Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

ClimateQUAL® and Thinklets: Using ClimateQUAL® with Group Support Systems to Facilitate Discussion and Set Priorities for Organizational Change at Criss Library

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Abstract

Objective – This article discusses a series of actions taken by the Criss Library at the University of Nebraska at Omaha to implement organizational change, using the ClimateQUAL® survey and facilitated discussions with ThinkTank™ group decision software. The library had experienced significant changes over a five-year period, with a renovation of the facility and three reorganizations resulting in a 50% staff turnover. Recognizing the strain that years of construction and personnel changes had placed on the organization, there was a desire to uncover the mood of the employees and reveal the issues behind low morale, uneasiness, and fear.

Methods – In November 2009, the library conducted a ClimateQUAL® survey to develop a baseline to assess the effectiveness of any changes. After the results were distributed to library faculty and staff, a series of two-hour facilitated discussions was held to gather opinions and ideas for solutions using thinkLets, a pattern language for

reasoning toward a goal. The group support system ThinkTank™ software was loaded onto computers, and employees were able to add their ideas anonymously during the sessions. Finally, 12 employees (29%) completed a four-question survey on their perceptions of the facilitated discussions.

Results – The facilitated discussions returned 76 sub-themes in 12 categories: staffing and scheduling issues, staff unity/teamwork, communication, goodwill/morale, accountability, decision-making, policy issues, skills and training, leadership, ergonomics/physical work environment, respect, and bullying. An advisory team culled the 76 sub-themes into 40 improvement strategies. Five were implemented immediately, and the remaining 35 were scheduled to be presented to the faculty and staff via an online survey. Participants' perceptions of the facilitated discussions were mixed. Eighty-three percent of respondents reported that they did not feel safe speaking out about issues, most likely because a supervisor was present.

Conclusion – Improving organizational climate is a continuous and iterative process that leads to a healthy environment.

Introduction

The Criss Library at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) has experienced exceptional level of change within the last five years. The Library has undergone a complete physical transformation; a 30,000 square foot addition was completed in 2006 and a total renovation of the facility was completed in 2009. Throughout the construction, the facility remained open and all services available to patrons.

Not only did the library faculty and staff endure the environmental stress of a renovation, they were also affected by three reorganizations in a three-year time frame. The reorganizations changed job descriptions for 30% of the employees and resulted in a 50% turnover in staff from resignations, layoffs, and retirements. The personnel changes left the remaining employees feeling uneasy; and while there is a high level of achievement among the staff, an undercurrent of low morale, distrust, and fear remained.

After the completion of the building renovation and a change in leadership, the organizational focus returned to collections, services, and employees after long being on facilities issues.

Recognizing the strain that years of construction and personnel changes had placed on the organization, there was a desire to uncover the mood of the employees and reveal the true issues behind the low morale, uneasiness, and fear. After doing some research on organizations, change, and the effects of change on employees, it was decided to use the ClimateQUAL® survey for assessment of the library staff.

Overview/Background and ClimateQUAL®

The Criss Library set out to determine its organizational health by measuring the diversity and climate of the organization. As Lowry and Hanges (2008) indicate, the climate of an organization helps employees interpret and understand what behavior is rewarded, supported, and expected. A healthy organization creates climates that show that teamwork, diversity, and justice are valued and there is a strong concern for customers.

Beckhard described the genesis of organizational development in *Organization Development: Strategies and Models*:

> "Today there is a need for longer-range, coordinated strategy to develop organization climates, ways of work, relationships, communication systems, and information systems. It is out of those needs that systematic planned change efforts – organizational development – have emerged" (Beckhard, 1969, p. 8).

The father of organizational development in academic and research libraries, Duane Webster, identified the following principles for improvement of organizations: "the importance of interpersonal competence; participation leading to commitment; the importance of groups and teamwork; and importance of those who will implement a change being involved in the planning of that change" (Sullivan, 2009, p. 314). Some of these same principles were repeated as elements of organizational development described by Karen Holloway: putting decision-making closer to people doing the work; improving group dynamics, organizational structure, and organizational culture; learning how to work collaboratively and across hierarchies; and building trust (2004). The Organizational Climate and Diversity Assessment (OCDA) used the principles and elements of organizational development and described them as *climates* (Lowry & Hanges, 2008). Questions were developed for the OCDA, which later evolved into the ClimateQUAL® assessment, to help libraries discover their strengths and weaknesses within each principle or climate.

The Criss Library used ClimateQUAL® tool to survey library employees and develop a baseline to assess the effectiveness of any changes. The ClimateQUAL® survey addresses climates for diversity, teamwork, learning, and fairness. The survey was administered in November 2009 and results were received in December 2009. The results were based on a seven-point Likert scale. With some exceptions, a higher mean score

indicates a stronger or healthier climate. The Criss Library results showed healthy climates in several areas but also indicated three areas where changes were warranted. The Criss Library work environment scored well on interpersonal justice (M = 5.86), informational justice (M = 5.02), a healthy climate for leadership (M = 5.69), a healthy climate for deep diversity (M = 5.18) and demographic diversity for race (M = 6.74), gender (M = 6.47), rank (M = 5.20), and sexual orientation (M = 6.40), organizational citizenship behaviors (M = 5.06), interpersonal conflict (M = 2.66, note scale with reversed coding), and task conflict (M = 3.35, note scale with reversed coding). The three areas where the mean scores were low included distributive justice (M = 3.29), procedural justice (M = 3.98), and structural facilitation of teamwork (M = 3.79).

Criss Library's ClimateQUAL® Results

With a better understanding of organizational development, research was conducted for additional clarification on the three climates with the lowest mean scores at the Criss Library: distributive and procedural justice and the structural facilitation of teamwork. The ClimateQUAL® tool defines distributive justice as the degree to which staff perceive that rewards are fairly distributed upon performance, and procedural justice as the degree to which staff perceive the procedures that determine the distribution of rewards are uniformly applied. (Association of Research Libraries, n.d.). The climate for teamwork and the structural facilitation of teamwork is the degree to which staff members perceive that teamwork is valued by the organization and to which they perceive that they are valued as team members.

In general, distributive justice is related to specific attitudes or perceptions of the fairness of organizational outcomes or processes received in a given transaction such as pay satisfaction and job satisfaction (Greenberg & Colquitt, 2005). Individuals evaluate and compare the outcome they receive to a standard or rule or to the outcome received by a coworker. Distributive

justice perceptions are positively associated with job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and trust, and negatively associated with organizational withdrawal (Chory & Kingsley Westerman, 2009). Negative associations of distributive justice can contribute to rumor spreading, counter-productive work behaviors, conflict at work, faking illness, and damaging or wasting organizational resources or equipment (Chory & Kingsley Westerman, 2009).

Procedural justice is more strongly related to global attitudes such as organizational commitment and group commitment (Greenberg & Colquitt, 2005). Procedural justice in the group context demonstrates that individuals care about fairness because of their relationships with the groups to which they belong (Greenberg & Colquitt, 2005). Procedural justice can be defined as the perception of the fairness of the processes used to arrive at outcomes. It is the individual's perception of the fairness of the process components of the social system that regulates the distribution of resources. Procedures are judged on their consistency of application, alignment with prevailing ethical standards, the degree of bias present, their accuracy and correctability in application, and the extent to which they represent all people concerned. Fair procedures ensure acceptance of policies such as smoking bans, pay systems, parental leave policies, and disciplinary actions. Positive procedural justice is associated with trust in management, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. Negative or low procedural justice can lead to counterproductive work behaviors, conflict at work, and the use of organizational revenge strategies (Chory & Kingsley Westerman, 2009).

Structural facilitation of teamwork was another opportunity area where the Criss Library scored lower than other academic libraries. The Criss Library work environment scored a mean of 3.79 compared to 4.24 for all institutions, placing UNO below the average. Only 40% of Criss Library employees responded positively to the question about the Structural Facilitation of Teamwork, which compares to the mean of 48% for all

institutions. Teams, as defined by Baughman, are "small groups of staff working on a common purpose" and teamwork is the environment that is created to foster how the members of a group work together" (2008, p. 294). Moreover, Baughman describes a true team as one empowered to make decisions, improve processes, and implement strategies to better serve the user. A team can add to the success of an organization by taking ownership of identifying ways to improve processes, promote continuous learning and development, and increase innovation and risk-taking. She goes on to explain that libraries that develop into learning organizations focus on customer needs and building a culture of continuous learning for team members.

The Criss Library scored the highest on the ClimateQUAL® survey in the climates for Diversity. The Valuing Diversity climate, defined as the degree to which equality between minorities and majorities is valued, showed 71% of Criss employees responded positively. In response to Race, which is the extent to which the library supports racial diversity, 96% responded positively. Another climate where Criss Library employees responded positively was Interpersonal Justice (84%) – the degree to which one perceives there is fairness and respectfulness between employees and supervisors. Finally, Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (71%) – the degree to which employees perceive that "professionalism," politeness, and care is exhibited within the organization, was another positive climate at the Criss Library. Some comments:

- "Overall this is a very good place to work. Folks are generally helpful, good natured and open minded."
- "Our library caters greatly to the patrons. There is a great working atmosphere at the service desks, and you know that other employees are friendly and ready to help you, should you require it."

In contrast to the healthy climates, three areas from the survey indicated opportunities for improvement: distributive justice, procedural justice, and structural facilitation of teamwork. In the climates for Justice/Fairness, Distributive Justice, and Procedural Justice the Criss Library ranked lower (22% and 35% employees responded positively respectively) than compared to all institutions (30% and 47% respectively). In the area of climate for Teamwork, the Structural Facilitation of Teamwork, the Criss Library received a lower score (M=3.79) than all institutions (M=4.26). Furthermore, 43% of Criss Library employees perceive they do not have as much influence over their teams as other institutions' employees, where 62% responded positively. Some comments on the teamwork issue:

- "Staff members, librarians, and administrators need to be more open to helping other departments within the library when asked."
- "I feel communication and teamwork are two areas at the library that need to be addressed."

Criss Library employees also expressed concern in the climate for Psychological Safety, defined as the degree to which employees feel the organization is a safe environment for offering opinions and taking risks. The mean score for the Criss Library was 4.52 compared with 4.95 for all institutions. Criss Library employees expressed concerns regarding expressing ideas and opinions, and fear that theirs is not a safe environment for risk-taking:

- "There is a great deal of fear in this organization."
- "This organization is a mess. People don't trust. Communication is the pits."
- ". . . they were out of favor with administration. It created a climate of fear across the library. This is why people are still afraid to try new things or offer dissenting opinions."

There were several comments regarding the absence of rewards in the organization. The mean score for the climate for Continual Learning shows that Criss Library employees felt they were not as encouraged to express new ideas and that their ideas were not accepted or rewarded as those from other libraries. The mean score for Criss Library was 5.05 compared to 5.28 for all institutions.

- "The rewards questions were very hard to answer because the library doesn't give reward."
- "There are attempts at saying thank you but I'd say most people do not feel personally rewarded for their work."
- "It would be nice if the Directors or the Dean provided greater recognition and/or rewards (not just monetary, but treats, prizes or even paper certificates) to those departments or individuals who go 'above and beyond' to serve our patron population."

Tables 1 and 2 break out the lowest and highest mean scores, by percentage of respondents assigning a ranking of 5 or above on each 7 point scale.

Table 3 shows the top three opportunity areas for all departments and the range of mean scores. All departments, with the exception of one (who did not have the minimum number of responses for reporting), had the same three lowest scoring climates (opportunity areas), but in varying rank order.

After the Survey: Group Support Systems (GSS) and ThinkLets

The receipt of the survey results coincided with the semi-annual ClimateQUAL® partners meeting at the 2010 ALA Midwinter Meeting in Boston. A number of partners spoke informally on their experiences with survey administration and the common theme running through those discussions was the importance of library staff involvement in the identification of interventions

Table 1
All Library Organization Climate Lowest Five Ranked

ClimateQUAL® climate	Percentage of respondents assigning a ranking of 5 or above (7 point scale)
Organizational Climate for Justice	
Distributive Justice	22.22%
Procedural Justice	34.62%
Climate for Teamwork	
Structural Facilitation of Teamwork	40.00%
Climate for Customer Service	62.26%
Climate for Psychological Safety	62.26%

Table 2
All Library Organization Climate Highest Five Ranked

ClimateQUAL® climate	Percentage of respondents assigning a ranking of 5 or above (7 point scale)
Climate for Demographical Diversity	
Race	95.74%
Gender	90.38%
Sexual Orientation	90.00%
Organizational Climate for Justice	
Interpersonal Justice	84.44%
Leadership Climate	83.67%
Leader-Member Relationship Quality	

Table 3
Top Three Opportunity Areas for All Departments

ClimateQUAL® climate	Range of mean scores
Organizational Climate for Justice	
Procedural Justice	2.00 – 4.88
Climate for Teamwork	
Structural Facilitation of Teamwork	2.75 – 4.36
Organizational Climate for Justice	
Distributive Justice	2.44 – 4.14

and solutions. This concept was communicated to the Criss Library ClimateQUAL® advisory team, and the group began to discuss ways to garner feedback from library staff. One of the team's members is a senior fellow at the University of Nebraska at Omaha's Center for Collaboration Science (CCS), an experienced facilitator, and knowledgeable about the CCS' use of group decision software to facilitate meetings both on-campus and in the Omaha business community.

The advisory team chose to use the group decision software based on prior experience using it in other contexts at UNO. In addition to being a very productive and successful system, it is fun and engaging to use. There is a level of anonymity that can provide psychological safety

to participants, which they may not experience using other traditional brainstorming systems, as well as providing a focus on the quality of the feedback and not on the personality of the person providing it. We felt the anonymity was an important factor given the general feeling of mistrust among library faculty and staff.

The system developed at the CCS uses "thinkLets." A "thinkLet" is "the smallest unit of intellectual capital required to create one repeatable pattern of thinking among people working toward a goal" (Briggs, de Vreede, Nunamaker, & Tobey, 2001. p. 2). Briggs and de Vreede (2009) have developed over sixty thinkLets that can be configured and used within a group decision system and can "encapsulate the components of a stimulus used to create a single repeatable, predictable, pattern of thinking among people working toward a goal" (Briggs, de Vreede, Nunamaker, & Tobey, 2001, p. 2). It was decided that the Criss Library would use the ThinkTank™ group collaboration software, and employ the FreeBrainstorm, FastFocus, and PriorityVote thinkLets.

Facilitated Discussion Process

The ClimateQUAL® survey was administered to the following library departments, which align with the current organizational reporting structure: Administrative Services, Collections, Leadership Team, Patron Services, Research Services, and Virtual Services. Likewise, the facilitated discussions were conducted among these same departmental groups, with the exception of student assistants, who did not participate in the initial facilitated discussions. There are plans to hold conversations with student assistants later in the process.

Prior to the scheduled discussions, each departmental group was provided a summary report of ClimateQUAL® results. The report included both the highest and lowest scoring climates for their department as well as the library as a whole. Faculty and staff were asked to reflect on the lowest-scoring climates, referred to as

"opportunity areas" and to begin thinking of possible answers to this question: *Over the next year, what can we do to improve our work environment?* Given the complexity of organizational development and possible interventions to address opportunity areas, the one-year time frame was presented in order to provide a manageable time frame for our initial work.

Two-hour blocks were scheduled to maximize participation from faculty and staff. Sessions were facilitated by faculty and graduate students affiliated with the Center for Collaboration Science as well as faculty colleagues from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries ClimateQUAL® team. The GSS software was installed on library laptops and each participant was given a computer with which to work. Facilitators used the ThinkTank™ group facilitation software to garner answers to the aforementioned question. A page was displayed for each participant in the session and the *FreeBrainstorm* thinkLet was used to provide participants the opportunity to share their particular points of view; and it also enabled them to quickly see the bigger picture and to diverge from comfortable patterns of thinking (see Figure 1). Participants were instructed to move to another page where they could either enter a new idea or comment on the other ideas that were entered onto that page by another participant. This thinkLet activity varied by the size of the group, but ranged from 20 minutes to over an hour in length.

The FastFocus thinkLet was used in the next step of the process to quickly extract a clean list of key issues (see Figure 2). Each participant was assigned a page and given the opportunity to choose the idea they felt was most important from that page. Each participant was given two "turns" to choose important ideas. Once each participant had identified their two most important ideas, the facilitator verbally engaged the group to refine this list to eliminate duplication and to ensure that all agreed on and understood the idea presented.

The final thinkLet employed was *PriorityVote* which is a simple ranking of the most important ideas (see Figure 3). The groups were asked to individually rank the list and the top five or six ideas for each group session remained.

Employee Survey Perceptions of the Facilitated Discussions

To gain more understanding and insight of employees' perception of the facilitated discussions, a four-question survey was distributed to all library employees, via SurveyMonkey®. Twelve employees answered the survey, a 29% response rate. Three short-answer essay questions were asked: "In your experience during the ClimateQUAL® facilitated discussion, what worked well?"; "What did NOT work well?"; and "What could have been done differently?" The fourth question was a Likert-scale matrix question where the respondents were asked to strongly agree, agree, disagree or
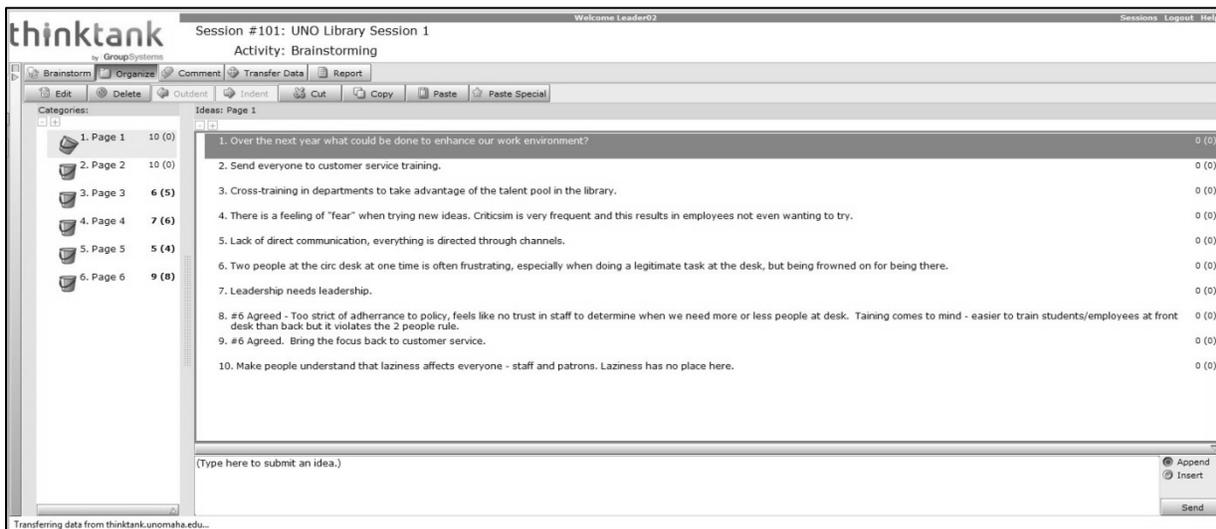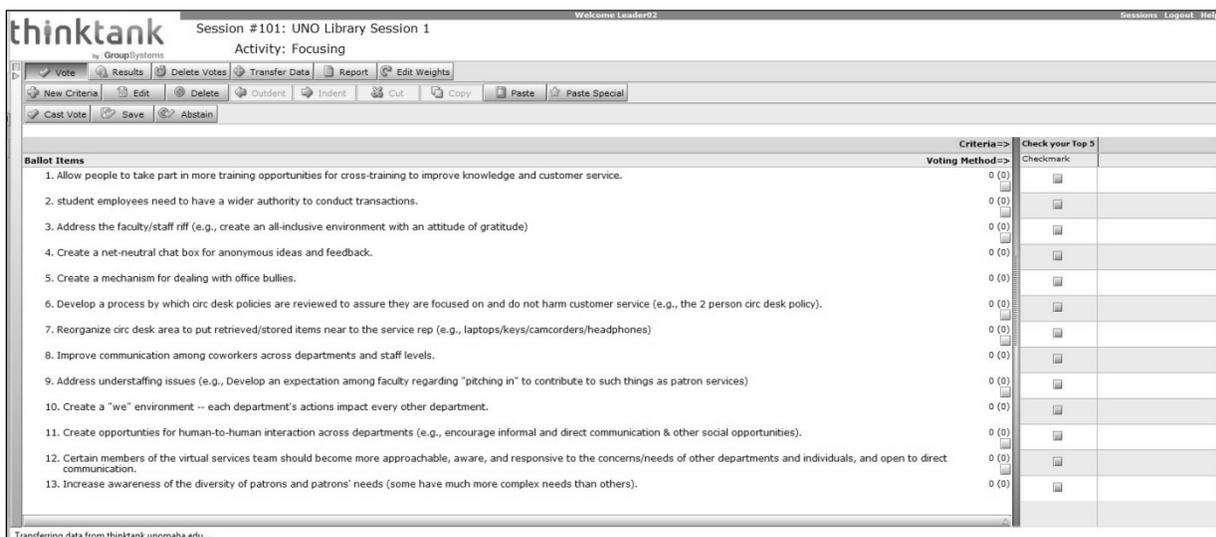

Figure 1
FreeBrainstorm thinkLet

Figure 2
FastFocus thinkLet

strongly disagree with four statements: 1) Differing opinions were openly discussed; 2) It was safe to speak up without fear of a negative effect; 3) I am satisfied with my involvement at the facilitated discussion; and 4) There was good cooperation within my group.

The response for Questions 1 and 2 was mixed. For Question 1, five respondents stated they felt the anonymity of the process worked well. Five respondents for Question 2 answered that anonymity did not work well with one comment stating anonymity was compromised in the facilitated discussions. Additional comments provided from the survey indicated participants could tell who was typing; others were uncomfortable expressing any opinions if their supervisor attended the same facilitated discussion. Additionally, 33% of the respondents (n=4) felt nothing worked well in the discussions.

Question 3 asked what could have been done differently in the facilitated discussions. Most people responded by writing that they wished they could have chosen their own group rather than joining their department in the discussions. Several reasons explaining this response can be found in the agree/disagree matrix questions. A large number (83%) did not feel safe speaking out about issues, most likely because of a supervisor present. Only 50% of the respondents felt opinions were openly discussed and were satisfied with their involvement in the discussions. Even though people did not feel safe

speaking in their group, a majority of respondents agreed that there was good cooperation in their group.

Results of ThinkTank™ Sessions in All Groups

Reports were returned for each departmental session, which included transcripts from the FreeBrainstorm sessions and results from the PriorityVote. All departmental sessions were combined to provide 12 general themes for the Library as a whole:

- Staffing and Scheduling Issues (5)
- Staff Unity/Teamwork (5)
- Communication (5)
- Goodwill/Morale (4)
- Accountability(4)
- Decision-Making(4)
- Policy Issues (4)
- Skills and Training (3)
- Leadership(3)
- Ergonomics/Physical Work Environment(3)
- Respect(3)
- Bullying (2)

The numbers in parentheses represent the number of groups identifying the theme as a priority (total number of groups, n=6). Each of the 12 themes had between 3 and 10 related sub-themes and strongly corroborated sub-themes (priority ranked by over one-half of the generating group) were noted.
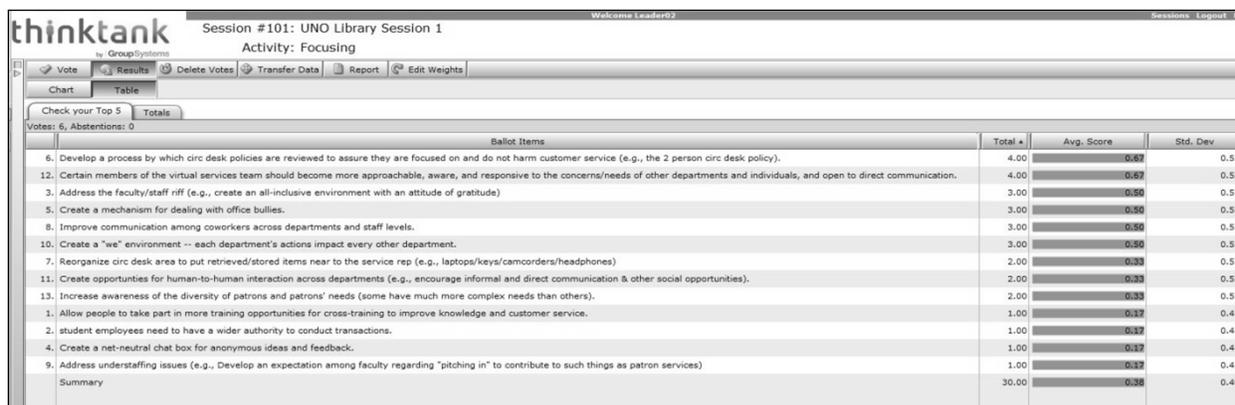

Figure 3
PriorityVote

**ThinkThank™ Sessions and ClimateQUAL®
results**

Recall that the question asked in the facilitated
discussions was "*Over the next year, what can we do
to improve our work environment?*" While some of
the groups answered that question in the context
of the opportunity areas (lowest scoring climates)
identified in the ClimateQUAL® report for their
department, some did not. Thus, it is somewhat
difficult to draw parallels between the feedback
from the facilitated discussion to the
ClimateQUAL® results. However, based on
keywords and concepts delivered in facilitated
discussions, some associations were made (see
Table 4). For example discussion related to "staff
unity and teamwork" were associated with the
ClimateQUAL® concept of "structural facilitation
of teamwork," "communication" relates to
"climate for psychological safety,"
"goodwill/morale" relates to a number of
different ClimateQUAL® scales such as "climate
for procedural justice," "job satisfaction," "climate
for psychological safety," and "organizational
citizenship behavior." Similarly facilitated
discussion themes on "policy issues" relate to
"climate for procedural justice," "leadership" to
"climate for leadership," "respect" to "team
psychological empowerment" and "bullying" to
"climate for interpersonal justice."

Strategies for Improvement: The Next Steps

The facilitated discussions returned 76 sub-
themes under the 12 general themes. The advisory
team culled the 76 sub-themes into 40 statements,
or *improvement strategies* by removing duplicates
such as "make people accountable" and "develop
a way to make people accountable" and
combining like statements such as "reorganize
circ area" and "optimize work spaces" into
"optimize work spaces for all departments as
needed so staff can do their job tasks effectively
and efficiently."

Of the 40 improvement strategies, there were five
that could be implemented immediately: The
Courtesy Committee was reinstated, and
reconceived as the Positive Employee Recognition
Committee (PERC). This committee would not
only oversee the social activities but also organize
and advise the leadership team and the Dean on a
staff recognition program. A mechanism for staff
to provide anonymous ideas, comments, and
feedback was developed by the Communications
Advisory Group (CAG), which was also formed
with representatives from each library
department. Several members of the leadership
team and library supervisors have completed or
are scheduled to participate in a new campus
leadership program; and lastly, a current project

Table 4
Mapping Themes from Facilitated Discussions to ClimateQUAL® Core Concepts

General Themes from Facilitated Discussions	ClimateQUAL® Core Concepts
Staff Unity/Teamwork	Structural Facilitation of Teamwork
Communication	Climate for Psychological Safety
Goodwill/Morale	Climate for Procedural Justice; Job Satisfaction; Climate for Psychological Safety; Organizational Citizenship Behavior
Policy Issues	Climate for Procedural Justice
Leadership	Climate for Leadership
Respect	Team Psychological Empowerment
Bullying	Climate for Interpersonal Justice

to collate policies on the library's internal wiki will be followed by an internal review of all policies.

The remaining 35 improvement strategies are scheduled to be presented to the faculty and staff via an online survey where they will be asked to rank the strategies in order of importance. The resulting list is where the Criss Library will take the first solid steps toward organizational change and a healthier organizational climate.

Conclusion

To sum up, the Criss Library conducted the ClimateQUAL® survey during the Fall semester in 2009. The Library had experienced numerous changes due to a three-year library renovation and several personnel resignations and library reorganizations. There was an over-riding perception of mistrust, fear, and uncertainty that needed to be addressed. The first step in addressing these negative perceptions was to administer the ClimateQUAL® survey to gather data for a better understanding of staff perceptions. The next step was to report the ClimateQUAL® results to library staff and begin discussions on goals and solutions for improving the organizational climate. The third step was to identify areas of concern within the organization to address. Once those organizational areas were identified, they were prioritized and goals with associated solutions were developed. Improving organizational climate is a continuous and iterative process that leads to a healthy environment.

Acknowledgement

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