



The Precision Leadership[®] Survey: Not just Another Yardstick for M&T Bank

By Gail Snyder

Eighteen years ago, M&T Bank began a relationship with Aubrey Daniels International (ADI) when it set out to improve how performance was managed at the Bank. A baseline employee commitment survey in 2001 showed that employees believed that in general the Bank didn't do a great job managing performance—both constructively addressing poor performance and differentially treating exceptional performance.

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– David Uhl



A committee of senior leaders in the Bank was chartered to revise the annual appraisal form as a first step in the journey to better managing performance. In the end, they realized that it was less about the specific form or even the year-end review, and more about how performance was managed day-to-day, week-to-week, and month-to-month. As a result, a decision was made to have ADI consultants train more than 650 M&T managers in the first wave in ADI's Precision Leadership®. Throughout the relationship, ADI consultants and certified internal trainers have trained more than 3,300 leaders at M&T Bank.

About two years into the journey, the sponsoring senior leaders began to ask, “Where is the culture change?”



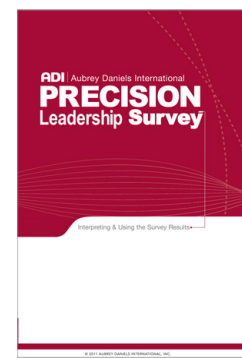
David Uhl, Senior Vice President at ADI, explained that it takes more than training to bring about sustained improvements in performance and culture. “During the two-day train-

ing they developed behavior action plans, but there was no feedback, no follow-up, and no accountability for applying what they learned once the people left the training,” he says.

It had been a deliberate decision by the Bank not to include surveys or follow-up coaching at the outset, as they believed the training alone with its focus on people management would likely feel counter-cultural. Once they saw that training alone would not meet their desire for sustained culture change, a decision was made to pilot ADI's **Precision Leadership® Survey (PLS)**—first by the senior leaders on the Performance Management Committee. After the pilot group's positive experience with getting pinpointed upward feedback, they decided to make the PLS available to the rest of the Bank.

Following the successful pilot, in the fall of 2004 the Retail Division rolled out the PLS to more than 690 managers across the Retail branch network. It also provided follow-up coaching support to all Retail Regional Managers (who managed Branch Managers) and those Senior Managers above them in the organizational chart. Early survey results showed an increase in regular coaching discussions between managers and their direct reports (many of whom also had supervisory responsibility). The PLS questions that showed the greatest improvement were in relation to dealing with monthly performance feedback and results review.

In 2005, M&T administered its third biennial Employee Commitment Survey. During the 2001 baseline, the Retail Division's results were right at the median for the entire Bank. By the





third and final cycle in 2005, the Retail Division now achieved the highest ranking division in Employee Commitment. The survey questions relating to coaching and effective supervision further positively differentiated Retail from the rest of the Bank.

For 2007, M&T had decided to use a different approach to assess its cultural progress. It began using the Gallup Organization's Q12 survey of Employee Engagement. Although analyses had shown a strong relationship between the earlier Employee Commitment Survey and ADI's PLS, leaders asked whether a similar correlation would emerge between the new Q12 and PLS. When baseline Q12 Engagement results were released, immediate correlation studies demonstrated a very strong positive correlation between those managers with strong PLS results and those with high Q12 Engagement scores.

Despite those strong correlations at an organizational level, Uhl cautioned against looking at individual manager's PLS results as an evaluation. *"It is really important that surveys be used as a learning tool, a developmental tool for improving relationships, and not just another yardstick,"* he says. *"If it ever becomes all about the numbers, then the*

numbers may improve but we may not be getting them through better leadership." After all, no matter how many surveys are done, if the feedback is not acted upon effectively, then what is the value of the survey?

With subsequent administrations of both ADI's PLS and the Q12 Engagement Survey beyond the Retail Division, stronger and stronger positive correlations have emerged. As leaders have focused on the behaviors consistent with Precision Leadership (examples include covering clear expectations, helpful positive and constructive feedback, and reinforcing incremental improvements) they have generated higher and higher Q12 Grand Mean scores. They have proven the hypothesis that *"good leadership will produce higher engagement."*

Nearly two decades later, M&T continues to use the PLS as a management development tool across the Bank. *"The Q12 is more focused on reporting outcomes whereas the PLS is more focused on leader behaviors,"* says Uhl. *"Over the years we have performed repeated regression analyses on the PLS and Q12 and found an incredibly strong positive correlation between our leadership survey and managers who drove up employee engagement, as measured by the Q12."*

Rich Gold, President and Chief Operating Officer at M&T, was part of the original senior leader group to evaluate appraisals and go through the training. Rich was a member of the pilot group in 2004 and remains a strong proponent of implementing the PLS on a consistent basis. In his areas of respon-



sibility (first in Retail and now as President and COO) ADI surveys have been administered every six months to all management levels. From the first surveys in Gold's organization, he has reinforced that the objective of the process was to learn to improve and strengthen relationships, and was not about "the number." He assured his managers that they must always use "the filter of judgment" when looking at perception feedback through an anonymous survey. Just because a manager might have received low numbers, or even harsh words in the comments, did not automatically mean they were doing the wrong things. Indeed, Gold may have given them a leadership assignment with the explicit expectation to hold people accountable when their previous manager had not.

Gold assured them, "This survey score is not going to be about any particular number that equates to your treatment at the end of the year. I just want you to learn from it and show accountability for one or two items you identify to improve upon following each survey." He has stuck by his word. The surveys, taken by every manager's direct reports, begin at the executive level, and Gold's direct reports complete surveys regarding his performance as well. Administered online, although paper administration is available, the survey takes only ten minutes to complete and includes three open-ended comment questions: What do you want your manager to Continue, Start, and Stop doing?

Written feedback on the continue, start, and stop questions are the comments that managers receive, describing what their direct reports want them to do more of, keep doing, or do less of. **That feedback is very valuable.** Leaders focus a lot on that information to provide more evidence of whether they're improving. "If we're showing an increasing score as an

organization, which we have survey after survey, Rich is very happy with that progress," says Erin Oliver, Assistant Vice President of the Mortgage and Consumer Lending Division.

Oliver, a business and planning analyst with multiple internal and external roles related to company engagement, Performance Management, and customer service, also has fine-tuned the Bank's survey process. "Communication is key," she explains. "Our senior management tells our employees that we take this seriously, so to please take the survey and give honest feedback. I've seen changes in my manager's behavior as a result of the feedback we've given him. **You have to keep building trust,**" she states.



With over 1,600 employees in the Mortgage and Consumer Lending Division alone, **clear instruction, assurance of confidentiality, and helpful feedback are crucial.** In conjunction with scheduled reminders sent by ADI throughout a survey's implementation, Oliver sends e-mails encouraging participation and feedback on percent

of participation, based on the regular progress updates she is provided by ADI's survey administrators. She encourages all managers to do the same. These combined efforts resulted in a remarkable **99 percent participation** on the most recent survey implementation.

"After we get the survey results from ADI, I send out another communication thanking all of the participants. Our scores always seem to go up, so I congratulate them and let them know how important their feedback is. They know their managers have the results and what to expect next, which is debriefs and action planning for the next six months," says Oliver.

The PLS serves as a tool for shaping the type of leadership that drives employee engagement. Each surveyed manager receives a debriefing regarding the feedback from their own manager. Then each surveyed manager discusses the results with their direct reports, decides on a course of action on one or two items, and works to improve those areas of performance over the next six months. **The survey scores never are used as punishment, but as valuable information for becoming better at one's job.**

"We define the PLS as a coaching tool, nothing more and nothing less," explains **Tyler Feola**, ADI's Director of Electronic Business Solutions. *"It's an efficient and effective way to get confidential feedback from direct reports that*

a manager typically would not have the opportunity to obtain otherwise." **That confidentiality is a sacred element of the surveys.**

The common experience is that, initially, survey participants may question that confidentiality and expect retribution for the comments and scores they provide. These concerns are sometimes reflected by tepid participation and guarded responses on the initial survey. However, as people experience that confidentiality is protected and that managers take the feedback seriously and act upon it, the survey feedback becomes more and more candid over time.

"In the beginning, the survey takers didn't really know that their managers were being held accountable for how they produce results. On the following survey, six months later, they realized the feedback was actually used constructively the last time, so this time they decided to be more forthright," Uhl says. This realization might result in a dip in question scores on the subsequent survey, but at M&T, that preliminary dip has been followed by ever-escalating survey results accompanied by rising employee engagement metrics. Survey trends also can highlight managers who could benefit from additional coaching and those who are doing so well that they might serve as mentors to struggling peers and/or new managers.



“Many companies implement surveys and provide the client with reports. Typically, there is a lack of professional interpretation of the feedback and skilled consultants to help them make sense of the data and change accordingly. Our behavioral expertise and follow-up consulting certainly set us apart from most organizations offering survey functionality,” says Feola. In contrast to organizations that offer only the “black box version”—administer the survey, compile the data, and report it back to the customer—**ADI offers expert debriefing, explaining the data in actionable terms to the recipients.**

In companies with large numbers of managers, ADI offers the option of training individuals within the organization to conduct the debriefs. They also provide coaching for creating action plans in keeping with the survey results. Feola points out that ADI can implement surveys without consulting follow-up, if preferred by the client. These surveys can be rebranded, if desired, and each client receives the same survey construction expertise, customer service, and flexibility as those surveys for clients that include consultation. However, the vast majority of clients, upon seeing the value that they can receive through expert

coaching/consultation, choose that option.

“Many organizations have a history of negative consequences with surveys or results and may try to stack-rank or compare their scores with other individuals and/or departments. That’s when I ask, ‘What did you learn from the survey and what are you working to improve upon?’ I want the leaders to be accountable and ask themselves, ‘What behaviors am I going to exhibit that will reflect that I really heard the feedback from my direct reports?’ With follow-up consulting, we’re able to make sure that the integrity of the process is maintained and we strive to remain highly responsive to client needs,” comments Uhl.

“I can always count on ADI to deliver my results to me by our deadline. They are great on follow-up and never complain about changes. They are Precision Leadership in action. It’s good to see that the company that promotes Precision Leadership also lives it. That helps us to believe and practice it even more here,” Oliver states.

At M&T and across other organizations, the **Precision Leadership Survey** has become a part of the culture and an integral component of management development. *“Year after year the data continue to show that managers who participate and excel in the Precision Leadership Survey are also the leaders who get the highest employee engagement results,”* Uhl says. *“Rich Gold and the people at M&T are convinced by the data and the impact to their culture, and are confident that if they practice Precision Leadership, employee engagement will most certainly follow.”*

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[About the Author]

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Gail Snyder is a staff writer for Aubrey Daniels International. For the past 27 years, she has worked with clients to share their stories of the impact the science of behavior has had on their people and their business. In addition, Gail was the editor of Performance Management Magazine from 1987 to 2004.

[About ADI]

Regardless of your industry or expertise, one thing remains constant: People power your business. Since 1978 Aubrey Daniels International (ADI) has been dedicated to accelerating the business and safety performance of companies worldwide by using positive, practical approaches grounded in the science of behavior and engineered to ensure long-term sustainability. ADI provides clients with the tools and methodologies to help move people toward positive, results-driven accomplishments. Our clients accelerate strategy execution while fostering employee engagement and positive accountability at all levels of their organization.

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