

GOOD PRACTICE BRIEF

MARCH 2021

STRENGTHENING ORGANIZATIONAL WELLNESS AND CULTURE

KEY TAKEAWAYS

A healthy, supportive, and intelligent office culture is seen as foundational and an enabler of other organizational priorities, such as staff development and retention, increased productivity, process improvement, and distributive leadership.

While measuring organizational health through a survey instrument allows an organization to identify key concerns, feedback and follow-up are essential to ensure that opportunities are created for staff to come together to explore, analyze, and share insights and perspectives, which broaden and deepen understanding of the internal and external issues they are confronting, and provide a space for their resolution.

Leadership especially, and staff, need to recognize their responsibility for co-creating a healthy and productive environment. Making technical or programmatic contributions to the education sector requires building respectful and productive relationships with colleagues, partners, and stakeholders. It is critical to have an eye for, listen, and observe the ways change is happening, and how to detect, capture, and share it. Small shifts can add up to something meaningful and lasting.

BACKGROUND

The challenge for leadership and staff of almost any organization is “how do we bring out the best in ourselves and others” consistently and over a sustained period of time. This often goes beyond the quick fixes, appreciation awards, the off-the-shelf trainings, or the organizational change “fads and flavors of the month.” Strengthening organizational wellness and culture is important to encourage and promote well-being of the staff.

DDI/EDU recognized and formalized their investment in this by establishing Office Culture and Organization Wellness as one of its five priorities in 2017.

To strengthen this priority, EPIC worked with staff and leadership to discuss:

- What does it look like when staff are at their best?
- What about the office culture is working? Why?
- What are our pain points and areas for improvement?
- What issues do we need to address to improve the climate, culture, and effectiveness?
- What are the behaviors and norms we want to see present?

Answers to these questions helped shape EPIC's support to DDI/EDU, and is captured in the good practices and outcomes below.

GOOD PRACTICE

CREATING AN INSTRUMENT TO MEASURE ORGANIZATIONAL HEALTH AND A PROCESS FOR ON-GOING IMPROVEMENT

EPIC created and socialized an organizational wellness instrument as a means to gauge progress over time, and it served as a tangible tool to reinforce priorities and accountability. This reflected real aspirations and pain points because the content of the instrument and survey emerged from focus groups that involved the entire office. The survey was administered periodically to compare the data with the baseline and included space for feedback and suggestions. The results were shared in All-Hands Meetings, along with key next steps to “move the needle.”

SHOWING APPRECIATION AND BUILDING A RESPECTFUL CULTURE

DDI/EDU staff make significant technical and programmatic contributions to the education sector, but helping and supporting others to be successful in their work is just as important. Over the life of the project, EPIC supported DDI/EDU in building in appreciation for small and big individual breakthroughs and successes, group achievements, and collective office progress.

Professional development opportunities, related to meta-leadership, self-awareness, awareness of others, and awareness of the changing context were available to staff.

DDI/EDU celebrated achievements of staff members (or groups staff) by acknowledging what was done, how it was done differently or better, and why it was important. Recognizing collective or team accomplishments helps reinforce the idea that when teams perform intelligently and effectively, they can lift the health of the organization and elevate its impact on education and development challenges.

OUTCOMES

INCREASED AWARENESS

The organizational wellness survey and resulting dashboard and analysis provided the necessary space for staff members to anonymously share input. This led to greater awareness of the most pressing issues among staff and helped shape intentional efforts to address key concerns. One example of progress includes a more targeted focus on distributive leadership by providing opportunities for junior and mid-level staff to lead and manage tasks, working groups, and key office processes.

SPACES CREATED

The following spaces were created, giving DDI/EDU staff and leadership to discuss, share, make decisions, and problem solve:

- Monthly All-Hands Meetings where all staff meet for three hours to talk about technical, DDI/EDU, and Agency issues.
- Bi-annual two-day Off-Site Meetings to go in depth on issues and themes defined by staff and leadership, usually involving a lot of cross technical theme/cross group work.

- Recurring individual coaching sessions to talk about goals, concerns, and having a thought partner on issues that matter to individual staff and leaders.
- Annual planning, team building, and periodic reflection exercises with different DDI/EDU teams.
- Periodic facilitated meetings with DDI/EDU leadership (the frequency varied over the 5.5 years—sometimes monthly as needed, sometimes every quarter).

LESSONS LEARNED

BE CONSISTENT AND RESILIENT

While DDI/EDU, like many organizations, faces external pressures and stressors that dominate the day-to-day, the relevance and urgency of organizational health are even more important during times of change and adversity. During key shifts and moments, it is important for leadership to model the values of empathy, support, care, and flexibility.

DDI/EDU should highlight and encourage the practice of the norms and values that have been identified as being important to DDI/EDU and its identity—and acknowledge when and how individuals or groups are leaning into them. DDI/EDU should further identify and build on what works, what does it look like when they are at their best, or when staff are most satisfied (appreciative inquiry). In other words, to quote [Peter Drucker](#), a lead thinker in organizational development, “build on your strengths to such an extent that you make your weaknesses irrelevant.”

CONTINUE THE USE OF REAL-TIME DATA FOR DECISION MAKING

Learnings, trends, and patterns from various work engagements such as the Organizational Wellness dashboards should provide leadership and staff with relevant and real-time data to make informed decisions and necessary improvements and interventions.

SURVEYS ARE NOT ENOUGH—FEEDBACK AND FOLLOW-UP ARE ESSENTIAL

Administering surveys and talking about the issues are not enough for a healthy organizational culture. Organizations need the time and opportunity to come together to explore, analyze, share insights and perspectives, and broaden and deepen understanding of the internal and external issues they are confronting. An integral part of this approach is to build the ethos and culture that all staff, especially leadership, are all responsible not only for their position/role/technical contribution, but for the overall office climate and wellness, systemic improvement, and greater good. Everyone needs to believe that their ideas and opinions will be taken seriously, that how they show up for others matters, and that a deeper and more meaningful change and performance—individual and collective—not only is possible but necessary.

BE AWARE OF THE EVIDENCE ON CULTURE AND WELLNESS AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO PERFORMANCE AND OUTCOMES

One of the [maxims](#) in organizational development is that “culture eats strategy for breakfast.” Organizations can have all the best visions, clear priorities, action plans, and resources, but unless they have a healthy culture and climate that brings out the best in people, they will nearly always fall short of their potential. Wellness is not just the absence of illness, but the presence of positive social, emotional, economic, security and contextual factors. Similarly, culture is more than just a “feel good factor” and rituals, but includes aspirations and practiced values, traditions and shared practices, resilience in the face of adversity, improving power relationships and personal efficacy, and agile systems that work for people and enhance work, individual, team/group, and organizational competencies and behaviors. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are woven into how people hire, act,

respect, and relate. While it does not take much toxicity to poison an office, neither does it take much light to brighten the darkness.

DDI/EDU efforts to build a vibrant and healthy culture need to be systemic (seeing the whole, the parts, the context, and the relationships of all these) and focus on:

- Individuals: coaching, supportive supervisors, and good professional development programs.
- Groups: how each works well together and connects productively with groups and broader goals.
- DDI/EDU: transparent and inclusive systems and procedures, creating and protecting shared norms and values, making connections and aligning across development, administration, Agency, and USAID Bureau shifts.

These efforts must be intentional and seek the evidence and emerging best practices of organizational effectiveness. The case for culture is both common sense and intuitive as well as being evidence-based. The common sense side is that people will not be productive over time if they constantly feel disrespected, bullied, unappreciated, or dissatisfied with their present work or future prospects. On the evidence side, a [2018 research project](#) of 1,000 companies by McKinsey showed that organizations that were in the upper quintile of organizational culture were 200 percent more productive than those in the lower quintile.

DDI/EDU should find ways to create a vibrant culture, which includes periodic and safe spaces for people to come together to agree upon and work toward a shared vision and common purpose, work through their issues and differences, build on what works and successes, define and practice their shared values, pilot and test approaches, and create feedback loops for reflection, continuous learning, and improvement. Individuals, groups, and the whole become resilient and respectful. Staff should see themselves as part of a broader context, global and organizational—that is asking and needing much more from us if we are serious about improving education systems for children and youth.

This brief was created by Education Performance Improvement, Communications, and Knowledge (EPIC), a five-year activity (2015-2021) of support services to the Center of Education (DDI/EDU). EPIC consisted of activities in four key areas that were implemented simultaneously: performance improvement through organizational effectiveness; professional development, training, and learning for all staff; knowledge management, generation, brokering, uptake, and use; and internal and external communications, engagement, and partnerships.