



Leading with Intention

Using Employee Viewpoint Surveys
to Promote Positive Organizational Change

U.S. Small Business Administration
Office of Inspector General

Introduction

Federal leaders have many levers available to promote positive change in their organizations. The Office of Inspector General (OIG) for the U.S. Small Business Administration adjusted these “levers of change” with intention, and achieved dramatic results. You can too.

Imagine a sound board at a recording studio—dozens of levers available to you. They can be adjusted individually or collectively, with a trained ear calibrating and recalibrating until the music sounds just right. Too much one way, or not enough another way? The audience will let you know if the music sounds right. Federal leaders also can adjust the levers of change to achieve deliberate results and achieve their strategic goals and objectives. There are numerous models available to promote change. Choose one, and be intentional.

Transforming OIG

OIG’s executive leadership committed itself to driving organizational change through its Strategic Plan. OIG’s Strategic Plan is premised on the belief that its workforce is its most valuable asset. The plan itself was the culmination of significant workforce engagement and seeks to promote a viable career path for employees. OIG promoted a positive work–life balance as a strategic objective and prioritized professionalism and development of their future leaders.

In the spring of 2016, OIG leaders learned that employees were not being accurately identified for an opportunity to offer input into the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS). A team was formed to take immediate action by developing an internal survey premised on the key components of the FEVS. The survey results indicated there were significant challenges within the office, which cast a heavy shadow on employee engagement.

The leadership team focused on responsive, tangible, and visible changes within the organization to show that leadership valued employee feedback. Significantly, an Employee Engagement Council was established that provided invaluable input and perspective to the leadership team. Within the Employee Engagement Council, groups were formed to work across the organization to assist leadership in driving forward initiatives, such as policy updates, work life balance initiatives, and employee development. As part of this initiative, OIG sought to ensure a complete list of OIG employees would have the opportunity to take the 2017 FEVS, and OIG also sought out a ranking in the Best Places to Work in the Federal Government by the Partnership for Public Service, though this would not be realized until 2018.

In the fall of 2017, OIG repeated its internal survey and realized dramatic increases in percentages of employees that strongly agree that OIG was moving in a positive direction. The internal survey showed huge percentage increases across the board, and of great significance, a 258% increase in employees who are very satisfied with their job. Not just satisfied, very satisfied.

Encouraged by these results, OIG leaders focused on two goals within its Strategic Plan—to create a work environment that attracts, develops, and retains quality staff and to foster innovative approaches to carry out the mission more effectively and efficiently. OIG leaders mounted a comprehensive and deliberate training program aimed at developing a culture of excellence. The program was initiated by decentralizing budget authority from the central budgeting office to the operating divisions—the Audits, Investigations, and Management and Operations Divisions. At the same time, the office implemented the mandatory use of Individual Development Plans by employees and supervisors in tandem with annual performance reviews. These two actions alone were instrumental in operationalizing training needs to drive increased performance and engagement by employees. They also initiated a mentoring program to promote a “One OIG” concept and leverage our greatest asset, our onboard staff. The mentoring program also force multiplied the investment in individual training.

In OIG’s line of business, professional certifications demonstrate proficiency in employee’s field of work (Certified Public Accountants, Certified Fraud Examiners, Bar passage, etc.) and are recognized as an indicator of an organization staffed with experts. To be the most effective OIG in the Federal government, leadership’s perspective was either to have, to hire, or to develop the talent or skills that are recognized as exceptional. As such, professional certifications benefit both the employee and promote the culture of excellence within the office. To that end, the office implemented a procedure to reimburse employees for exams and study materials that lead to certain professional certifications. This procedure fueled the direction of training, which sought to increase the competencies of the workforce.

With these processes and programs implemented, OIG leaders took a bottom to top approach to training OIG staff and promoting the culture of excellence. The training program begins for OIG staff through a unique employee orientation program designed to familiarize employees with the organization. They also are assigned a mentor for a minimum period of 1 year through the “Ambassador Initiative” within the mentoring program. Their most seasoned and senior leaders also focused on developing new skills. OIG leadership embarked on executive training to promote and drive organizational change. These tools moved leaders from an instinctual to a deliberate form of leadership.

The Inspector General also committed to training supervisors and managers at an annual training. This opportunity allows for development of skills needed to effectively manage and lead our staff in achieving our mission. The trainings included the Birkman Method Assessment, Franklin Covey's 7 Habits for Managers, and a customized 2-day training at the Federal Executive Institute designed for Leading High Performing Teams.

While these training initiatives were ongoing, OIG leaders continued to focus on promoting employee engagement and measuring results. It was vital to ensure internal communication platforms were effective and fully utilized to keep staff informed of our progress. A newsletter focused on human resource developments was significantly enhanced to serve as an engaging and visually appealing platform for internal communication, known as the OIG Insider. This publication provides information on ongoing and completed initiatives, serves as an outlet for executives to share insight and leadership perspectives and to respond to questions from staff in an "Ask the Inspector General" segment, and celebrates office accomplishments. OIG leaders also were charged with semi-annual updates to their staffs on the status of strategic initiatives. The Assistant Inspectors General for Audits and Investigations planned and conducted division leadership meetings to communicate office initiatives and to gain firsthand knowledge of the impact of the training efforts. This knowledge informs their objectives to achieve the goal of fostering innovative approaches to carry out the mission more effectively and efficiently.

Results

Measuring employee engagement and gaining insight and perspective from the workforce was key to OIG's success in Human Capital Management efforts. The internal surveys and FEVS conducted in 2017 and 2018 demonstrated they were continually improving the organization and creating a positive environment for staff to develop and to thrive. Though OIG leaders were mindful of the outputs achieved in implementing strategic objectives, the outcome and impact of the actions were best assessed by measures of employee engagement, notably the FEVS.

The 2017 FEVS results showed significant improvement across the key OPM indexes. The office had 55 strength areas out of a possible total of 71, with only 2 challenge areas noted. The most important takeaways were the large increases in employee engagement (19 points); global satisfaction (28 points); leadership (25 points); and recommend OIG as a great place to work (31 points). Empowered with this data, OIG leaders embarked on the deliberate and intentional strategy to promote organizational change.

OIG's 2018 FEVS results demonstrated a response rate of 81.7%, which is twice the overall government response rate and an improvement from the 76% participation rate in 2017. This shows that the staff is engaged and committed to the success of the mission. Overall, there was an 84% engagement level within OIG, with 66 strength areas and no challenge areas identified. With these results, OIG is ranked among the Best Places to Work in the Federal Government. This is a testament to the intrinsic work experience at OIG, the relationships between subordinates and supervisors, and the leadership within the office. This all can be summed up by a statement that OIG staff are working together as "One OIG" and "Owning it at Every Level."

An engaged workforce also measurably performs at a high rate, which translates to overall mission effectiveness. OIG has several key performance measures which integrate into a measure of return on investment to taxpayers. These measures are realized in the overall impact of OIG. In 2017, OIG achieved more than \$82 million in monetary recoveries and savings, and in FY 2018, OIG achieved more than \$224 million in monetary recoveries and savings—an elevenfold return on investment to the taxpayers relative to its regular operating budget.

Not only did OIG produce an unprecedented level of reports in FY 2018, but OIG also realizes one of the highest rates of recommendation implementation by a parent agency when contrasted with the rest of Government. Remarkably, SBA took corrective action to close 191 open recommendations to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of SBA programs and operations during this period. OIG's investigations resulted in 97 indictments/informations, 68 convictions, and \$159 million in potential recoveries, fines, asset forfeitures, civil fraud settlements, or loans/contracts not being approved or being canceled. These results instill integrity and deter fraud in SBA's programs.

Sustainment

OIG's vision to be the most effective OIG in the Federal Government established a very clear direction to take the organization. However, there is a destination, whereas the mission of the organization carries it beyond such a destination. OIG leadership continues to recalibrate and adjust its levers of change to position the organization for continued success and pursuit of excellence. Its 2019, OIG's FEVS scores evidence such intention bears fruit, attaining an overall engagement score of 79 percent, with 62 strength areas and no challenge areas identified. With these results, OIG remains ranked among the Best Places to Work in the Federal Government. The leaders are acutely aware that its organization's success is contingent on recruiting and developing a talented workforce, empowering them "to do things with excellence."