

**How the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department
Used Surveys to Engage Employees
and Improve the Organization.**

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How the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department Used Surveys to Engage Employees and Improve the Organization

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The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) is the largest state parks and wildlife agency in the United States. Headquartered in Austin, TX, TPWD manages 11 diverse internal divisions tasked with enforcing, managing, and protecting wildlife habitat, parklands, and state historical areas across the broad geographic area of Texas. To meet the challenge of successfully administering the functions, TPWD takes a straightforward approach and builds leadership throughout the workforce through a program called Natural Leaders. As a resource and driving factor, TPWD employs the survey of employee engagement (SEE) to assess employee attitudes and beliefs toward their work environment and organizational management. The SEE (and its earlier form, the survey of organizational excellence) is an employee engagement tool that has been provided to Texas state agencies since 1979 by the Institute for Organizational Excellence at the University of Texas at Austin. The SEE assesses more than 250,000 employees every two years across 70 state agencies. The SEE has been a long-standing effort in the state strategic initiatives to provide human resource data and benchmarking to enhance leadership and decision-making.

The following case study relates how TPWD has used data from the survey to create viable and lasting solutions to areas of concern and strengthen the function of the organization. In particular, the Natural Leaders program was not only developed in response to results from the survey data, but, this program was designed as a mechanism through which to proactively address issues identified from the data each year. The program and operations have been tremendously successfully and is evident by the fact that TPWD has one of the highest employee retention, employee engagement, and job satisfaction rates as measured by the SEE as compared to other state agencies.

The high level of employee engagement and satisfaction that is enjoyed at TPWD has not come without effort from departmental leadership. Due to the size and workload of the department and the many individuals it employs, TPWD must utilize management tools to monitor and evaluate how the department is doing and how staff feel about their employment. One such tool is the SEE. Since inception of the Natural Leaders program, the SEE has been consistently administered across the entire agency. Over the past six survey cycles, the human resource department has systematically entered key metrics data into a database created by TPWD. The HR function at TPWD includes expertise in organizational development and performance

management. With the data collected and stored, HR leaders then analyze the data to identify trends, patterns, and significant current cycle changes, and then present findings to the executive director and other senior leaders. A key deliverable generated by this process is the decision of which survey constructs to make a focus of attention. Likewise, this process also determines at which organizational level to address the identified issue. Typically, recurring systemic issues are addressed at the agency level, while those that may be specific to a particular division are handled at the individual division level.

One significant aspect of this process is the SEE works with each division director and his/her key leaders. In these sessions, decisions regarding areas for improvement are made based upon a detailed analysis of data over time. Specifically, some organizational performance areas of the survey may be considered areas of weakness and concern. Conversely, high-scoring performance areas are indicated as significant strength, which are then evaluated to determine the potential for leveraging further value. In addition to these internal longitudinal analyses of the survey data, the TPWD also looks at comparative external benchmarks. Namely, it makes comparisons against overall average scores of equally sized agencies with similar missions. The SEE provides benchmark data on organizations of similar size and across eight different missions such as regulatory, health and human services, public safety, education, national resources, etc. Based on these analyses, the agency is able to further refine its listings of systemic issues or those matters that might require deliberate statewide intervention by executive staff and/or other agencies with systems or processes in place that may be transferrable.

As a result of the extensive and continued use of the survey data by TPWD and its HR department, the utilization of the data has been implemented on several levels. One area in which it was implemented was in leadership development and management training at the department. Data have shown over consecutive survey cycles that constructs related to employee perception of supervisor effectiveness, fairness, and team effectiveness were scoring less than the desired benchmark score of 325 (a scale ranging from a low of 100 to a high of 500). To address this, TPWD instituted a comprehensive 32-hour management training program for first-line supervisors and a leadership development program for this same cohort of agency leaders. In large part, due to the cumulative effects of these complementary leadership programs, agency scores on these specific survey constructs significantly improved by 69 points for supervisor effectiveness, 93 points for fairness, and 45 points for team effectiveness.

The aims and scope of the project to be carried out by Natural Leader participants were defined by TPWD leadership and additional analysis of the survey data by program participants. The identified constructs used for the Natural

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Leader project from within the survey were internal communication, supervisor effectiveness, and fair pay. In fact, analyses showed that fair pay had been an issue for staff spanning six consecutive survey cycles. Because fair pay was assessed to be a systemic challenge reflected in both TPWD as well as in all Texas state agencies, the executive team made the decision that it would address the monetary component, and the Natural Leader team would address the non-monetary compensation aspect.

To address these consistently low scores, the TPWD leadership decided the project team would conduct focus groups with TPWD staff members throughout the state to gain a broad consensus on how to address the identified issues. Following the completion of project management training and using project management methodology, the team wrote a project charter. The charter outlined the purpose of the project, the scope of how much work the project aims to accomplish, and the goals of the project that relate to the larger mission of TPWD. The charter also described the duration of time the project is anticipated to require, the key stakeholders within the department who will be involved and/or impacted by the project, and the deliverable products or accomplishments of the projects. Those who crafted the charter also included assumptions (such as when certain materials or data will be available to project team members) and the constraints (such as limitations of funds available).

Building upon the charter, a project plan was also written by the team, which operationalized and expanded upon the ideas in the charter. For instance, a plan for communication was drafted and described how often and to whom the project accomplishments were to be reported. During the project, team members were also required to provide monthly status reports, and at the end of the project, a final report and presentation to executive leadership were delivered.

Many ideas were generated and recorded for presentation to TPWD executives. However, of those ideas presented to department executives, only those with the greatest potential to favorably impact the issue were selected for execution. The first suggestion implemented was the virtual leader training program, which trains leaders on how to manage a geographically dispersed workforce. In addition, the agency implemented a blended-learning online concept for training leadership and management, among other vital employee core competencies. With this online learning system, employees of TPWD have 700 courses available that can be taken online at any time. In addition, TPWD leadership had not underestimated the value employees placed on in-person orientations. Therefore, in 2010, all new employees came to Austin for a multi-day orientation as part of their introduction to the culture and mission of the agency.

Non-monetary compensation was also an identified area discussed in the groups and an area for which recommendations were made. One idea requested for review was that of a “senior scientist” track within the department. This track is intended to be a benefit to those career TPWD staff members who do not possess a great interest in taking on management roles; nevertheless, they are valued members of the department as a result of their technical expertise in various areas. The intention of this track is to retain, refine, and enhance those technical skills as a central part of these staff members’ employment at TPWD. While this particular recommendation has not been implemented yet, research of similar options in other organizations has been carried out by staff to lend credibility to this approach within the department. Currently, this career path is under review with executive leadership, and the expectation is that at some point in the near future, it will be approved and implemented.

Another non-monetary compensation suggestion that came from the groups was for a more liberal use of the department’s tele-work policy. Working remotely from home for some employees is not only convenient, but, this approach also can be rewarding for good workers. Therefore, this more flexible work environment is now an option for some employees. In addition to broadened career trajectories and work environments within the department, the use of employee paid time off came to light as an area for non-monetary compensation. Already existing within statute, the state of Texas permits employees to be awarded up to 32 hours of performance leave each year.

With these recommendations either approved by executive leadership or pending approval, evaluation of the impact of these changes on TPWD has begun and continues to happen. Because the impetus for the focus groups included three constructs that emerged from survey data, current and future survey data will be a primary metric for evaluation of the implemented changes. For instance, in the most recent deployment of the survey, internal communication and pay have both experienced increased scores.

There were many impacts of the Natural Leaders project at TPWD. The clearest impact of the project was that three low scoring constructs from the survey were addressed by the department. The manner in which these were addressed was by going to employees who were reporting the problems and asking them for help in devising achievable solutions. Likewise, another one of the most important repercussions of the project was the improved perception of employees about the influence their voice can have on the larger organization. For instance, those employees who participated in the focus groups were able to see their collective voice transform from commentary or suggestions to actual organizational changes. In a less direct but larger scale, department employees also realized that the

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information that they provide on the organizational survey likewise can have a far reaching impact within TPWD.

In addition to the impact the project and the data have had on managers and employees, there have been lessons also learned by department executive and directors. For instance, HR leadership understands to a greater degree the importance and utility in championing organizational change on multiple levels by using data from the organizational survey. Organizational change has resulted from the consistent presentation of the data to managers and leaders within the department. However, this change certainly has not occurred overnight. As was mentioned, the survey began to be strategically and systematically used in TPWD around 10 years ago. Building survey data over the years to depict longitudinal issues instead of cross-sectional inferences requires effort and diligence.

A final insight gained by managers was with respect to the influence they could have over employees' perceptions of pay. As a result of the focus groups and the focus of TPWD on non-monetary compensation, leadership was able to help employees see that the compensation they receive for their time in the department is much more than their hourly wage. In particular, TPWD employees are compensated with other aspects of their employment, such as lifestyle options of working from home and job security—something not enjoyed often in the current private employment market.