LESSONS FROM AN EMPLOYEE SURVEY IN AN IRRIGATION DEPARTMENT IN NORTH INDIA

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Abstract

An employee survey was undertaken in the Uttar Pradesh Irrigation Department as part of the research of an Institutional Strengthening and Restructuring consultancy. A methodology commonly used in Australia was simplified and circulated to 32,000 staff. A relatively low response was received compared to that usually expected, but even so, much information about the organisation could be extracted.

The survey faced formidable barriers due to an organisational culture, which is coercive and non-transparent, but many lessons were learnt that are useful to those seeking to apply democratic management tools in “feudal” bureaucracies.

Keywords

Employee survey, India, Irrigation Department, Analytical techniques

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Introduction

Throughout the world, large organisations use the technique of employee surveys to gauge the opinions of staff about features of current operating conditions and perceptions of the future. A perception survey is both democratic and personal, if returns are completed honestly. The literature on this subject is extensive and a vibrant consultancy industry exists in India, as

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elsewhere, offering Employee Perception services to companies. However, a web search will quickly reveal that the published results emphasize outcomes like “our Company is the best place to work” rather than the far more valuable insights such as “managers who communicate company objectives clearly have more productive teams”. The techniques have evolved internationally during the last twenty years and organisations usually prefer to outsource the activity since this increases the perceptions of independence as well as protecting individual staff confidentiality. The downside of this evolution is that an organisation wishing to commence a survey process (commonly it is repeated every second year) is generally forced to engage a specific consultant, and use them repeatedly, and thus become trapped in the extent of benchmarking across similar industries to the size of the consultant’s client base. The author gained lengthy experience in Australian government department undertaking surveys, using generic Australian questionnaires designed to be applicable across different industry types.

During the author’s tenure in Lucknow (2004-2007) leading the Institutional Strengthening and Restructuring project, it was noted that discussion was prevalent in both the popular press\(^2\) and in serious journals\(^3\) of the concept of India’s “Feudal Democracy”. This refers to the gap between notional democratic norms and the ground reality of power, influence and money in the daily political economy, which is particularly strident in North India.

These papers resonated with the observations of the operations of the Uttar Pradesh Irrigation Department (UPIID) bureaucracy, and led to the coining of the expression “feudal organisation” for this paper. The phenomenon is certainly not new, being elegantly described by Sharma\(^4\) who noted that the cultural framework of Indian management presents:

> “a plausible picture of the average Indian’s resistance to change, his willingness to delegate but unwillingness to accept authority, his fear of taking an independent decision, his possessive attitude towards his inferiors and his abject surrender to his superiors, his strict observance of rituals and his disregard of them in practice, his preaching of high morals and against personal immorality, and his near desperate efforts at maintaining the status quo while talking of change”

\(^2\) E.g. The Hindu, January 01, 2002
The seminal work by Robert Wade\(^5\) also greatly influenced the author as he struggled to make sense of the emerging UPID data and in fact when he shared the then 25 years old paper with a senior engineering manager in the organisation, the engineer announced “it is describing me”. However, it should be emphasized that the term is not intended to be judgemental, rather the author hopes that it assists in the discrimination between simple bureaucratic responses and the far more hierarchical and tribute-related transactions of the truly feudal relationship that emerged as commonplace within the organisation.

This paper was prepared as a “practitioners report”, not an academic critique of employee perception surveys, and two themes will be pursued:

1) Demonstration of the use of a survey to assist management decision making.

2) Lessons learned in survey design and practice in the Indian Public Service context. The goal of the paper then is to demonstrate how information-laden is this management tool, even when facing a feudal organisation.

**Design of the survey**

Approximately 32,000 copies of a one-page questionnaire were distributed widely across the UPID area of operations, accompanied by an endorsement of the process by the Head of the Department. A conventional five-point response scale was considered, but the survey team were doubtful about using it because it was thought there would be a tendency to "mark down the middle". Instead, a simple “yes/no” option was given. An invitation to freely comment was included at the end of the questionnaire.

The results of this survey are remarkable because of the high incidence of what the author has called “feudal” voting, where the employee has answered in the way that would please his boss. In fact it came to be known that some staff checked their responses with their supervisors, *who countersigned the results!* When this became apparent, experienced locals said, “Well what do you expect in a punishment-driven organisation?”

In excess of 2,000 questionnaires were completed and returned for analysis - a return rate of 6.3 %. For comparison, it is not unusual to achieve a 70% response rate in an organisation that is reasonably compact, that provides a personal survey to each employee delivered by mail to their home address, and which undertakes a follow up telephone call to each employee to assist with preparation of a response using an independent consultant.


*Lessons from an Employee Survey in an Irrigation Department in North India*
None of these logistical criteria were met in Uttar Pradesh and although geography, communications and cost were a significant barrier, the main limiting factor was concerns held regarding the independence of 65% of the received returns, where such features as endorsement by supervisors on the form and “block voting” done with the same handwriting and pen in the ‘Comments’ field were apparent, leading to a rejection of these from the analytical process. In order to analyse all responses in a similar way, those lacking the important demographic and geographic data were also rejected, resulting in 850 usable responses.

In the structured survey of 12 questions\(^6\), information was sought in three areas where future management initiatives were feasible:

- relating to the relationship with the individual’s superior officer
- relating to the impact of the organisation on the individual
- relating to the individual’s perceptions

Therefore we can look at the survey in terms of the management behaviours of the boss and of the organisation and the impact of these two forces on employee satisfaction and hope.

Figure 1 in the next page illustrates the experience of staff, where it can be seen that a broad range of length of work experience was sampled.

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\(^6\) A major unanticipated difficulty arose with the translation of the English questions into Hindi. Readers familiar with surveys will be aware that the specific wording used in a survey has a major impact on responses. For this reason surveyors are extremely reluctant to revise questions in subsequent survey exercises, as this destroys the temporal comparisons. Similarly with translations, there is the challenge of a lack of a one-to-one correlation with the English, with often a wider word choice in the Hindi. If our exercise is repeated in UPID in the future, we would advise maintaining the wording, even if misinterpretations arise in practice (see analysis in Figure 10 later). The survey form in Hindi is appended to this paper.
Those familiar with North India will be aware of most of the staff designations in the chart.

(figure 2). Seenchpals and Beldars are skilled field workers, Senior Assistants are clerical..
workers with long seniority, and Junior Engineers (JEs) are para-professional engineers. Assistant Engineers (AEs) and Executive Engineers (EEs) are qualified professional engineers.

The UPID, which is common with most irrigation departments in India (and in Central Asia, where the author is currently engaged), suffers from a major decline from its halcyon days of large budgets and the construction of gigantic new projects. It has slipped from its position as employer of choice to an organisation that has extreme difficulty in attracting young talent (figure 3)\(^7\).

Table 1 indicates the names of the places in Uttar Pradesh from where more than 10 responses were received, and also the 13 main designations of the respondents. Note that “EE” includes Executive Engineers, Supervising Engineers and Chief Engineers together since they are all Class 1 officers.

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\(^7\) To “investigate the reasons why young engineers are not attracted to the Department” was part of the terms of reference for the consultancy. Contributing factors include remoteness of work locations, poor working conditions, low official remuneration (and in recent times, reduced “unofficial” remuneration). The questionnaire was designed to provide data in some of these sociological areas.
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
<th>Designation</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LUCKNOW</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>HEAD CLERK</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEERUT</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>SEENCHPAL</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GORAKHPUR</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>PEON</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BULAND SAHAR</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>JE</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MODI NAGAR</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>DRAWING STAFF</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MATHURA</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>JUNIOR CLERK</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JHANSI</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>AE</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAHARAJGANJ</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>EE</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALLAHABAD</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>MATE</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGRA</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>SENIOR ASSISTANT</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAHARANPUR</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>CLERK</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAREILLY</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>BELDAR</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEORIA</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>RUNNER</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MUZAFFARNAGAR</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SANT KABIR NAGAR</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEW DELHI</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LALITPUR</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>ETAWAH</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>JILEDARI DADRI</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALIGARH</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2, in the next page, lists the questions, and their short titles used in the charts that follow. Included in the table are the percentages of “yes” responses to these questions and below that, these results are charted in figure 4. Readers familiar with drafting surveys, you will note that there are no tricky questions where a “no” answer is required for a “yes” opinion, nor is the same matter raised in a different way in more than one question as a verifying tool.

**Figure 3**

![Percentage of "Yes" Responses](chart.png)
Table 2 Summary of Percentage of “Yes” responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question No.</th>
<th>Full Text of Question</th>
<th>Text used in charts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>My reporting officer/official is a good/correct source of information.</td>
<td>Boss good info source 92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The affected workers are consulted before decision-making occurs.</td>
<td>Consultation occurs 64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The future of irrigation department is bright.</td>
<td>Future bright 64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>My reporting officer/official gives me credit for satisfactory work.</td>
<td>Boss gives credit 74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>My nature of work &amp; environment encourage me for maximum work output.</td>
<td>Productive environment 74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The directly concerned management understands my problems.</td>
<td>Boss understands 76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Is it necessary to strengthen &amp; restructure the irrigation department?</td>
<td>Restructure necessary 78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The objectives of irrigation department are clearly defined.</td>
<td>Objectives Defined 81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>In all circumstances I am satisfied with my work.</td>
<td>Satisfied with work 84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>My work gives me a feeling of personal achievement.</td>
<td>Personal achievement 86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>My peer colleagues provide complete cooperation to me.</td>
<td>Peers cooperate 88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>I am encouraged to discover new &amp; innovative ways of working.</td>
<td>Encourage innovation 91%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The next chart (figure 5) reveals the variation between responses more clearly by “discounting” for the overall positive bias in the scores. During the planning for the survey, consideration was given to a 5-point scale, but it was felt that the novelty of the exercise was already sufficient for staff who often have low standards of education. Discussion of the results with local sociologists supported the view that a positive bias to questions “from the management” can be expected, leading to the 79% median “yes” score that we recorded.

In figure 5, attention is also drawn to the “management initiatives” (like consulting with staff before taking actions) which are in hatched blue colour, and those relating to the responses of the staff to those initiatives are shown red.

The body of this paper is associated with unpacking these results using the demographic and geographic indicators that were collected. To this was added a large amount of anecdotal data gathered from the author’s staff, who undertook the logistics along with other data from our research in this Institutional Strengthening and Restructuring consultancy.

**Analysis of the Results by Classification of Employee**

In the survey a grouping of the 12 questions can be made: those relating to the relationship with the individual’s superior officer, those relating to the impact of the organization on the individual and those relating to the individual’s perceptions, as listed below.
Questions relating to the relationship with the individual’s superior officer:

1. consultation occurs
2. boss gives credit
3. boss understands
4. boss a good information source

Questions relating to the impact of the organization on the individual:

5. work environment encourages me to maximise output
6. objectives defined
7. encourage innovation
8. peers cooperate

Questions relating to the individual’s perceptions:

9. satisfied with work
10. feeling of personal achievement
11. restructuring necessary
12. future bright

Therefore we can look at the survey in terms of the management behaviours of the boss and of the organisation and the impact of these two forces on employee satisfaction and hope.

The responses are shown in terms of the classes of employees in the next 12 charts. It is impossible to add a commentary about all the employee classes for all the charts, and so to illustrate, some themes are followed.

– Perceptions amongst the engineers (EE, AE, JE)
– Perceptions of the employees who interact with farmers directly and continuously (particularly seenchpals, but also beldars)
– Head clerks and clerks

The majority of the charts that follow illustrate “% of staff responding with ‘yes’ to the question under discussion”, which is the Y-axis in most cases. The Y-axis scale is usually from zero to 100, with ‘yes/no’ responses indicated by colour and a legend. Where this is not the case, the axes titles and scales are identified.
The relationship with the individual’s superior officer

First we investigate the relationship with the individual’s superior officer. In relation to consultation (see figure 6), findings can be summarized as:

- AEs feel consulted, but their bosses (the EEs) perceive they are consulted less.
- Both field worker groups strongly perceive that they are consulted.
- This is reversed with clerks – the superior officer considers himself consulted more often than the subordinate clerk.

The senior engineers respond equally in the question of recognition as do the field workers (see figure 7). For the clerical staff, recognition is also similar. The “Runner” has a low score here, and considering that many of them spend their days in the corridors, sitting waiting to be dispatched on errands, the response shown is likely to be realistic.
There is a gap between the EE/AE engineers and the JEs regarding sensitivity shown by supervisors (see figure 8). This is an instance of the Feudal Organisation in action, where chauvinism by the Degree-holding engineers towards the para-professional JEs is apparent. The JEs have a stronger employee union and have a history of gaining their rights despite the objections of the EEs and AEs. Again the field workers respond similarly, and likewise the clerks are close, but with a less positive view of the understanding of the boss.
The question of trust in the boss’s **provision of information** (figure 9) reveals the first instance of the low positive responses to questions among senior engineers. Since these staff were all promoted from AE, something happens during the transition (or during the EE experience) to drive down trust. This will be explored more later.

![My supervisor is a reliable source of information](image)

Regarding trust in the information from the boss, the three clerk classes fare badly. Thus we have administrative departments peopled by staff who are relatively untrusting of each other and those above.

**How The Organisation Impacts On The Individual**

Next we examine responses to the questions relating to how the organisation impacts on the individual. This group of questions probably has the strongest cultural overlay, with very high scores for innovation and for cooperation being recorded, and so analysis will be more limited. In employee surveys we should guard against the trap of asking the “Is India the best country on Earth?” type question, which perhaps is the fate of enquiring, “Are Indians innovative and do they cooperate?” A 5-point scale and independent-minded respondents would also change this result.

The question of **work and environment** (figure 10) is an important one in the UPID Employee Survey, as a later analysis will reveal how this assessment correlates with other important issues.
On reflection, the team could not be sure how the question was interpreted, although it was meant to explore whether jobs were stimulating and if conditions encouraged productivity. Obviously it is possible to have a stimulating job in dreadful working conditions, to which the truthful answer would be “yes and no”. From extensive association with the Departmental staff over four years, the author has decided that the dominant thought in the minds of the respondents would be “working environment”, not job stimulation.

Within the category of engineers the gap between the “field-based” JE and the “deskbound” AE and EE is notable. The EE response is of particular concern, considering that they have the best offices! The author interprets this response as relating to the frustration felt because of the wide range of stakeholders they have to deal with. In the UPID, the EE position is the interface with the local politician, as well as the more difficult issues with farmers and the upwards and downwards interactions in the organisational hierarchy. The result shown is probably a fair representation of their chaotic lives.

Perhaps this is why the two clerk groups fare better in the same office environment –they are insulated from the political pressures.

The high score by the “customer service” officers (seenchpals) is indicative of the certainties of their roles and responsibilities (figure 11). Having limited freedom to act, in an unchanging environment leads to confidence about objectives. For the JEs there is some of that too, and so this group scores higher than the senior engineers. The result of most concern for Objectives is the perceptions of these senior engineers, where objectives would be expected to be clearly defined. This lack of clarity poses a serious threat, but at the same time it is probably a true
representation of a Department that has completed its “build” mission but has not willingly embraced the “maintain” mission in its mature phase of development.

The “heroic” era of canal construction has now passed and with it the challenging (and lucrative) design and construction postings. In other countries, energetic engineers have turned to the science of maintenance planning and control, but this has not occurred in UPID, largely because of the lack of sufficient budget for maintenance. Most of the budget that is received is consumed by salaries and so, particularly for the engineers, the objectives of the organisation have become blurred as employment and promotion become the main pursuits. Throw in the perturbations of frequent political interventions targeted at these EEs, and their responses are understandable.

Incidentally, it would be interesting to quiz the clerks further – the author suspects the low score for strategy reflects the chaotic administration procedures, where the maintenance of accurate records is discouraged because it would impose unwanted transparency. It is reasonable for a clerk to wonder, “Well, what am I here for?”

Innovation (figure 12) and cooperation (figure 13) will not be analysed further at this stage for the reasons outlined earlier.
As a footnote to the ‘innovation’ topic, it may be noted that despite the grandiose title of the "Senior Assistants", they and the “Mates” are at the bottom of the power system, often idle and more dependent on patronage for their positions than other ranks. The chart then is
counter-intuitive, where those with the most freedom to act (the Executive Engineers) show the lowest result in innovation, whilst those with the most menial tasks have the highest scores. It is included here because that is what was found, but explanations are not apparent. As mentioned earlier regarding pride in the nation, perhaps it is in the wording of the question.

In figure 14, again it is seen that the more senior staff of the organisation (the engineers) have a lower sense of achievement than the junior staff. This loss of a sense of achievement increases with rank.

It is intriguing that Clerks fare poorly whilst Head Clerks and Junior Clerks do better. With all these results above 80%, however, it would not be a focus for management action.
Similarly the overall response question (figure 15) elicited high positive answers, again decreasing with increasing rank in the organisation. Normally in surveys this is the “Indicator Question” which an organisation would track over the years as surveys are repeated. When this is done, trends emerge, and so the question is of less interest in this first (and possibly only) survey.

Another use of this question is for benchmarking across similar organisations in different parts of the nation – a wonderful project to undertake in India, because of its diversity.

As an illustration, the author compared two groups of mechanical tradesmen in two different types of industries in Australia, one a rigid production line situation, and the other involving direct customer contact and emergency response work. Unexpectedly, the production line workers were found to have a higher score for sense of personal accomplishments. Further analysis revealed that the production line workers were reporting a more frequent achievement of their relatively poor expectations of job satisfaction compared to the expectations of the customer service crews. The latter, because of their higher personal expectations of their roles, reported greater failures to achieve these outcomes. The sharing of perception survey results (using identical wording in questions) amongst differing work groups across a nation can be rewarding to all who participate.

Attention should now be paid to the two most important questions from the standpoint of a strengthening and restructuring consultancy. In the remainder of the paper, the author’s analysis of these two questions from different viewpoints will form the majority of the discussion.

For restructuring (figure 16) at an aggregate level, there are really only two discernable responses – those above 80%, and the two classifications of employees well below 80%. For one of these (“Mate”) only 30 returns were received, and they do not hold a senior position in the organisation. For JEs, there are 97 useable returns, and so the latter’s response is worthy of deeper analysis.
To reiterate, the JEs are the senior officers in the field, but they experience chauvinistic treatment from the degree holding AEs and EEs. Their strong union has achieved advancement in their entitlements and this may explain their aversion to strengthening and restructuring – they are “getting along quite nicely”.

A final important observation regarding this question is that, like a working environment, it is open to two interpretations. Strengthening is a word usually understood as meaning “training and development”, whist restructuring is usually interpreted as “change”. Therefore the message from the JEs could be, “Do not develop us and do not change us”, but it is more likely to be, “Change is not warranted”.

The “future bright” results (figure 17) have been chosen to receive the most analysis in this paper. This is partly because of their significance to the consultancy objectives, but also because of the variations found in the responses – this was the “indicator question”.

![Graph showing the future bright survey results](image)

Figure 16

Note this may not be seen as the critical indicator for management purposes by the UPID, and so deciding “what to watch” should be related to the objectives and roles of a particular manager, perhaps with the more general questions like “future bright” being the focus of general management rather than line management.
The observations from this last aggregated chart are:

- The low perceptions of the senior staff, including all the engineers,
- The extremely low value of the perceptions of the EEs,
- The more positive view of the seenchpals, who relate to the farmers directly, than that of the beldars who maintain equipment and canals, and
- The pessimistic views of the clerks, as compared to their bosses.

These matters are explored further in the next section with more detailed charts.

**Perceptions of The Future in UPID**

Reams have been written about the Roles and Responsibilities of the Executive Engineer in the Irrigation Departments of India, and this author does not claim to be an expert. For a reader, new to the subject, the following factors dominate the EE working environment:

- They are the interface between Departmental Operations and the local political figures – and therefore suffer the greatest pressures on transparent behaviour.
- They are the Principal’s Representative in contracts, carrying the power to impede or accelerate works done under contract, and often facing threats that are real and deadly.
- An unknown proportion of this group will have influenced their promotion to the position through financial offerings. Lucrative positions gained this way have to be protected through a continuing process of financial patronage.
- Failure to participate appropriately in the “marketplace for transfers” will lead to punishment appointments to locations where access to additional payments is not possible, such as the Design Branch.

It is the author’s conclusion from extensive observations of this cadre in action over a number of years that many of the negative responses apparent in the following chart are due to these factors (figure 18). As well as their designations, employees of the Department are divided into “classes” – classes 1 and 2 being the senior engineers and class 3 comprising of Junior Engineers (para-professionals), field staff and office staff. Class 4 includes base level field and office staff, where the responses to “future bright” are similar to class 3 (figure19). It is concluded that, apart from the engineers, the aggregated perceptions of the department’s staff are similar whilst the most senior engineers have the least positive perceptions about the future.
Understanding the Engineers’ Responses

Before analysing the situation with the engineers, the author has included the following notes from the surveyor’s diary of interviews carried out in a region where the engineers all reported poor perceptions about the future.

There was a general feeling among the respondents, irrespective of their rank (SE and EE are referred to here) that the situation is quite worse and there is hardly any hope for the department. This is explained by the following recorded statements of respondents.

SE: “I am about to retire and I have seen all the deteriorating trends within the department, including corruption and interferences at all levels. Plus nobody allows us to do technical work.”
Now the dominance of other players is so much that there is hardly any hope for a better future."

EE: “I am highly depressed with current state of affairs, where everybody, from administration to politicians ask for all sorts of undue favours. I used to book AC train tickets for politicians. District Administration asked me to get the fuel tank of their cars filled from the petrol pumps where we have credit accounts for our department jeeps, or sometimes they even take our vehicles for their personal works/tours.”

An AE, highly depressed at the deteriorating scenario in the field with operation and maintenance of canals. While working under this region, which is (i) a sugarcane belt (means water requirement is always intense), (ii) highly resourceful but with volatile mentality, (iii) head to middle reach of Ganga system, and (iv) politically sensitive area, leads to a lot of social and political pressures for providing undue share of water. This often leads to lesser water availability to many command farmers. Although they are senior officers, people don’t pay much heed to them and any small-time politician can easily bash them. So they are highly depressed and don’t look forward towards the future.

The next chart (figure 20) compares the aggregated results of the senior engineers and field staff, where the comparatively lower positive responses of the engineers to the working environment and the future are clear.
In order to further reveal the distinctions between the two groups, each was plotted against the mean of the responses to all the questions by the respective groups, shown in figure 21.

![Figure 20: Departure of the Group’s response from the Group’s average response to all questions](image)

It can be seen that generally the engineers vote in a more extreme way than the field and administrative staff. Thus in the aggregated questions, their influence on the average for the Department will depend on the number of responses received. When a sub-sample of data is analysed, for example from one office, this could become even more exaggerated. However, the evidence in this chart is clear. Senior engineers report poor perceptions about both, the future and their working environment.

Another approach to this part of the research was to use regression analysis between pairs of questions and search for the “trending regressions”, that is, where the influence of either the relationship with the superior officer or the organisational context on the individual’s perception of the future is strong and also taking into consideration the correlation coefficients generated, as shown in figure 22.
This enables the identification of influencing factors that can be reported with high confidence. To illustrate, “Future Bright” is presented in this way too. This chart includes the thirteen classifications of employees used in this study, with a correlation coefficient of 0.6808.

This can be summarised by using the four employee classes. The results in the following chart (figure 23) have a higher correlation coefficient partly because of the fewer data points, but the understanding of the contrast between the classes is increased, as the perceptions of a good working environment correlating strongly with perceptions of a bright future is seen.
An extensive search was made for other strong and reliable correlations, mostly without success. For example, the relationship between “Future Bright” and “Department Objectives Defined” is positive (figure 24), but the correlation coefficient is low.

Using regressions through only four points is always a dubious procedure and overlaying this on the feudal voting behaviour can lead to bizarre results, like the next chart (figure 25), where it appears that if the boss spends less effort acknowledging good performance, perceptions of the future improve.
The work reported indicates that regression analysis assists with the study of trends (in this case the progression up the engineering hierarchy, from class 3 to class 1, where a reduction in the reported rate of bosses giving credit occurs). But it is also obvious that there is no useful understanding revealed between giving credit and the perceptions of the future.

Of these correlation charts, the strongest relationship with “Future Bright” was found to be with “My nature of work and environment encourage me for maximum work output” (figure 23). This is a surprising result, considering the previous experience of the author.

In Australia, stronger correlations with perceptions of the future come from clear objectives and democratic decision-making and so one of the author’s Indian staff was requested to comment, as reproduced below. The question the author put to him was, “In UPID why is the quality of the chair, the desk and the almira (storage cupboard) more influential than strategy and consultation?” The response from the surveyor was:

“Yeah, the objective is much more significant than the table-almirah-chair. But when it comes to hardcore reality of their offices, the story is different. We know that they earn a lot of money from other means, but they tend to live a simple life, either to hide the truth or expect the government to do such things for them.

In this case as well, the offices (especially divisions, circles and sub-divisions) are in bad condition and from their general responses, one can conclude that they desperately need basic infrastructure rather than any philosophical or ethical thought. However, there are certain individuals, who still believe in integrity and want to uplift the department to new heights, but the other bunch outnumbers them significantly.

Another reason for table-almirah-chair greed appears to be their exposure to other high profile officers in private offices, which is often like a shock for them. What they actually deserve is a different thing, but they definitely compare their offices with the other ones.”

The Influence of the Individual Workplace on Employee Responses

The disaggregation of results by workplace is discussed here. This is the area where most attention is focussed in organisations that undertake surveys regularly, allowing the impact of individual manager performance to be revealed, as well as the impact of changes in organisational strategy. “How did we compare?” is a phrase raised by both, managers and staff at individual locations when the survey results are released.

Because the UPID management declined to circulate the results of the survey, this question could not be answered and in retrospect, the extremely low response-rate may have led to incorrect conclusions being drawn. To illustrate, the following analysis explores the results from 6 different offices, reviewed as 3 pairs of charts. It will be seen that comparisons between work groups are complex to interpret.
Modi Nagar and Jhansi – “the commitment of the manager is not enough”

Modi Nagar (figure 26) – comments from the surveyor:

“It is more or less Operation and Maintenance divisions. Lots of interferences but being a well connected district (to Delhi) and a highly resourceful area (in terms of water and soil fertility, it is known for being a sugarcane area), people love to be here. Of course, the avenues for other means to generate money is also relatively high over here”.

This work site returned one of the most positive perceptions across all questions, with “Future Bright” being their poorest result.

But there is an indication of feudal voting apparent - where the consensus on all questions is strongly positive, including Restructure Necessary. If all is so wonderful, why is there a consensus that restructuring is necessary?

Compare this with Jhansi (figure 27), where Restructuring received a far lower positive response.
From the surveyor:

“As I recall, the Jhansi guy was relatively okay with the current scenario. I think it is more to do with an individual. This guy was sober, quiet but highly positive and work oriented. So probably the restructuring requirement from his viewpoint is minimal. Despite the fact that this place is remotely connected, poorly resourced, drought prone but still boss is relatively satisfied with their work and are performance oriented”

The results are similar except there is only 40% support for restructuring. Further analysis revealed that the sample, from Modi Nagar, contains 50% seenchpals – field supervisors who distribute water, whilst 50% of the Jhansi sample were Head Clerks. There was a 95% yes vote for restructuring among seenchpals and 40% support from the clerks.
Bareilly and Maharajganj – “staff responses reflect the group’s core activities”
The responses for Bareilly (figure 28) and Maharajganj (figure 29) are presented next.
From the surveyor:

“The Bareilly people are mainly from workshop divisions. As they did not have significant workload, they are a bit disgruntled. They are more annoyed by the fact that, although they can do designing and fabrication works, the Department still outsources this task to private players and never takes their opinion in this regard.

This workshop used to be the pioneer in its times, but now the situation has totally turned around. Two reasons – first, lack of construction works, in comparison to earlier construction-driven era, and second outsourcing of similar works to other private players.

However, Department may be right in doing so, as the work efficiency in such workshops have gone down along with the usual government labour complexities.”

“Maharajganj is a Floods division and part of it may be looking after Operation and Maintenance. It is a highly remote area, with a lot of mafia and political interferences. I will not be surprised by the responses like no hope for future, desperate need for restructuring, deteriorated working environment, etc. This is all attributed to current social and political complexities. Part of the reason is persistent negligence of authorities towards this area and under-resourced scenario of this area”.

Comparison of the charts indicates contrasting scores in these locations for both Consultation and Future Bright. Thus for these two worksites the impressions of the surveyor in onsite conversations was confirmed by the survey: consultation was lacking in Bareilly and the impact of political interference in Maharajganj on hope for the future was apparent.

**Allahabad and Agra – “Local management decisions will have an impact”**

Allahabad (figure 30) and Agra (figure 31) are two prominent cities with large local Irrigation Department offices. Despite this similarity, their results are contrasting and the author’s surveyor provided some reflections on their local operating environment.
Figure 28

Figure 29
“Agra Managers are forward looking but since they do not have significant workload and were just doing deposit works, so they desperately sought change, but under the current scenario, they felt that the future of the department is bleak for them, unless some significant irrigation construction work comes to them. At the time of the survey, an active Division of Agra Circle was transferred to the city of Mathura, leading to further resentment among those that were left behind.

Agra was having no significant work in hand, except some deposit works on behalf of water supply (Jal Nigam) and Municipal (Bathing Ghats) departments. I still remember, the manager of Agra Irrigation Works Circle - relatively dynamic person, looking forward to change, as his current work is not what they are actually supposed to do. So may be degree of hope towards requirement of restructuring and change is high in this case.”

“Allahabad is having a couple of major construction works like Bansagar and Ken-Betwa Link. So they are happy and feel that for them, the change is already on.”

And so an opportunity exists for the Department to take into consideration these responses to the strategic decisions taken by the organisation. If the assessments by the author’s surveyor are accurate, then in this case it is not a management style problem that is leading to poor outcomes in Agra, rather strategic decisions by the organisation.

Conclusions

This paper records the results of the application of a modern employee survey instrument in a large Indian Irrigation Bureoucracy in which the author was undertaking an Institutional Strengthening and Restructuring consultancy.

The conclusions drawn have been separated into those relating to the outcomes and those relating to the lessons learnt from the application of the instrument in an organisational environment far different from that commonly encountered in modern private organisations and most public institutes.

Outcomes from the UPID Employee Survey

- Poor perceptions about the future of the organisation are widespread and are most extreme amongst senior engineers.
- Responses to the phrase “my work and environment encourages maximum output” followed the same pattern, although it is suspected that the question was related to “office comfort” rather than to working relationships and frustration with interactions with external parties, like politicians.
- Staff have a strong confidence that their supervisors are a reliable source of information.
Field staff interacting directly with farmers report a clearer sense of the objectives of the Department than office workers. Here too, the office-based engineers score lowest.

The perceptions of personal satisfaction and the overall satisfaction with work are high.

Most groups of staff recognise that restructuring and strengthening is necessary, but the Junior Engineer class is least in favour of change.

There is a pronounced trend towards increasing pessimism about the future of the Department as we move up the ranks of engineers. This is partly because of the more extreme responses of this group to all the questions, but appears to be linked to their working environment. For this senior group, this is unlikely to be a reflection of “hygiene factors” like a lack of furniture, but probably reflects the often compromised nature of their role in the organisation.

The responses to the UPID employee survey are strongly geographically biased. Wide variations were revealed in perceptions of the future, communications, trust and other measures across the State. This implies that individual managers or the local strategies of the Department affect outcomes. These are controllable by the organisation if it chooses to address these factors.

With the limited knowledge of the author and his team, it has been possible to account for some of the variations in local strategic and social issues. The survey has demonstrated its power to reveal forces that obstruct the performance of the organisation.

Lessons learnt from the application of this management tool in an Irrigation Department in India.

Democratic tools are far less effective in these environments since they will be resisted by feudal management at all levels.

The survey was designed to be extensive and inclusive by offering questionnaires to 40% of the 82,000 employees. This involved enormous logistical efforts, particularly collecting returns, some of which arrived on the author’s desk six months after the completion of the survey. Next time the author would narrow his search and invest more in increasing understanding by the staff of the purpose of the survey. In other words, apply a sampling strategy and provide more context to staff.

Endorsement by senior management, although effective in other cultures, did not lift the response rate. This is not surprising in a feudal bureaucracy where instructions delivered personally by telephone from the Head of the Department are commonly ignored in the field.

The “yes or no” choices given to the staff was not a successful survey tactic. The decision resulted in a heavy bias towards the positive, but it is suggested that in a feudal bureaucracy, being positive about one’s boss has a survival value.
The survey was undertaken under "instructions" from the Department, which was the author’s client at the time. None of the results was included in the final recommendations regarding strengthening the reforms as most of the empirically-based research undertaken was rejected by the client. It is important to explore the intended use of the data with those who commission it before the exercise is undertaken.

For UPID, the author predicts that at some future date, if other keen persons undertake a survey, they will encounter cynicism from the staff towards the process. To take a survey and then take no action, even just to give feedback, is damaging to the credibility of those who commission the work.

Despite the barriers to success inherent in the feudal organisation, the author’s staff can be considered to have been successful in executing the survey, in that the subsequent analysis described herein demonstrates that much has been revealed.

From the author’s experience of implementing management development initiatives based on the same questions in an Australian utility, it would be possible for the Head of the Department in UPID to use these results to identify the high performing units and assist managers to improve the performance of the staff under their control.
Annex 1 Map of Uttar Pradesh showing locations referred to in the paper.
पद:  
आड़:  
तेज कार्यकाल:  
कार्य रूप:  

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हमरे उद्योग के लिए ऐसे कॉर्पोरेट विभाग पर आपका प्रभाव छोटा नहीं है।

उत्तर प्रदेश वित्त व वाणिज्य विभाग

Lessons from an Employee Survey in an Irrigation Department in North India

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