

# VBA's 2001 VA Employee Survey

## BACKGROUND

The mission of the Veterans Benefits Administration, in partnership with the Veterans Health Administration and the National Cemetery System, is "to provide benefits and services to the veterans and their families in a responsive, timely and compassionate manner in recognition of their service to the Nation." Actionable information about VBA's relative strengths and weaknesses *from the employees viewpoint*, can help achieve this goal, by enabling the organization to create a climate which is conducive to providing excellent service to veterans and their families. This information is also critical in addressing issues of employee recruitment and retention which will factor heavily in achieving a VBA plan for the strategic management of human capital in the next few years. In addition, VBA will use this information to continue to examine the relationship of employee perceptions of the workplace to other organizational outcomes such as timeliness and accuracy.

In August 1996, the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) Personnel Resources and Development Center (PRDC) assisted in developing and conducting an organizational climate assessment of the entire VA workforce. The assessment used the OPM-developed Organizational Assessment Survey (OAS). The OAS consists of a set of 133 core items developed by OPM to measure aspects of organizational climate related to high-performance. Items were based both on a thorough research foundation and on practical experience in administering earlier versions of the survey to government-wide and agency populations. The survey also allowed for comparisons with the evaluation criteria for the Malcolm Baldrige and Presidential Quality awards.

All VA employees were given the opportunity to complete the voluntary survey during April 1997. VBA again administered the survey to all of its employees in June 1999, based on the commitment to reassess employee perceptions of their organizational climate on a biennial basis. The most recent employee survey, conducted in the fall of 2001, was administered to all VA employees through a Departmental work team with the assistance of Caliber Associates, a national research firm. The work team included representatives from the Office of Human Resources Management, the Veterans Health Administration, the Veterans Benefits Administration, the National Cemetery Administration, the Office of Policy and Planning, the Office of Management, and union representatives.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The survey was administered from October 16, 2001 to December 18, 2001. The VBA approach was to offer all VBA employees a choice of replying through the contractor's secured web site online, or to fill out a paper version. All VBA employees were sent an e-mail notifying them of the survey, with a individual password and direct link to the contractor's web site address that contained the questionnaire. Entry into the website was restricted to individuals with valid passwords. For those individuals who preferred the traditional hard copy questionnaire, the e-mail contained a link to the facility point of contact (POC) who could be notified to put a paper version and return envelope (with the contractor's return address) in the employee's mailbox. Aside from the original e-mail, several reminder e-mail messages were sent out during the course of the field period to encourage employees to respond to the survey.

In 1997 the survey was administered via a paper-and-pencil method only resulting in a 74.5 percent response rate. The 1999 VBA survey was administered using a VBA intranet site only, resulting in a drop in the response rate to 43.0 percent. The reasons for the decreased response rate were unclear. However, the most probable explanations are that 1) employees were concerned about the confidentiality of their results using the intranet and 2) employees saw no clear organizational use of the 1997 results. In planning the 2001 survey, it was hoped that a combination of paper and on-line choices would increase the response rate. Indeed, that did seem to be the case with a total of 6,345 employees responding out of 13,040 total employees, yielding a response rate of 48.7 percent. Fully 80.4 percent of the responses were received on-line.

Response rates will vary from station to station. Please refer to the VBA 2001 Employee Survey Response Rates chart, available via the Surveys and Research website, to determine the response rate for your facility or office. Those stations with low response rates or those where the demographic characteristics of respondents differ greatly from 1999 to 2001, should interpret their data with caution.

## **ELEMENTS OF THE SURVEY**

The 2001 VA Employee Survey instrument used by VBA was a slightly modified version of the Organizational Assessment Survey (OAS) instrument used in 1997 and 1999. All of the individual questions used to define the dimensions of organizational climate in previous administrations

were included in 2001, ensuring comparability among the original 17 dimensions in 1997, 1999, and 2001. A new dimension was added in 2001, consisting of four questions related to “organizational politics” as suggested by recent literature. In addition, because of increasing evidence that personal experiences at work help determine a person’s satisfaction with their job and their intention to remain, several questions were added to the 2001 survey including “My supervisor sees me as a person, not just an employee.” Another change in 2002 was the “funneling” of the questions from organizational experiences, to experiences in the immediate work group, to personal experiences. In 1999, many employees were confused by the term “supervisors” and who they should refer to when answering those questions. In response, the 2001 questionnaire included instructions for non-supervisory employees to refer to their immediate supervisor or team leader when answering those questions.

It should be noted that essentially two questionnaires were used in the administration of the 2001 VA employee Survey. The VBA questionnaire described above was also used by the National Cemetery Administration (NCA), the Board of Veterans Appeals (BVA), and all other VA Staff Offices. The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) used a separate instrument that included a significantly reduced number of questions asked on the original 1997 OAS survey. This instrument also included many new questions that addressed issues of occupational health and safety issues particular to the healthcare field. Both instruments included new questions on the degree of stress experienced by employees, their understanding of the VA strategic plan, and their intent to retire or leave VA or federal service. In all, there were about 75 questions in common between the two questionnaires. However, because of the lack of complete overlap between the two questionnaires, it is not possible to compare VBA dimension scores with VA or VHA scores for the 2001 administration of the survey.

Using the original OAS structure, the 2001 VBA results assess dimensions that are related to a high-performing organization. These dimensions and their definitions are included below:

### **Definitions of Employee Survey Dimensions**

Employee Involvement: Organizational emphasis on involvement and participation in organizational goal setting, work design, and decision-making at all levels.

Leadership and Quality: Management promotes quality and continuous improvement by creating and modeling an organizational vision that values quality.

Teamwork: Cooperation in defining and accomplishing work objectives is integrated into work processes and reward systems.

Rewards and Recognition: Rewards are diverse, related to organizational values, and perceived as fair by employees.

Job Security/Commitment to Workforce: Long-term commitment to the morale and effectiveness of employees by emphasizing job security and flexible work roles.

Strategic Planning: Looking to the organizational future by monitoring its responses to the realities and requirements of the external environment.

Performance Measures: Reliable and valid information is regularly collected on organizational performance and used for benchmarking, standard setting, and quality improvement.

Training/Career Development: Employees are provided continuous education and learning opportunities for effective job performance and career development.

Innovation/Change: Creativity and risk-taking in adapting to change are encouraged and rewarded.

Use of Resources: Necessary physical resources and a sufficient number of well-trained employees are available to assure effective performance.

Work Environment/Quality of Worklife: Preventing physical or psychological harm in the workplace through facilities that are conducive to safe, effective work, along with programs that encourage good employee health.

Communication: Free exchange of information upward, downward, and horizontally to meet the need for effective performance and mission accomplishment.

Work and Family/Personal Life: Supporting work schedule, job-location, leave, and other programs and facilities that help employees balance work, family, companionship, and personal life needs.

Supervision: Supervisors clearly communicate goals, priorities, and standards, provide constructive feedback and guidance, and give fair performance evaluations.

Customer Orientation: Empowering employees to provide high-quality products and services, while soliciting feedback necessary to respond to customer needs and expectations.

Fairness and Treatment of Others: Protecting the rights of all employees to a fair and respectful work relationship by promoting trust, protecting privacy, and providing a fair dispute resolution system.

Diversity: Valuing differences in employee backgrounds, perspectives and attitudes by embracing programs that promote tolerance and equal

opportunity across the broadest ethnic, racial, religious, and cultural groupings.

Organizational Politics: Minimizing unsanctioned behavior that promotes self-interest and the suppression of dissenting views at the expense of organizational goals.

## TIPS FOR INTERPRETING THE SURVEY RESULTS

### Report Layout

Separate reports were generated for the entire VBA , all Central Office (including Insurance Service), each major VBA Staff Office and Service, SDN's, and each facility. All reports follow a similar format:

**Section A**—This section presents a summary of the results on each *dimension* of the survey. Comparable data for VBA as a whole and the next lower organizational level in 2001 are included for comparison. Dimension results for 1997 and 1999 for the organization or facility highlighted in the report are included if available. The “N” shown for each dimension is the average number of respondents across all questions (items) used to calculate the results for the overall dimension.

**Section B**—This section presents a summary of the results for each *item* within each dimension related to “organizational and immediate work group experiences.” (The items shown beneath each dimensional category constitute the complete listing of the items used to calculate the dimension results shown in Section A.) Again comparable data for other organizational elements for 2001 are shown where appropriate, as well as historical data for 1997 and 1999 for the organization or facility highlighted in the report. The “N” shown for each item is the number of respondents who answered the question; this number was used to calculate the results shown. Question numbers relate to the 2001 VBA questionnaire—they may not be in sequence as items from various sections of the questionnaire were used to calculate specific dimensions.

**Section C**—This section presents a summary of the results for each *item* within the “personal experiences” section of the questionnaire. Comparable data for other organizational elements for 2001, and 1997 and 1999 data for the highlighted organization or facility are shown if available. The “N” shown for each item is the number of respondents who answered each question and is the basis for the results shown.

**Section D**—This section presents results for items included in the “Background and Employment Information” section of the questionnaire. Data are shown only for the organization or facility highlighted in the report. The “Number of Responses” is the number of persons answering the question used to calculate the percentage distributions shown.

**Appendix 1**—The Appendix contains the complete questionnaire.

## **Guidelines for Interpreting Overall Dimension Ratings**

In order to interpret dimension ratings in a way that contributes to effective organizational improvement and action planning, it is useful to establish guidelines for identifying dimension-related strengths and opportunities for improvement.

An overall picture of organizational strengths and opportunities for improvement is provided for the 18 dimensions in three ways: (1) *percent ratings for each of the five response categories*, (2) *top-box scores*, and (3) *mean (average) ratings*.

The dimension mean is the average of individual item means and ranges from 1.00 to 5.00, with the higher score being more favorable. This measure provides a good summary of the dimension and can easily be compared against a benchmark standard or against other dimension averages. However, two dimension means that are numerically the same may mask important differences in the distribution of responses among the five categories of “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” It may also be difficult to establish precise and understandable better/worse guidelines for comparison, since even very small differences in two averages may be statistically significant. The standard deviation shown is computed on the basis of the dimension mean, showing the amount of dispersion of individual observations from the group mean. The larger the standard deviation, the more the individual scores are spread out; the smaller the standard deviation, the more they cluster together.

An alternative measure, the stacked horizontal bar graph showing all five categories, is more straightforward in that it is easier to see the proportions of favorable, neutral, and unfavorable responses. Agree and strongly agree are considered favorable responses, neither agree nor disagree is considered neutral, and disagree and strongly disagree are considered unfavorable responses.

A summary of the percentage distribution is the “topbox” score or the sum of the top two favorable categories, agree and strongly agree. These

summary percentages are shown in the bar chart at the top of each page in Section A, for 1997, 1999, and 2001.

While both means and percents are useful measures, the percents may have more practical utility compared to the mean rating because it is easy to consider improvement in terms of a specific change, e.g., by answering the question, "What additional percent of personnel is needed to respond more favorably (or less unfavorably) in order to improve a dimension's overall rating?"

The following model for evaluating dimensions incorporates both standards of the dimension average and the percent ratings, as follows:

#### **Guidelines for Interpreting Overall Dimension Ratings**

*Dimensions of relative strength* -- those with average ratings of at least 3.00 **OR** percent favorable (topbox) ratings of at least 50 percent.

*Dimensions with greater opportunity for improvement* – those with average ratings of less than 3.00 **OR** percent unfavorable (strongly disagree plus disagree) ratings of at least 35%.

Note: If a dimension meets **both** stated conditions, for either a strength or greater opportunity for improvement, this provides stronger evidence of its relative standing.

#### **Guidelines for Interpreting Item Ratings**

The item results provide specific information on the opportunities for improvement and the strengths in your organization. There are three ways you can look at the item results: 1) an absolute standard, similar to the standard stated above for interpreting dimension results, 2) a relative standard, and 3) patterns. Most organizations use at least the absolute standard method, but any combination of methods may be appropriate.

The absolute standard: At the item level, if 50 percent or more of the employees answered favorably (strongly agree plus agree) then that item shows a strength. If 35 percent or more of the employees answered unfavorably (strongly disagree plus disagree), then that is an area that may need attention. Many organizations involved in the survey feedback process, both private and public, interpret climate survey data using this method.

The relative standard: Another way to interpret your data is to look at how the results stand in relation to the agency overall, or to any other

comparison line provided (e.g., your SDN). A rule of thumb to use is if there is more than a 5 percent difference between your organization's topbox results and the comparison organization, then it may be worth investigating; the larger the difference, the more noteworthy. If your organization has an item that is very different than the agency and it is an area that needs improving, you may want to focus your improvement efforts on it.

Patterns: You may also find that there are patterns across dimensions and/or individual items. For instance, there are supervisory-related items in the Supervision dimension. However, there may also be items related to this area in Section C, "personal experiences" which show how the quality of supervision is experienced at a personal level. Many of the items across the dimensions are related and you may find patterns in the responses. You may also find patterns of responses within a dimension.