

**REPORT**

**Focus Group  
2009 OIG Survey  
Open, Collaborative Working Environment**

- Encompassing:
- I. The Open Door Policy
  - II. NRC Non-Concurrence Process
  - III. The NRC Differing Professional Opinions Program
  - IV. Ask Management

By:

(b)(6)

Administrative Officer (Team Lead)  
Division of Resource Management and Administration

**Focus Group Members:**

(b)(6)

*C-15*

**2009-2010**

**U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission • Region IV**  
612 E. Lamar Boulevard, Suite 400 • Arlington, TX 76011 • 817-860-8085

Release

## Open, Collaborative Working Environment

During the spring of 2010, the NRC Region IV Office conducted a series of focus groups with Region IV staff. The purpose of the focus groups was to gain a better understanding of the results of the OIG safety culture survey that was administered in the spring of 2009. The specific area of focus of this report is the open, collaborative working environment which is supported by the Open Door Policy, Non-Concurrence Process and the Differing Professional Opinion process.

Each focus group followed a similar format. The participants responded to a series of questions related to their knowledge, experiences, and perceptions of the open, collaborative working environment. The questions are provided in (Appendix A). Approximately 55 participants representing all of Region IV Divisions brought to the focus group discussion a broad range of backgrounds and experiences. In this report, all references to individuals and divisions have been deleted in order to protect the identity of the participants.

The discussions revealed many similar experiences and perceptions among the focus group participants of the open, collaborative work environment process. In some instances, staff members praised individual managers, divisions and the Regional office as a whole; more frequently, however, the participants pointed toward some organizational issues rooted in some upper management. The focus of discussions maintained a broad view of the management team, although, at times, issues applied to one or two specific managers. While each topic of discussion, as listed above, were covered individually, the experiences, feelings and perceptions were very similar for all three policies/processes.

Each focus group also included a discussion about the Ask Management feature on the Region IV webpage. The focus group discussions centered on awareness, experiences, and satisfaction with the process and answers provided. Several insights, concerns and suggestions for improvement were explored and will be discussed in more detail in the Ask Management section of this report.

The NRC defines its approach to an open, collaborative work environment with the following:

"The NRC strives to establish and maintain an open, collaborative working environment that encourages all employees and contractors to promptly voice differing views without fear of retaliation. At the NRC, we encourage trust, respect, and open communication to foster and promote a positive work environment that maximizes the potential of all individuals and improves our regulatory decision-making."

The following summary of the Focus Group findings is based upon nine recurring questions presented during Focus Group Discussion which are found in (Appendix A). The summary also incorporates 5 recurring themes: (1) Trust/Retaliation, (2) Implementation, (3) Management Skills, (4) Survey Impact, and (5) Ask Management.

Part One of this Reports summarizes each theme and offers recommendations of what management can do to improve the level of satisfaction and achievement for non-management personnel. Part Two provides extensive quotations and paraphrases from individual participant responses, meant to illustrate and support the themes.

Release

Release

## PART ONE

### RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **(1) Open Door Policy, Non-Concurrence, and Differing Professional Opinion policies/processes.**

In general, the participants of the focus groups felt the Open Door Policy, Non-Concurrence Process, and Differing Professional Opinion process were good processes/policies and most, though not all, were at least aware of the policies and their intent. Those not fully aware of policies and intent of the policies appeared to be mostly administrative staff. Contrary to the stated NRC vision of encouraging trust, respect and open communication, experiences and perceptions provided by the focus groups revealed that this vision is not being fully met.

- (a) In terms of **trust and retaliation**, the participants in this study stressed the importance of management—
- Respecting confidentiality of employee's when requested as required in MD 10.160
  - Preserving the privacy of the employee's concern
  - Being approachable to the staff and listen to their views and concerns
  - Objectively consider different views and alternative approaches
  - Process an understanding of the intent of the policies
- (b) In terms of **Implementation**, the participants in this study stressed the importance of management—
- Taking prompt committed actions on an issue when identified
  - Actively engage in honest evaluation of all sides of an issue
  - Be willing to "go to bat" for staff members
  - Maintaining respect and privacy for the concerned staff member
- (c) In terms of **Management Skills**, the participants in this study stressed the importance of management—
- Having or developing strong interpersonal skills
  - Communicating effectively in person, writing and email
  - Truly champion the use of the Open Door, Non-Concurrence and Differing Professional Opinion processes
  - Respect the idea of preserving privacy about employees' concerns
- (d) In terms of **Who the policies are open to**, some participants in this study—
- Were not aware that they could use the policies.
- (e) In terms of **Who the employees perceive as the Regions' Management and Senior Management**, participants in this study —
- Most participants had different opinions on how these terms were used in the survey.

Release

Release

**(2) Survey Impact.** The safety and climate survey was conducted in order to measure NRC's safety culture and climate to identify areas of strength and opportunities for improvement. The identified areas of improvement were further studied via focus groups to improve understanding of open, collaborative working environment and determine if the staff is comfortable with the process.

In terms of the survey's impact, the participants of this study stressed the importance of management—

- Not only taking a critical look at the programs and policies in place, but also taking a critical look at themselves for opportunity for improvement
- Providing feedback to the staff on the results of the focus groups and corrective actions being put in place
- Recognize when other managers are consistently having personnel issues and take corrective actions (i.e. coaching or removal from management position)
- Not sending constant reminders to complete the survey
- Not pressuring the staff to complete the survey

**(3) Knowledge needed by some staff to use the policy/Changes needed.** While most technical staff were well versed with policies for Open Door Policy, Non-Concurrence Process, and Differing Professional Opinion, many administrative participants in the study were not. Several employees would not use the process because it's not properly implemented and feared retaliation.

In terms of the knowledge needed to use the policies, the participants of this study stressed the importance of management —

- Correctly implement the policies
- Post results of the DPO and Non-Concurrence process
- Ensuring that all staff is aware of the Open Door Policy, Non-Concurrence Process, and Differing Opinion

Release

Release

## PART TWO

### SUMMARY OF FOCUS GROUP MEMBERS' RESPONSES

#### (1) Trust/Retaliation

Trust is the basis for almost all relationships in life. When trust is absent, it is impossible to create a healthy and productive work environment.

##### Open Door Policy

During the focus group discussions concerning the Open Door Policy, participants shared multiple occurrences in which retaliation was felt or trust was violated. For example, several experiences were shared in which a manager was approached via the Open Door Policy due to issues with the participants' immediate supervisor. In all shared experiences, the immediate supervisor was advised of the meeting and promptly confronted the staff member. The prompt confrontational response by the immediate supervisor suggests that not only did the manager share the fact that issues had been raised about the immediate supervisor but also identified the person(s) who raised them. According to the differing views program, the success of the Open Door Policy relies heavily on trust and once a manager has "opened the door" to an employee, they should "close the door" and preserve privacy. Whether intentional or unintentional, this program expectation was not met in the multiple instances shared by focus group participants.

##### Non-Concurrence

During the focus group discussions concerning the Non-Concurrence process, participants revealed that the use of the process is non-existent. Several participants observed that "zero reports have gone out with non-concurrence". Furthermore, many participants shared the belief that an unspoken understanding exists in which "You will concur." Specifically, one individual stated, "the unwritten policy... is you will not -- not concur."

##### Differing Professional Opinion

During the focus group discussions pertaining to the Differing Professional Opinion process, participants expressed a reluctance to use the DPO process unless the issue in question was substantially significant. The general feeling of some was that if the DPO were used, the end result would carry negative consequences especially if the DPO effort was unsuccessful. For example, one participant stated, "I'll never do it, it's a black mark if I am not successful," and "If I made everyone work and don't win, I will see repercussions." Other participants expressed concerns with being new to the agency. They felt that due to their lack of experience with the NRC, "unintended backlash" could occur. One of the participants shared that they were aware of six or seven individuals that were involved in a DPO six or seven years ago, since that time only one of those individuals have been promoted. The participant admitted that there could be many reasons for the others not getting promoted, but since their involvement in the DPO is a common denominator, the perception is careers have stalled due to the use of the DPO.

#### (2) Implementation

The key to a successful policy or program is two-fold. First, the staff must be well-informed of the programs and be able and willing to use the programs when appropriate. Secondly, and more importantly, the management team must be successful in implementing the programs fully

Release  
-4-

Release

and correctly once the process has been initiated by the staff. During the focusing group discussions concerning the Open Door Policy, Non-concurrence, and Differing Professional Opinion, a common theme was identified for these programs/policies in which the management teams' implementation of the programs failed to meet the intent of the programs.

### **Open Door Policy**

During the focus group discussions concerning the Open Door Policy, participants expressed the viewpoint that a manager's poor implementation or lack of implementation of the Open Door Policy was a reason for the policy to not be initiated by the staff. Specifically there were concerns that "management may not act on an issue" and "management may not go out on a limb due to own career concerns." The focus group participants also shared the perception that not all managers really support the Open Door Policy. For example, one participant said that "managers mention the Open Door Policy to check off a list" and they "haven't seen a Division level manager or higher walking around encouraging the use of the Open Door Policy." Some administrative participants felt that the technical staff by-passed them and go to the front office on matters that can be resolved at the lowest level. This process causes reactions from all levels of management and thus brow-beating occurs. Some also thought that the tone of the Region encourages misuse of staff. For example, some administrative staff carries the burden if an error is found in a report that was reviewed by several levels of management.

### **Non-Concurrence**

During the focus group discussions pertaining to the Non-Concurrence process, participants revealed that not only is the process not implemented, but its use was in fact discouraged. Several participants observed that "zero reports have gone out with non-concurrence." Moreover, many participants shared the belief that an unspoken understanding exists in which "You will concur." Specifically, one individual stated, "the unwritten policy... is you will not -- not concur." During the discussions, a participant shared that the non-concurrence process has been used as leverage to get management's attention. The specific instanced described a scenario in which a document was going through concurrence even though a contributing staff member had a differing view on certain aspects of the document. The staff members concerns were ignored until the threat of using the non-concurrence process was presented. At that point, management then worked to reconcile the differences.

### **Differing Professional Opinion**

During the focus group discussions concerning the Differing Professional Opinion process, participants expressed concerns of negative consequences from being involved in a DPO, especially if the DPO Process is not successful. The focus group later stated that part of those concerns extends from the fact that occurrences and results of DPOs are not well publicized in the Region. One participant stated "I know of two instances of DPO within 20 plus years." The focus group indicated that more visible posting of DPOs and more importantly the results of the DPO whether successful or non successful may ease some of the concern about using the process.

### **(3) Management Skills**

During the focus group discussions concerning an open collaborative working environment, many participants shared the view that the region has programmatic problems that can be contributed to one or two problem managers. The focus groups recognize that becoming a

Release  
-5-

Release

successful manager is not an easy task. However, when a repressive management style exists, the issue should be addressed. Since many focus group participants expressed having similar problems with the same manager(s), the perception has developed that other members of the management team are either unaware of the issues and therefore do nothing or they are aware and choose to do nothing. Other staff participating in the focus group felt that a different set of rules applies to upper management than the rest of the staff. One individual shared an example involving the behavior of a manager at a facility. They concluded by saying, "If I would have done that, I would have been fired."

The focus groups also recognized that individuals are often promoted based on technical competency. However, once individuals reach the management level, interpersonal relationship competency becomes as important, if not more important, than technical abilities. To that end, several participants felt that the process for selecting managers, including SES managers, should re-evaluated. Additional emphasis should be placed on interpersonal, behavior, and leadership skills during the selection process. Managers who don't meet expectations need to be brought up to standards and/or moved to a different position.

#### (4) Survey Impact

During the focus group concerning the 2009 OIG safety culture and climate survey, participants felt that the survey will have little or no impact on changing the culture. Some participants felt the survey was Headquarters biased and was "limited in response options." As such, the results may present a positive when the situation is negative. Others described the survey as being too vague and designed to deflect the responsibility of having a poor open collaborative work environment away from management and onto either the policies or the staff. The focus group participants also expressed discomfort with the idea of having members of management lead the focus groups. Some participants felt that with management involved, results could be steered.

Regarding the terms "Senior Management", most participants had different opinions of what that meant. Region management is non bargaining unit and Senior Management is SES Management. Given this misconceptions, the survey should be written to clearly articulate who is being addressed in the question. This will allow staff to clearly identify who the question is addressing. In example, first line supervisor, second line supervisor, senior management, regional administrator and etc.

#### (5) Ask Management

During the focus group discussions concerning Ask Management, participants voiced concerns over confidentiality since one would be logged in under their username while using the feature.

Focus group participants fell into one of two categories. **Category 1** includes those who were not aware of Ask Management and/or did not know how to access it. Ask Management is accessed via the RIV webpage. Several focus group participants said that they never visit the RIV webpage and have never seen the Ask Management feature. Others shared that even when they did visit the RIV webpage, they either did not see the Ask Management link or did not know what it was. **Category 2** includes individuals who have visited the Ask Management page and/or have used it to ask a question. The general consensus among the participants in Category 2 was that the answers were vague and very "cookie cutter", i.e. copy-and-paste from a policy guide, or did not really answer the question at all. Others felt that great effort is expended to make the answers "politically correct" and "appease everyone" versus being

Release -6-

Release

honest and to the point. Other participants expressed concerns of whether or not "management" is actually answering the questions. One individual shared that they were contacted for information to help answer a question from Ask Management. After the information was provided, that individual was instructed to rewrite the information in a form that "looked like it came from management." Recommendations include a desire to have a rating system so the answers can be rated and an email being sent when Ask Management is updated. The email should list the questions that were added. Another suggestion was to make the feature more personable by sending the response to the person who asked, if they provided their name, and soliciting feedback on the quality of the answer before it gets posted on the webpage.

### Conclusion

The Open, Collaborative Working Environment in Region IV is not meeting the intended vision and corrective action is essential in addressing issues identified in this report. This report suggests that many employees do not feel comfortable with the process and feel that it's not meeting its intended purpose. Therefore, the Region IV Office should consider invoking change starting with expectations from the front office to those charged with carrying out the vision of Open, Collaborative Working Environment in Region IV. Specifically, there needs to be clear expectations on implementation of the Open Door Policy, Non-Concurrence Process and the Differing Professional Opinion process. This report also suggests that some interpersonal skill training is needed by a few managers. Ask Management needs to be reviewed for effectiveness and recommendations for improvements identified in this report considered. Moreover, the NRC as an agency should consider revising its survey questions to address staff concerns. Many believe the survey was written to achieve favorable responses. Finally, it is strongly encouraged that continuous feedback be provided to staff on how the results of this focus group are being addressed.

Release

Release

**APPENDIX A**

**I. Open Door Policy**

**Main Question:**

1. Think about the NRC's Open Door Policy, what comes to mind?

**Follow-Up Question:**

2. What causes you to feel the way you do?

**Probing Questions:**

3. Who do you think the NRC's Open Door Policy is Open to?
4. Who do you perceive as the Region's Management and Senior Management?
5. Do you think the Survey helps change the Culture?
6. What was going on at the time you answered the Survey? Did it impact your response?
7. What do you need to know about this process in order to use it?

**Prompting Question**

8. If you could change one thing about the policy, what would you change, and what's the main reason that one thing needs changing?

Release

II. NRC Non-Concurrence Process

Release

**Main Question:**

1. Think about NRC's Non-Concurrence Process, what comes to mind?

**Follow-Up Question:**

2. What causes you to feel the way you do?

**Probing Questions:**

3. Who do you think the NRC's Non-Concurrence Process is Open to?
4. Who do you perceive as the Region's Management and Senior Management? (If same group of people participating, you don't need to ask this question again.)
5. What was going on at the time you answered the Survey regarding this process? Did it impact any of your responses? (If same group of people participating, you don't need to ask this question again.)
6. What do you need to know about this process in order to use it?

**Prompting Question:**

7. If you could change one thing about the NRC's Non-Concurrence Process, what would you change and what's the main reason that one thing needs changing?

Release

### III. Differing Professional Opinions Policy (DPO)

#### **Main Question:**

1. Think about NRC's Differing Professional Opinions Policy, what comes to mind?

#### **Follow-Up Question:**

1. What causes you to feel the way you do?

#### **Probing Questions:**

1. Who do you think the Differing Professional Opinion Program is Open to?
2. Who do you perceive as the Region's Management and Senior Management? (If same group of people participating, you don't need to ask this question again.)
3. What was going on at the time you answered the Survey? Did it impact your responses? (If same group of people participating, you don't need to ask this question again.)
4. Do you think the Survey help change the Culture? (If same group of people participating, you don't need to ask this question again.)
5. What do you need to know about this process in order to use it?

#### **Prompting Question:**

1. If you could change one thing about the NRC's Differing Professional Opinion Policy, what would you change and what's the main reason that one thing needs to be changing?

**IV. Ask Management**

Release

**Main Question:**

1. Think about Region IV's Ask Management, what comes to mind?

**Follow-Up Question:**

1. What causes you to feel the way you do?

**Probing Questions:**

1. Have you had a desire to use Ask Management?
2. Do you feel Ask Management questions are adequately answered?

**Prompting Question:**

1. If you could change anything about Region's IV Ask Management, what would you change and what's the main reason for the change?

Be good