

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE PROJECT

Final Report



May 2000
Office of Workforce Analysis
Office of Human Resources

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SECTION

Executive Summary

Background

A. How did the project begin?

B. What is organizational culture and why are we interested in it?

C. Why was the culture objective included in the Agency Strategic Plan?

Baselining: Secondary Research

Baselining: Employee Interviews

Baselining/Gap Analysis: Surveys

A. Methodology

1. Employee Survey

2. Senior Staff Survey

B. Findings—Quantitative Data (Surveys)

C. Findings—Qualitative Data (Employee Comments)

Benchmarking

Conclusion

Recommended Next Steps

A. Desired Results

B. Intercomponent Workgroup

C. Analysis and Review

Afterward: Is It Possible to Categorize SSA's Current Culture?

Attachments:

Tab A-Research Paper on Organizational Culture

Tab B-Results of Secondary Research

Tab C-Employee Survey (Acrobat Reader File)

Tab D-Organizational Survey Results

[Tab E-"Where They Agree" Charts](#)

[Tab F-Benchmarking Survey](#)

[Tab G-Bibliography](#)

[To view Organizational Culture Report in Word format \(*.doc\).](#)
(Printer friendly version)

Note: The culture survey ([tab C](#)) is in .pdf format and is not included in the Word document listed above. You will need the Adobe Acrobat Reader program to view it. You can download and install Adobe Acrobat Reader for free from the following web site <http://www.adobe.com>.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE PROJECT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

May 2000

BACKGROUND
[Contents](#)

[Back to Table of](#)

The Organizational Culture Project originated with the Agency Strategic Plan which includes the objective *to promote an Agency culture that successfully incorporates our values*. Those values are in the current Agency Strategic Plan. A good definition of organizational culture is: "The shared practices and values of the group" or, more simply put, *"it's the way we do things around here."* Shortly after publication of the ASP, the Office of Workforce Analysis (OWA) in the Office of Human Resources (OHR) was assigned the lead for developing a plan to achieve the culture objective, to include *baselining* the current culture and conducting a *gap analysis* between the current and the desired culture. There are a number of reasons why it is important to know the culture; for example, ignoring the culture can derail new ideas since new ideas may require ways of working or behaving that are not like "the way we do things around here."

[The attached report documents fully the findings from all stages of](#)

the project, including results from secondary research, employee interviews, benchmarking, and a survey. This summary highlights the most significant findings from the survey.

METHODOLOGY

To find out what values and workplace issues are important, teams of SSA employees conducted individual and group interviews with more than 1000 employees and managers. The interviews took place in six regions and all headquarters components. We used the information from these interviews to design a survey which covers topics related to workplace practices, values and work climate. We asked employees to react to 67 statements on these survey topics in two ways—to what extent the practice now exists in their workplace and how important the practice is to them. The difference between the two answers will help identify how much of a gap there is between what the culture is and what employees would like it to be. The survey also included questions on demographics, such as the respondent's component, age, gender, grade level, bargaining unit membership, and so on. A copy of the survey is attached at tab C of the full report. (Note: The survey is in .pdf format. You will need the Adobe Acrobat Reader program to view it. You can download and install the Adobe Acrobat Reader for free from the web site of <http://www.adobe.com>).

We sent the survey to 13,600 SSA employees during the Summer of 1999; altogether, we received 6,605 completed surveys. We also received written comments from 574 employees. We sent the same survey to all 128 members of the Senior Staff to see how their vision and opinions compared to the rest of SSA. Are there serious disconnects and are there areas of agreement? Sixty-five members of the Senior Staff responded (about 51%). None of them submitted comments relative to SSA's culture.

In addition, we identified mid-level managers from the survey demographics and compared their results to the items where employees and Senior Staff agreed or disagreed the most.

FINDINGS—QUANTITATIVE DATA (SURVEY)

Charts displaying the data in the following categories appear in the attached report on pages 10 through 22.

1. Current situation: The highest rated "practices" in the workplace now are the observance of zero tolerance for program fraud and abuse and knowing what is expected [of me] at work. Eighty-one and 83%, respectively, agreed or strongly agreed that *currently* these are normal practices in their office. In addition, nearly 81% of those responding believe we provide accurate information about SSA programs; about 81% of respondents know that their day-to-day work is important to SSA's mission; 75% reported that satisfaction is treated as a top priority; and 73% reported pride in the contribution their work unit is making.

The two lowest rated current practices were the appraisal system and understanding the administrative budget. Fifty percent of our respondents think we do not *now* have an appraisal system that supports clear and challenging performance standards. Only 28% of respondents said it is the practice in their office *now* to understand the administrative budget.

2. Importance: Providing accurate information about the programs and having zero tolerance for program fraud and abuse were the two practices that were most important to employees. In both cases, about ninety-six percent of our respondents agreed or strongly agreed that these two practices are *important* to them. Both of these practices received high marks in the current situation as well, meaning that the majority thinks we are doing a good job in these areas now.

"I have a best friend at work"—was the situation rated least important by about 50% of our respondents. Interestingly, forty-six percent said they have a best friend *currently*—so, more than half of our employees *do not* have a best friend at work and about half *do not* think it is important to have one.

3. Largest/smallest gaps: The appraisal system resulted in the largest gap (1.72) between the average answers to the current situation and importance. Fifty percent think the system is inadequate now, but 85% think it is important to have a good appraisal system. The smallest gap (0.21) appeared in "I am able to explain SSA's mission." Seventy-three percent are able to explain the mission *now* and 81% think this is *important*.

4. **Values:** The values rated highest in the workplace currently are "to discharge faithfully our role as guardians of the public trust," "to act with integrity," and "to act with this thought in mind: to millions of people we ARE the government." Sixty-three percent of employees agreed or strongly agreed with the first statement in the *current situation* column; 62% believe we act with integrity in the workplace *now*, and, 58% agreed we are *currently* the government to millions. The average answers for these three values were 3.7, 3.5 and 3.6 respectively.¹

The values rated lowest in *importance* are "to value diversity" and "to act with this thought in mind: to millions of people we ARE the government." Seventy-eight percent agreed valuing diversity is important while 51% said we value diversity *now*. Seventy-nine percent think being the government to millions is *important*. This was the second lowest rated value in *importance* (4.2). Since it was rated 3.6 in the workplace *currently*, there is not a large gap (0.6) between where we are and where employees would like to be.

5. **Senior Staff survey results:** There are some notable differences in the results of the Senior Staff survey as compared to employees. For example, Senior Staff responses were more positive than the rest of SSA on almost every item on the survey, both for the *current situation* and the *importance*. The biggest difference for the *current situation* was in "For employee opinions to count." Eighty-seven percent of the Senior Staff agree or strongly agree that employee opinions *now* count; only 37% of employees would agree. The biggest difference in *importance* was in "I share common values with my coworkers—ninety-one percent of the Senior Staff think it is *important* to share common values with coworkers; 72% of employees agree.

There were areas of agreement between employees and the Senior Staff. One of these is that we provide accurate information about SSA programs. Another is the inadequacy of the current appraisal system. See tab E of the report for this and other areas of agreement between employees and the Senior Staff.

The attached report covers the Senior Staff survey results in some detail because organizational culture experts say when the

culture feels different in different parts of the organization, people at the top often misread the thoughts and feelings of those lower in the hierarchy.

FINDINGS—QUALITATIVE DATA—EMPLOYEE COMMENTS

Historically, 5 to 10 percent of survey respondents take the time to make written comments.² Thus, the *percentage* of written comments we received is typical—about 9%. What is not typical is the *length* of the written comments—generally they are "short and terse" or "just a few words³." Many, if not most, of the comments we received were from one to three handwritten or typed pages long—and employees often identified themselves. We read the comments and did a rough stroke tally by category to see what issues appeared most often. There were some positive comments, but most were negative.

Based on our tally, the top 10 most frequently cited issues or problems, from number ten to number one, were:

10. The appraisal system;
9. Complex policy and procedures;
8. Increasing workloads;
7. Work environment (such as poor air quality and unstable temperatures);
6. The awards program;
5. Not enough staff;
4. Poor quality and service;
3. Lack of career and promotion opportunities;
2. Morale—many commented that it's the worst they've seen it in years; and,
1. The number one most frequently cited problem by those who commented was **Management**—far and away managers

got the most criticism.

Employee responses on the survey may shed some light on this last finding. For example, as already noted, only 37% of respondents think it is normal practice in their office *currently* for employee opinions to count; only 51% of our employees are comfortable now telling their supervisor/manager what's on their minds; nearly a quarter (24%) of the respondents do not think that their supervisor supports them in getting the job done; and while 63% say their manager treats employees with respect, 22% said their manager does not. The others neither agree nor disagree.

Some may dismiss written comments because they assume only the most disgruntled employees take the time to write. However, we could not find any research to support this assumption. In fact, the issues identified in the survey comments are nearly identical to those we heard during our 1998 interviews and previous OWA studies. They are also borne out by the survey results.

CONCLUSION

A review of interview remarks, employee comments, and survey results shows some very healthy beliefs, behaviors, practices, values, and attitudes on the part of SSA employees. These areas need continued support and encouragement.

On the other hand, many problems have emerged as well. We believe we should focus on those issues that we can do something about quickly and that will have the most payoff for employees and the Agency. For example, it may be a higher priority to focus on the 58% who think we could work more efficiently and productively and the 41% who feel that work responsibilities could be shared more fairly than the 23% who do not think the work environment is attractive or professional enough. Several of the differences between Senior Staff results and the rest of SSA need similar review, as well.

RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

As stated in the current plan for achieving the culture objective, the next step is for the Agency to define its vision of the desired culture. We suggest addressing the questions raised in this report by referring them to the group of Executives already assigned to issues related to goal four (To be an employer that values and invests in each employee).

Once this group considers the issues, we recommend convening an Agency-level intercomponent workgroup, with Union and Management Association membership. Based on the direction provided by this group, the Workgroup would further address issues identified during the various stages of this project. The most important workgroup deliverable would be a change strategy that will help SSA employees and managers achieve the culture they want.

OWA will continue to analyze the survey results to make pertinent demographic comparisons (e.g., men and women; bargaining and non-bargaining; different age groups; varying lengths of service, and so on). We also plan to share individual component's results with them to show them how they compare to the rest of SSA.

Finally, in about 3 years, we will conduct the survey again and compare the results to the 1999 baseline to see if there are any measurable differences as a result of the various change initiatives.

AFTERWORD

The attached report contains a section titled "Afterword: Is It Possible to Categorize SSA's Current Culture?" which summarizes what we did to help us better understand the findings from this study. We searched the literature for documented cultures that, at least in general, typify SSA.

We discovered what we were looking for in two texts⁴—Diagnosing Organizational Culture by Harrison and Stokes and Corporate Cultures by Deal and Kennedy. The authors describe organizations that have the same characteristics as SSA—"Role

Cultures" for Harrison and Stokes and "Process Cultures" for Deal and Kennedy. They also identify the best and worst features of these cultures. We found the material from the various phases of the organizational culture study to be startling in its similarity to the concepts these authors describe.

We invite you to read the "Afterword" in its entirety. We believe it provides insight into who we are and why. It is clear to us that SSA's organizational culture embodies many features of the Role-oriented (or Process) culture—the extent to which a particular feature exists appears to depend on the component and its managers.

Footnotes:

¹ In some cases, ranking of average answers and percentages do not match because of weighting. ([Back to Executive Summary](#))

² Earl Naumann and Kathleen Giel, *Customer Satisfaction Measurement and Management* (Cincinnati: Thomson Executive Press, 1995), 145. ([Back to Executive Summary](#))

³ Ibid. ([Back to Executive Summary](#))

⁴ Footnotes and bibliographic information for these texts are in the attached report. ([Back to Executive Summary](#))

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE PROJECT

FINAL REPORT

May 2000

BACKGROUND

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

A. How did the Organizational Culture Project begin?

In September 1997, the Commissioner published the Agency Strategic Plan for 1997-2002 to all SSA components. The Agency Strategic Plan included five goals—each with a number of associated objectives. Goal 4 of the Plan,

often referred to as the "employee goal," is: *To be an employer that values and invests in each employee.* The Organizational Culture Project stems from the objective under goal 4 that reads *"to promote an agency culture that successfully incorporates our values."*

Shortly after publication of the ASP, the Office of Workforce Analysis (OWA) in the Office of Human Resources (OHR) was assigned the lead for developing a plan to achieve the culture objective. Once developed, the plan included the following initiatives:

1. Perform a *baseline* study of the current culture (what it is now);
2. Conduct a *gap analysis* between the current culture and the desired culture (what we want it be);
3. Conduct a *benchmarking study* to see how the best organizations measure their success in this area; and,
4. Design and implement a *change strategy* to get from where we are now to the desired agency culture.

B. What is organizational culture and why are we interested in it?

A good definition of organizational culture is: "The shared practices and values of the group" or, more simply put, *"it's the way we do things around here."* It is:

- o The subconscious that tells us how to act and how to get things done in the workplace;
- o How we treat each other and our customers; and,
- o The way we communicate, the way we react to criticism and celebrate success, and many more behaviors and practices we see and do every day.

In essence, *culture* is to an organization what *personality* is to an individual. All organizations, SSA included, have a "personality" or *cultural identity* that is reflected in their shared beliefs and values.

There are at least three reasons why it is important to know the culture:

1. There is a strong correlation between organizational culture and performance —people are what make the organization "go." If the culture is positive, productivity and performance usually are, as well;
2. Ignoring the culture can derail new ideas since new ideas may require ways of working behaving that are not like "the way we do things around here"; and,
3. Finally, there is the issue of SSA's retirement wave—knowing the culture will help us recruit and select people who will be good "fits," who will do well at SSA, and who will stay for awhile.

Attached at tab A is a short research paper which answers a number of other questions about organizational culture, including some of the common elements that define it, such as work environment, values, rites, and rituals.

C. Why was the culture objective originally included in the ASP?

During the development of the ASP, a number of Senior Staff involved in the planning process understood the importance of organizational culture and the influence it has on behavior in the workplace. They also believed that a more complete understanding of the current culture would assist in implementing change in a more successful and efficient manner.

BASELINING: SECONDARY RESEARCH Contents

[Back to Table of](#)

A. Methodology

In their text, Corporate Cultures¹, Deal and Kennedy recommend starting a culture analysis by reading what an organization *says* about its culture. Thus, we started the baselining effort by conducting secondary research into written material already available to us—including former study reports, focus group reports, GAO study reports, results of various employee surveys, process review documentation, and previous Business and Strategic Plans. We also visited SSA's Internet site. These documents (and the Web site) gave us a picture of SSA's public "persona" as well as insight into what employees think and say about it.

In reviewing these documents, we attempted to answer six questions:

1. What are our strengths?
2. What opportunities for improvement are identified?
3. What themes, if any, are evident?
4. What behavior would make a difference to the desired outcomes?
5. What financial (bottom line) implications are linked to behavioral outcomes?
6. What barriers to change are evident?

B. Findings

A full report of our findings from this research is attached at tab B. However, the finding most pertinent to this project was the emergence of three themes that were prevalent throughout the vast majority of these documents:

1. Building confidence in Social Security;
2. Providing world-class service; and,
3. Creating a supportive work environment.

Warded in various ways in the documents we reviewed, these three themes embody what most of the documents *said* we are (or would like to be) about at SSA.

BASELINING: EMPLOYEE INTERVIEWS
Contents

[Back to Table of](#)

A. Methodology

To further educate ourselves, we hired Dr. Judd Allen from the Human Resources Institute to conduct a one-day seminar on organizational culture theory². During the course of the seminar we reviewed the language in the

Agency Strategic Plan on the culture objective and took stock of where we were. The nine values already in the plan were developed without employee input; thus, one important piece of information that we did not have was what employees would think about them. We also decided we needed employee input on what the culture is and what employees would like it to be.

To that end, we organized interviewing teams that included representatives from almost every major SSA component³. The teams traveled to six regions⁴ and all HQ components during the summer of 1998 and interviewed close to 1000 managers and employees in 200 individual and group interviews. We discussed a variety of topics with the participants, including what they thought about the three themes that emerged from our document search and what issues are important to them. We also observed the physical space, the atmosphere of the workplace, and even how employees reacted to the interview teams⁵.

B. Findings

We found that there is an unmistakable organizational culture at SSA—some aspects are positive and some are negative. We also learned that there are differences in the cultures of different components, as well as differences from field office to field office (FO) in the same region. Nonetheless, some "universal truths" surfaced; for example:

1. At SSA, we have a sense of mission and are supportive of the Social Security programs.
2. It is not part of the culture to promote Social Security or to educate others about it—especially on our own time.
3. We are dedicated to providing good public service but many employees do not like the term "customers."
4. We feel that there is a competitive "us vs. them" attitude between and among SSA components and we feel there is a lack of cooperation as well. Further, employees in the field feel strongly that SSA Headquarters is out of touch with them.
5. We have a workforce with very strong opinions—employees do not like the awards process, or pass/fail appraisals; and even

though numeric standards were eliminated almost 10 years ago, it is still a hot topic.

6. SSA is very hierarchical—we often feel like cogs in a wheel and perceive limited authority; yet, we are leery about taking personal risks, usually looking to policy and procedures to guide us.

7. Employees are often cynical about and critical of new management initiatives (such as TQM, reengineering, teaming, and learning organization). In fact, some interviewees greeted the organizational culture project with that same cynicism.

8. Employees supported the three themes, but were skeptical about the Agency's commitment to them, especially world-class service and supportive work environment.

9. Given urgent and legitimate circumstances (such as implementing legislation or court orders, or responding to natural disasters), SSA employees will mobilize and deliver to meet the need.

10. Many employees long for the "good old days" when they thought SSA was a good place to work.

11. Finally, managers and employees alike, especially those in FOs, believe more staff is the solution to most of their problems.

Sidebar: During the last 10 years, OWA study teams have visited many field components—FOs most often. In comparing the culture interview findings to results from three previous FO studies, we found that the basic tenets of SSA's culture (as described above) have not changed much over the years. And, although the purpose of the interviews for this project was different from the purpose of earlier studies, FO employees cited many of the same issues and problems in 1998 that they had told us about in the past. Thus, despite automation and other employee initiatives and workplace improvements that have been implemented over the years, it appears that, from the FO employee's perspective, not a lot has changed for the better.

Contents

A. Methodology

Employee Survey—We used feedback from the interviews to design a survey which is divided into three sections—workplace behaviors and practices, values⁶, and work climate—the elements that define an organization's culture. The survey asked employees to react to 67 statements (on topics related to these elements) in 2 ways. On a scale of 1-5 (from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*):

1. What is their level of agreement that the behavior or practice described currently exists in their office; and
2. What is their level of agreement as to how important the behavior or practice is to them.

The difference in the answers will help identify how much of a gap there is between what the culture is and what employees would like it to be.

The survey also included questions on demographics, such as the respondent's component, age, gender, grade level, bargaining unit membership, and so on. This information permits breakouts and comparisons of survey results by various demographic categories. For example, we will give SSA's larger components their own results for local review and analysis. A blank survey is attached at tab C (Note: The survey is in .pdf format and you will need Acrobat Reader program to view this survey, which you can download and install for free from the web site of <http://www.adobe.com>).

Using terminal digits of the SSN, we picked a 20% random sample from the Human Resources Management Information System and sent the survey to 13,600 SSA employees during the last week of June and the first week of July 1999. Ultimately, we received 6,605 completed surveys. We also received written comments from 574 employees (about 9% of those who completed the survey).

Senior Staff Survey—We also sent the survey to all 128 members of the Senior Staff to see how their vision and opinions compared to the rest of SSA. Are there serious disconnects and are there areas of agreement?

- o 65 members of the Senior Staff responded (about 51%).

- o None of them submitted comments relative to SSA's culture.

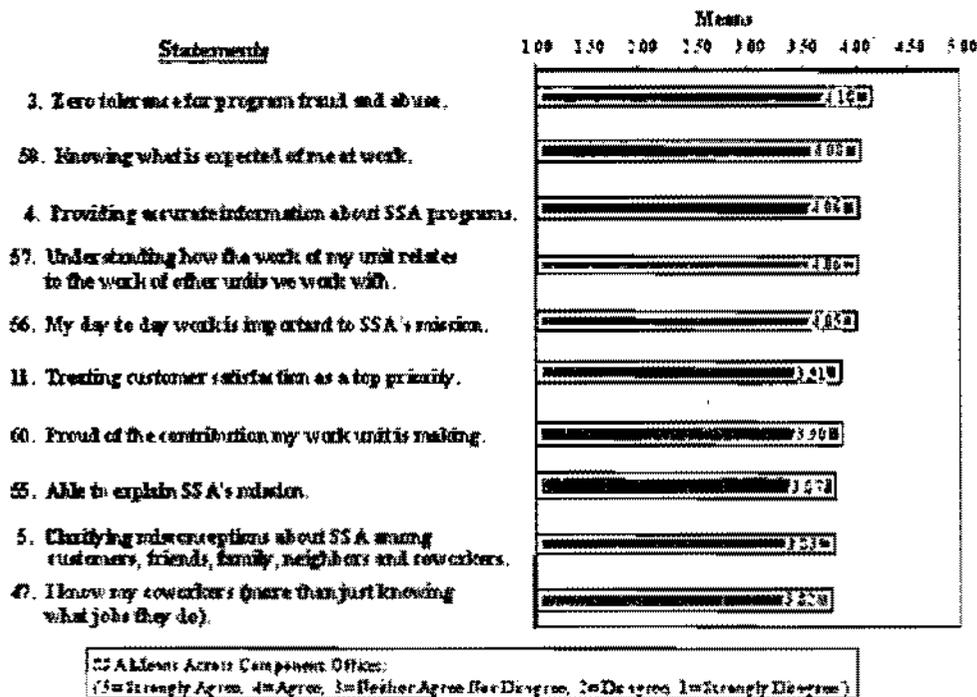
In addition, we identified *mid-level managers* from the survey demographics and compared their results to the items where employees and Senior Staff agreed or disagreed the most (that is, smallest and largest gaps).

B. Findings—Quantitative Data—Survey Results

A chart attached at tab D provides detailed survey results at the national level. The complete results are available from OWA in hard copy or electronically. What follows are the most significant findings from the survey.

- 1. The 5 highest rated "practices" in the workplace now are all job-related with the observance of zero tolerance for program fraud and abuse—statement 3 (S-3)—rated the highest.

Chart 1: What Is... 10 Highest Rated



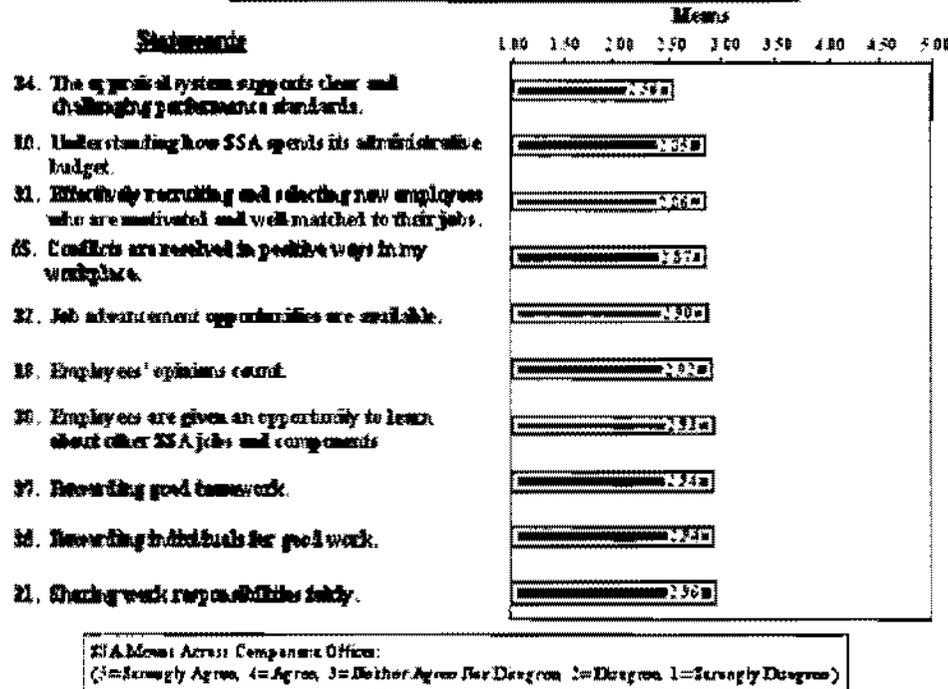
The average answer to S-3 (on the 1 to 5 scale) was 4.18. Eighty-one percent of those responding agreed or strongly agreed that it is normal in their office to have zero tolerance for program fraud and abuse.

The other four *current* practices that employees rated highest follow:

- o 83% agreed or strongly agreed that they know what is expected of them at work— (S-58)²;
- o 81% of the respondents believe we currently provide accurate information about the programs (S-4);
- o 82% said they understand how their work relates to the work of other units (S-57); and,
- o 81% believe their work is important to SSA's mission (S-56).

2. The two lowest rated current practices were the appraisal system (S-34) and understanding the administrative budget (S-10).

Chart 2: What Is 10 Lowest Rated



The appraisal system was the *lowest* rated with an average answer of 2.56. Fifty percent of our respondents think we do not now have an appraisal system that supports clear and challenging performance standards.

- o Although 50% of our respondents disagree or strongly disagree that we now have an appraisal system that supports clear and challenging performance standards, 85% believe a good appraisal

system is *important*. This resulted in the *largest gap* (1.72) between the average answers to the *current situation* (2.56) and *importance* (4.28).

o Senior Staff, employees, and mid-level managers shared the same low opinion as to the adequacy of the current appraisal system.

Understanding how SSA spends its administrative budget was the second lowest rated *current* workplace practice with an average answer of 2.85.

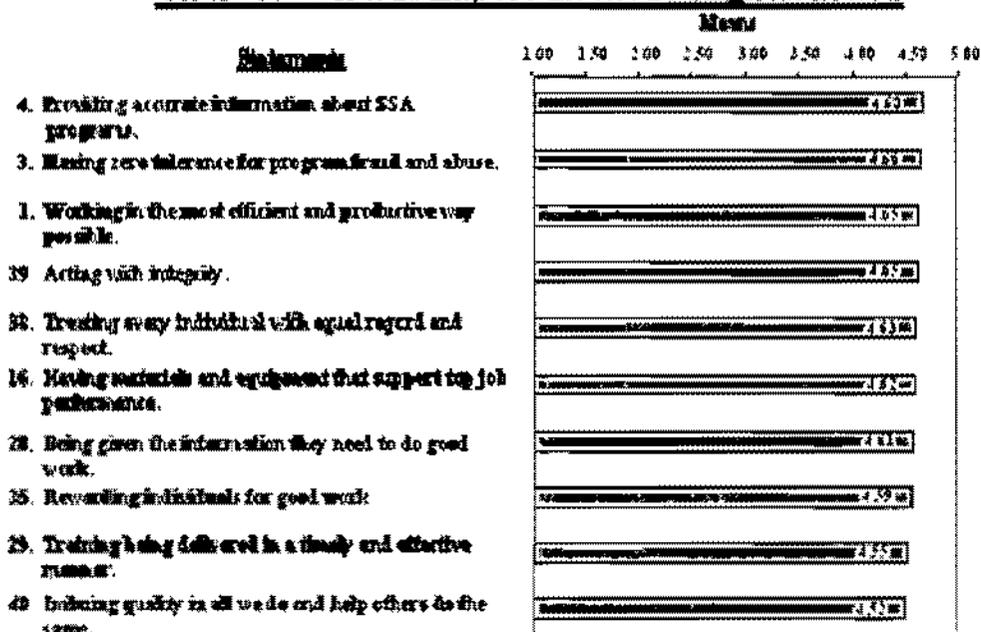
o Only 28% of respondents said it is the practice in their office *now* to understand the administrative budget.

o On the other hand, the average response as to the *importance* of this practice was also relatively low at 3.6, with 55% saying it is important to understand the administrative budget.

This appears to be an instance of "we don't have this situation now, but it's not all that important to us, either." This lack of understanding and interest in the administrative budget could contribute to employee misconceptions about Agency decisions.

3. Providing accurate information about the programs (S-4) and having zero tolerance for program fraud and abuse (S-3) were the two practices that were most important to employees--with average answers of 4.68 and 4.66 respectively⁸.

Chart 3: What Is Important ... 10 Highest Rated



SSA Admin Access Component Office:
 (5=Strongly Agree 4=Agree 3=Neither Agree/Disagree 2=Disagree 1=Strongly Disagree)

In both cases, about ninety-six percent of our respondents agreed or strongly agreed that these two practices are *important* to them. As noted in the first finding above, the majority thinks we are doing a good job in these areas now⁹.

Other practices employees see as important to them follow:

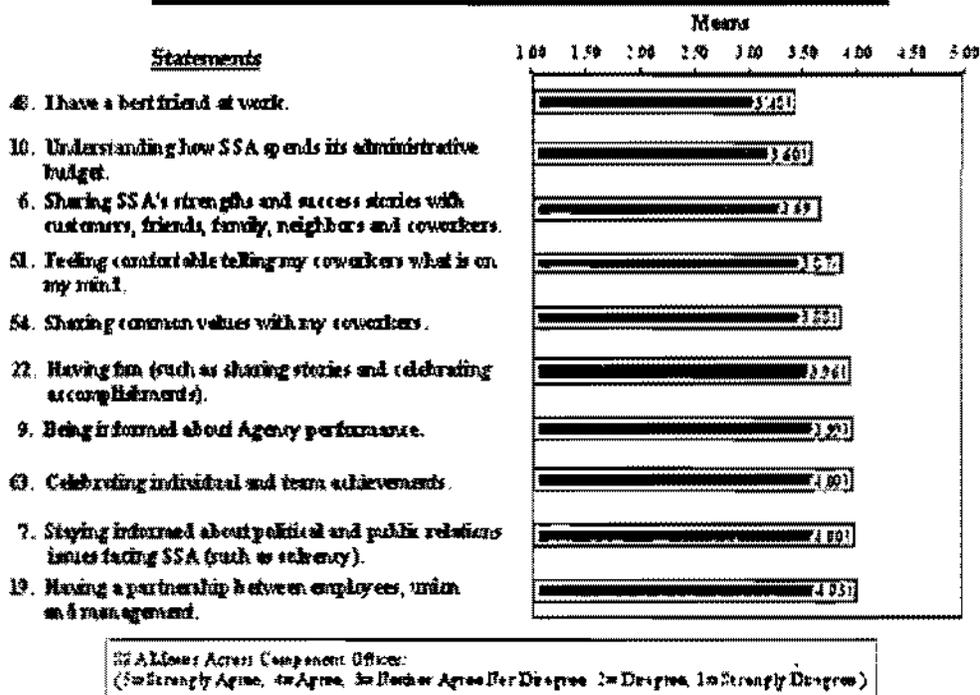
- o 98% say it is important to work in the most efficient and productive way possible (S-1) while 58% say we are now;

- o 98% of our employees said acting with integrity is important to them in contrast to 62% who think we act with integrity currently (S-39); and,

- o 97% said treating every individual with equal regard and respect is important to them—51% say this is the normal practice in their office now (S-38).

4. S-48—"I have a best friend at work," with an average answer of 3.48 was the situation rated *least important* by about 50% of our respondents.

Chart 4: What Is Important 10 Lowest Rated



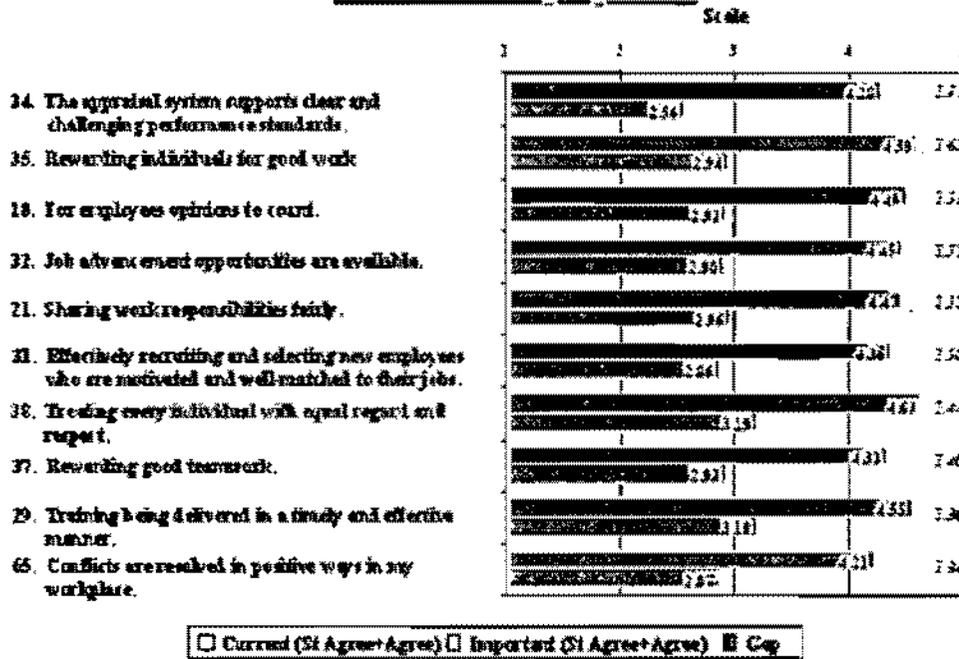
Interestingly, 46% said they have a best friend *currently*—so, more than half of our employees *do not* have a best friend at work and about half *do not* think it is important to have one.

Other practices employees rated low in importance¹⁰ include understanding the administrative budget process, discussed above, and the following:

- o 59% think it is important to share SSA's strengths and success stories with customers, friends, family, neighbors, and coworkers (S-6);
- o 73% said it is important to feel comfortable telling coworkers what is on their minds (S-51); and,
- o 72% said it is important to share common values with coworkers (S-54)¹¹.

5. Most of the behaviors and practices that have the largest gaps appeared on our lowest rated *current situation* list.

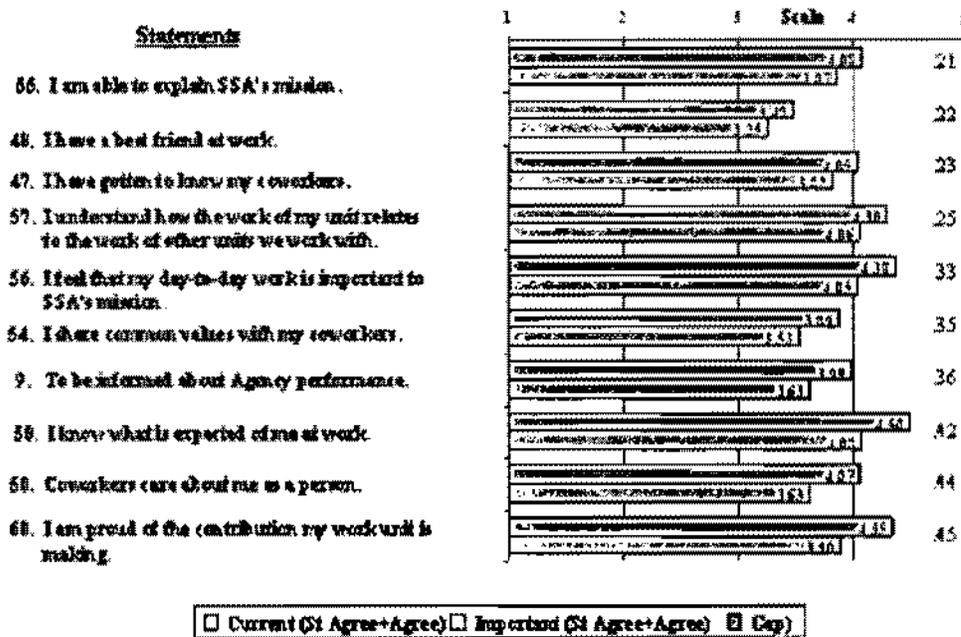
Chart 5: TOP 10 GAPS



In fact, eight of the ten (34, 35, 18, 32, 21, 31, 37, and 65) made the ten lowest rated *currently* list (Chart 2, page 11). However, only three (35, 38, and 29) made the top ten in *importance* list (Chart 3, page 13). Still, these ten high-gap items (eight behaviors and practices, one value, and one work climate issue) might be a good place to start if we are looking for ways to improve the culture.

6. There are a number of areas of agreement on the survey where the gaps between the average answers to the *current situation* and the *importance* of a behavior or practice are very small.

Chart 6: 10 SMALLEST GAPS



Six of the statements with the smallest gaps were also among the ten statements rated highest in the *current* situation (Chart 1, page 10). All six of these items were in the work climate section of the survey: S-47, S-55, S-56, S-57, S-58, and S-60.

Survey questions 47 through 67 asked employees to assess SSA's overall work climate. We included this section because our research into organizational culture indicates that an employee's "work climate" is important to creating a positive workplace. Employees (and employers) gain a number of benefits from a positive workplace. For example:

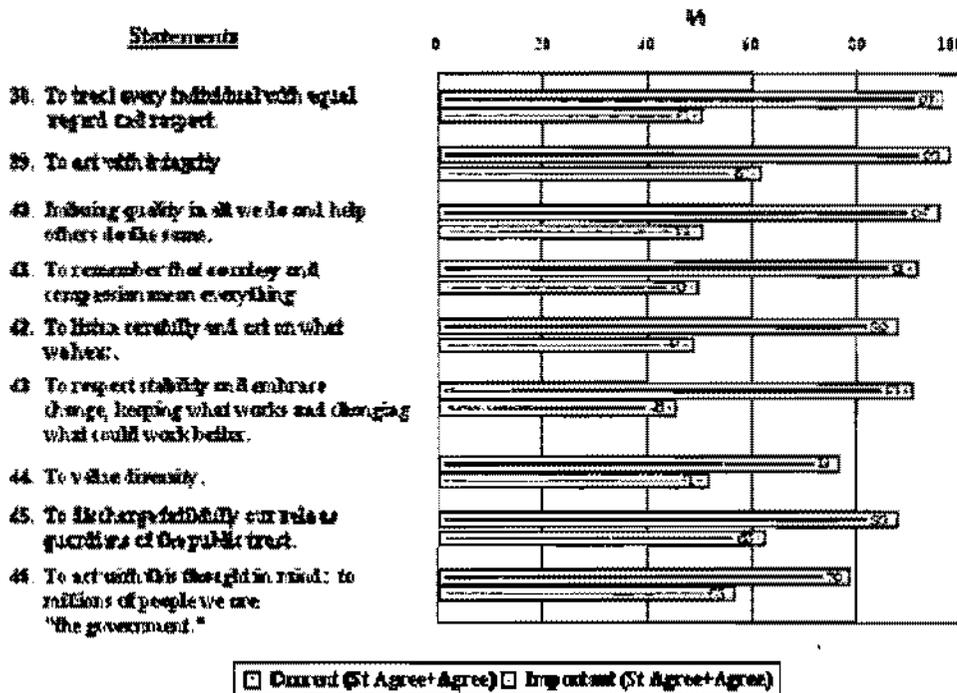
1. *A sense of community.* Employees get to know each other, feel like they "belong," and help one another in times of need;
2. *A shared vision.* Employees see their workgroups as having direction and purpose, and believe that their personal values are reflected in the workplace. They may even feel inspired by their work; and,
3. *A positive outlook.* Employees view difficult situations as challenges and opportunities. They also find ways to have fun at work. And they do not discount strengths by calling attention to weaknesses.

Three of the low-gap statements were among the ten lowest rated in importance: S-9, S-48, and S-54. (S-50 does not appear on any of the "high/low" charts.)

These results tell us that, whatever the current situation, the workplace is about where employees think it ought to be in these ten areas—especially with regard to their work climate.

7. None of the nine values in the Agency Strategic Plan appeared on the list of highest rated *current* practices (Chart 1, page 10) and only three (statements 38, 39, and 40) made the top ten highest rated in *importance* list (Chart 3, page 13).

Chart 7: Values



The two values rated highest in the workplace *currently* are "to discharge faithfully our role as guardians of the public trust" (S-45) and "to act with this thought in mind: to millions of people we ARE the government" (S-46). The average answers were 3.66 and 3.56, respectively.

- o 63% of employees agreed or strongly agreed with S-45 in the current situation column; and,

- o 58% agreed we are currently the government to millions¹²,

The values rated lowest in *importance* are "to value diversity" (S-44) and "to act with this thought in mind: to millions of people we ARE the government" (S-46).

- o 78% agreed valuing diversity is important while 51% said we value diversity *now*,

- o 79% think being the government to millions is *important*—since this was also one of the higher rated values for the *current situation* (at 3.6) and was rated 4.2 in *importance*, there is not a large gap (0.6) between where we are and where employees would like us to be.

Beliefs and values form the bedrock of a company's cultural identity and can influence what people actually do. Deal and Kennedy say that *shared* values create a sense of identity, making employees feel special and giving them esprit de corps¹³. Thus, if the nine values in the Agency Strategic Plan are the ones that the Agency wants to promote, it is important to know whether employees share them. Granted, employees gave the Agency Strategies Plan values fairly lackluster ratings as to their existence in their current workplace. Still, it is encouraging that the majority of employees rated all of the values as important to them. This ranged from a low of 78% for valuing diversity to a high of 98% for acting with integrity.

How would these values come to be shared at SSA? "Through the reinforcement provided by all the other elements of the [Agency's] culture, but primarily by the culture's lead players..."¹⁴

8. There are some notable differences in the results of the Senior Staff survey as compared to employees and mid-level managers.

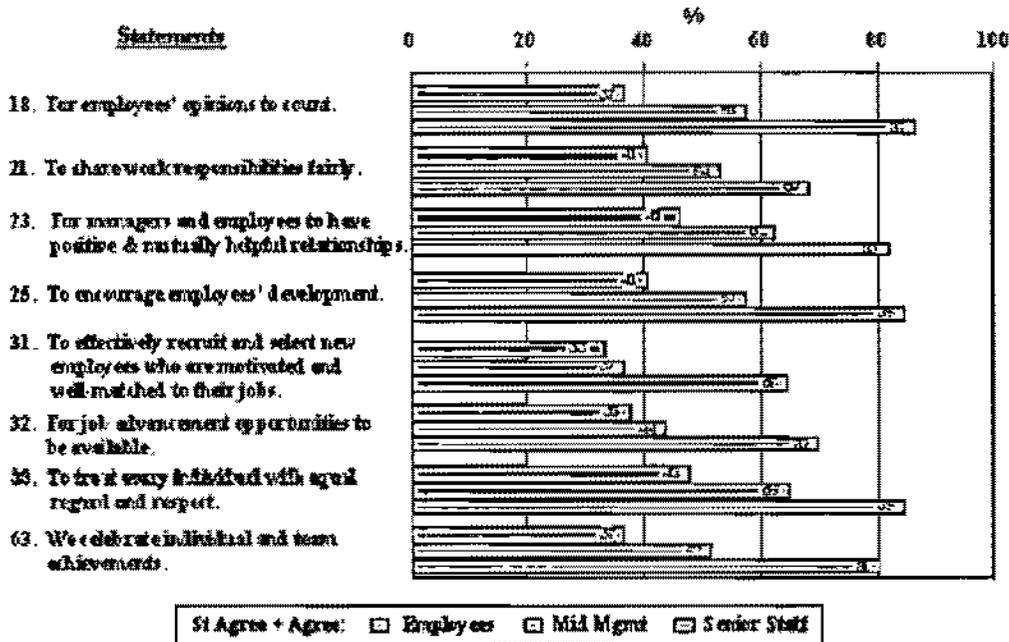
For example, the Senior Staff's responses were more positive than the rest of SSA about almost every item on the survey, both for the situation and the *importance* answers.

We are reporting these results in more detail because we agree with the organizational culture experts who say, "When people in an organization disagree about the culture they actually have, it often is because the culture looks and feels different from the perspective of different parts of the organization... people at the top of the organization [often] misread the thoughts and feelings of those lower in the hierarchy and...believe that people are happier about the state of affairs than is really the case."¹⁵

The current situation:

Chart 8: Employees / Mid Management / Senior Staff

Biggest Differences: What Is



o 87% of the Senior Staff agree or strongly agree that employee opinions *now* count (S-18); only 37% of employees would agree; mid-level managers came in at 58%.

o 69% of the members of the Senior Staff think work responsibilities are shared fairly *currently* (S-21); 41% of employees agree; 54% of mid-level managers agree.

o 83% of the Senior Staff say managers and employees have positive and helpful relationships (S-23); 46% of employees think so and 62% of mid-level managers agree.

- o 85% of the Senior Staff say it is normal practice in the workplace to encourage employees' development (S-25); 46% of employees agree; 62% of mid-level managers agree.

- o 65% of the Senior Staff say we now effectively recruit and select new employees (S-31); 33% of employees and 37% of mid-level managers think this is the case now.

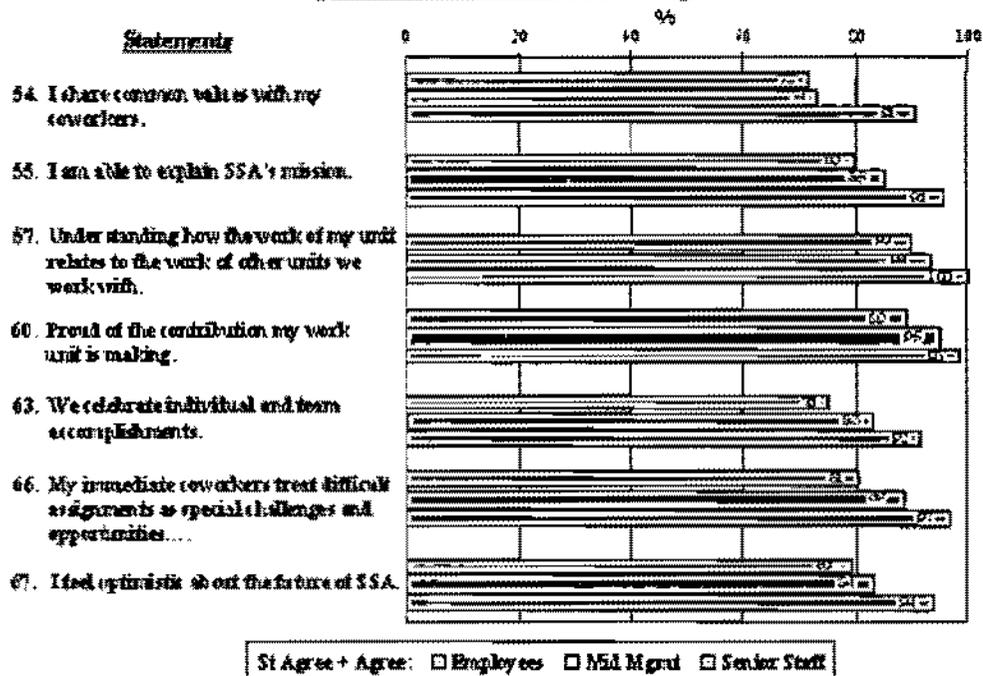
- o 70% of the Senior Staff think job opportunities are available (S-32); only 38% of employees and 44% of mid-level managers think they are.

While employees and Senior Staff differed on the extent to which these practices exist in their offices *now*, they had virtually the same responses as to the *importance* of the first three (statements 18, 21, and 23).¹⁶ See charts at tab E for these and other areas of agreement between employees and the Senior Staff.

What is important:

Chart 9: Employees / Mid Management / Senior Staff

Biggest Differences: What Is Important



- o 91% of the Senior Staff think it is important to share common values with coworkers (S-54); 72% of employees

agree followed closely by 74% of mid-level managers.

- o 96% of the Senior Staff agree it is important to be able to explain SSA's mission (S-55); 80% of employees and 85% of mid-level managers agree.

- o 100% of the Senior Staff agree or strongly agree that it is important to them that they understand how the work of their unit relates to the work of other units they work with (S-57); 90% of employees and 94% of mid-level managers say this is important.

In discussing the results of the Senior Staff Survey, questions have been raised about the perspective of the Senior Staff—that is, were they thinking of their immediate office or SSA as a whole when responding?

Obviously, we cannot answer this question; what is important, regardless of perspective, is that the Senior Staff is experiencing a different reality from employees. (This applies to mid-level managers as well, although to a somewhat lesser extent.)

C. Findings—Qualitative Data—Employee Comments

Historically, 5 to 10 percent of survey respondents take the time to comment in writing.¹⁷ Thus, the percentage of written comments we received is typical—574 or about 9% of the 6605 responses.

What is not typical is the length of the written comments—generally they are "short and terse" or "just a few words."¹⁸ Not ours. Many, if not most, of the comments we received were from one to three handwritten or typed pages long—and employees often identified themselves. We read the comments and did a rough stroke tally by category to see what issues appeared most often. Although there were some positive comments, the majority was negative. This is to be expected—experience has shown that employees will usually not write about what is going well, but will comment on what they are dissatisfied about.

Based on our tally, the top ten most frequently cited issues or problems, from number ten to number one, were:

10. The appraisal system—there were no positive comments about the

current system; in fact, the most frequent comment was, "It's a joke!"

9. Policy/procedures—employees say they change too often, are too complex, and employees don't get enough training on them.

8. Workloads—the perception is they are increasing and are increasingly complex.

7. Work environment—comments focused on things like poor air quality, unstable temperatures, lack of free parking, and insufficient or run-down space.

6. The awards program—many of those who commented voted to give decisionmaking on awards back to management. Some feel the process is now a popularity contest.

5. Staffing—everyone needs more. One manager commented that she had not hired a new employee in her office since 1991.

4. Quality and Service tied for #4—nearly all employees who commented felt there is far more emphasis on doing the work quickly than on doing the work right. Many commented that the loser here is the public.

3. Career/promotion opportunities—most comments centered around the real lack of promotional opportunities and the fact that employees are often at the same grade level for years.

2. Morale—many commented that it's the worst they've seen it in years.

1. And the number one most frequently cited problem by those who commented was Management—far and away managers got the most criticism. The comments described managers who verbally abuse employees, managers who display blatant favoritism, managers who are "goldbricks," and managers who refuse to address poor performers.

Employees' responses on the survey may shed some light on this last finding. For example:

- o As already noted, only 37% of respondents think it is normal practice in their office currently for employee opinions to count (S-

18);

- o Only 51% of our employees are comfortable now telling their supervisor/manager what's on their minds (S-52);
- o Nearly a quarter (24%) of the respondents do not think that their supervisor supports them in getting the job done (S-64); and,
- o 63% say their manager treats employees with respect (S-53); 22% said their manager does not; the others neither agree or disagree.

Some may dismiss written comments because they assume only the most disgruntled employees take the time to write. However, we could not find any research to support this assumption. In fact, the issues identified in the survey comments are nearly identical to those we heard during our 1998 interviews and previous OWA studies. They are also borne out by the survey results.

BENCHMARKING

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

A. Methodology

The Agency Strategic Plan also suggested that SSA conduct a benchmarking study to find out how others measure, create, and support the cultures that make them successful and satisfying organizations. To that end, we identified 37 organizations (25 private and 12 public) that have investigated their organizations' cultures. Eleven of the organizations we contacted responded (the best known are Sears, the U.S. Mint, the Department of the Navy, Eaton, GSA, Monsanto, and Xerox).

Teams of OWA employees visited four that agreed to participate in site visits (GSA, the Defense Logistics Agency, Sears, and Monsanto) and held a conference call with Xerox. All 11 participants completed a survey. A copy of the survey questions is attached at [tab F](#). We completed a detailed report of the findings on 03/11/99. The full report is available from OWA; a summary of the findings is below.

B. Findings

1. Six out of 11 benchmarking partners identified a business reason for undertaking a culture change effort, such as loss of market share for private sector companies.

2. All respondents performed some form of organizational assessment before, during, or after implementing their culture change initiative (the tools varied from the Baldrige self-assessment criteria to OPM's Organization Assessment survey, to employee surveys, town-hall meetings, and focus groups).
3. Eight of 11 benchmarking partners used at least one external consultant in their culture change effort.
4. All benchmarking contacts indicated that upper management supported the culture change efforts in their organization.
5. Seven of 11 benchmarking partners had data on the length of time required to perform their initial assessment. Timeframes ranged from 10 weeks to 15 months.
6. Seven of 11 benchmarking partners had a target culture identified as their goal. These included: achieving the Baldrige model; becoming "a compelling place to work, shop and invest"; creating a high performance culture; and, cultivating a culture that values trust and openness.
7. Six of the 11 had significant employee involvement in determining the new organizational culture.
8. Ten of the organizations promoted and supported their desired cultures, using a variety of approaches such as: training; spinning off non-core businesses; reducing policy and procedures; changing management practices; delegating authority to the lowest possible levels; and, adding more family friendly programs.
9. Seven of the 11 evaluated the success of their culture change activities and said they would continue to do so on a regular basis.

Another interesting finding was that most Government agencies responding to our survey said that they had made substantial efforts to change the culture in their organizations. However, when we requested site visits to discuss the details of their efforts, several did not respond. Among those that did, we found little evidence of change initiatives.

We think the information from this study will be useful mainly during the

change strategy phase of our project. While we do not have all the flexibilities our private sector partners have, we should be able to use or adapt some of their techniques for creating and supporting the kind of culture we want for SSA. In addition, we found that our project approach compared favorably to the approaches of our benchmarking partners.

WHAT CAN WE CONCLUDE FROM THESE FINDINGS? [Back to Table of Contents](#)

Dr. Allen, the consultant we worked with last year, would conclude that *any* gap between what is and what is important is unacceptable and needs to be addressed.

The Gallup Organization would say the scores on the importance of some items in the Work Climate Section of the survey tell us we have problems.

- o In their book First, Break All the Rules,¹⁹ Buckingham and Coffman (from Gallup) describe findings from 25 years of research. During that time, Gallup interviewed more than a million employees and ultimately identified a number of recurring themes (or factors) relative to their work experiences.

- o Gallup's themes are similar to those we identified from the interviews we conducted and employees' comments on the survey, such as concerns about work environment, procedures, supervisors, management, coworkers, teams, and customer service.²⁰ According to Gallup, when you measure the strength of the workplace around these themes, you should not rest until employees select "5" (strongly agree) on all items on your survey.

- o Further, Gallup places responsibility for getting that "5" on management and *immediate* management, at that—meaning the person who defines and pervades your work environment.

- o Gallup also says that employees do not leave *companies*, they leave *managers*. SSA employees' comments about management and the differences between the Senior Staff's and employees' perspectives make this a point worth considering. This is especially important in light of our need to hire and retain qualified people in response to the growing retirement wave.

We believe we should focus on those issues that we can do something about quickly and that will have the most payoff for employees and the Agency. For example, it may be a higher priority to focus on the 58% who think we could work more efficiently and productively and the 41% who feel that work responsibilities could be shared more fairly than the 23% who do not think the work environment is attractive or professional enough. Several of the differences between Senior Staff results and the rest of SSA need similar review, as well.

On the other hand, a review of interview remarks, employee comments, and survey results shows some very healthy beliefs, behaviors, practices, values, and attitudes on the part of SSA employees. These areas need continued support and encouragement.

WHAT ARE THE RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS? Contents

[Back to Table of](#)

A. Desired Culture

As stated in the current plan for achieving the culture objective, successful completion of the gap analysis relies on the Agency's defining its vision of the desired culture. This might include consideration of the following questions:

- o What *are* the Agency's values that we want to promote and incorporate into the culture? None of the nine values in the ASP appeared on the list of ten highest rated *current* practices (Chart 1, page 10) and only three made the ten highest rated in *importance* list (Chart 3, page 13).
- o What are the issues identified in the survey, comments, and interviews that most concern us? What about those areas where gaps were small, showing that employees think we are about where we ought to be?
- o What issues do we want to focus on at the national level?
- o What exactly does the Agency want to change about the current culture? What is good about the current culture that we should encourage and reinforce?

- o What is leadership's reaction to the fact that the Senior Staff is experiencing a different reality in the workplace from the one employees and even mid-level managers are experiencing? Is this inevitable? Is this acceptable?
- o Many studies, besides Gallup, indicate that the single greatest influence on the work culture is the manager. Lee Iacocca said it best: "The speed of the boss is the speed of the team." How do we ensure that these "bosses" take the initiative to bring about culture change?
- o Experts say the three most powerful tools to help shape culture are:
 1. recruitment and selection—hire employees who have an overall fit with the culture we want.
 2. orientation and training—that emphasize the core values of the Agency.
 3. rewards and recognition—to reinforce the desired behavior on the part of managers and employees.

Can we commit to using these tools?

We suggest addressing the questions raised in this report by first referring them to the group of executives already familiar with issues related to goal four (To be an employer that values and invests in each employee).

B. Intercomponent Workgroup

Once this group considers the questions above, we recommend convening an Agency-level intercomponent workgroup, with Union and Management Association membership. Based on the direction provided by this group, the Workgroup would further address issues identified during the various stages of this project. The most important workgroup deliverable would be a change strategy that will help SSA employees and managers achieve the culture they want.

Sidebar: There is no "one-size-fits-all" change strategy. This assessment of SSA's current culture is only a beginning—one way it can be used is to get

employees talking and sharing their insights about the culture—why we are the way we are, what do we like about being this way, and what would we like to change? As long as we can agree on where it is we want to go, we can figure out ways to get there. Or, as Harrison and Stokes described it, "From that base of agreement about the desired ends, it often is possible to resolve differences about the means."²¹

C. Analysis and Review

OWA will continue to analyze the survey results to make pertinent demographic comparisons (e.g., men and women; bargaining and non-bargaining; different age groups; varying lengths of service, and so on).

We also plan to share individual component's results with them to show them how they compare to the rest of SSA. Where needed, we will assist components with the analysis of their data. As components review their results, it is likely that they will identify areas of concern that need local attention. In some areas, we believe that "customized" initiatives might be appropriate and could offer more immediate solutions than improvements made at the national level.

Finally, in about three years, we will conduct the organizational culture survey again and compare the results to the 1999 baseline to see if there has been any measurable improvement as a result of the various change initiatives.

AFTERWORD: IS IT POSSIBLE TO CATEGORIZE SSA'S CURRENT CULTURE? [Back to Table of Contents](#)

A review of the highest rated practices (Chart 1, page 10) in our workplace now shows that SSA employees clearly support two of the three themes discussed earlier—building public confidence in Social Security and providing world-class service. For example: we have zero tolerance for program fraud and abuse; we know what is expected of us at work; we provide accurate information about SSA programs; we know SSA's mission and can explain it; and, we treat customer satisfaction as a top priority.

Support for these themes carries through to what employees think is important as well. Providing accurate information about our programs, zero tolerance, and working in the most efficient and productive way possible are the top three on the importance list (Chart 3, page 13).

Most employees' concerns, however, centered around providing a supportive work environment. Virtually all of the practices on the lowest rated list (Chart 2, page 11) relate to this theme. Supportive work environment issues also accounted for most of the items on the top ten gaps list (Chart 5, page 15). Yet most employees we interviewed commented that it is the most important of the three themes since it underpins all we do.

On the other hand, while we could argue that much of what is on the highest importance list would enhance the work environment, only one item stands out as particularly employee-centered and that is rewarding individuals for good work. It appears, then, that employees say a supportive work environment is important, but in reality rate other practices higher. Note that survey respondents who said they were *not* members of the management team outnumbered management team respondents by six to one.

To help us better understand the findings from this study, we searched the literature for documented cultures that, at least in general, typify SSA. We found that there are as many descriptions, or models, of culture types as there are experts who write about them. However, most of these experts agree that organizations have some combination of cultures, with one being predominant.

In their book Diagnosing Organizational Culture, Harrison and Stokes describe four basic organizational culture models. The one that comes closest to describing SSA is the "Role Culture." "The Role culture substitutes a system of structures and procedures for the naked power of the leaders. Structures and systems give protection to subordinates and stability to the organization."²² Deal and Kennedy (authors of Corporate Cultures) call these organizations "Process Cultures."²³

The values of these cultures are order, dependability, rationality, and consistency. Because performance is organized by structures and procedures (rather than personally controlled by the leader), work can be reliably directed at a distance, thereby putting order into work that needs to be *predictable*. Thus, large, complex organizations, such as bureaucracies, can be created and managed.

At its best, the Role-oriented (or Process) organization provides stability, justice, and efficient performance and "...they make sure the world works

for others."²⁴ Under the rules of the Role culture, employees are protected from the arbitrary exercise of authority.²⁵ As a result, they spend less time looking out for themselves, and more time doing their jobs. According to Deal and Kennedy, people who are valued in this culture are those who are trying to protect the *system's integrity* more than their own. And, what is important in this culture is technical perfection, that is, getting the process and the details right.

Material from the organizational culture study is startling in its similarity to the concepts described above (and throughout this section).

From the interviews—"the nature of SSA's workforce is to be productive"; employees said they like the job security, pay, and benefits; employees appreciate the family friendly policies; employees liked our old (process oriented) mission statement—getting the right check to the right person at the right time.

From the survey—employees know what is expected of them at work; they understand how their work [role] relates to the work of other components; and they believe we provide accurate information about the programs and have zero tolerance for program fraud and abuse—these were rated as the top two in importance as well.

From survey comments—many employees objected to what they perceived as too much emphasis on quantity as opposed to quality—at customer expense.

On the other hand, "the weakness of Role-oriented organizations is in the very impersonality that is their strength. They operate on the assumption that people are not to be trusted, so they do not give individual autonomy or discretion to members at lower levels. Employees often get *little or no feedback*. The system is designed to control people and to prevent them from committing selfish or stupid acts. It also keeps people from being innovative and from doing the right thing when the right thing is outside the rules."²⁶

From the interviews—"to get ahead, you have to keep your mouth shut"; communication is poor in many offices; some would advise new employees not to try anything innovative; quantity is more important than quality.

From the surveys—employees say their opinions don't count; half of our

employees don't care about having a best friend at work; more than one-third of the respondents believe their managers do not treat employees with respect.

From survey comments—"management from top to bottom treats us like children"; "...employees are not made to feel that they are trusted and valued;"

Harrison's and Stoke's most telling comment about Role cultures is "...they tend to squeeze the spirit out of working life...."²⁷

From the interviews—"morale is lower than it's ever been"; many employees said they can't wait to "get out" (retire); the work environment in a number of offices was characterized as hostile and untrusting—"pure poison" said an interviewer about one office; interviewers talked to a number of distraught employees who cried during the interviews.

From the surveys—there is little opportunity for advancement; close to half of our respondents say they are not treated with regard and respect; more than a third do not celebrate individual and team achievements.

From survey comments—"...the work environment in my office can best be described as hostile"; many employees described stressful work situations where burnout was common and coworkers were openly looking for other jobs; others said their voices were never heard.

It is clear that SSA's organizational culture embodies many features of the Role-oriented (or Process) culture—the extent to which a particular feature exists appears to depend on the component and its managers.

Footnotes

¹Terrence E. Deal and Allan A. Kennedy, Corporate Culture (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1982), 119. ([Back to Report](#))

² Dr. Allen later conducted three additional seminars designed to assist the intercomponent team with other phases of the project (such as the design of interview guides and identification of survey topics). ([Back to Report](#))

³ OSM, OGC, OCOMM, OP, Operations, ODISP, Systems, CSI and Office of Personnel (OHR). ([Back to Report](#))

⁴ NY, PH, ATL, CHI, SEA, and SF. ([Back to Report](#))

⁵ Summaries of all 200 interviews are available from OWA; identifying information has been removed. ([Back to Report](#))

⁶ Since the Agency Strategic Plan objective calls for promoting an agency culture that successfully incorporates our values, we included the 9 values from the Plan on the survey to see whether they are values that employees embrace now and think are important. ([Back to Report](#))

⁷ In some cases, ranking of average answers and percentages do not match because of weighting. ([Back to Report](#))

⁸ Note that we highlighted the Agency Strategic Plan values in gold whenever they appear on any of the charts. ([Back to Report](#))

⁹ In some cases, ranking of average answers and percentages do not match because of weighting. ([Back to Report](#))

¹⁰ As expected, respondents frequently selected "agree" or "strongly agree" for the importance of a workplace practice; thus, the items of least importance still had relatively high percentages of employees rating them as important. ([Back to Report](#))

¹¹ In some cases, ranking of average answers and percentages do not match because of weighting. ([Back to Report](#))

¹² In some cases, ranking of average answers and percentages do not match because of weighting. ([Back to Report](#))

¹³ Deal and Kennedy, Corporate Cultures, 23. ([Back to Report](#))

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 36. ([Back to Report](#))

¹⁵ Roger Harrison and Herb Strokes, Diagnosing Organizational Culture (San Francisco: Pfeiffer/Jossey-Bass Inc., 1992), 15. ([Back to Report](#))

¹⁶ Both employees and senior staff rated these three statements at 4.5 in importance. Mid-level managers were close (or agreed) as follows: S-18(4.4); S21 (4.3); and S-23 (4.5). ([Back to Report](#))

¹⁷ Earl Naumann and Kathleen Giel, Customer Satisfaction Measurement and Management (Cincinnati: Thomson Executive Press, 1995), 145. ([Back to Report](#))

¹⁸ *Ibid.* ([Back to Report](#))

¹⁹ Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman, First, Break all the Rules, (New York: Simon and Schuster), chaps. 1 and 2, *passim*. ([Back to Report](#))

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 253. ([Back to Report](#))

²¹ Harrison, Diagnosing Organizational Culture, 24. ([Back to Report](#))

²² Ibid., 15. ([Back to Report](#))

²³ Deal and Kennedy, Corporate Cultures, 119. ([Back to Report](#))

²⁴ Ibid., 123. ([Back to Report](#))

²⁵ The Federal bureaucracy started breaking this rule in the '80s and '90s with downsizing, early outs, and outsourcing; now there is not much of a "deal" between employees and the organization. ([Back to Report](#))

²⁶ Ibid. ([Back to Report](#))

²⁷ Ibid., 24. ([Back to Report](#))

You are the Hit Counter visitor.