Best Practices:
Public Satisfaction Survey

July 2016
Re: Trial Court Best Practices: Public Satisfaction Survey

Dear Colleague:

As part of its effort to improve performance, the judiciary has been conducting court public satisfaction surveys since 2013. The feedback from those it serves is vital for the courts in identifying where improvements are needed and in recognizing where we are doing well. The trial courts have given generously of their time for this important aspect of court improvement and it has not gone unnoticed.

The purpose of this manual is to assist courts with translating the public’s thoughts into actions that improve the court and give the public a return on their investment. The eight best practices serve as a road map for using the survey data to gain internal staff buy-in, focus efforts effectively, and enhance public trust in the judiciary. It also prescribes the roles of judges, court administrators, and other court employees in developing and implementing new practices in their courts. I appreciate your past participation in conducting these surveys and your continuing commitment to pursue excellent service to Michigan.

I encourage all courts to use this manual and the practices suggested in it. Please share your questions, concerns, or ideas with your regional administrator. It is my hope that all courts will be challenged and encouraged to strive to enhance the public trust in the judiciary.

Thank you for your thoughtful dedication to Michigan’s court system.

Sincerely,

Milton L. Mack, Jr.
Executive Summary

The purpose of this manual is to assist courts with translating the public’s comments into actions that improve the court and build a stronger justice system. The eight best practices contained within serve as a road map for using the survey data to gain internal staff buy-in, focus efforts effectively, and enhance public trust in the judiciary.

Much of the information in this manual is adapted from *The Survey Action Results Guide* published by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, Office of Policy and Evaluation.¹ The guide was designed to assist federal agencies with using employee survey results to implement positive change. Using a similar framework, this manual provides courts with a plan and structure for making changes based on feedback from their public satisfaction survey.

In addition to best practice recommendations, this manual includes information on the role of the court in implementing these strategies, staffing needs, and associated costs. While actual spending should be minimal, the time invested by court staff and leadership may be significant. Therefore, it is important for the court to carefully consider its strategy in implementing these best practices and effecting change in the court. Ultimately, these best practices should help courts improve their service to the public.

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Introduction

When a court user takes the time to give an honest assessment of his or her experience in the court, the citizen has given the court a gift. Court staff is familiar with court processes. They know where different services are located within the court. They know the order of activities, what to anticipate, and who to contact for various questions. While this knowledge is what makes staff so helpful, it prevents them from taking the perspective of someone unfamiliar with the court and legal procedure. There is no other way to obtain the public’s external perspective but to ask them. A public satisfaction survey is one way to solicit input in a readily usable format.

A public satisfaction survey serves the court in many ways. First, it creates the impetus for an in-depth review of court processes. Court users provide feedback about their experience in the court in exchange for court leaders’ thoughtful analysis of the results and review of court processes. It is an outside-looking-in review of court processes and procedures. That externally driven review provides fodder for meaningful internal conversations about customers’ experiences in the court. Using this information for meaningful court improvement closes the loop on the survey process. By acknowledging the valuable information that the public has given and translating their thoughts into actions, the court shows a good-faith effort to fulfill its end of the social contract created when the court solicited feedback from its customers.

The purpose of this manual is to assist courts with translating the public’s thoughts into actions that improve the court and give the public a return on their investment. The eight best practices that follow serve as a road map to using the survey data to gain internal staff buy-in, focus efforts effectively, and enhance public trust in the judiciary.

Best Practice #1 – Identify Focus Areas

Once survey results have been returned to your court, select a group of three to four people to do an initial review of the results. These individuals should include court leaders such as judges and the court administrator – it is important for court executives to be involved in identifying strengths and weaknesses. This will improve buy-in and also provide a valuable perspective on customer service. The group should begin by reviewing the questions that were asked in the survey. After refreshing the group’s memory regarding the questions, the group should agree upon a scale for evaluating the court’s performance on each question. For example, for the first question, what percentage of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing constitutes success? What percentage of respondents disagreeing or strongly disagreeing would be cause for concern? Determining a threshold or measurement will help the team and court determine how to proceed.

Next, review the responses to each question and identify, using the agreed-upon scale for each question, whether the court is excelling or lagging behind the group’s own expectations in each area. It is also helpful to compare the results from this survey to the results of previous surveys question by question. As before, the group should determine what amount of change between years, either positive or negative, is noteworthy. Then, compare the results and identify where the court is improving and where it might be declining.
In some instances, the group may wonder if subsets of their customers answered a question differently. For example, did men answer question one differently than women? If your group would like additional analyses of the survey responses, the State Court Administrative Office’s Statistical Research division can provide more detailed results. To request additional analysis, contact Laura Hutzel at hutzell@courts.mi.gov or 517-373-5569.

After examining the questions asked, the survey responses, and determining whether those responses meet the group’s expectations of their service to the public, the group should select one to three responses from the survey that will be the focus of efforts going forward. The focus does not necessarily need to be on areas that did not meet the group’s expectations. It is sometimes advantageous to focus on areas that are the court’s greatest strengths. When deciding which areas to focus on, the group should consider which strengths could be further enhanced, which questions had the greatest number of unfavorable responses, which questions had significant changes from previous years, and which questions cause concern given the court’s current overarching goals. Since the group will need to explain their choices to other court staff, make sure that the group can clearly articulate why it believes it is important to focus on these areas, and what benefit court staff and the public would experience from additional work in these areas. A highly visible area may be a good choice if significant change can be observed within the next six months. Significant observable change sends the message to court staff and the public that leadership finds the survey results to be important, and that the survey was a good use of time and resources because of the actions it primed. Sample findings are below.

SAMPLE SURVEY FINDINGS

- The community has many Spanish-speakers.
- Many survey respondents had difficult taking the survey because it was only offered in English.
- Those who did complete the survey indicated that the language barrier presented difficulties in doing business with the court.
- The court uses many signs and posters to inform court customers about where to go, how to get help for a specific problem, or what rights they have. These signs are only in English.
- The group recognizes that the community’s population is changing and the court’s communications have not yet caught up.
- The group recognizes a need for improved Spanish-language communication.
- Improving Spanish-language communication at the court would be a very visible improvement and in direct response to the survey results.

Best Practice #2 – Create a Communication Plan

It is important to communicate the results of the survey to all employees at all levels and all locations of the court. Communicating to all employees reinforces that court leaders believe that court staff share in the success of the court. A communication plan ensures that everyone in the court receives the same message, delivered in a particular manner, and at particular times.
To effectively communicate the results of the survey, group the survey results into areas of strength, areas for improvement, and areas that are satisfactory using the agreed-upon scales. Then, share the results with other court leaders and obtain their commitment to use the survey results to the court’s benefit. Discuss how the leaders want to share the results with court staff and the best way to communicate the areas that have been chosen to focus efforts. Ensure that it is clear why those focus areas were chosen and how focusing efforts in those areas can benefit the public and the court staff. In addition to deciding on the messaging, decide on the logistics of delivering the message. There could be one large meeting for all, or leaders communicating to managers who then communicate to staff. Court leadership may also wish to hold a series of small group meetings. No matter which method a court chooses, a good communication plan includes a timeline for communication, identifies the audience, has a clear purpose, makes a few carefully selected key points, identifies the next steps, and considers the appropriate media to deliver the message.

**Best Practice #3 – Build Teams and Develop Responses**

Once staff is aware of the survey results and the areas chosen to focus efforts, it is time to solicit employee volunteers. For each focus area, a team of employees should be chosen to lead the effort. The goals of the teams are to collect additional information, as needed; to identify the underlying reasons for the positive or negative survey results; to develop an action plan for their assigned focus area; and then to implement the plan. The team should work with court leadership to evaluate the effects of the plan.

In courts with smaller staffs, it may be necessary to have one team that has only a few volunteers. Using a small team of representatives is a good way to more efficiently use limited resources and staff time. The size of a team is not as important as its commitment to the focus area. Courts with fewer employees or limited resources may choose to complete work on one focus area before moving on to another, while larger courts may have multiple teams each working on their own area.

It should be made clear that this is a desirable assignment. Explain that the volunteers have a role in shaping the future of the court and that this is a high-visibility project that may result in newspaper stories or other media involvement. When requesting volunteers, emphasize that it is possible not all volunteers will be selected because leadership needs to balance the teams with staff from all levels and with complementary characteristics. In building the teams, include a mix of supervisors, employees, and union representatives. Look for individuals who are well-organized, have strong analytical skills, and meet deadlines. People are more likely to support an effort when they have been a part of designing it. Therefore, consider including some volunteers on the team who may be difficult to get on board if they are not involved from the ground up.

For each focus-area team, identify a team leader. The team leader will be responsible for scheduling and conducting team meetings, and developing and implementing an action plan. It is also helpful if each focus-area team has an executive-level advocate, such as the chief judge or a court administrator. An executive-level advocate helps to provide visibility for the focus-area team’s work, is able to direct resources, provides encouragement, holds the team accountable for results, approves their action plan, and addresses problems that arise that are outside of the team’s scope of authority.
The focus-area teams should consider the frequency of team meetings. Early in the process it may be necessary to hold frequent – even weekly – meetings. The executive-level advocate should attend the first team meeting and set the scope of the work to be accomplished by the team; they should also review the survey data that relates to the team’s focus area and explain that the team is responsible for:

- Identifying possible reasons for the results.
- Determining if additional information is needed and, if so, collecting it.
- Developing focus-area objectives and an action plan for each objective.
- Implementing the action plan.
- Evaluating success of the action plan.

If the focus-area team is charged with addressing a weakness, some questions that the team may want to consider are:

- Is this weakness the result of a lack of time?
- Is this weakness the result of poor workflow?
- Does staff have adequate knowledge and skills?
- Does staff have the authority to address this weakness?
- Is this weakness the result of inadequate equipment or technology?
- Is the court understaffed in this area?
- Is this weakness the result of inadequate funding?
- Could conflicting demands on staff contribute to this weakness?
- Is staff inadvertently rewarded by not addressing this weakness, or are they punished if they do address the weakness?
- Does staff perceive this weakness as an important matter?

If the focus-area team is charged with addressing a strength, some questions that the team may want to consider are:

- Is this strength the result of motivated staff?
- Is this strength the result of court culture?
- Do strong supervisor-employee relationships contribute to this strength?
- Is this strength due to knowledgeable or skilled staff?
- Is this strength the result of good workflow?
- Is this strength the result of a service-oriented staff?

Once the focus-area team has developed a list of assumed underlying causes for their survey results focus area, the next step is to consider collecting additional data to accurately interpret the survey results. This can be accomplished by focus-area team members meeting with staff to gather additional feedback or forming focus groups. These groups, made up of staff not on the focus-area team, can provide valuable insight on particular issues. For example, in the example above the survey results identify a language barrier for many court customers. Here, front-line staffers like clerks can be invaluable in helping explain the issues Spanish-speakers have and how the court does or does not address them. At the conclusion of this process, the focus-area team should have a clear idea of the underlying causes of the strength(s) or weakness(es) of their focus area.

Next, the focus-area team should decide how to address the strength(s) or weakness(es). Factors to consider are:
• Which approach is most likely to be effective?
• Which approach offers the most benefits for the lowest costs or use of resources?
• Does the court have the needed knowledge or skills to address the strength or weakness and, if not, can it obtain them?
• Are there any legal, ethical, or organizational constraints that affect the decision?
• What obstacles might the team encounter?

Ranking the focus-area team’s options by anticipated effectiveness and success may help the team identify the best options. The best option(s) should be taken to the executive-level advocate for approval. If the option involves changes with staff or staff duties, the court may wish to involve union representatives. If the executive-level advocate approves of the focus-area team’s approach, the focus-area team should proceed to developing an action plan with measurable objectives (See Best Practice #4).

**Best Practice #4 – Develop and Implement an Action Plan**

The goal of an action plan is to create a document that serves as a roadmap for how the focus-area team will accomplish change in the court. The action plan should begin with a brief statement of the charge of the group. A sample action plan is available in Appendix 1.

An action plan should have objectives that, if successfully completed, will address the strength or weakness on which the team is focused. An objective is a specific and concrete statement of work to be accomplished. The acronym “SMART” can be helpful in developing objectives.

- **S** stands for Specific. The objective should be clear and concrete.
- **M** stands for Measurable. The objective should be written in a way that can be evaluated.
- **A** stands for Achievable. The objective must be practical.
- **R** stands for Relevant. The objective must make a positive impact on the court.
- **T** stands for Time. The objective must have a completion date.

**SAMPLE OBJECTIVE**

*Spanish-language translation will be added to all signs in public courthouse spaces by the end of the fiscal year.*

**Specific:** This objective is clear and concrete.

**Measureable:** It can be evaluated by counting the number of signs with Spanish-language translation today and at the end of the fiscal year.

**Achievable:** It is a practical way to communicate directions to Spanish-speaking customers. Creating new signs and having them printed is something the court can accomplish with relative ease and at a low cost.

**Relevant:** The objective would make a positive impact on the court by assisting the public with directions.

**Time:** The objective has a clear deadline of the end of the fiscal year.

Next, an action plan involves identifying what the court must do to achieve the objective. For the example above, actions might include identifying signs in public areas of the courthouse,
obtaining accurate translations, identifying and soliciting quotes from sign manufacturers, receiving approval for and purchasing the signs, proofing the new signs, and posting the signs. For each objective, the focus-area team should consider which resources might be needed, such as time, staff, materials, tools, or training. Each action should be assigned to a specific person with a deadline. For example, “identifying signs in public areas of the courthouse” must be assigned to a specific staff member, and it must have its own deadline because these actions must occur in order. For example, “obtaining accurate translations” cannot come before “identify the signs to the translated.” A delay in accomplishing any individual deadline can hold up the entire project.

When the action plan has been developed, the focus-area team should seek approval from court leadership before beginning implementation. Once approved, the focus-area team should begin implementing the plan. Continuing to hold regular focus-area team meetings throughout the implementation period is highly recommended because it helps to keep the group accountable and to identify and solve any problems early.

**Best Practice #5 – Support Improvement Efforts**

New initiatives are more readily embraced when there is a visible commitment from court leadership. That commitment can be demonstrated by clearly communicating that court improvement is a priority for its leaders. Commitment can also be shown by allowing employees time to work on focus-area team activities. Making room in employees’ schedules for focus-area team activities may mean temporarily reducing or reassigning other daily work. Also, providing frequent updates to court employees about the focus-area team’s accomplishments helps keep the project in the forefront of everyone’s mind. Using the sample objective, court leadership could support improvement efforts by:

- Ensuring that staff have the time and access to inventory the court’s current signs.
- Setting aside funding for new signs.
- Communicating to all court staff that new signs will be hung throughout the court, and the purpose of the new signs.

Once action plans have been approved and implementation begins, it is important that employees receive any training they need to be successful with new processes, procedures, or technologies. It is also important that leadership listens to court staff’s concerns and accepts feedback.

**Best Practice #6 – Accountability**

For any new initiative to be successful, the individuals responsible for its completion must be held accountable for their work products. Staff must know what is expected of them, the deadline, and that there will be positive consequences for high-quality work or negative consequences for missing the mark. Then, court leadership must carry through with the promised consequences. Potential rewards for high-quality work could include handwritten thank-you notes, taking the focus-area team out to lunch, a certificate, a celebration party, a desirable assignment, a good performance rating, or a valued development opportunity. In developing a list of potential negative consequences, check with your court’s human resource leaders. Using the sample objective, court leadership could ensure accountability by:
• Reviewing all new signs once installed to ensure all old signs have been replaced.
• Rewarding the employees responsible for the sign project, including praise or noting the accomplishment in a performance review.
• Following up with the staff member(s) responsible if the signs are not installed by the deadline.

**Best Practice #7 – Evaluate and Revise**

After the action plan has been implemented, use the following questions to guide the court’s evaluation of its success.

- Did we select a realistic objective and an accurate measure of achievement?
- What interfered with our plans?
- Were those interfering factors beyond our control? If not, what could we have done differently?
- Did team members meet their commitments?
- What lessons did we learn?
- Ultimately, was the plan a good response to what we heard from the survey?
- Did the plan result in better service to our customers?

If revisions are necessary, use the steps of Best Practice #4 to develop new objectives and action plans to carry out change.

**Best Practice #8 – Make Improvements Visible**

Even minor changes to policy, process, or procedure can have ripple effects of change throughout the court and require careful thought and execution. It is important that the focus-area team members who worked to improve the court are recognized for their efforts. Consider publicly thanking the focus-area team members or having colleagues share how the changes positively impacted their work. In the sample objective, perhaps clerks who work at the counter now have an easier time guiding Spanish-speaking customers to the appropriate area of the courthouse thanks to the new signs. Positive feedback from the clerks and other court staff will help the focus-area team to know their work was effective and appreciated. Even a small change such as new signage can have a major impact.

Remember, changes resulted because of court customers’ comments. Thanking the public and reporting back to them through media outlets is another way to make the court’s improvements visible. For example, the court might alert the public to the new Spanish-language signs through the news media. Including a comment that the new signs were installed in response to customer feedback will create a lasting impact with the public.

**Roles in Implementing Best Practices**

A large-scale project like this works best when one individual is selected as the overall project lead. Typically, the chief judge will identify a project lead to be responsible for developing the project plan and coordinating the overall project and its associated focus-area teams. The chief
judge may serve as the executive-level advocate for a group or may delegate that responsibility to other judges or court staff.

**Judges**: Judges are leaders in the court. As such, the importance that judges assign to the customer satisfaction survey results sets the tone for court employee investment. Judges help to identify the focus areas from the survey results by examining the survey responses and determining what areas of strengths and weaknesses the court should address. Judges also serve as executive-level advocates for the focus-area teams, directing resources and holding the teams accountable.

**Court Administrator(s)**: In conjunction with judges, the court administrator(s) help select the areas of strengths and weaknesses revealed in the public satisfaction survey results. Court administrators can also serve as executive-level advocates that help secure resources for the focus-area teams and hold the teams accountable for their work products. In many cases, court administrators will be responsible for developing the communication plan and for holding kick-off meetings with staff to inform them of the project and solicit volunteers for the focus-area teams. Court administrators may also be responsible for communicating with the media about the steps the court has taken in response to the public’s survey feedback.

**Court Staff**: Court staff has one of two roles: to serve on focus-area teams or to execute the results of the focus-area teams’ work. Those on focus-area teams will examine the underlying reasons for the survey results; perhaps collect additional data, develop objectives and an action plan; and then implement the plan. Those executing the results of the focus-area teams’ work will institute new processes, procedures, or policies by adjusting their previous practices, using methods or instructions developed by the focus-area teams.
Appendix 1: Sample Action Plan

June 1, 2016

Team #2

Focus: Improve Spanish-Language Translation Services

Objective: Spanish-language translation will be added to all signs in public courthouse spaces by the end of the fiscal year, September 30, 2016.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
<th>Person(s) Responsible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identify existing signs (all English language) throughout the courthouse.</td>
<td>June 8, 2016</td>
<td>Carl Carlson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obtain accurate Spanish translations of English-language signs.</td>
<td>June 24, 2016</td>
<td>Irene Jones Rosa Lopez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solicit quotes from sign manufacturers.</td>
<td>July 8, 2016</td>
<td>Carl Carlson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decide on vendor and approve purchase.</td>
<td>July 29, 2016</td>
<td>Carl Carlson Anita Adams, Court Administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receive completed signs from vendor.</td>
<td>August 19, 2016</td>
<td>Carl Carlson Selected Sign Vendor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proof new signs.</td>
<td>August 26, 2016</td>
<td>Irene Jones Rosa Lopez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post new signs.</td>
<td>August 31, 2016</td>
<td>Carl Carlson Facilities Management</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>