

## **How to Maximize Survey Participation**

The fundamental reason leaders seek to assess an organization's climate is because the climate—positive or negative—will influence the organization's success. In a military setting, this is usually described in terms of “readiness” or “mission accomplishment.” DODD 1350.2 maintains that leaders will assess their organizations' EO climate on a regular basis and—importantly—that they are *responsible for that EO climate*.

Obtaining an accurate snapshot of the organization's climate is best accomplished by having its members provide their frank and honest perceptions about the way the organization is run and how they are treated. Moreover, progressively higher participation rates provide a more accurate picture of the organization's climate.

### ➤ ***How can leaders realize a high command climate survey return rate?***

**1. Publicly endorse the assessment process.** The two factors that most powerfully influence survey participation include the belief that participation in the survey is genuinely anonymous, and that leaders will do something with the results. Leaders can reassure members that the survey is administered anonymously and—unless a survey respondent provides personally-identifying information—that the survey report does not “single out” anyone by virtue of their unique demographic profile.

DEOMI provides a short PowerPoint-formatted presentation at <http://www.deocs.net/DocDownloads/DEOCSAnonymityMAY2013.pdf> that illustrates how unique demographic profiles cannot be identified in the report. Leaders can push this point further, emphasizing how they are interested in the information respondents provide in the survey, and not who provided it.

DEOMI provides a template commander's letter at <http://www.deocs.net/public/saveCount.cfm?countID=8> that encourages members to participate in the survey and assessment process, and commits to addressing issues that are identified. When a high percentage of members complete the survey, leadership had confidence that the results reflect the genuine sentiments of all members; the converse is true with low completion rates.

**2. Leaders must make good on their pledge to accept the results of the survey.** One good way to demonstrate this is to provide the members with feedback on the survey report's principal findings soon after the report has been reviewed. It is also a good idea for the leader to report results with the survey administrator and other assessment team members present, and have them also provide insights about the results; this helps project the assessment endeavor as a team effort. Leaders must be careful to report what was found in objective terms, without discounting the members' perceptions as inaccurate or invalid. Moreover, if a leader becomes defensive about what is found in the survey report, this will have a chilling effect on members' propensity to participate in subsequent surveys. This is also a good time for follow-on climate assessment efforts to be discussed, to show how the leader seeks to better characterize the predominant perceptions identified in the survey report. The leader can take this opportunity

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to encourage members to participate in focus groups and interviews—again emphasizing that anonymity will be preserved, and that results will be presented thematically and without attribution—to ensure securing a more detailed picture of the command’s climate, and garner members’ suggestions for improvement. This may also be an opportune time for the leader to mention those perceptions identified in the survey that are amenable to validation by reviewing records and reports (e.g., that one demographic group receives a disproportionate number of awards, promotions, training opportunities, disciplinary actions, etc.).

### ***3. Create, socialize, and track a plan of action to address validated concerns.***

Clearly, conducting a climate assessment without creating and executing a plan to correct identified conditions that diminish climate will do nothing for the organization’s climate. In fact, inaction itself can prove corrosive to morale, and will likely discourage members from completing climate surveys in the future. The plan, which can be laid out in tabular form, should identify: each issue to be addressed; the identified action; the responsible party; and the action’s status (e.g., not started, ongoing, completed), using color coding to facilitate status identification (e.g., red for not started, yellow for ongoing, and green for completed). The organization’s leader—again with the survey administrator and assessment team members—should publicly review the plan with all members, so that everybody understands what to expect. It is equally important to periodically review progress that has been made in realizing the plan’s goals. In the end, the leader should be able to show the members that all the identified remedial actions were accomplished.

In the end, members will see that the leader was willing to listen to their concerns, entertain their suggestions for improvement, and follow through with concrete actions intended to improve conditions and morale. Imagine being the leader of this organization a year later, when you’re again asking members to complete a climate survey. Chances are the members will be far more inclined to complete the survey, and provide their candid input and beneficial suggestions, since they believe their contributions will be used to further improve the organization’s climate.

The Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute (DEOMI) DEOCS Support Team delivers a range of support services, and can provide consultation and analytical services to assist commanders, directors, and survey administrators through all phases of the command climate assessment process. For additional information contact the Support Team at [support@deocs.net](mailto:support@deocs.net) or at (321) 494-2675/3260, DSN: 854.