly with problem personnel instead of treating everyone with suspicion.

As a manager, it is important to deal with problems on both the individual and team basis and to communicate the reason for a change in policy in a way that does not point blame at one particular person. Additionally, notice that the employee was not asking for leniency, but for the manager to handle problems directly with the person or persons involved. This implies a level of open communication between the manager and staff as well as a mechanism for honest feedback on performance.

The other area that stands out in this exchange is the employee's desire to grow through additional educational opportunities. She expressed a desire for mentoring by senior members. This response suggests that the employee is seeking additional information about the profession; providing this information is a simple way to help her feel valued by the organization.

Investing time with a newer employee can yield huge benefits for the organization, as that person learns more about the department and the profession and stays motivated to do his best work. Additional short-term projects with concrete objectives and quantifiable deliverables help employees build skills outside of their core job description and can help personnel feel successful. Encouraging employees to work together to solve problems for the organization builds a sense of team and ownership. Note also that the tuition benefit is another way that the organization invests in the employee's professional and personal growth. This also helps the employee understand the student experience at the institution and contributes to retention by encouraging employees to remain at the institution longer.

Open-Ended Human Capital Investment Questions

What is turnover like in advancement?

When I joined the staff, it was right after a manager left the university, so my first year seemed to be a period of adjustment in the division. A lot of people were unhappy after he left, so it seemed like we lost a large part of the staff. In the past year or so, things seem to have calmed down and we have a stable group of staff members.

Do you have flexibility in your work arrangements?

I feel that I have a flexible work environment because my manager is very understanding and supportive. I know that if I need to work from home or campus, he will be supportive. For example, I ended up working from home one day after I moved into my first home because I had a couple contractors coming in to make repairs. Since I was online and available by phone, he knew he could reach me if something came up. I know that not all managers are as flexible and that can be frustrating to other staff.

Tell me about the communication within the division.

I think this is one area where we could do a much better job. Sometimes it's hard to really understand what each group is doing outside of our quarterly divisional meetings. It would help to understand how the goals of each group fit into our overall divisional goals and have these goals linked together. Often, it's frustrating to find out that there was an alumni event that would have been perfect to invite a key prospect to attend, but the information on the event was not shared until after the fact. One of my strategies has been to make friends with people throughout the division because it's one of the best ways to know what's going on. I genuinely like the people I met through orientation, and it helps to have someone to call when you have a question outside of your area.

How would you describe the division's recruitment strategy and/or recruitment approach?

When I was first hired, the division had just completed a huge hiring push. It seemed like they were doing everything to fill seats without much thought to what would happen next. Now, it seems like there is an actual strategy of what the different needs are across the division and the best way to find a good fit between the position and the rest of the team.

I think the managers have a much better sense of what they are looking for when they interview candidates, and that the rest of the staff understand how the new position will fit with the team. The candidates really feel like the university is interested in them and committed to determining if this is the right fit for the university and the individual.

Tell me about the function of the human resources department within advancement.

The human resources department has a much larger role than it did in the past. I know that the whole university has shifted its performance management process to provide better feedback to employees. It also helps that the internal staff dedicated to human resources issues has grown. The department can offer more training and support since there are more people to share the work. Before, the office was little more than a place to turn in paperwork. Now I know I can go to the director of the program to talk about any professional issue confidentially. There are great resources for learning and development and as a manager, I feel like the sessions offer great advice for working with employees. In previous positions, I never felt like I had anyone to talk to for help except other supervisors. It was the blind leading the blind, which is never a good idea for HR issues!

Do you feel as though the division has a good reputation as a place to work?

I think it depends. Nationally, I think we've done a great job of raising the profile of the university and our division through different conferences and the increased media attention. Regionally, I think people really respect the institution, but it is a small town environment and as people have left for other local institutions, the development community has noticed. On campus, I think that we still have a lot of work to do to help faculty and other staff understand why the trustees have invested so heavily in our division and why it is so important that we focus on building the endowment when there are other needs across the campus. I think being off campus also hurts our reputation because people don't know us as well as they did when it was a small office. Regardless, I wouldn't hesitate to recommend the division to other people if they were looking for an opportunity to work here.

This section demonstrates that the employee has seen many changes during the past three years. He offers positive feedback on the growth and development of human resources staffing within the division and the effect of the additional staff on recruitment strategy and training opportunities. The employee shares that flexibility in the workplace depends on the manager, something that the division may need to be aware of as other employees may be resentful if they are not offered the same opportunities. While the senior leadership does a good job of communicating down to the division, there is a need for better communication throughout the division on tactical matters.

Probing Human Capital Investment Questions

Does the division offer training or education opportunities? If so, what? If no, do you know why it does not?

Yes, there are more offered than anyone could realistically attend and still get their work done! There are a number of learning opportunities, and I appreciate the different types of classes. One area of focus is getting to know other parts of the division. It helps to understand what other departments are working on and how it might impact your work. I especially enjoy the campus series, when they bring faculty and administrators to share information on research priorities and university goals. This information helps the advancement officers as we meet with alumni and parents, so we can share the latest information and know the faculty.

Do you think a professional development program would enhance your working experience and the working environment? If yes, why? If no, why not?

I think it would. When you think about the advancement officer team, there are a lot of people doing the same type of work. It is not practical to imagine that everyone will be promoted to management at the same time. I think it would help the morale of the team if we knew that the managers were investing in each of us by focusing on our professional development, even if it did not lead to immediate promotions.

Is the division committed to helping poor performers improve? If so, how?

I think so. I know that the performance management process is much more detailed than it was in the past. By setting clear goals and objectives each year, you can assess how well each employee is doing, and if there are gaps, there is a performance improvement plan to help bring the employee back to meeting expectations.

That said, while the tools are in place, I think certain managers are more committed to their employees than others. There are some people who are still working here who don't seem to do a lot of work, but their managers seem unlikely to step in. They would rather do the work themselves than address the problem. That seems unfair, both to the manager and the employee, because eventually everyone suffers.

Do you have the sense that the division will terminate those who continuously perform poorly?

Again, I think it depends on the manager. Sometimes it feels like it takes a long time to deal with a problem employee, whereas other times the situation is handled quickly and efficiently. I know that there are procedures in place to help managers through the process, but I know how difficult it can be to admit that someone needs to be terminated.

Is “promotion within” standard in university advancement? If so, can you tell me about a time when you were promoted? If no, why do you think the university does not promote from within?

I think there are a number of examples of promotions from within in university advancement. It definitely depends on the position and whether the internal employee is a good fit for an open position. In my case, since I had previously directed a targeted fundraising program, it made sense to apply for the new program in the division. One of the best examples is our vice president. He has worked for the university for almost his entire career, quietly working his way up through the division over 20 years. Because of his long tenure, he has great institutional knowledge and knows the donors really well.

This section of questions illustrates the employee’s perception of training and professional growth opportunities across the division. Through these questions, we gain more understanding of the organization’s investment in its people. This organization has a number of tools in place to provide training to its employees. Managers are also given the tools to help poor performers improve, though people may differ in how effectively they implement the plans. It is also clear that the team may want more information on how advancement officers can grow professionally. Managers could use the interest in this area to share information on how advancement officers can be successful in their work and what skills and competencies staff should focus on if they want to be considered for promotions long-term.

Can you work from home at times? Are you granted “comp-time” if you work on weekends or extensive hours? If yes, is it important to you? If no, why not?

I do work from home at times, and that is truly appreciated! Sometimes it’s easier to get things done when you’re not surrounded by a lot of other people. I do not receive “comp-time” officially, because I am classified as a salaried employee. However, after a long weekend of work, my manager usually lets me know I should take off early one afternoon or not use leave for an upcoming doctor’s appointment. I really appreciate the flexibility to work from home and the flexible schedule when I need to take a few hours away from the office. It makes me feel like my manager appreciates my time and understands when I need to recharge.

Do you feel you have access to the appropriate technology to communicate sufficiently? If so, what means are they? If no, why not?

I feel like we have a lot of technology tools to communicate effectively. E-mail is probably the easiest and most used communication tool in our division. The university has also provided us with PDAs, so we can check e-mail and get online while traveling.

Do you feel as though university advancement is a collaborative workplace that encourages teamwork? If yes, how and why? If no, why not?

Sometimes. I think my manager is very collaborative and strongly encourages our team to work together to reach our goals. Across the division, it depends. Some of the vice presidents do not seem as interested in encouraging teamwork because they seem to think it will detract from their power within the organization.

Do you feel as though university advancement is a hierarchical workplace? How do you feel about this?

I definitely feel that our office is a hierarchical environment. It's amusing at times because, as an advancement officer, I'm one of twenty people with the same basic job description. I think that frustrates a lot of people, but I'd rather focus on doing the work than worrying about a title. Overall, I think the focus on the hierarchy takes the focus off of our true priorities, meeting the goals of the campaign. It can also lead to low morale within the group.

Do titles and office space designate authority? What is your reaction to this policy?

They shouldn't but I think they do. Having a door really makes a difference in how people see you. When we shifted offices, people were very interested to know how the new space would be used. It's difficult because no one likes working in a cubicle; there is no privacy. So, if you have an office, the division must value you and your work by giving you the perk of an office. I feel frustrated by the titles and office space issue. I would rather focus on my actual job than worrying about titles, but it's hard to escape when the whole division is focused on the issue.

Do you feel as though the senior administration is actively engaged with you? If yes, why? If no, why not? Is this important to you?

Not really. There are one or two times a year when we see the senior administration, but usually there's not much interest in learning about us, either personally or professionally. I think this would be more difficult if I didn't have a great manager. He takes the time to invest in me, which makes me feel better about working here. If the senior management took the time to meet lower level employees and learn about us, I think it would help morale. Even a personal thank you for working hard after homecoming or parents weekend would really make a difference. I know we're all working really hard and I can't imagine the pressure the senior administration faces each day. Yet, having them reach out to us helps inspire us to do our jobs better. I appreciate the reminder that I make a difference.

Do you feel as though you can give your opinions and ideas to senior management? If yes, why? If no, why not?

I feel pretty comfortable talking to senior management. I have worked with them long enough that I feel they know me well and are open to hearing from me. I think the newer staff doesn't know the senior management well enough to feel as comfortable, but that could change over time. I joined the division when it was a smaller place and it was easier to meet senior management. If they make it a priority to build relationships with new staff, I think they will find people are more willing to share their ideas.

Here we learn more about the employee's perception of the investment the management is making in the staff. We see that the employee feels trusted and appreciated when given flexibility to work from home. We also see that small things, such as office space versus a cubicle, make a difference in how employees perceive their value within the organization. While it may be impossible to grant everyone an office, a simple thing such as a personal thank you can go a long way in improving the morale of the staff.

Does your division have a mission and a set of core values? If so, do you know what they are? If not, do you think it would benefit from having one or both?

I know we have them, but I'm not sure what they are. Every summer, we talk about the mission and core values at the annual retreat, but then we don't do much else until the following year. I think it would help if we reviewed them more often and talked about ways to integrate them into our daily work.

Do you have an understanding of the vision of university advancement and the goals of the institution? If yes, what are they? If no, why not?

This is hard to answer because I feel that the goals of the university, or its priorities, seem to be changing. Overall, I know that the university wants to be a top research institution with great undergraduate programs. The vision of university advancement is to support the university's goals by providing the financial support and building relationships with external groups (alumni, parents and friends) to help the university reach its goals.

Do you feel as though your manager demonstrates the division's values and carries out its mission? If yes, how? If no, why not? What is your reaction to this?

I feel lucky to have my manager because I think he is committed to the university and supporting the mission. However, he does this implicitly because these values are also important to him personally. This really makes a difference because I know that his work and care for donors is not just a statement written on paper to review every year. This affects his daily routine, to the point of his spending three weeks in December delivering homemade poppy seed bread to his donors to say thank you. This is one of the busiest times of the year for our office, but he makes it a priority to reach out.

Is there a formal recruiting strategy in place? What kind of people do you think the university is looking for? What kinds of skills? Why?

There is a formal strategy in place for recruiting new members of the team. I think the university is looking for smart people who reflect the values of the organization and have the skills to get the job done. Obviously, we look for people who can meet the job requirements. Beyond that, we look for people who are able to communicate well, provide excellent customer service, both internally and externally, and are committed to staying with the organization over time. I think that the university knows that the biggest investment it makes is in its people. There are very skilled people out there, but someone who understands and supports the mission makes a better fit long term.

Have you ever had input in a hiring decision? Is there team input as to who joins a particular group? If so, why is that important? If not, do you think it is important and why not?

Yes, I have. Ultimately, the hiring decision rests with the hiring manager, but I think the process of gathering information through behavioral interviews helps better inform the decision making process. There is usually a team of four to five people interviewing candidates and providing feedback. I think it is important to use the team approach because different conversations reveal more information about the candidate.

Do you think the staff members who interviewed you determined what your skills were? If so, how? If not, do you think that you were equipped to perform your job effectively?

Again, you have to remember that I was hired under the old system. I think that system depended much more on what people thought on a gut level versus a systematic approach of developing questions and searching for both skills and fit. The interviews were very conversational and, except for one or two people, didn't go into too much depth. I think I was equipped to perform my job effectively, though I wish there had been more follow-up after the initial orientation process. It felt like I had one month of constant training and then was left to determine the next steps on my own.

Did you go through any new hire orientation or on-boarding process? If so, what did it involve? If not, would that have been helpful?

I spent about one month meeting people in the division and across the university. I also spent a lot of time meeting with the advancement officers to learn more about them and their style of working. There was a lot of information to learn about the university, so some of it went over my head until I met with alumni from those areas. I traveled with one other advancement officer to learn more about the qualification and cultivation process and then was sent out on my own. I think the process was helpful, though I think that it has improved over time.

Do you have a divisional department focused on the needs of the people?

We do. The organizational development department has five staff members who oversee recruitment, retention, training and development, on-boarding, and benefits administration.

Do you feel as though you could go to the human resources department with personal and/or professional issues or problems? If yes, why? If no, why not?

I think this is a great resource for employees and I would check in with the director if I had problems. They do a great job of being professional and respecting confidentiality in difficult circumstances.

Is there an internal divisional Web site, with a human resources section where you can make changes to your benefits or payroll deductions?

Yes. The system is fairly simple to use, and we make our annual benefit plan changes online each year.

Have you ever taken an opinion survey in the division? If so, when? If not, why not?

I have, after different training sessions. Usually these are internet surveys through an online form that rates the presentation and the speaker.

Organizations sometimes miss the mark when they go through the vision, mission, and core values exercises. The point of these activities is not just to create a document, but to produce something that actually guides the work of the division. Employees need to see that the ideals articulated are relevant to their daily interactions with colleagues and external “customers.” The recruitment and on-boarding process is another area in which organizations can set the right tone for new employees. Having a formal recruitment process and strategy ensures that the interview team understands what the manager is searching for in a new employee. It also helps ensure that the organization does more than find someone to fill a seat, that it finds the best person to do the job and strengthen the organization.

Just as important as recruiting is the on-boarding process, which is crucial to the success of the new hire. Developing the appropriate training process can help new employees be more successful in the long term and help all employees become more aware of the resources available to help them be successful.

As you can see, the amount of information that may be gleaned from a good interview is substantial. Good analysis calls for scanning for a consistency of themes across multiple interviews. The more you do, the more common threads appear throughout the interview process. You should keep a running list of consistent positive and developmental issues to address in your final assessment or solutions strategy. If your leadership team does not want to complete a large-scale individual interview assessment, you can still conduct such interviews with your own staff or within your own department. You could also select a random sample of staff.

The Exit Interview

Another powerful assessment interview tool is the exit interview. Depending on the questions asked, the attitude and approach of the interviewer, and how honest the interviewee feels she can be, the exit interview can provide important information.

Instead of merely making assumptions about why your people leave your organization, take the time to ask them before they go. Often, a departing staff member feels free to be frank. She may earnestly want to give you important information, so that changes can be made for the benefit of current and future staff members.

- Exit interviews can be used in lieu of large scale interview assessments. They are better than nothing. However, I recommend using both methods to get the most information you can. Besides, isn't it better to get useful information before a staff member leaves?

Exit interviews can tell you what you're doing wrong, and they can also tell you what you're doing right. They can provide confirmation for organizational leaders that their strategies are having a positive affect.

One organization for which I worked used exit interviews in various ways.

- They helped us to innovate and deliver programs responding to specific needs articulated by several departing members of a department.
- They provided the basis for individual management coaching to address issues departing staff consistently divulged concerning particular managers.
- They provided material warranting praise for department managers or division leaders.

It is important to understand that some turnover is healthy for an organization. Sometimes a multitude of factors that have little to nothing to do with the organization, its culture, or its manager prompt someone to leave. Avoid insisting that someone or something is to blame.

Honest feedback can be both constructive and positive. Let's look at a sample exit interview. A blank sample exit interview can also be found in *Human Capital Toolkit B* in Part Two of this book.

The exit interview is best completed in person; however, if necessary, you can ask an exiting employee to complete it on his own and return it.

SAMPLE EXIT INTERVIEW

Employee's Name:	Jane Smith
Department:	Alumni Relations
Position:	Associate Director
Employment Start Date:	January 2, 2002
Employment Termination Date:	June 30, 2007
Manager's Name:	Bob Dogwood

We want to provide an opportunity for you to comment on your reason for leaving and to recommend any changes to the organization you feel appropriate. It is also an opportunity to let us know about practices that worked particularly well for you. Your individual responses are treated as confidential and will not become a part of your personnel file; however, the information gathered here is critical to making necessary changes to practices throughout the division. Your answers will be summarized and may be used without your name attached to provide important data for making such changes.

What prompted you to seek a position outside of the division?

Challenge of work

Compensation

Lack of recognition

Issues with the organization

Issues with supervisor

Working conditions/organizational culture

Family circumstances

Career advancement opportunity

Other

I was looking for more challenging work and the opportunity to advance in my career. After working here for a number of years, I was ready for something new.

Before making your decision to leave, did you seek out and discuss other options that would enable you to stay?

I did speak with my manager and with the director for Alumni Relations, but I was told that they didn't see any additional leadership positions being developed in the next two years. Since I prefer working in alumni relations versus the development or communications/marketing areas, I didn't see any other opportunities that would fit my career goals and interests.

In this section, we gather a general understanding of why the employee has chosen to leave the university. This is the first attempt to delve into the mindset of the departing employee. Since the employee is leaving the organization, she is willing to be quite honest about her reasons for choosing another organization. From the outset, we learn that lack of career advancement is a critical issue.

Please rate your manager in regard to the following: (Excellent/Good/Fair/Poor)

Demonstrated fair and equal treatment to all members of the team	Good
Provided recognition for a job well done	Good
Developed cooperation and teamwork within the department	Good
Encouraged/listened to suggestions	Fair
Resolved complaints/problems within the department	Fair
Followed policies and practices	Excellent

Please rate the following: (Excellent/Good/Fair/Poor)

Cooperation between you and your colleagues within your department	Good
Cooperation between your colleagues with other departments in the division	Poor
Cooperation between your colleagues with other departments out of the division	Good
Communication in your department	Excellent
Communication within the organization as a whole	Fair
Communication between you and your manager	Fair
Overall morale in your department	Good

Your overall job satisfaction	<i>Fair</i>
Professional development opportunities	<i>Poor</i>
Training you received	<i>Good</i>
Opportunity for growth and advancement within	<i>Poor</i>

How the departing employee rates the manager and the department provide an understanding of the employee's sense of the work environment. As we continue to ask probing questions, we learn more about specifics in areas that could need improvement and those in which things are going well. In this example, the employee has identified deficiencies in opportunities for advancement and professional growth. Additionally, I would want to know why this employee rated the manager on two critical areas as only "fair." Communication outside of the department is also an area that warrants further exploration.

Was your workload usually:

Too great

Varied, but all right

About right

Too light

The work seemed to come in cycles. It would be very busy in the fall and spring and then much more relaxed in the summer. Part of this is the nature of the academic calendar. In my first year or so, I felt challenged throughout the year because I was learning how each event worked. The past few years, it's been much more routine and almost boring at times, because there's not a lot of change in what we do from year to year.

Please describe how you felt about your salary and benefits?

The salary seemed consistent with what other universities advertise, though I think the benefits were minimal compared with other places. The health insurance options were expensive once you added more than one person to the plan. I also think that the paid time off plan here is challenging, especially to those of us who have children. When they are sick, I have to take time off, so I often found myself taking time off when I should have been allowed sick time. I should not have had to lump vacation with sick time.

Are there any other benefits you feel should have been offered?

I was very surprised that we didn't have separate vacation and sick leave and felt that the vacation time was insufficient. I also think that the university should reconsider its maternity/paternity leave policy.

How frequently did you receive performance feedback? Would you have wanted more or less feedback from your manager?

It basically happened once a year, during the universitywide performance management process. We would celebrate team successes throughout the year, but she didn't provide clear feedback after every major project. I think the tools put in place were very helpful, but my manager didn't

use them to her full advantage. I wish we could have reviewed the information quarterly and developed strategies to discuss my performance on a more regular basis. Also, I don't think she was interested in hearing feedback on her performance as a manager.

What were your feelings about the division's overall performance management process?

Overall, I thought it was a good process, but I know it caused a lot of tension throughout the division. People started to compare the ratings they received, and that led to conflict as managers appeared to apply the ratings differently.

Did you ever have discussions with your manager about your career goals? How often?

Once a year, but they weren't very productive. I tried to bring up my desire for more responsibility, but she didn't have any feedback.

The responses in this section indicate the failure of the manager to take full advantage of the performance management process. While no organization can promise employees promotions every year, the process allows the employee and manager to discuss current performance and the employee's professional goals. Also, while the formal evaluation takes place annually, there is always room for feedback at other times during the year, especially after key projects. By failing to respond to address the employee's desire to discuss the future, the manager seemed not to be listening, thereby encouraging the employee to seek other opportunities.

What did you like most about your job?

I really enjoyed the people I worked with in my department. It was a very collegial work environment among the team members, and we were all willing to work hard to make sure things worked well for alumni and parents. I also really enjoyed the alumni and parent volunteers. They were so excited about the university and willing to help. Their positive attitudes and enthusiasm for the university made it fun to come to work.

What did you like least about your job?

I felt frustrated that we were isolated from the rest of the division. I wish my manager had supported integrating our work with other teams so we could have been more effective in the overall strategy of building relationships with alumni and parents.

When you leave, what will you miss the most about the division?

I'm going to really miss the alumni and parents I worked with, as well as my colleagues. The people connected to this university are so amazing, and I feel really blessed to have worked with them.

When you leave, what will you miss the least about the division?

I won't miss the office politics and the lack of collaboration between the different groups.

Here the employee sends two key messages. First: The department's employees are a strong team and enjoy working together. Morale is currently high within this group, and it will be important to work at maintaining this positive morale after the loss of this employee. Second: Communication and collaboration within the division are key issues the manager and organization must address. The organization cannot be successful if the different groups in advancement do not trust each other or work well together.

What would you describe as the two most important things that make the new job better?

I finally have the opportunity to try something new and fulfill my desire for more responsibility. It's definitely a promotion, and while I'll be working for a smaller organization, I think the additional responsibility of leading a staff and building a program will be a great learning experience. I also get to work with a vice president who enjoys mentoring staff, which is important for me as I advance in my career. The increased pay and better benefits are a nice bonus, but I value the mentorship more than the money.

If you were able to change one thing about the division, what would it be? Have you tried to raise this issue in the past? If so, what is your impression as to what happened with your suggestion?

I would encourage my manager and the department to think seriously about professional development opportunities for the staff. This is a really great team, but it's hard to stay in a job if there's not a sense of challenge or opportunities for growth. Flexibility is an area where I think the whole organization could improve.

Would you recommend this organization to a friend?

Absolutely

Probably, but with reservations

No

It would depend on the position and the friend. Overall, I really like the organization, but I've been frustrated for the past few years, so I wouldn't want to encourage someone to join the staff if they didn't see ways they could grow after the first two years.

You can see from this sample exit interview how useful it is for gathering feedback. In reviewing this interview, I would identify the key themes and determine whether they were also voiced by other departing staff. If they were, I would raise the relevant issues and themes in an assessment meeting or document, doing so in a general way that preserves the anonymity of the respondents.

Exit interviews are often most helpful when several people leave the same department because the likelihood of identifying salient problems is higher. Exit interviews can also confirm earlier discoveries and impressions, and they can lend support when you are making an argument for a particular improvement.

SURVEYS

Surveys are another valuable method of gathering feedback from large groups. Administering surveys, especially using today's inexpensive technologies, is a quick and inexpensive way to take the pulse of an organization.

Surveys should be short and easy to complete. Many organizations administer employee opinion or employee satisfaction surveys. I suggest using them as a second step in the assessment process. Often, these confidential assessment tools provide excellent general data to support or to counter interview data. Nevertheless, it is quite possible to use surveys alone, without interviews. Using surveys is better than not asking your staff for any feedback at all.

Surveys can also be used to measure effectiveness of specific or new programs. You can administer a pre-test as an assessment baseline, innovate and implement your programs, and then conduct a post-test survey one, two, or three years later to measure the effect of the initiatives. Having this quantitative data is always helpful when you are trying to prove your case to the vice president and the leadership team. Anecdotal evidence is rarely sufficient.

Not too long ago, I built upon a “lunch-and-learn” program that a colleague had established and used it to create a multi-curricular, robust learning and training program. Through my original interview assessment, it became very clear that learning, training, and professional development were critical issues to the staff. I knew that a full training and learning program was essential to meet the needs of the staff and the leadership team. We wanted to be a high-performance organization, and giving our staff training and knowledge was a key step toward this goal.

In Chapter 11, we'll take a closer look at how this program was created, launched, and maintained. For now, it's enough to say that the staff greeted the learning and development program with great enthusiasm and positive reviews. Attendance at each session averaged around thirty people out of a division of about two hundred, and attendance often increased when certain speakers or trainers were on tap.

To consistently assess how the program was evolving and whether or not we were actually meeting our division's needs, we gathered feedback after each session in a qualitative questionnaire format, which gave us great suggestions for improving individual sessions and prompted us to try new classes. After a year or so of the program, however, we wanted a quantitative snapshot of how the learning and training program was working. We wanted to know what its weaknesses were and how the curriculum or specific sessions could be improved. Therefore, a larger-scale survey was the right tool. I have included the survey in *Human Capital Toolkit C* in Part Two. It is just one example of how a survey can collect feedback on a specific topic.

FOCUS GROUPS

Yet another useful assessment tool is the focus group. A focus group can consist of five to seven people brought together to give feedback on specific topics. A focus group may validate a hypothesis or dispute it. It can be used to gather important feedback on specific initiatives or plans for such initiatives. Depending on the scope of the issues, plans, or initiatives under consideration and on time and budget constraints, you may use a single focus group, several, or many. In either case, the method is a quick but meaningful way of getting feedback from a significant number of people without having to spend the time it takes to conduct individual interviews. Focus groups also provide data that is more qualitative in nature than surveys can generate.

My own preference is to use focus groups to follow-up on interviews and surveys to ensure that the thematic analysis that I have completed is valid and accurate. I especially use them to test out new programs or initiatives. Focus groups have helped me hammer out the flaws and kinks in new systems or programs. Recently, for instance, I led a divisional assessment as a first step in developing a new performance management program. We used focus groups in the process of program development as well as deployment.

Focus groups have helped me hammer out the flaws and kinks in new systems or programs.

First, we gathered nearly one hundred staff members to help us discover what core competencies the division valued. We divided them into several small groups and gave each the same exercise. (We will pursue the details of developing focus group exercises in Chapter 9. For now, I want to give you an idea of how and when focus groups can be used.) Next, we reconvened the focus groups to gather feedback on the effectiveness of the program we had developed. Finally, after the program had gone through a full cycle of use, we gathered the groups for a third time, now in an effort to understand the problems, the questions, and the concerns raised by the new program. With the feedback provided by the second and third focus group sessions, we were able to make important changes and improvements to modify the effectiveness of the program.

A MAJOR INVESTMENT FOR A MAJOR OUTCOME

I realize that you may be questioning whether you have the time to complete this array of assessments—or, for that matter, even a single one of them. It is my very strong belief that you have to make the time—or, better yet, shift some resources to make the assessment process a full-time job. The next chapter makes the case for such a strategy. In this day, when competition for the recruitment and retention of top staff is so intense, I would argue that continual assessment is as important as any other activity in your organization—and probably more important than most.

Whether you use interviews, surveys, focus groups, or a combination of these tools, the most important thing to remember is that you are asking for feedback rather than simply assuming, in the absence of data, what the salient issues are. By actually knowing the issues, good or bad, you prove to your staff that you care enough to understand just what is going on, what is going right, and what is going wrong.

The process is too important to rush. Before actually embarking on any assessment, devise a clear plan for how you will use the information you gather. Few things are more destructive to any organization than asking for people's opinions and then doing nothing with them.

What do you do with the information you gather? The rest of this book is all about answering this question.