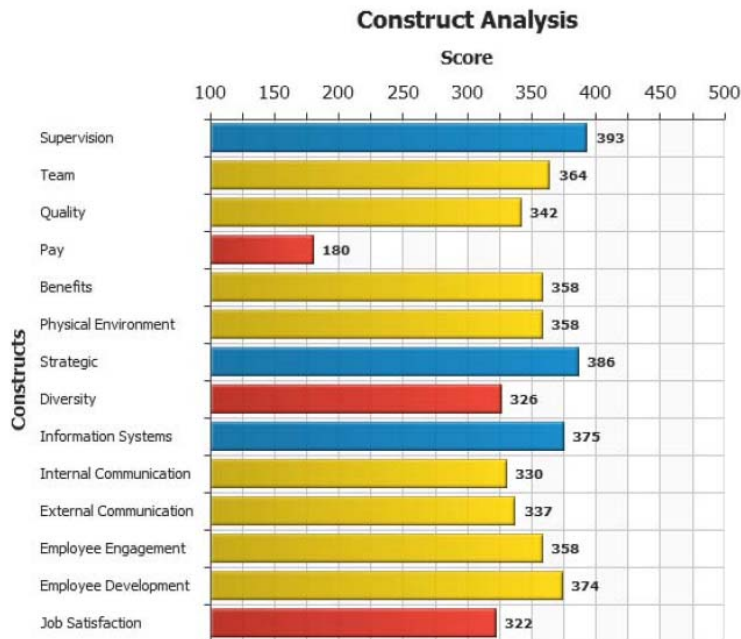


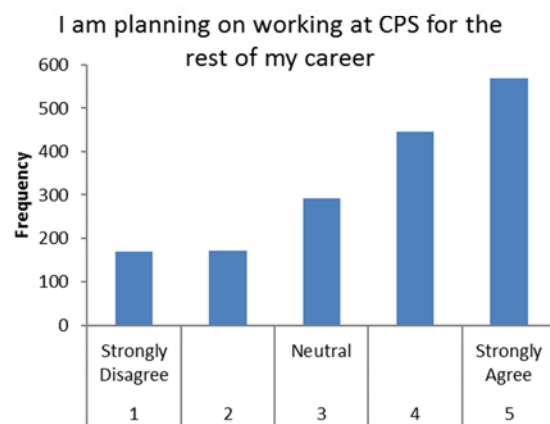
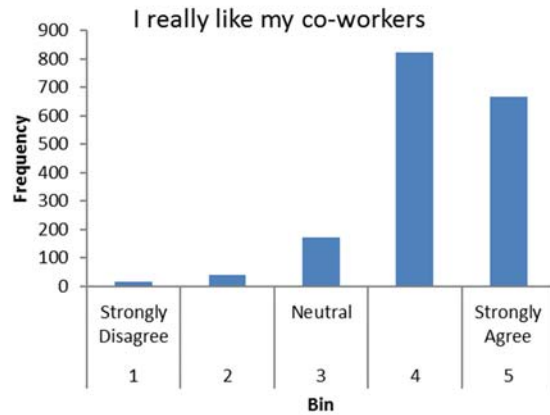
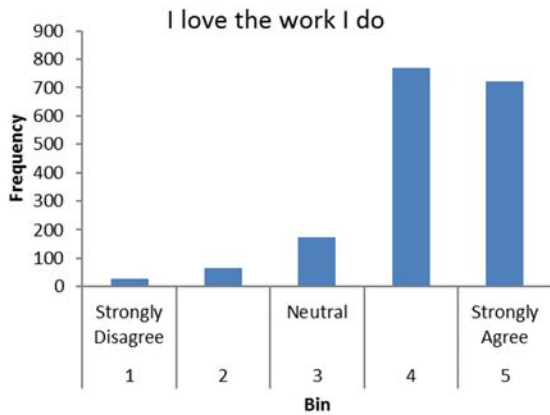
## The Importance of Comments in a Survey

State agencies often conduct surveys of employees or “customer satisfaction) of constituents. For example, as part of building “CPS Transformation”, Texas’ Department of Family and Protective Services wanted to hear directly from employees about the forces that were driving high turnover among case workers.

Before conducting a survey, DFPS reviewed the University of Texas’ Survey of Employee Engagement. This is a survey of everyone who works in DFPS about how they feel about their job. The Institute for Organizational Excellence at University of Texas does the survey every 2 years for all Texas state agencies as well as many other state agencies nationally. The survey asks everyone who works in DFPS about how they feel about their job, and had a response rate in excess of 70%. That survey concluded that workers responded well to their supervisors but felt less well about their jobs. It identified pay as a significant issue. The table below is taken from the UT report, and summarizes the findings. According to the report, higher scores reflect more positive assessments of the CPS work environment, and 350 is an expected level for each measurement. This numerical survey suggests a workforce that is happy on every dimension, though it wants more money and diversity. However, the last line shows that overall, the workforce is somewhat dissatisfied. Reading these results, DFPS leadership were considering increasing larger salaries and how to address diversity to raise overall satisfaction. Both good things, but would they reduce turnover?



A much less scientific survey allowed DFPS to drill into the details behind the UT survey findings. It found similar results in the numbers. Workers reported liking the work and their coworkers. They reported planning to stay with the agency. However, the hard data showed in excess of 50% turnover within the first 12 months. However, anecdotal evidence “wandering the halls” suggested that people were less happy than the numbers seemed to suggest.



The same survey offered five opportunities for respondents to enter a comment:

- Please give one example you have seen of CPS working at its best. What happened? Who was involved? What was your role?
- Describe one example of something your supervisor or manager did to improve your performance
- Describe the best single change CPS could make to improve performance
- Why do you feel that way about the likelihood of dramatic improvements (previous question)?
- Elevator Question: Let's say you ran into Commissioner Specia in an elevator tomorrow. He doesn't recognize you, so you have a few seconds to tell him how you think CPS could improve—with no risk....

The first question is adapted from the positivist change methodology: Appreciative Inquiry. The fifth is the common “elevator question”. None of the comment opportunities used wording that suggested a negatively-oriented answer. They were designed to avoid pre-disposing a particular answer—looking instead to provide an opportunity for DHFS to listen and learn to free-form employee input.

The survey resulted in 84 pages of comments which told a far more nuanced story about the CPS work environment. Below are sample comments for: “one example of something your supervisor or manager did to *improve* your performance”. Note that the comments below are presented as worded by the

respondent—which is sometimes a bit sloppy. The objective was to listen to the exact words, not to jump too quickly to re-characterization using more formal management terms.

- LOL<sup>1</sup> My favorite attempts by a supervisor to improve performance in all my years at CPS has been – “I don't want to be put on a level<sup>2</sup>, so that means your unit has to be at 100% or you will be put on a level.” It wasn't appreciated when I pointed out that it was impossible to get 100% -something usually happens. Even our performance evaluations don't require 100%.
- My supervisor is not a support. She does not help. She makes us work harder and not smarter. She keeps as much information to herself as possible and likes to tell us that she is our supervisor. We know that she is our supervisor. She doesn't need to remind us. What we would like to see is someone working with us, and not against us. Our supervisors are being taught to delegate EVERYTHING. What do they do all day? We gather the information and do the tasks for all of their reports. One we have doesn't even respond to emails or phone calls timely. Then we have to resend information. Hitting your head against a brick wall all the time, does not motivate us to improve our performance.
- Went on vacation.
- My unit has had a huge issue with my supervisor putting her duties off on [other] workers
- I get verbal threats and written ones of levels and dismissals. No help is given when workers ask for it, but the minute something goes wrong it's the workers fault. Caseloads are too high.
- Tell me to work weekends or do more overtime. Saying that x amount of cases have to be closed this week or we will discipline actions will be taken.
- Management threatens workers to stay late and work excessive hours to close cases and that if they do not they are threatened with either with being put on an action plan.
- They don't because when you go beyond my job duties it is not recognized or appreciated.
- He has done nothing to improve my performance and is not willing to consider suggestions. He demands things get done.
- My Supervisor is stuck in the past and expects too much out of me and makes me feel like a failure and puts me down. / Too much is asked of me and when turnover happens because of the overwhelming amount of reasons that it does then I/we have to pick up the slack and it is overwhelming. I am at a breaking point currently as I believe most CPS employees are currently.
- My boss doesn't even know what I do and has said so herself.
- Nothing, my supervisor does not know policy and does not make good decisions.
- I haven't had a supervisor teach me or direct me to work smarter, to encourage me work harder, or to support me as a person through difficult times. I have been with CPS for seven years and only two supervisors have given me a performance evaluation. I haven't had one since 2009. No supervisor that I've ever had with CPS has ever done anything to improve my performance. I think I am doing a great job because I responsibly complete the tasks that are assigned to me timely. Each year I keep getting more and more work. Right now I am doing three people job and I have not received a merit increase since I have worked for CPS.

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<sup>1</sup> Laugh out Loud

<sup>2</sup> This is an internal term for a negative action taken in the supervisors HR file

I Used to work for another state agency (DPS) there they evaluated me every six months. I have never work for an office where no one teaches you your job, train you. In CPS you just learn as you go. I also noticed that supervisors don't follow policies and decisions are made without a team approach.

- Upper management does not have a clue on how work is done.

Had the agency relied only on “the numbers”, it might have tried to reduce turnover with more pay and more new hires. Given this important input from comments, DFPS leadership realized that hiring more workers into a system of weak supervision would have ignored some important underlying causes and made the problem worse. Following the numbers might have created a death spiral of hiring more people, further stressing supervisors, further increasing turnover.

Comments require a different method of analysis compared to numeric responses. To assess comments DFPS read through them to learn and summarize the common themes in what people are saying. This is a long process that requires at least two readings of the comments by several people. It requires that analysts to take care to assure inter-rater reliability. Above all, it requires that analysts focus on listening and allowing the story to be told by the respondents—not jumping too quickly to conclusions. The steps to conduct a qualitative assessment of comments involve:

- Read the comments, then write a memo describing the key themes coming out of the reading
- Compare themes with others who have read the comments
- “Code” the comments by noting where the key themes are reflected in the comments
- “Code counts” are often frowned upon by purists. However, counting the number of comments that raise a theme is one way to indicate the most prevalent themes

In addition to the qualitative analysis described above, it is useful to understand the quality of the comments. For example, Texas CPS received 84 pages of comments – 92% of survey responses included comments. Comments averaged 63 words—they were not merely flippant rants. Survey respondents spent an average of 20 minutes to complete the survey (start and end times recorded by the survey tool). This is for a survey designed to take 8-10 minutes. Thus, respondents were taking time to reflect and carefully consider both the qualitative and quantitative answers. These are not measures typically provided in the analysis of numeric surveys, but were important for DFPS to understand the results.

Based on input from the numerical and comments analysis, MDHS leadership took aggressive action and succeeded in reducing turnover within one year:

- Commissioner conducted town meetings with caseworkers throughout the state
- All management participated in a course to improve leadership skills
- Case worker training was changed from classroom to field-based learning built around local office supervisors and senior staff
- The process of marketing the caseworker job was adjusted to present a more realistic picture of the job