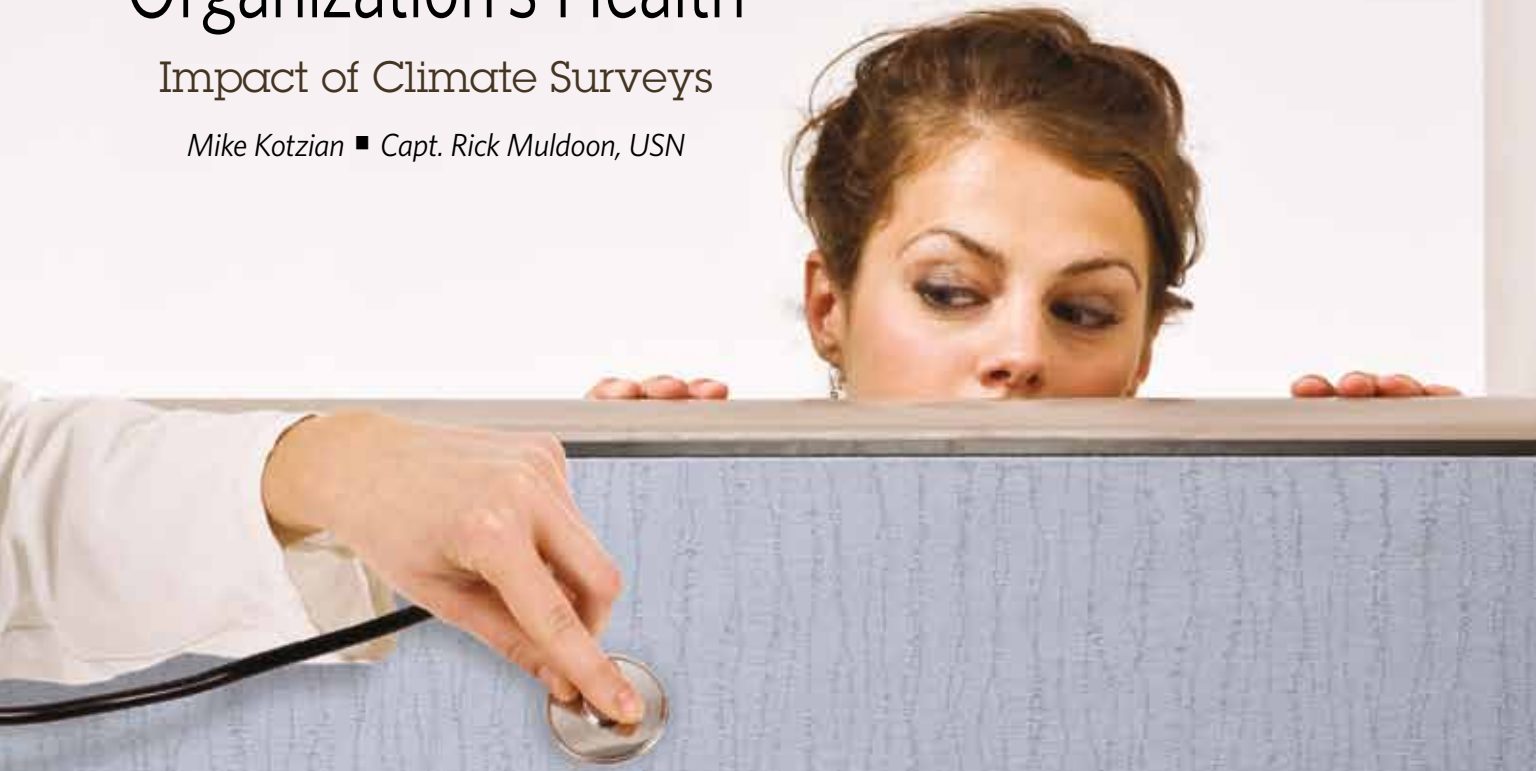# Determining Your Organization's Health

Impact of Climate Surveys

Mike Kotzian ■ *Capt. Rick Muldoon, USN*

If you're part of the Department of Defense acquisition community, you're likely part of an organization. You might be part of a virtual team in which parts of the organization are geographically dispersed or in a physical arrangement where there are no virtual connectivity concerns because everyone is crammed on top of one another—or somewhere in between these two workplace environment extremes. You may be new to your organization and still trying to become oriented as to who does what, or you may have been there for years and know where all the skeletons are buried. Regardless of your organizational situation, the objective of any DoD acquisition program is to deliver the most cost-effective capability in the most timely manner while ensuring that all threshold—and ideally at least some objective—warfighter requirements are met.

Kotzian *is a DAU professor of acquisition management.* **Muldoon** *is the program manager for PMA 261.*

To help accomplish this goal, an organization needs to be operating at its maximum effectiveness. But how do you know if your organization is operating to its full potential? Well, before making any strategic moves, you might first want to determine your organization's climate. No, we're not talking about the room temperature in your office or carbon credits. Rather, we're referring to the health of your organization in terms of the perceived "soft" factors that the organization's workforce believes to be true about how their organization is operating. Soft factors are attributes that are more closely aligned to aspects of human interaction such as communication skills, establishment of a team, the importance of trust, etc. In contrast, "hard" factors are typically aligned with the more programmatic aspects of an organization's acquisition mission such as development of an acquisition strategy, ensuring that the necessary documentation is in place before a major milestone review, using earned value management to track financial progress, etc.

Organizational Culture Versus Climate

Many of us might be used to hearing the term "organizational culture" rather than "organizational climate." While both culture and climate are related to organizational management, they are not the same thing.

An organization's culture is typically viewed as those deeply held values, beliefs, assumptions, symbols, and rituals shared across the enterprise. Culture describes the social context of an organization's workplace. Therefore, as a general rule, an organization's culture is shared among all or most of the workforce throughout the enterprise as a result of lengthy periods of repetition and indoctrination. The organization's culture is reinforced through a socialization process from the organization's senior-level people to new employees. Since an organization's culture is deeply ingrained and takes a relatively long time to become established, the corollary is that an organization's culture takes a relatively long time to change. Changing an organization's culture relies upon changing aspects that comprise the basic foundation of what *makes* the organization. Resistance to organizational change is largely driven by a fear of leaving the comfort of an organization's established culture.

On the other hand, an organization's climate represents those behaviors, attitudes, and feelings that reflect the day-to-day operations across the enterprise. Climate describes the psychological impacts of the organization's workplace; it emphasizes the shared perception of how things are done around an organization. Think of organizational climate in terms of relationships and the human side of an enterprise. Compared to an organization's culture, an organization's climate is less ingrained and usually easier to change; it is more malleable and influential in the short term.

Therefore, if an organization's leadership is interested in making enterprise improvements in a relatively short period of time, then focusing on the organization's climate is one approach that could provide timely changes. By understanding an organization's climate, senior leadership is able to better understand the fundamental perceptions, feelings, and attitudes that drive the workforce's performance. As a result of this increased understanding, an organization stands to gain improved productivity from one of its most valuable resources: its people.
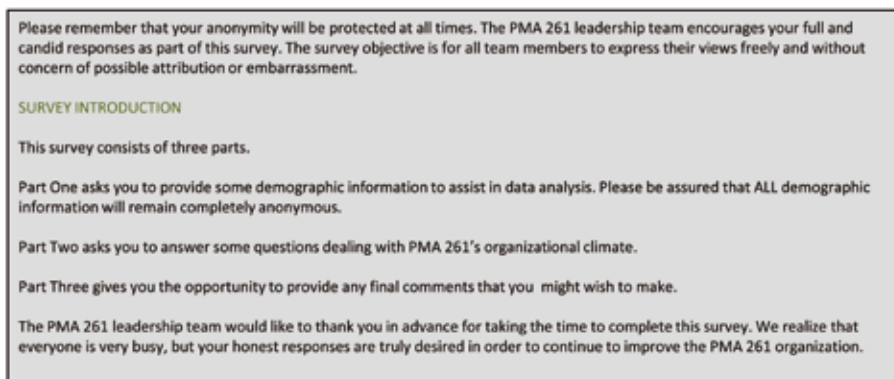
Determining Your Climate Approach

Since your organization's climate is a function of your workforce, you ideally should select a tool that measures what your workforce is thinking, feeling, and perceiving. In general, there are two different approaches to determine your organization's climate.

> # How do you know if your organization is operating to its full potential?

First, organizational climate data could be collected from a primarily qualitative approach, which typically involves the use of face-to-face discussions with members of the organization's workforce. A qualitative approach could use an interview method in which the interviewer and an individual workforce member are isolated in a face-to-face setting, or a focus group method could be used in which several workforce members are simultaneously in the same room with one interviewer. While the same set of questions could be used in either setting, the interview method in a face-to-face setting affords the potential advantage of openness since the lack of fellow coworkers typically increases an individual's tendency to provide complete and honest answers. However, the focus group interview can provide some qualitative insights not found in the individual interview setting since some workforce members who would not normally open up are actually spurred into providing an input based on the comments from others present at the session.

A second approach is more often quantitative in nature (i.e., numbers and statistics) and based on the use of a survey tool, which allows the respondent to anonymously provide a numerical rating for each question. In this case, each numerical rating is bounded by an established high-to-low range that is described in the survey instructions. The specific questions can easily be tailored from one organization to the

Figure 1. **Importance of Leadership in Instructions**

Please remember that your anonymity will be protected at all times. The PMA 261 leadership team encourages your full and candid responses as part of this survey. The survey objective is for all team members to express their views freely and without concern of possible attribution or embarrassment.

SURVEY INTRODUCTION

This survey consists of three parts.

Part One asks you to provide some demographic information to assist in data analysis. Please be assured that ALL demographic information will remain completely anonymous.

Part Two asks you to answer some questions dealing with PMA 261's organizational climate.

Part Three gives you the opportunity to provide any final comments that you might wish to make.

The PMA 261 leadership team would like to thank you in advance for taking the time to complete this survey. We realize that everyone is very busy, but your honest responses are truly desired in order to continue to improve the PMA 261 organization.

next based on the organization's senior leadership's desired focus. In addition, distributing the same survey tool on a recurring basis after the passage of time—for example, one or two years between each sampling—allows senior leadership to track the organization's climate over time to determine where the organization is showing improvement as well as where the organization is displaying a lack of progress or even regression within certain areas of interest.

One of the advantages of the quantitative survey approach as compared to the qualitative interview or focus group approach is that the survey approach is much easier to accomplish in terms of the resources required to distribute the survey and timeliness to complete. Alternatively, the survey approach has the potential for a low participation rate as there are no ramifications to anyone who is asked to complete the survey but elects to ignore the request to participate. To increase the probability of having a large number of the organization's workforce membership participate in the survey, many organizations will send out a preemptive top-cover electronic message across the enterprise stating the importance that the organization's senior leadership places on everyone taking the necessary time to complete the survey. However, to combat low survey response rates, organizations such as the Defense Acquisition University will send out e-mail reminders while the survey is "open" to respondents to help motivate non-participants to complete the survey. DAU has used this last approach with great success as a means to achieve high survey response rates.

A Representative Climate Survey

A quick search on the Internet will reveal that there are many organizations offering services and suggestions regarding organizational climate surveys: how to develop, distribute, monitor, analyze, and report the results. As an organization chartered to provide mission assistance to DoD's acquisition workforce, DAU has conducted organizational climate surveys across the enterprise in support of a spectrum of different acquisition program offices. In practice, each DAU region utilizing an organizational climate survey may differ slightly in their approaches so as to best meet the needs of their specific customers; however, the underlying approaches are similar enough so that DAU's use of organizational cli-

mate surveys across the enterprise can be viewed as one of many tools to assist program offices—regardless of the specific DAU region being considered. With that in mind, let's walk through how one of DAU's regions—the Mid-Atlantic Region located in California, Md.—has gone about structuring a representative organizational climate survey.

The subsequent paragraphs are not intended as an endorsement that a DAU organizational climate survey is the "best" such survey within DoD. Rather, the following organizational climate survey approach is simply a known tool familiar to and used by DAU's Mid-Atlantic Region to provide organizational mission assistance to acquisition program offices. Any organization contemplating an organizational climate survey needs to conduct the necessary due diligence to ensure the tool ultimately used is structured to gather the necessary information deemed most important to that organization's senior leadership in light of the intended focus.

The DAU Mid-Atlantic Region organizational climate survey has evolved to include five sections: senior leadership statement of importance, survey instructions, requested demographic information, actual climate survey questions, and closing question and remarks. Let's look at each one of those sections.

Leadership Statement of Importance

A focused introductory statement from the organization's senior leadership is used to request the organization's workforce complete a climate survey. This first step is critical to how successfully an organizational climate survey turns out. It is imperative that workforce members understand that their senior leadership fully supports them taking the climate survey—and that the results significantly matter to senior leadership. The DAU Mid-Atlantic Region organizational climate survey clearly states that the results of the survey will be used to make meaningful changes to the organization in an effort to improve performance and effectiveness towards meeting warfighter requirements (Figure 1). So the intended message—just like electing your political representatives—is to participate in the process or don't complain about the outcomes.

Survey Instructions

The DAU Mid-Atlantic Region survey instructions are written so that respondents taking the survey shouldn't have any uncertainties about how to complete it. The climate survey instructions make it clear that there are two different types of questions. One type is the closed question in which the survey participant provides a response based on a scale that offers distinct options such as Strongly Agree,

Agree, Neutral, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. In addition, those rating questions will each have a text box available for the respondent to provide clarifying comments. While not required, the instructions encourage the survey participant to provide qualitative comments in the text box as often as possible—especially for those questions answered with a Disagree or Strongly Disagree response. The other type of question is open-ended, in which the objective is for the respondent to provide qualitative written answers in a text box.

Demographics

The third section of the DAU Mid-Atlantic Region organizational climate survey asks the respondent to provide some demographic information. The rationale for seeking this type of information is to more finely locate where problem areas might exist. For example, is the problem something constrained to just military members within the organization or common to all military, government civilian, and contractor members? This type of refinement helps senior leadership apply their limited resources in a more bang-for-the-buck manner. DAU knows, however, that requesting too much demographic information may ultimately prevent respondents from taking the organizational climate survey because of the fear that the results could be traced back to the originator. Therefore, the organizational climate survey instructions inform the survey respondent that all results, including the demographic information, are completely anonymous. The results of any one organizational climate survey cannot be linked back to a specific workforce member. In addition, the type of demographic information is tailored to each situation based on what that organization's senior leadership feels is acceptable to their workforce membership.

Survey Questions

The heart and soul of the organizational climate survey are the survey questions, which represent the source of all data for subsequent analysis leading to conclusions and recommendations. As discussed earlier, the DAU approach is to use closed- and open-ended questions (Figure 2). That approach allows for a complete picture of an organization's health for two reasons. Closed questions provide quantitative results that are subject to regimented statistical analysis. On the other hand, open-ended questions come from

Climate surveys in general offer a solid departure point for any organization that seeks an assessment of its organizational health.

a different perspective by providing soft data available only through the interpretation of human thoughts and musings vice the hard, cold factual results afforded through quantitative means.

Careful thought needs to be applied to the development of actual questions proposed as part of an organizational climate survey. At the DAU Mid-Atlantic Region, we've tried to maintain a core set of questions that have proven to provide a broad insight into the workforce's perception of the organization's climate. In addition to those core questions, there is the capability to augment a survey with questions that might help provide additional data tailored to a particular senior leadership's intent. The bottom line is that whatever questions are chosen, they should be structured in advance to ensure that the collected data will help provide the organization's senior leadership

Figure 2. Illustrative Closed and Open-Ended **Questions**

67. Communication is free-flowing in PMA 261 (up, down, and across the chain of command)
  ● Strongly Agree
  ○ Agree
  ○ Neutral
  ○ Disagree
  ○ Strongly Disagree

68. One process that PMA 261 leadership is NOT doing and should START doing is....?

with the proper information needed to best capture a true picture of that unique organization's health.

Concluding the Survey

Finally, DAU Mid-Atlantic Region surveys—and surveys for other DAU regions—usually conclude with an open-ended question that offer all survey respondents an opportunity to voice closing remarks (Figure 3). This final question is phrased so that respondents understand comments are welcome regarding anything related to the previous survey questions or, more important, it allows the workforce member to provide a comment on something not addressed as part of the survey's formal list of questions. This closing question uniquely serves as an outlet for the survey respondent to vent on a topic or topics at the forefront of the workforce member's concerns. Therefore, the DAU premise for including this open-ended question is that survey respondents are likely to openly discuss problem areas given the chance, which can only add to the depth of better understanding an organization's health.

Figure 3. **Closing Open-Ended Question**

PART THREE: FINAL COMMENTS

You've now completed all the required survey questions. In closing, we'd like to provide you with the opportunity to add any comments that you have not already addressed. Your comments can range from thoughts regarding any of the previous questions, general observations about PMA 261 that you feel were not covered as part of the survey questions, or anything else that you might want to mention. Providing any closing comments is completely optional. Please use the following text box.

73. Do you have any other comments?

The PMA 261 Experience

One of the recent organizational climate survey success stories is related to PMA 261, a program office associated with the U.S. Navy's Program Executive Office for Air Anti-Submarine Warfare, Assault and Special Mission Programs responsible for two major helicopter programs: in-service aircraft (CH-53D, CH-53E, and MH-53E) sustainment, support, and capability improvement projects; and the CH-53K Heavy Lift Helicopter development program. When Navy Capt. Rick Muldoon, co-author of this article, took command of PMA 261 a little less than three years ago, one of his first actions was to enlist DAU Mid-Atlantic's support with an organizational climate survey. Muldoon used the results to chart a course for improving PMA 261's organizational health as he recognized the importance of his workforce to reach mission accomplishment.

Muldoon followed up the initial organizational survey effort with a second organizational climate survey approximately 18 months later. The intent was to achieve an understanding as to how his efforts based on the initial organizational survey results were working as well as to identify any potentially new hot spots within the organization. The results from the second organizational climate survey allowed him to refine the organization's strategic plan to maximize his workforce effectiveness. Regarding the importance of the concept of an organizational climate survey, Muldoon remarked that "the organizational climate survey proved to be an extremely useful tool for me to quickly take the pulse of the command and chart a course to improve the organization's effectiveness. Following up with a second climate survey after 18 months allowed me to reassess how the organization had improved as well as to identify any new areas of concern. An additional benefit of doing the survey and following through with necessary changes, major or even seemingly minor ones, was that it sent a strong message to the team that leadership truly values their opinion and cares about their wellbeing. While not a panacea for all organizational problems, I'd highly recommend its consideration for use by all program managers as a means to increase workforce effectiveness."

Improve an Organization's Health

Virtually every organization pays homage to its workforce by emphasizing their importance to mission success. You've heard the proclamation before: People are our most vital resource. Repeated studies have defended this philosophy because people represent a huge leverage point in an organization's quest for program effectiveness and productivity. Since an organization needs its people to operate effectively and productively, an organizational climate survey might provide a useful tool in the program manager's tool kit to help maximize the impact its workforce has on mission accomplishment. While the specifics associated with DAU's approach to an organizational climate survey might not fit every acquisition program office, we do think that climate surveys in general offer a solid departure point for any organization that seeks an assessment of its organizational health.

Bill McGovern of DAU's Learning Capabilities and Integration Center contributed to the development of this article.