Staff Satisfaction Survey 1999

Executive Summary

Version 2  August 2002

Conducted by Dr Bruce Tulloch
Staff Satisfaction Survey 1999

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During April 1999, over half of DCS's employees responded to a staff satisfaction survey (2027 total, 1244 males, 783 females). Custodial staff included Correctional officers in maximum security correctional centres (n=614), medium & minimum security correctional centres (n=554) and court escort security units (n=188). Non-custodial staff included employees in probation & parole units (n=343), industries, training & administration offices (n=328). The survey assessed job satisfaction, job involvement, morale, burnout, job interest, job security, work load, physical conditions, hazards and support, fairness and feedback from management. Personal resilience, coping and self-reported work absence were also assessed.

Figure 1: Overview of Staff Survey 1999

Most employees rated their jobs as interesting (70%), involving (75%), satisfying (64%) and worthwhile (60%). Many employees reported feeling motivated to do their best at work (72%).

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more important than social activities and hobbies (63%). Most employees reported working hard (68%) and striving for excellence in everything they do (80%). Positive features of employment in DCS included good job security (68%), fair work load (60%) and good relations with immediate supervisors (66%) and peers (70%). Supervisors were usually rated as competent (71%), respectful (74%), supportive and fair (67%). Key motivators for DCS staff were high job interest, job security and good management. Support from local management was regarded as crucial, followed by fair treatment, access to training and performance feedback. Key factors for job burnout were excessive work load, exposure to hazards, job boredom and lack of equitable management.

**Figure 2: Job satisfaction and burnout**

Despite high levels of job commitment and involvement, DCS staff generally reported low work place morale. Only a quarter of staff reported feeling like part of a supportive family (28%) with a shared sense of affiliation, involvement and trust. Employees rarely felt involved with management in their work. Job burnout was high, especially among custodial officers (56-63%) and probation/parole staff (58%). Burnout was defined as feeling physically and emotionally exhausted due to work. Most employees reported feeling drained and worn out at the end of the work day (66%). Over half of custodial officers reported being concerned that their jobs were causing them to be callous and uncaring (56-61%). On average, probation and parole staff reported being very dedicated (89%) but more fatigued than any other group (69%). Court escort/security staff reported similar rates of job satisfaction (63%) and burnout (57%) to other custodial employees. Staff in offices, industries and training centres reported the highest job satisfaction.
(70%) and the lowest rate of job burnout (40%).

Unfortunately, such positive work features had little effect on job satisfaction. For example, although support from co-workers and friends rated highly (70%), these factors had little effect on job satisfaction scores. Evidently, where support from management was considered lacking, other supports were seen as well-meaning but irrelevant or ineffectual. Similarly, high job interest and enthusiasm (70+%) failed to protect staff against cumulative job stress and burnout. Exposure to hazards and poor physical conditions (45-50%) had little effect on job satisfaction scores, evidently being accepted as part of the job. The main factors to affect job satisfaction were management equity and support.

**Figure 3: Management equity and support**

Most aspects of management were rated as poor (35-55%). Many employees appeared to be cynical about management's intention and/or ability to operate fairly. Staff rarely reported seeking assistance for problems at work (34%) and felt resigned to the belief that nothing would change (41%). The most fundamental problem identified by DCS staff was lack of management support, particularly at a local level. Many employees viewed the department as fundamentally uncaring and unconcerned about their personal or professional needs (66%). Lack of feedback and lack of acknowledgment for effort and success (38%) also contributed to low morale. A perceived lack of fairness in operations (54%), promotions (37%) and disputes (53%) often caused staff to feel unsupported and 'on their own'. In general, management equity/fairness was rated as poor (53%). Even though staff usually reported being able to complain about unfair
treatment (70%), they maintained that disputes tend to be handled poorly (54%) by supervisors with dubious conflict resolution skills (51%). Standard ethical operating procedures were not always maintained (54%), particularly in custodial settings (65%). Staff often reported being faced with conflicting instructions (76%) and divided loyalties (53%). Personal rights and trust in the workplace were rarely rated as adequate (43%). Staff tended to regard immediate supervisors as fairer (73%) than management generally (53%).

**Figure 4: Supervisor performance**

Supervisors were usually rated as supportive (74%), non-intimidating (80%) but not particularly well-equipped to deal with staff conflict (48%). Supervisor equity was the only supervisor-related issue to affect staff satisfaction to a major extent. It appears that the tone established by management as a whole affected staff attitudes more than the competence of individual managers. Supervisors were seen as a buffer against poor overall management mainly if they did not subject employees to additional injustice. Staff did not tend to blame their immediate managers for deficits in work training or feedback. They attributed failings in these areas to ineffective management systems in general. Camaraderie was strong overall (75%), particularly among non-custodial staff (83%). About three quarters of staff rated their co-workers as being ethical, professional, cooperative and fair (63-72%).

Management information and feedback was rated as very poor, especially by custodial staff (35%). Less than half of the respondents reported receiving any feedback about their work performance (custodial 30%, non-custodial staff 52%). Only half of that group considered the information to be helpful or fair (35-60%). Taken together, only 10% of custodial staff and 25%
of non-custodial staff regarded their work feedback as adequate. Only a third of employees reported receiving recognition for work effort and success (36%). Combined with poor and/or inequitable access to training (40-48%), staff often regarded their scope for advancement as limited (51%).

**Figure 5: Workplace conditions and hazards**

Physical conditions were generally rated as good by office staff (74%) but relatively poor by custodial (36-50%) and probation/parole staff (46%). Only a third of custodial officers in maximum security correctional centres rated their workplaces as healthy and safe (33%). Temperature, work space, layout and noise levels were usually regarded as adequate (52-68%) although these factors affected job satisfaction only slightly. Custodial employees reported high exposure to anger (85%), trauma (80%), threat of violence (74%) and risk of infection (82%). Although exposure to hazards was related to job burnout, it did not tend to influence employees’ job satisfaction scores. Evidently, most custodial employees accept hazards as a manageable part of the job. Despite this, exposure to hazards had a cumulative adverse effect over time. Self-rated symptoms of stress, work absence and job burnout increased substantially, peaking at ten to fifteen years of service. Probation and parole staff reported high levels of burnout/fatigue due to hazards, trauma and chronic work overload.

Stress-related symptoms associated with work were generally in the moderate range (custodial and P&P: 40%, admin staff: 30%).
A quarter to a third of DCS employees reported experiencing physical aches and pains (36%) and digestive problems (20%) due to work. Psychological problems such as poor concentration and memory (33%), feelings of panic (29%) and hopelessness (23%) were also common. A high incidence of sleep disturbance (46%) and tiredness/fatigue (74%) was consistent with high rates of job burnout (66%). Employees differed considerably in their methods for dealing with work stress. Most employees reported using strategic planning and increased effort (68%). Few employees reported avoiding problems (15%) or taking out their frustration on other people (5-10%). However, custodial staff reported increased usage of alcohol and other drugs during stressful periods (30%), more often than non-custodial employees (20%). Drug usage by custodial officers increased markedly with years of service. Sedatives, alcohol and tobacco were often used as long-term solutions to pressure at work.

About three quarters of DCS employees reported being absent from work for one or more days during the prior six months (77%). On average, custodial employees reported eight days of unscheduled work absence during that period. Non-custodial employees reported about five days absence. Most work absence was attributed to personal illness (68%) and family responsibilities (31%). Relatively few employees reported taking unscheduled leave for personal reasons (14%) or because they felt like it (7%). About one in ten employees reported being absent from work due to workplace conflict or stress (10%).
Contrary to expectations, work conditions and job burnout had little effect on self-rated work absence scores. Work absence was influenced most by belief of entitlement. Nearly a quarter of DCS employees reported believing that they were entitled to use sick leave for personal reasons apart from illness (15-20%). Other factors related to work absence included shift work, job dissatisfaction, problem avoidance and lack of management support. Work absence was affected by job burnout for probation and parole staff in particular. Over half P&P employees reported pushing themselves to the point of illness for their jobs (57%). However, for most employees, job stress affected work absence only slightly. Gender, age and years of employment had no substantial effect on self-rated work absence scores.

**Results for main occupational groups**

**Correctional centre custodial staff**

Custodial staff in correctional centres generally rated their jobs as boring but secure. Immediate supervisors were often seen as well-intended but not particularly effective at conflict management. On the whole, DCS management was rated as unsupportive, unfair and not willing or able to provide staff with adequate feedback about their performance. It is likely that poor management also contributed to custodial employees feeling uninterested and vulnerable in their work. Perceptions of poor management, low job interest and high exposure to hazards resulted in the very low morale (27%) and high job burnout (56%). This pattern was most pronounced for custodial officers in maximum security centres. The major compensations of custodial work...
were reasonable work load and good job security. However, these factors did little to improve job satisfaction overall. Deleterious effects of exposure to hazards and poor management were often compounded by excessive use of alcohol and other drugs to cope with work stress. Stress-related symptoms tended to accumulate over time, reaching a peak at ten to fifteen years of service, when job burnout and work absence were highest.

Table 1: Major results for Occupational Groups

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<th>MAX</th>
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<th>CESU</th>
<th>P&amp;P</th>
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<td>75%</td>
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<td>41%</td>
<td>45%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Job Burnout</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>56%</td>
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Factors affecting job satisfaction *:

1. Job Interest       63%   68%   75%   84%   83%
2. Management Support 46%   46%   57%   63%   65%
3. Job Security        73%   65%   82%   61%   61%
4. Management Equity   39%   42%   64%   78%   65%
5. Supervisor Equity   69%   65%   76%   85%   82%
6. Work Overload       37%   37%   33%   57%   44%
7. Management Feedback 35%   38%   42%   62%   63%
8. Physical Conditions 36%   51%   57%   46%   68%
9. Hazard/ Trauma      78%   61%   70%   38%   8%

* Results are listed in order of importance. Important factors affected job satisfaction scores most.

Court escort and security staff

The results for custodial staff in court cells, inmate transport and security units were slightly more positive than for correctional centre staff. A higher proportion of CESU staff reported adequate management support and equity. Feedback to staff about their job performance was considered lacking but not the extent of correctional centre staff. On average, CESU staff reported being moderately interested and involved in their jobs. They also reported feeling relatively secure and satisfied with their work load. The major negative aspect about CESU custodial duties was high exposure to hazards and trauma. Indeed, hazard scores were similar to those of custodial staff in maximum security correctional centres and contributed to moderately high burnout (57%). Self-reported stress symptoms and drug-usage were also high, similar to that reported by minimum and medium security correctional centre staff. Positive factors such as adequate management, high job security and fair work load resulted in moderate job satisfaction scores for CESU staff overall (58%).
Probation and parole staff

Probation and parole staff usually reported being loyal, diligent (90%) and very stressed (60%). They rated their work as very interesting (84%) and were generally satisfied with the fairness, support and feedback provided by their management (70-85%). However, they also reported feeling over-worked (60%), insecure in their jobs (40%) and vulnerable to risks of injury and infection (40%). They often rated their physical working conditions as poor, similar to correctional centre staff (54%). Although P&P staff reported lower work place hazards than custodial employees, exposure to hazards had a major negative impact on their job satisfaction and burnout scores. Many P&P officers reported feeling physically exhausted (57%) but not uncaring toward their clients. P&P staff generally reported utilizing positive coping strategies and were not inclined to over-use alcohol and other drugs to deal with work stress.

Office, industries and academy staff

Staff in offices, industries and training centres (mostly non-custodial officers) reported being more satisfied (70+%) with their jobs and less burnt out than any other group (40%). This group tended to rate management as moderately supportive and fair (65%). They often considered their jobs to be interesting and involving (85%). Work load scores were in the average range (44%), higher than correctional and CESU staff (35%) but lower than P&P staff (57%). The reported incidence of hazards and trauma was very low, except for anger/hostility from other employees (33%). Physical conditions were generally rated as comfortable and safe (70-75%). Job burnout was in the moderate range due to moderate work over load and short-falls in job interest and management fairness. Low job security among office staff had a detrimental effect on workplace morale. Office staff and P&P staff expressed concerns about mismanagement, excessive work load and low job security. This group reported positive coping methods for work stress.
Conclusion

The most important issue identified by DCS staff was the style and competence of their management particularly at a local level. Management was often rated as unsupportive, uncooperative and unfair. Equity appeared to be a major focus. In its basic form, equity reflects a desire for equal opportunity and justice. Management support was also very important to staff. Support reflects the feeling that management is concerned about the personal and professional needs of staff. Support and equity appeared to be the foundation upon which job interest, advancement and security were based. Factors such as workload, conditions and hazards were generally less crucial to staff, although they related to job burnout over time.

It should be noted that the current survey deals with opinions not facts. It sheds light on employees' perceptions and beliefs about work in the DCS. Hopefully, the information will assist the department to develop strategies impacting on staff experiences at work. Follow-up surveys are required to monitor the effect of interventions by the DCS. Information about employees' specific work location, occupation and salary would enable a detailed analysis of issues affecting particular locations or groups (e.g. managers). Many participants omitted demographic information to protect their privacy. Subsequent surveys should involve the Public Sector Association, whose assistance and support was invaluable.

Requests for complete survey report

Copies of the full report of Staff Satisfaction Survey 1999 may be obtained for approved purposes from Dr Bruce Tulloch, Staff Psychologist, North West Region, 45 Maitland St, PO Box 607 Muswellbrook NSW 2333 (Phone 65 490400).