Office of Strategic Consulting
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON

Assessment of Employees' Feelings on Psychological Safety – School of Pharmacy

Summary Report and Recommendations

Prepared by: Deb Gurke, Internal Consultant

Date: November11, 2022

Introduction

Leadership in the School of Pharmacy originally contracted with the Office of Strategic Consulting in the spring of 2022 to conduct a follow-up climate and culture survey to the one completed in 2019. However, because two campus-wide surveys were already being conducted during this same period (the Women in Science & Engineering Leadership Institute [WISELI]) survey for faculty and the all-staff survey), the decision was made to hold off on the school survey temporarily. Instead, the school decided to use focus groups, interviews, and a different short survey to assess concerns specifically about psychological safety (several issues related to psychological safety had been identified in the 2019 survey, and anecdotal data indicated that the problem had not yet been resolved). For the assessment, psychological safety was defined as follows:

> *"When people on a team possess psychological safety, they feel able to ask for help, admit mistakes, raise concerns, suggest ideas, and challenge ways of working and the ideas of others on the team, including the ideas of those in authority. Via this honesty and openness, risks are reduced, new ideas are generated, the team is able to execute on those ideas and everyone feels included."*

This report provides a summary of the methodologies used to conduct the assessment, the findings from the assessment, and recommendations for improvements, as well as a rationale for change. It also includes background information on the current financial and competitive position of the school.

Background

Due to declining interest in the pharmacy profession and an increase in pharmacy schools, schools of pharmacy started to see their applicant numbers decrease around 2015. The UW–Madison School of Pharmacy has experienced an 18% drop in enrollment in its Doctor of Pharmacy (PharmD) program since 2019. Enrollment numbers are not projected to increase any time soon. The decline in enrollment in the PharmD program has resulted in budget reductions of over $1 million. Future reductions are expected if the school continues to recruit and retain class sizes of no more than 100 students.

To offset some of this enrollment decline, the school launched two new master's-level programs, one for applied drug development and the other for psychoactive pharmaceutical investigation. These programs have proven to be very popular, and both have doubled the number of students enrolled and credits taken over the past year. In fiscal year (FY) 2023, the school is projected to have 100 students in each program, for a total of 1,892 credits.

Amid these large-scale changes, the school has been working to improve its climate and culture. The 2018 climate survey findings pointed to concerns about psychological safety. When asked about the overall atmosphere within the school, employees reported that they:

- Considered leaving due to atmosphere (28%).
- Heard insulting or offensive comments (29%).
- Felt a lack of belonging/inclusion (30%).
- Witnessed or experienced discrimination (34%).
- Had the reluctance to voice their concerns (49%)—with 26% indicating that they did not know where to go for help.

In response, the school included a strategic direction related to climate and culture in its strategic plan, which is to foster an inclusive community focused on inquiry, respect, diversity, and dedication to talent development. In addition, the school has an Inclusive Excellence Initiative that builds on the strategic plan and includes actions related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), as well as climate and culture--though most of these actions are focused on students.

This focus on students seems to be having an impact, as the school has made some improvement with this group in terms of their feelings about the school's climate and culture and their understanding of how to address any concerns they may have. For example, when students were asked about how to use school policies to deal with harassment and discrimination, the percentage of those who understood the policies improved from 83.8% in 2019 to 95.8% in 2022. From 2019 to 2022, there was also an improvement in the number of students who reported feeling welcome (from 82.3% to 95.8%).

While the school had more recent feedback indicating how students were feeling, they were interested in finding out how faculty and staff were feeling—specifically about psychological safety, due to the issues raised in the 2018 survey.

Methodologies

The consultant met with members of the school's Dean's Advisory Council (DAC), Committee on Academic Staff Issues (CASI), and DEI Committee to discuss the change from the original plan of conducting another climate survey to the new plan of conducting focus groups, interviews, and a short survey on psychological safety. The committees were also able to provide input into the process and questions that would be used for these activities.

Because the focus of this assessment was on psychological safety, a traditional focus group approach was not likely to be successful, as people were unlikely to talk honestly in front of

others. To address this concern, faculty and staff were offered four options for participating:

1. Attend a focus group (there was one held for faculty, two for staff, and one as an open session).
2. Organize your own small group and schedule a group interview.
3. Schedule an individual interview.
4. Complete a Qualtrics survey (which contained the same questions as used in the other options).

Faculty and staff were instructed to contact the consultant to schedule individual and small group interviews (options 3 and 2, respectively). The survey was disseminated after all scheduled focus groups and interviews and was open for two weeks.

Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, and to maintain confidentiality, the summary findings in the next section do not identify any individuals, include any quotes or specific comments, or include a breakdown by employment category (although participants were asked about their role in the school).

The definition of psychological safety was shared in the email inviting participation and was repeated in each focus group, small group interview, and individual interview, as well as in the survey. The same questions were used for all these activities and are included in the Appendix.

Summary of Findings

Forty-four employees participated in the focus groups, interviews, and survey—for a response rate of 22.6%. Participants came from across the school and included both tenured and non-tenured faculty, academic staff, senior leadership, supervisors, long-term employees, and newer staff. While post-doctoral staff were invited to participate, it is not known if any of them did so. Although all focus group, interview, and survey participants were asked about their roles, none identified themselves as post-doctoral staff. However, not all survey participants responded to that question (69.9% either chose "I prefer not to answer" or did not complete the question). So some post-doctoral staff may be represented in the results.

When asked about what the school does well, most respondents indicated that they like the all-staff meetings, retreats, and other social events. Many respondents said they like their co-workers and expressed positive comments about their supervisors. Several indicated that they see the school moving in a positive direction.

Regarding areas of concern, themes emerged in four key areas:

- Leadership
- Transparency

- Confidentiality
- Communication

Leadership

Leadership is a key component in creating a positive climate and culture. The tone and expectations of an organization are established by its leaders.

According to feedback provided in the interviews, focus groups, and survey, in the School of Pharmacy, leadership is perceived as inconsistent at best. While many respondents expressed positive sentiments about their own supervisor, they had concerns about other supervisors, as well as about senior leadership. They expressed not feeling that concerns are taken seriously, that there is inconsistency in how concerns are addressed, and that there is often retaliation for raising concerns. Of the 44 responses to the question about retaliation, only one respondent said they had no concerns about this issue. A small number of respondents indicated that they had not personally experienced retaliation but that they heard stories about it. Across both faculty and staff respondents, concerns were raised about retaliation related to power differentials, employment, and work processes.

Strong leaders model the behaviors they want to see in their organization. Some comments by respondents pointed to leaders not modeling positive behaviors or not always taking staff concerns seriously. Others expressed the perception that policies and processes are inconsistently administered. Lastly, some comments conveyed that leadership does not always behave professionally.

It is the responsibility of the School of Pharmacy leadership to address the climate and culture issues raised in the 2018 climate survey and in this more recent assessment on psychological safety. More importantly, faculty and staff expect the school's leadership to address these issues, even if the leaders themselves are not the main source of the concerns.

Transparency

In addition to concerns about leadership, many respondents also raised concerns about a lack of transparency. Not understanding how, why and by whom decisions are made creates confusion and frustration among faculty and staff. They start to see inconsistencies in the way policies and procedures are administered—leading to a sense of unfairness. They can feel undervalued because they do not see their perspectives reflected in decisions. Stress levels increase because they do not know how they are going to be treated from one time to the next. When leadership does address issues that have been raised but does not widely

share what they have done to address them (or that they have addressed them at all), it leads to a perception that nothing is being done.

Confidentiality

Respondents also expressed concern about confidentiality. They shared experiences of bringing issues to school leadership or Human Resources and then hearing their issues repeated through the grapevine. While there may be a need to share information conveyed in confidence so an issue can be addressed, the individual bringing the issue forward should be made aware if the information will be shared so they do not have an unrealistic expectation of confidentiality.

When people do not have confidence that the information they share will remain confidential, trust is eroded and they are reluctant to share such information in the future. Concerns go underground, sometimes resulting in general dissatisfaction and grumbling in the grapevine—and at times leading to serious consequences such as high turnover and complaints of hostile and intimidating behavior.

Communication

Lastly, communication between divisions is another concern that was raised by respondents. Comments indicated that there is a perception that supervisors are reluctant to bring issues to other leaders when there is a problem across divisions. Respondents also expressed feeling that there is no recourse when an issue emerges, especially when the issue includes another division. Rather than being discussed, problems fester and gossip ensues. In other words, people talk **about** each other rather than **to** each other.

Why Change?

Every system is perfectly designed to yield the results it gets. Taking a business-as-usual approach to the school's current climate and culture will not lead to the kind of transformation that is needed to address the school's challenges. Three of the issues (transparency, confidentiality, and communication) identified in the finds point to a need to develop processes that could address the concerns raised by the School of Pharmacy employees. Without clear processes, people are left guessing about what to do. In addition, there are other external stressors the school is facing, further illustrating a need for changing the way leadership, faculty, and staff works together:

- Enrollment has dropped and budgets are strained.
- The external environment is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous.
- Faculty and staff are recovering from more than two years of the pandemic.

- Younger members of the school, whether students, faculty, or staff, have different expectations than more senior members.
- Remote work is changing the expectations and communication needs of the workforce and the relationships between people.

We talk about changing organizations, and at the heart of that, we are asking people to change the way they do things.[1] When change initiatives are rolled out (e.g., implementing a new strategic plan), they tend to focus on the actions to take and do not consider the internal shifts individuals need to make to take those actions. Paying attention to change management principles and processes can help employees make the internal shifts that are needed for the work to be successful. People need to let go of the old ways, work through the middle where everything is in flux and confusing, and then grasp the new beginning. It is the psychological shift people need to make to take on new responsibilities and tasks that are key to the successful implementation of change.[2]

Recommendations

The following recommendations focus on people, especially leaders, reflecting on how they work in the organization—as individuals and in teams.

Focus on Leadership

While some of the concerns raised by employees can be addressed by creating clear processes, central to the system is the leadership. Without changes at the top, it is highly unlikely that the climate and culture will change. The first and most important recommendation is that members of the school's leadership team reflect on their behaviors and make changes to the way they lead. There is work to be done as a leadership team, as well as individually, to reflect on what leadership means and what leadership values the school wants to embody.

The consultant recommends that the school's senior leadership, CASI leadership, and DEI leadership spend time together developing the values they want to see in the behaviors of the school's leaders, faculty, staff, and students. Research indicates that teams that write down their expectations of each other are more productive and efficient.[3]

---

[1] Jeffrey M. Hiatt and Timothy J. Creasey, *Change Management: The People Side of Change* (Fort Collins, CO: Prosci, Inc., 2012).
[2] William Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capa Press, 1991).
[3] CRR Global, 2011, "Fundamentals of Organization and Relationship Systems Coaching."

The leadership is encouraged to specifically develop values that address the concerns related to transparency, confidentiality, and communication. In addition to defining these values, they should include examples of the behaviors that bring these values to life. For example, in addition to developing a definition of transparency, include examples of behaviors that embody that value (such as "When decisions are made that affect people school-wide, both the decisions and the rationale for them are communicated broadly").

The consultant also recommends that collectively the school's leadership:

- Communicate the process for how decisions are made, including the process for how remote work agreements are negotiated.
- Share information on how the school is doing related to enrollment and budget and what's important about this information.
- Ask faculty and staff where a lack of transparency is causing problems and address these issues.

Individually, senior leaders are encouraged to reflect on and document the desired norms and behaviors of their teams and refer to this documentation to evaluate the behaviors within their teams over time. They may also want to assess their own leadership competencies relative to the UW–Madison Leadership Framework to identify potential growth areas. (The framework recently underwent a review and now includes a DEI lens through which leadership can be assessed.) They can then pursue relevant professional development opportunities, such as leadership coaching (which the Office of Strategic Consulting offers) or any of the programs, academic courses, trainings, and workshops offered through Leadership @UW.

To reinforce and build on the values developed by the leadership team, individual teams can create their own norms that work within these values, and CASI, the DEI Committee, and other standing committees can create their own working agreements.

Lastly, it's important to remember that anyone in the organization can be a leader. There are positions of formal authority and supervisory roles, as well as informal opportunities for faculty and staff to exercise leadership. The consultant recommends that the School of Pharmacy leadership team encourage and empower all faculty and staff to take on a leadership role and provide opportunities for them to develop the skills necessary to support them in that role.

Promote Ongoing Professional Development

Beyond the focus on leadership, the consultant recommends promoting ongoing professional development for all staff, particularly in areas that strengthen knowledge and skills related to DEI, team dynamics, effective communication, leadership (broadly), etc. The following list provides some examples of activities that faculty and staff can choose from to

improve their knowledge and skills. To the extent possible, it is recommended that when planning any of these activities, invitations be extended widely across the school, so people can learn about others in the school beyond their own division.

Opportunities for Professional Development

Some choices include:

- **Training on the Leadership@UW Framework.** The Office of Human Resources can lead a workshop with supervisors and managers to develop their leadership skills using this framework.
- **Leadership Coaching.** The Office of Strategic Consulting offers leadership coaching as an effective and meaningful way for leaders across campus to grow and develop. A leadership coach is a confidential resource who helps you identify goals and create action steps that will take you from where you are to where you want to be.

- **Learning and Talent Development Course Offerings.** Learning and Talent Development in OHR offers an array of courses, both in person and online, that address some of the topics raised in this report. These trainings can be taken individually by members of the School of Pharmacy, or if you have a group of 15 or more for a course, OHR can arrange to conduct the course just for the School of Pharmacy. There is no charge for these courses.

Additional Suggestions from Focus Group, Interview, and Survey Respondents

Participants in the focus groups, interviews, and survey were all asked what could be done to address concerns about psychological safety. Their suggestions are included below as additional recommendations for consideration by the school's leadership:

- Continue the all-staff meetings, retreats, and social events.
- Add additional social connection events.
- Use 360 reviews.
- Initiate training on how to address interpersonal issues and how to use feedback.
- Continue the use of regular surveys.
- Use CASI more effectively to address this issue.
- Improve supervisor practices.
- Emphasize more open communication.

Conclusion

It takes time for an organization to improve its climate and culture. The School of Pharmacy is moving in the right direction, yet more work needs to be done. It will take a focused, intentional effort to address the concerns raised in this assessment. The recommendations in this report focus on strengthening the school's leadership—which will help improve communication and relationships—and on promoting ongoing professional development for leaders, faculty, and staff alike.

> *"Culture affects every member of the organization and should be owned by all members. It truly is co-created through dialogue."*
> *-- Deri Latimer, TEDx Speaker, Author and Organizational Consultant*

-

Appendix: Focus Group, Interview, and Survey Questions

Note: The same questions were used for all activities.

1. What do you think the school does well regarding engendering a sense of psychological safety?

2. How would you describe your interactions with your co-workers?

3. How would you describe your interactions with your immediate supervisor?

4. How would you describe your interactions with the person you report to directly?

5. Share a time that you wanted to voice a concern about the behavior of a colleague or co-worker.

6. There seems to be a perception in the school that there will be retaliation if concerns are raised. Where do you think these perceptions come from? Can you share examples?

7. How would you describe the way you perceive your supervisor's response to your ideas, contributions and concerns?

8. What actions do you think the school needs to take to address your concerns with psychological safety?

9. Is there anything not asked that you want me to know?