

Work Climate Surveys in the Danish Armed Forces

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Since 1972, The Danish Armed Forces have made systematic surveys of the soldiers' views of their working conditions. The survey system was called "The Armed Forces' Attitude Survey" and was introduced in the conscripted units of the army. Later, it was implemented as a regular routine among all units of the Armed Forces, covering all personnel from private to officer level. The system has been in use since, with small alterations over time.

The purpose of developing the Attitude Survey System was to offer the Defence a management and co-operation tool. Through the means of attitude surveys, it would for the first time be possible to reach an insight into the soldiers' thoughts on and experience with their working conditions. The hope was that the results of the attitude surveys might contribute to the talks in the newly established co-committee between management and the representatives of the conscripts/privates' organization, whose purpose was to facilitate collaboration and to ensure the conscripts' influence on their working conditions.

The officer organizations were worried that the results of the attitude surveys could have negative consequences for the evaluation of the implementing commander. It therefore became necessary to introduce anonymity not only in the individual answers, but also in the overall survey results. The results of the survey was thus the "property" of the implementing commander, and it was up to him with whom he wanted to share it.

Later on, it was made obligatory to inform the targets of the survey of its results. However, the results are still not accessible to the implementing commander's brother officers of equal or superior rank.

The Attitude Survey System is divided into six areas with altogether 54 questions. The questions are ranged within the following areas:

- 1) The job (the conditions of the individual job)
- 2) The working community (horizontal co-operation)
- 3) The closest superiors (vertical co-operation)
- 4) Leadership and management (the overall co-ordination of the work activities)
- 5) The work of the co-committee
- 6) The training (only for personnel in training)

In case the implementing commander /authority wishes to gain insight into a particular area which is not included in the five/six basic areas, it is possible to add up to six further questions to the questionnaire.

For the first ten years of use, the system included a further area, the conscripts/privates' attitude to the Defence, their so-called will to defence. This theme

was included, because it was a matter of some doubt whether unsatisfactory results of the attitude survey could be a result of the general attitude of the young to the Defence more than a reflection of their attitude to the specific working conditions.

However, surveys of young people's will to defence contradicted this hypothesis, as no connection could be shown between their will to defence and the other answers to the attitude survey. It even turned out that the will to defence was increasing over time, independent of the other surveyed areas.¹

The surveys in the conscripted units are done twice during the 8 month period of conscription, and the computed results, done by the Institute of Military Psychology (IMP), are sent to the commander of the sub-unit/unit. In connection with the attitude surveys, the sub-unit/unit can request consultant service from the Faculty of Leadership and Psychology in order to fully interpret the results, as well as to gain support for implementation of activities within possible problem areas. The rules regarding attitude surveys in other units call for surveys being conducted every third year as a minimum. Surveys among the civilian personnel are not obligatory, but can be done at the request of the local co-committee.

The Attitude Survey System today

A current appraisal of the system shows that surveys are primarily being carried out in the conscripted units of the army, while the distribution of surveys in the two other services is very limited, as is the distribution among parent units in all three services.

Thus, it can be concluded that while the rules concerning attitude surveys call for a survey frequency of minimum three years in all Defence military units, this has not been the case in large parts of the Defence. This is partly due to the fact, that IMP stopped sending a reminder in the form of a survey initiating letter to most units except the conscript units of the army and a few other units. Very little parent units of the Army, the Navy and the Air Force do surveys. These few surveys are done ad hoc, when a unit commander requests a survey, for instance in connection with an acute need. Deployed forces have at no time done any surveys.

The development of a new system for surveying the working climate

Taking as a starting point the limited use of the system and the major changes in society in general as well as in the Armed Forces since the beginning of the 1970s, the Defence Command has formulated a need for a new work climate survey system in the Danish Armed Forces. A system that reflects the Armed Forces of today as a workplace, and which builds on the development which has happened in general within the field of working environment and work climate surveys during the last 30 years.

The articulated purpose of a new system is that it should further the development of a good work climate for the employees through a systematic elucidation of important focus areas within job satisfaction, management and co-operation. This purpose does

¹ In 1975, a specific survey was started of the will to defence of the population as a whole to ascertain whether conscripts were representative of young men in general. These surveys are still being made.

not differ in any degree from the purpose envisaged at the beginning for the development of the attitude survey system.

The focus is on developing a system which can use the survey results as a means of indicating possibilities of progress within the above-mentioned areas. At the same time, the aim is to establish a connection between the personnel policy formulated by the Defence and the targeted areas of survey. Furthermore, there is still no wish for the system to function as a fault-finding mechanism.

When it comes to the propagation of the new system, it is the aim that it will be used in all Defence units:

- In relation to the civilian as well as the military personnel
- In all three services
- Within both schools, staffs, training units, and standing as well as deployed forces.

Prior to the development of the new system, the Institute of Military Psychology has initiated an exploratory study in a number of different units covering the three services, as well as schools, staffs, training units, standing forces, among civilian as well as military personnel to reveal needs and wishes concerning the new work climate survey tool. Attitudes towards and experiences with the former system will enter into the study. By seeking explanations for the limited use of the present system in many of the units, it is the goal to pinpoint possible barriers to a successful implementation of the new system.

The goal is to posit the collected knowledge about the needs of the Defence units against the knowledge about work climate surveys which has been the result of the last 30 years' research within the field.

The study includes 30 qualitative interviews among a broad spectrum of commanders at unit and sub-unit level. The interviewed persons fall within two categories: those who have used the attitude survey system within the last three years, and those who have not. The last group consists of commanders from units where surveys are not traditionally done. It has turned out that some of these are unaware of the existence of the attitude survey system, while others have consciously chosen not to use it.

The aim has been the greatest possible dispersion as regards both unit size and type, geographic location, age of persons interviewed etc. This is first and foremost for professional reasons, but also with regard to the political signal accruing from future users of the system being heard as regards their wishes and attitudes. When the system is implemented later, this might have some influence on its reception.

Furthermore, the study includes a quantitative survey among appr. 100 current and coming unit commanders, as well as a quantitative survey of experiences with the attitude survey system among privates.

The preliminary results of the study point to a series of questions and dilemmas which call for an answer:

- 1) Several commanders express a positive attitude towards full openness as regards the survey results, but at the same time they fear that negative results

of a survey may have a negative influence on their career possibilities. How to solve this dilemma?

- 2) There is a general agreement, that there is an absolute necessity of following up the results of the survey. How to ensure this?
- 3) How to counter a falling commitment over time, as is often the case in such systems?
- 4) Is it possible to develop a basic questionnaire, (possibly with an additional part) which can be used in all units, or should wholly differentiated systems be developed? (For instance conscript units, deployed forces, schools, civilians etc.)
- 5) Does inclusion of a new type of work climate survey questions regarding stress symptoms go hand in hand with the military culture?

It has seemed desirable to gather experience as regards work climate surveys over as wide a front as possible, and so a series of interviews have been done with larger Danish businesses with experience in this area.

The same goes for gathering experience from military organizations in other countries, which is why some of you may have received our request for information. We have received many replies which have inspired us greatly, and for which we want to thank you.