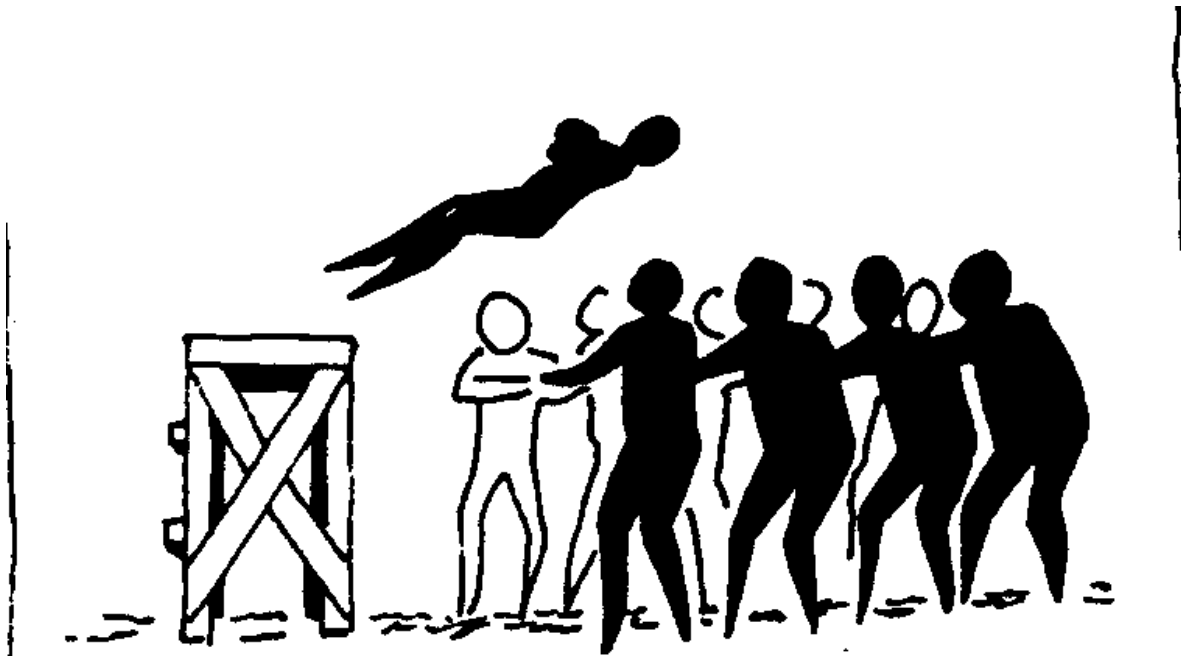




Improving Trust at KCCD
A Report on Focus Groups and a Survey
Spring 2015



“A relationship with no trust is like a cell phone with no service; all you can do is play games.”--Anonymous

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Introduction

In 2011, as part of its district-wide strategic planning process, the Kern Community College District implemented a Climate Survey of employees, evaluating the climate on issues such as morale, trust, diversity, communication, and professional development. That survey was repeated in the fall of 2013, so the district now has two rounds of survey results.

In examining the results of the 2013 survey, with comparisons to 2011, many aspects were positive. More than 85 percent of employees across the district say that, given the choice again, they would choose to work at KCCD.

The district however, wanted to focus some effort on improving those areas that were among the lower rated items in the survey in the hopes of improvement. In both 2011 and 2013, the lowest rated item in the survey was a question regarding trust between the colleges and the district office. In 2011, 30 percent of respondents replied “agree” or “strongly agree” to a statement that there is trust between the colleges and the district office. By 2013, the responses were slightly improved, but similar, just 33 percent.

These results were presented to a number of groups across the district. District Consultation Council, the group with the broadest representation of constituency groups in the KCCD, discussed the survey on October 28th and November 25th, 2014. The group discussed a number of ideas regarding how to improve trust and determined that the next step was to engage in further qualitative research to investigate the causes for the lack of trust and possible solutions.

A two-pronged approach was adopted to provide for broad, but manageable input. A brief follow-up survey was conducted with current and past members of the KCCD Leadership Academy. The Leadership Academy is a group of employees, selected from each of the colleges and the district office in most of the past several years, who have engaged in a series of workshops and other activities designed to develop leadership skills and improve understanding of district-wide issues.

The second approach was a series of focus groups, conducted at each college and the district office. The college focus groups were conducted with each College Council, the group on campus that includes representation from each constituency group. At the district office, the focus group participants were chosen at random from a list of all district office employees, stratified by department. Only a handful of employees were excluded, including the Chancellor and all institutional research staff.

Overall, a total of 29 people responded to the Leadership Academy Survey. A total of 66 people participated in the focus groups across the district, including 15 members of classified staff, 23 faculty, and 28 confidential/management employees.

The Leadership Academy survey was conducted anonymously, with no demographic or other information collected from respondents. Focus group participants were assured of confidentiality. In the results below, we provide some quotes, but we do not name any participant or her/his position or location. Focus group participants were also asked to keep discussions confidential. Participants were also reminded that participation in focus groups was entirely voluntary. Given the sensitivity of the topic, participants were asked to give specific examples, good and bad, when possible, but to avoid using names of specific individuals to the extent feasible. Each focus group was recorded, but recordings were only used by institutional research staff to compile notes and this report.

The Questions

Survey respondents and focus group participants were asked essentially the same five questions, listed below.

1. In general, what kinds of behaviors and practices would you say engender trust in a work environment?
2. What are the negative consequences of a lack of trust in the workplace?
3. What kinds of things do you think ____ College could do to improve trust between the colleges and district office?
4. What kinds of things do you think the district office could do to improve trust between the colleges and district office?
5. What other thoughts do you have regarding building trust between the colleges and the district office?

In question three, focus group participants were asked about their specific college, Bakersfield, Cerro Coso, or Porterville. For district office participants and those responding to the survey, the phrase “the colleges” was used in place of each college name. Also, questions three and four were reversed in order for the district office focus group as we wanted participants at each location to focus first on what their location could do before discussing others.

For focus group participants, two additional opportunities were provided for input. Because some participants might be disinclined to be forthcoming with their opinions in front of a group that might include their supervisor, their subordinate, or coworkers, we provided a five-minute opportunity at the end of each focus group where participants could write down additional thoughts. Upon leaving, each group was also given a page to take home where they could write additional ideas that might come to them after the focus group was over. These papers were returned to the research office anonymously.

In the results below, we combine these last two chances for input with question five.

Results

“Inspire us to rise above our petty us against them, clique mentality.”—Focus Group Participant

The results of our two-pronged study are presented below, organized under each question with survey and focus group responses interspersed under each question.

In this report, we attempt to be very precise with language. Where we mention “the district”, this refers to all three colleges and the district office, including all constituency groups over a large geographical area. Where we use the term “district office”, this refers to a specific building in central Bakersfield and the employees who work in that building, also including in some situations, district-wide employees who work at the campuses. Note however, that where we quote people from the focus groups or the survey, they may not make this distinction because these two terms are often used interchangeably by employees.

Question 1. In general, what kinds of behaviors and practices would you say engender trust in a work environment?

A sense of community will foster trust in a work environment. People (by virtue of their positions) play a particular role, but all should feel that they belong to the larger group and that they are valuable members of that group....Because our roles often keep us separated, developing relationships won't happen. We have to make them happen....—Survey participant

Focus group and survey participants were first asked about the types of behaviors and practices they associate with trust in a work environment. Many things were mentioned, among the most prominent being quality communication and follow-through.

Quality communication. Employees were very specific at times about the kinds of things that would enhance communication. In one group, it was called “listening with purpose”; in another “listening with engagement”. This is contrasted with “listening for the sake of listening” or requesting input but giving the impression that a decision has already been made. Employees want to feel that there are

opportunities for their opinions to be heard and explanations provided when their suggestions are not accepted.

Responsiveness/Follow-through. One survey participant put this simply, “If you say you are going to do something, do it.” Employees feel there is trust when their fellow employees follow through on what they say and respond to inquiries. This means again, responding even when the answer is negative and providing a clear explanation for rejected suggestions. It also means keeping your word.

Other qualities cited as correlating with workplace trust include the following:

- Transparency, open dialogue
- Encouraging/allowing for the safety to speak freely, innovate without repercussion
- Recognition of good ideas
- Humility
- Respect
- Regular meetings
- Accountability
- Consistent application of policies
- Face-to-face interaction

Question 2. What are the negative consequences of a lack of trust in the workplace?

“You’re going to see a dirty campus. You’re going to see lines of students...you’re just going to see delays in shepherding the students through the educational experience in our district when we don’t act in a unified consistent way across the board...”—Focus group participant

“Everything takes longer as people vet the other side because their motivations are not known/trusted. Small improvements don’t happen as people suspect ulterior motives. Great employees leave because they’re frustrated by the culture and inability to move. Bad employees dig in and pit sides against each other because the political battle is easier to manage for them rather than doing real productive work. Middle of the road employees fall back and try not to rock the boat, they don’t want to get stuck in the political battle between parties that don’t trust each other...--Survey respondent

Next, we asked respondents to highlight the consequences of a lack of trust in the workplace, including impacts on operations, effectiveness and efficiency. In the focus groups, we specifically probed for how

a lack of trust might impact students. Common responses included reduced morale and poor decision-making.

Morale and its impact. Not surprisingly, study participants felt that a lack of trust led to reduced morale. This loss of morale has a ripple effect throughout the organization causing what one survey respondent called “resistance to collaborative efforts, even when they are truly collaborative.” Students are affected as well, sensing distrust. Students, we were told, pick up on the distrust, including the attitudes, energy levels and body language of employees.

Even when students are not aware, they can be affected. As one focus group participant put it, “It distracts you from being able to focus on what you need to teach the students. You’re out having heated discussions with everybody in the area instead of thinking about what you’re going to teach.”

Poor decision-making. One focus group participant put it succinctly, “A lack of trust leads to less honesty.” When there is a lack of trust in the workplace, employees withhold information from one another or work separately. In multiple focus groups, participants mentioned doing work outside their areas of expertise due to lack of trust. This leads to inefficient and ineffective work and decision-making. One survey respondent discussed how bad decisions are made, suggesting that “Because things move so slowly, people with ideas that require movement adopt the “it’s better to ask for forgiveness than permission” mindset because asking for permission always results in gridlock...” Such decision-making outside of established processes can lead to problems that must be cleaned up later, furthering the lack of trust. Examples of these are discussed in other sections.

A lack of trust can also contribute to “a lack of openness and hoarding of information” and “people working in silos”, again furthering poor decisions.

In short, a lack of trust leads to decisions that are ineffective, inefficient, and that take much longer than they should.

Other consequences of a lack of trust that were cited include:

- Reduced productivity
- Work assigned to the wrong people
- Poor information flow, upward and downward through the organizational structure
- Lack of interest and motivation
- Employees not wanting to participate in district-wide meetings/committees
- Reduced accountability
- Increases in complaints and grievances

Question 3. What kinds of things do you think ____ College could do to improve trust between the colleges and district office?

“We have to stop only conversing when we are upset about something. If have questions, we need to ask, not attack. If something sounds crazy, then we need to consider that maybe we don’t have all the information...”--Survey respondent.

“It does seem that sometimes people at the college tend to jump to the conclusion that there are nefarious intentions ...at the district downtown, when it could just be basic incompetence, or people being too busy, or any number of things that could drive it....They are just people.”---Focus group participant

In this question, study participants were asked what their particular college could do to improve trust between the colleges and the district office. At the district office focus group and in the Leadership Academy survey, the phrase “the colleges” was used instead. The most common responses tended to involve a desire for more and clearer communication and modeling the kinds of behavior they would like to see from others.

Improving communication. Participants across the focus groups on this and in other questions expressed a desire for better communication. On this question, participants suggested that college employees be willing to attend district functions more often, including travelling to the district office. “Drive” was the way one participant put it succinctly. Additionally, college staff suggested that the colleges invite district office personnel to visit the colleges more often, which one participant jokingly called “bring your district office administrator to work day”.

In one focus group, an example of a positive interaction was when one of the colleges invited certain district office personnel to a flex training activity. The feeling was that both sides learned from the event, particularly in how processes work at each location and the impact on college work of district-wide policies. This interaction is key as one frustration at the college level is that they believe district office personnel often do not understand the impact of small decisions on college operations. As an example, a simple error that creates a minor convenience at the district office could result in dozens of angry students in someone’s office.

At another group, we heard a description of how well it works when a college invites a district administrator to a committee meeting. A bit of that discussion:

We may not agree...but at least we have a dialogue...It exposes more of us to the framework around which a decision is made....(The district administrator) may not persuade me, but I can see that there is a rationale for it.

One concern was that, when district-wide employees work regularly on college campuses, there is inconsistency, both between the colleges and among departments, as to whether and how much these employees are encouraged to participate in college committees. In some cases, these district-wide employees may hold key knowledge, yet their absence from influential groups can cause inefficiency and poor decision-making.

In addition to more frequent and in-person communication, another suggestion was that the colleges improve how often and how well they make their needs and desires known, rather than, in some cases moving forward with plans without making them clear. College employees themselves suggested they had a need to be “more candid”.

Modeling behavior. College employees also suggested that they could improve relationships through modelling “the behavior we want” from others. Some of this involved things such as listening, but also granting the benefit of the doubt more often, such as the quote above at the beginning of this section. “Don’t expect the worst” was how one focus group participant put it. There was also a strongly expressed desire for colleges to participate more in district-wide meetings, the lack of which seems to be both a cause and a consequence of the lack of trust.

In some cases, suggestions for modelling behavior were specific. Faculty feel they should be more involved in district committees and some have felt that the lack of trust has discouraged their participation. However, some also believed that college administrative leadership are part of the problem. As one survey respondent put it:

“I think it comes from the top. If the executive team gives off the impression that they don’t trust the district, then that trickles down to the employees. There are several of us on the campus that understand the both sides of this equation and attempt to bridge some of the gaps but it is an uphill battle when both sides are taking actions that hinder the progress of trust.”

Other things mentioned by survey respondents or focus group participants include:

- Acknowledge expertise at the district office.
- Meet openness with openness
- Listen
- Follow policies, rules and procedures
- Invite and listen to rationales for decisions.
- Coordinate better amongst colleges

Question 4. What kinds of things do you think the district office could do to improve trust between the colleges and district office?

“There are times when I would love to have...somebody to come sit in my office and see what two vacancies does and how it impacts the students...just that lack of urgency...” ---Focus group participant

“The parent has spoken and we are the kid.”—Focus group participant

“In order to trust, you have to know people.”---Focus group participant

“I’d have a lot more acceptance of what they do if I knew what they did.”---Focus group participant

Next we focus on activities the district office could take to improve trust between itself and the colleges. Themes that ran across discussions include greater, especially in-person communication and interaction, reducing confusion about policies, consistency in how policies are enforced across the three colleges, and more timely follow-through, particularly on approvals.

Improved communication/interaction. If there was one item that ran through all of the focus groups and the survey, it was the need for increased interaction, particularly of the face to face, in person type. College employees want to meet, get to know, and see district office staff on a regular basis. This includes especially those who are at high levels of decision-making, but in some cases, this desire was expressed for other employees as well with the belief that problems were more likely to be solved, and even acknowledged with in-person contact. This desire was expressed just as strongly in the district office focus group.

Policy confusion and its effect on behavior. It was clear from each of the focus groups that many people at the colleges simply do not understand what policies and procedures are in place or how they can suggest changes to those policies. In some cases, this leads to exasperation because college employees feel that things were imposed upon them. At times, college staff feel paralyzed and do not act because, as one focus group participant put it, “they don’t want to get their hand slapped”. On the other hand, at times, it would seem that colleges are going forward in unknowing (or in some cases knowing) violation of policy on the belief it is a more effective approach because they do not understand policies or do not agree with them. The consequences to these violations appear to be mixed. In some cases at least, this tactic seems to be effective as college staff are able to get what they want more quickly by acting outside the process rather than within it. When asked where they go to address these concerns, participants in multiple focus groups drew a blank.

Greater consistency in policy enforcement between colleges. Focus group participants expressed anger that they would be chastised for what they see as minor policy breaches only to find out that their counterpart at another college uses an entirely different procedure or violates the policy on a regular basis, apparently without repercussions. In some cases, there is a perception that policies are changed

due to one or more colleges' refusal or inability to adhere to it. There is a strong perception that processes are interpreted and enforced differently at different locations.

At the same time though, we also heard requests for flexibility to the different needs of the different colleges and an acknowledgement that a "one size fits all" approach does not always work.

Follow-through. This issue came up most often in areas where approvals are required from district office management. When approvals are delayed, or denied for reasons that are not clear, this results in delays in implementation of good policies and lost opportunities at the college level, many of which might benefit student success. Requests for approval often go through long delays and reasons are not clearly communicated. In some cases, there is little to no response to requests for approval or for information. Though again, employees would rather hear a negative response with an explanation than not hear anything.

Other suggestions for changes at the district office level included:

- Don't assume that information flows well downward or upward. Communicate with everyone at all levels.
- Greater college input into district office department processes and budgets
- Recognize our successes. (Including acknowledgement and attendance of college events).
- Defend inconveniences to colleges and students (as an example, a technical problem that may create a minor inconvenience at the district office could result in college staff having to provide explanations to numerous angry employees or students).
- Be flexible in policies and procedures for the differing needs of the different colleges.
- Justify decisions that are made with clear explanations.

Question 5. What other thoughts do you have regarding building trust between the colleges and the district office?

I think this particular venue (the focus group) shows that (our college) hasn't given up. Because people were honest without just complaining. That's trust....that we believe it's possible to do better. ---Focus group participants (multiple, speaking together)

Where responses to question 5 (and for the focus groups, the two follow-up questions that were similar) more naturally fit in other sections, they have been moved there. This is common, especially with focus groups, as discussions can get off topic easily and can move back and forth between questions.

However, there were some themes that ran across the various questions rather than belonging in a single one and they are discussed here.

First, we'll focus on three areas that were more positive:

While much of this report provides suggestions for changes due to a perceived lack of trust, this lack of trust was not universal. Across the focus groups and the survey, some participants did report trusting relationships between college and district staff. This seems to be the case most often where there is regular communication and interaction between the two groups.

One thing that was mentioned positively was the KCCD Leadership Academy. This came up not only in the survey of current and former Leadership Academy participants, but in a number of focus groups as well. The interaction Leadership Academy participants gain, meeting their fellow employees across the district, was often described as valuable and something that breaks down barriers and leads to greater understanding across the district.

Another event mentioned positively in multiple groups was a convocation event held several years ago at Bakersfield College. This event has not been repeated, likely because the logistics were difficult, but it was an occasion where employees across the district got to know one another and interact. Some who were initially skeptical of the event had high praise for it and some lasting relationships among people at different locations seem to have resulted.

There are some other things to note as well. One is that in addition to issues of trust between the colleges and the district office, there are some problems of trust between the colleges as well. This was not a question on the climate survey (it may be added next time) but the issue seems to have worsened in the past two to three years and it has led to communication breakdowns at a number of levels.

There are also some mixed messages across the district about whether and how college staff should communicate with district office employees. In some cases, college employees have been asked not to contact district office employees or to contact them only through college leadership. This instruction has come at times from specific college leadership and at times from district office leaders as well. In some cases, this instruction may have been given with the best of intentions, either to streamline communication or to reduce confusion. But it also leads to frustration among employees, who, in many cases, do not know how to address concerns or grievances.

Summary and Recommendations

The next step(s) are for this report to be discussed in the KCCD Consultation Council so that they can consider further action. The following is a series of recommendations that come from the data collected in this research. These recommendations fall under three broad categories: increasing contact among district office and college employees, clarifying and documenting policies, and all employees working together to set a trustful tone across the district.

Again, we note that we are very specific with language. Where we reference “the district”, this means the entire district of three colleges all of their centers and the district office. No assumptions are made as to which groups or individuals will take leadership of each initiative. Where we use the “district office” this refers to those who work in the building in downtown Bakersfield and, in some cases, those district-wide employees who work at the college campuses.

Recommendation 1: Increase contact, especially face-to-face contact, among employees across the district.

- Leaders of each district office organizational unit (educational services, human resources, business services, information technology, and institutional research) should visit each college regularly, at least once per semester, in open forums and/or with specific college committees to provide updates and gather input.
- Leaders of each district office organizational unit should send out regular email messages district-wide, updating all staff on what is going on in their areas, including new initiatives and decisions.
- In addition to leadership, ground-level employees at the district office should visit the colleges more often. In addition, college employees need formal instances when they are allowed and encouraged to visit the district office.
- The KCCD Leadership Academy should be continued. Even if it served no other purpose, the Academy provides an ongoing opportunity for college and district office employees to have regular contact and get to know one another. In addition, there might be value in extending this initiative, or something similar, to non-leadership areas. Some employees, not interested in leadership, might still benefit from this increased interaction.
- The district should consider reimplementing of events such as the convocation held several years ago at Bakersfield College. Such events, though logistically difficult, bring people together so that all employees learn from one another.
- The district should create formal structures whereby employees who perform the same or similar tasks at different colleges or locations, meet on a regular basis to discuss common issues. This should include faculty who teach the same or similar subjects and administrative unit personnel who perform similar functions. Groups that have been doing this already report greater levels of trust and better communication.

Recommendation 2: Clarify, document, and widely disseminate policies, procedures and protocols.

- The district should spend a significant effort, in each of its organizational units, clarifying, documenting, and disseminating clear policies and procedures on how each facet of the organization functions.

- The district should clarify criteria for which policies and procedures must be uniform across the district and which aspects can have greater flexibility, adjusting to the different needs of the different colleges and locations.
- This effort should involve, to the extent possible, representatives of each constituency group.
- The district should clarify the district-wide decision-making process, including the role of each constituency group in that process and how each employee can provide input into each type of decision.
- Policies and procedures should be enforced consistently district-wide and across the colleges with clear consequences for violations of policies.
- The district office and each of the colleges should clarify when and how college employees are to communicate with district office employees, including interactions at both leadership and staff levels.
- College managers and constituency group representatives should communicate on campus how district decisions are made, how college staff can have input, and how they do have input.
- Managers, at both the college and district office, should make it a regular practice to provide clear explanations of decisions made, including why suggestions were rejected, and, where possible, alternative solutions. When possible, these explanations should be in writing and broadly disseminated.

Recommendation 3: All must work to set the right tone for trust.

- College and district office leadership should avoid unnecessary criticisms of one another, particularly in public forums such as at meetings and in emails.
- Employees at all levels and locations should give one another the benefit of the doubt, refuse to assume the worst in others, and should attempt to gather information before criticizing, especially publicly.
- Employees at all levels should make it a regular practice to respond to communications and requests for information in a timely manner, including when the response is negative. When a response cannot be timely, the requestor should be notified of that fact in a timely manner, and when possible, alternative solutions should be provided.
- Employees at all levels and locations should practice civil and clear communication, and respect, humility, and empathy in dealing with their fellow employees, including those at a distance.