

Back to Campus Faculty Study

Actionable Summary

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NC STATE
UNIVERSITY

Poole College of
Management



NC STATE UNIVERSITY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



It is not uncommon for faculty across the nation to respond to a variety of survey endeavors; however, it is incredibly rare for institutions to truly take that feedback to heart, openly acknowledge both the good and the bad, and further take tangible action based on the information provided. **The findings below present NC State and its constituent colleges with an opportunity to truly Think and Do – to be leaders nationally at the forefront of research and practice related to trust repair and overall faculty wellbeing.**

In May 2021 a team of researchers from the Poole College of Management and the College of Humanities and Social Sciences approached the Provost's Office to propose a descriptive program of research with an interest in identifying how factors, which can be actively managed by the Provost's Office, facilitate high-level adaptation and resilience among faculty in the transition back to campus following a largely online hiatus in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the course of five months of surveys from August through December of 2021, followed by an additional survey in April of 2022, this research team was able to collect a wealth of information about the faculty here at NC State. These data painted a descriptive picture of the prevailing sentiments, change dynamics, and areas of notable concern among a broadly representative sample of the university's faculty. Five of the most interesting and potentially applicable findings from the initial plan of research are summarized here tied to related pieces of advice.

1) Nature Contact - Contact with nature prior to the return to campus generally reduced burnout. We recommend that NC State encourage and enable faculty to spend time outdoors and interacting with nature (Time Outdoors).

2) Trust Repair - One of the most poignant findings from this research program is that faculty's trust in, and willingness to be vulnerable to, NC State remained startlingly low throughout the data collection with only ~1% of faculty responding that they Agree to Strongly Agree on the relevant trust items. There exists a very real opportunity moving forward to strategically diagnose the source and form of existing trust deficiencies (specifically in perceived ability, benevolence, and integrity) and to then begin repairing those rifts where they exist. This is an area in which additional research as well as the cooperation of college and university leadership will be crucial (Trust Repair & the A-B-I Model).

3) Organizational Alignment - Streamlined Messaging and Organizational Alignment (when information, messaging, and action are aligned and complementary across multiple sources) facilitated higher average trust as well as trust growth over time. We recommend that NC State streamline and coordinate communication and action to create alignment within and between university, college, department, individual. Identify and repair problem areas where divergence or misalignment exists (Align Action).

4) Message Framing - In times of dynamism, prevention-focused (loss-avoidant) message framing in communications is more beneficial to sustaining important work-related attitudes such as job satisfaction. We recommend that NC State use loss-avoidant message phrasing when communicating with faculty during times of dynamic change and upheaval (Loss Avoidance).

5) Share Feedback - We know both from this work as well as from wider psychology and organizational health research that acknowledging that you hear what someone is saying is incredibly important and powerful, especially in an organizational context. Our final recommendation is that NC State shares feedback with the faculty and lets them know that they have been heard and that their voices have mattered (Acknowledge).

INTRODUCTION

Study Overview

This study was conducted among the faculty at NC State during the fall 2021 semester. The university began online instruction and campus operations at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 and continued predominantly online instruction and remote work until August 2021. From March 2020 through August 2021 more than 95% of undergraduate courses were online and more than 70% were back to face-to-face instruction starting in August 2021. The shift back to campus represented a *strong event* (Morgeson, Mitchell, & Liu, 2015) that set off a period of organizational change. During this period faculty were required to change their mode of course instruction (from virtual to face-to-face) and were responsible for maintaining health and safety protocols such as enforcing mask usage, social distancing in the classroom, and sanitizing classroom resources. The setting represents a period of dynamic organizational change where study participants had to adapt to rapid changes (i.e., Krishnamurthy, 2020) and may have also been a period of discord between faculty and administrative policy (e.g., Murphy, 2021). This is an ideal setting for exploring within- and between-individual variation in job attitudes and well-being over time because all faculty are simultaneously exposed to comparable work demands and ongoing dynamism within the university. Participants were asked to complete a survey once a month over the five months of the fall 2021 semester and were offered incentives based on their total number of survey responses. Faculty were additionally asked to fill out a sixth survey four months later.

All of the full-time faculty at NC State (~2,258) were solicited by email for voluntary participation in the longitudinal study. A total of 471 faculty members enrolled in the study and provided consent. Of those 471 faculty members, 327 responded to at least 4 of the 5 survey waves. The median response age of participants was between 40 to 49, and approximately 54% identified as women, 44% identified as men, and 2% were non-binary or preferred not to say. Concerning race, approximately 81% of respondents identified as white or Caucasian, while 6% identified as Asian, 5% as mixed race or multicultural, 3% as Black, 3% as Hispanic or Latino, and 3% preferred not to say.

The remainder of this document will proceed as follows: First, we will re-introduce **five key take-aways** from this research. Second, we will explore each of these take-aways in more depth. Third, we will provide an overview of **existing and ongoing action plans** surrounding research and university action. Finally, we provide **concluding remarks** and acknowledgements by the research team.

FIVE KEY TAKE-AWAYS

Five of the most interesting and potentially applicable findings from the initial plan of research are summarized here tied to related pieces of advice.

1) Nature Contact -- Contact with nature prior to the return to campus generally reduced burnout.

(Time Outdoors) Encourage and enable faculty to spend time outdoors and interacting with nature.

2) Trust Repair -- One of the most poignant findings from this research program is that faculty's trust in, and willingness to be vulnerable to, NC State remained *startlingly low* throughout the data collection with only ~1% of faculty responding that they Agree to Strongly Agree on the relevant trust items.

(A-B-I Model) There is a *very real opportunity* moving forward to strategically diagnose the source and form of existing trust deficiencies (specifically in perceived ability, benevolence, and integrity) and to then begin repairing those rifts where they exist. This is an area in which additional research as well as the cooperation of college and university leadership will be crucial.

(Moving Forward) Concerning though these findings may be, we believe that NC State is typical in terms of the existence of such trust dynamics; however, NC State now has a *unique opportunity* to become a recognized cutting-edge leader among U.S. Universities by being among the first to actively acknowledge and address these trust dynamics.

3) Organizational Alignment -- Streamlined Messaging and Organizational Alignment (when information, messaging, and action are aligned and complementary across multiple sources) facilitated higher average trust as well as trust growth over time.

(Align Action) Streamline and coordinate communication and action so as to create alignment within and between university, college, department, individual. Identify and repair problem areas where divergence or misalignment exists.

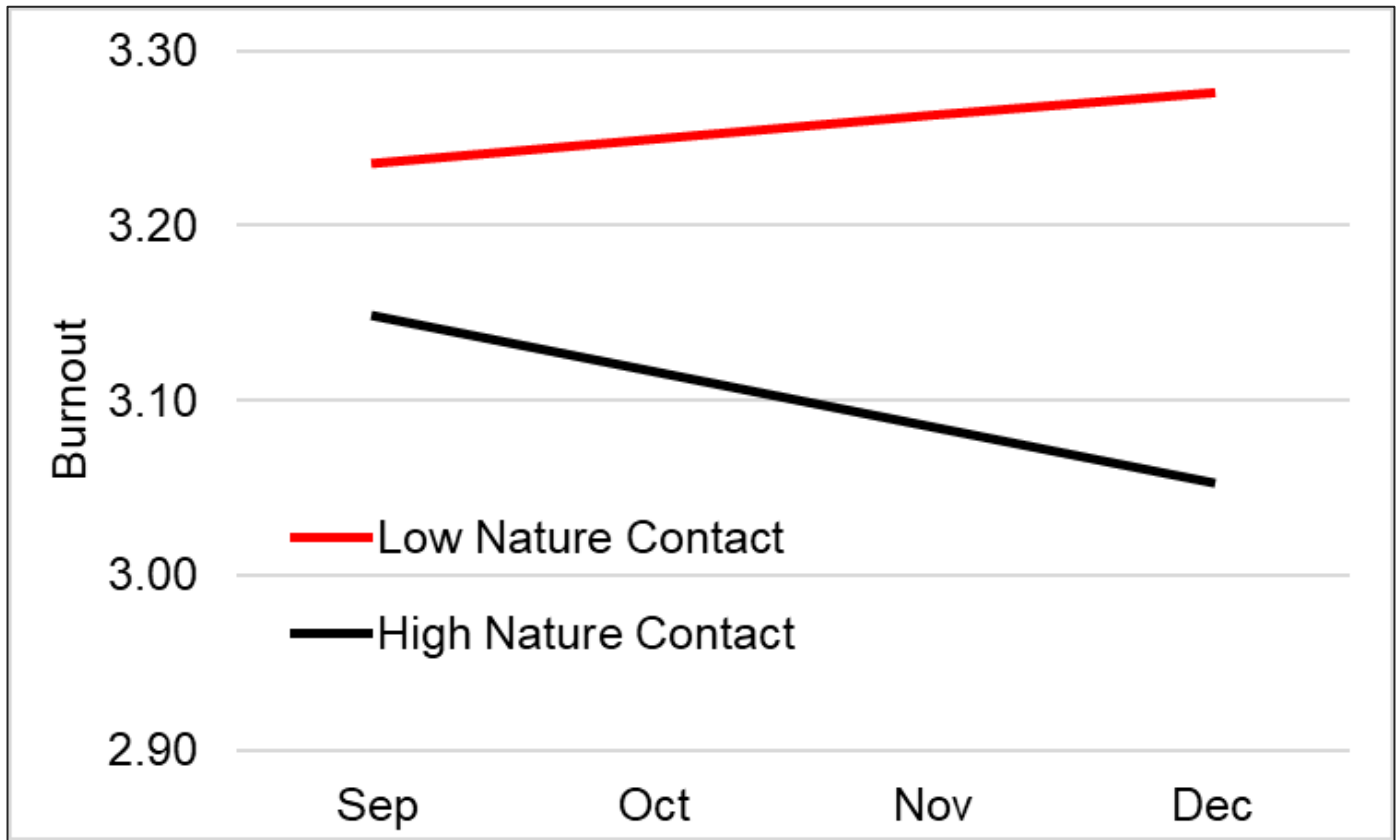
4) Message Framing -- In times of dynamism, prevention-focused (loss-avoidant) message framing in communications may be more beneficial to sustaining important work-related attitudes such as job satisfaction.

(Loss Avoidance) Use loss-avoidant message phrasing when communicating with faculty during times of dynamic change and upheaval.

5) Share Feedback -- We know both from this work as well as from wider psychology and organizational health research that acknowledging that you hear what someone is saying is incredibly important and powerful, especially in an organizational context.

(Acknowledge) Share feedback with the faculty, let them know that they have been heard and that their voices have mattered.

1) NATURE CONTACT



Overview

Contact with nature prior to the return to campus generally reduced burnout.

More Detail

One of the factors examined during the research was faculty's contact with the outside environment near their workspaces prior to the return to campus (nature contact). Findings indicate that on average, contact with nature prior to the return to campus reduced emotional exhaustion over time during the return to campus semester. These findings align with prevailing knowledge regarding the myriad benefits of human contact with nature (Frumkin et al., 2017; Klotz & Bolino, 2021; Largo-Wight et al., 2011). Findings from the present research have led to ongoing collaborative interdisciplinary work at the university level facilitated by Dr. Rob Dunn, Senior Vice Provost for University Interdisciplinary Programs.

Examples of Outdoor Spaces

Following the conclusion of the initial study, the research team began to mark down various outdoor spaces on campus in which they observed students, staff, and faculty congregating or otherwise spending time outside throughout the course of a given day. Some of those spaces are listed below as examples of outdoor spaces which are used with relative frequency around campus and serve to encourage and allow additional contact with nature. Some of the seemingly important features observed in the spaces that appear most frequented include *shade*, *shelter*, *central location*, *access to electricity*, and obviously *contact with some form of nature*.

1) NATURE CONTACT



More Temporary Spaces

Large Tent near Poole College of Management (i.e., the Poole Cabana) – This tent was an example of a temporary space that allowed and encouraging people to be outside while chatting, having lunch, doing work, taking calls, and so forth. Since the time of this study, this tent has been removed, and use of the space has dropped considerably.

More Permanent Spaces

The Corner on Centennial Campus – The Corner is an example of a relatively new construction which does a good job of incorporating many of the key elements listed above (providing shade, shelter, some access to electricity, and contact with the outdoors).

Pagoda Adjacent to Lampe Drive – This is an example of a more high-tech and permanent space which perhaps goes often unused because, while it does have access to power outlets, it fails to meet two other important criteria; it does not provide shade or shelter from environmental events like rain, snow, or direct sunlight.

Shaded Area Between Talley Student Union & Reynolds Coliseum – The area between the Talley Student Union and Reynolds Coliseum is one of the most frequented areas on north campus, and a location in which you will find students, staff, and faculty using the shaded benches at nearly all hours of the day every day of the week.

Court of North Carolina – Quads and central grassy areas are perhaps the most classic example of an outdoor space on any college campus. The Court of North Carolina is no different, with people frequently using the chairs and congregating towards the shade under trees across this space.

Examples Pictured Below

Former tent outside of the Nelson Hall (*Pictured on the Left*), the pagoda adjacent to Lampe Drive (*Pictured in the Middle*), and the new ‘Corner’ on Centennial Campus (*Pictured on the Right*)



2) TRUST



How **willing** are faculty to be **vulnerable** to the college and/or university?

Trust Referents:

- Trust in Organization: 1.06% Agree or Strongly Agree
- Trust in College: 1.10% Agree or Strongly Agree

~1%

Agree or Strongly Agree

Overview

Employees' trust in (willingness to be vulnerable to) the university remained notably low throughout the entirety of the survey period. On average, only 1.6% of the respondents indicated that they agreed to strongly agreed on items regarding their trust in the university. This number remained relatively the same for their trust in their individual colleges. This finding is one of the most salient from the initial research and elucidates a clear opportunity for further investigation and the possibility to develop prescriptive advice for both the university as an entity as well as for individual colleges on improving trust moving forward.

More Detail

While it was not the original intention of this research program to study organizational trust, it quickly became evident that trust – defined here as the trustor's willingness to be vulnerable to a trustee – was an important factor, especially during this time of flux and change. Descriptive findings from this study showed that Faculty's trust in NC State as an organization as well as in their individual colleges remained relatively low across the 5 months of the study, with only approximately 1% of the survey respondents indicating that they agreed or strongly agreed that they trust NC State or their respective colleges. While the research team does not believe this finding to be unique to NC State, it remains a clear area of needed focus and further action.

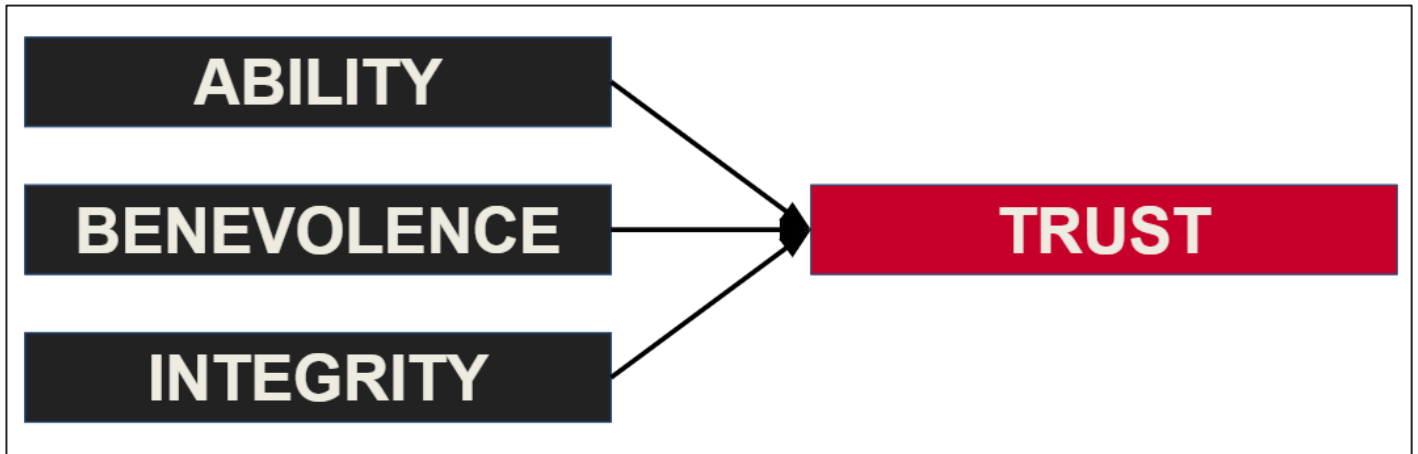
Trust is a foundational component of any relationship, and provides numerous interpersonal and organizational benefits (Davis, Schoorman, Mayer, & Tan, 2000; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Mayer & Gavin, 2005). Meta-analytic research on trust finds robust evidence for multiple advantageous outcomes including voice, creativity, individual and team performance, innovative behaviors, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, turnover intentions, and organizational citizenship behaviors (Dirks & De Jong, 2022). Trust holds incredible value, and while trust repair is rarely a simple or easy task, the value of regaining and repairing trust cannot be understated.

Representative Participant Quotes (August 2021 & April 2022)

"Institutional distrust due to lack of transparency on covid data on campus and inability to ensure a safe work environment, burnout from 'flexible' work hours and 'flex' teaching, loss of sense of belonging and community with dept/college/university due to isolation."

"I don't trust the administration at all..."

2) TRUSTWORTHINESS



Overview

One approach to consider in looking forward towards trust repair is the Ability-Benevolence-Integrity Model of Trust (ABI – Mayer et al., 1995). Potential steps in the process of applying this model to trust repair may include 1) identifying the sources of trust breach for ability, benevolence, and integrity for each college within the university; 2) developing strategies to address those deficits; and 3) enacting those trust repair strategies in a maximally transparent manner.

More Detail

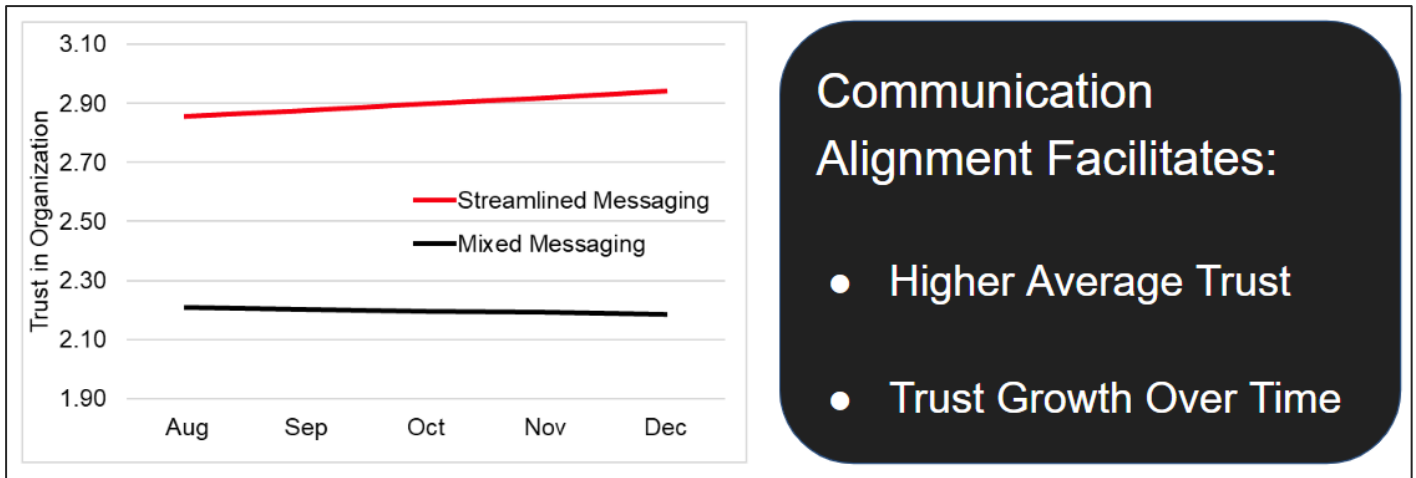
The ABI Model (Mayer et al., 1995) examines trustors' perceptions of ability, benevolence, and integrity in a trustee. In the context of this research the trustor is the faculty, and the trustee is the university.

Ability refers to a trustee's perceived capability and competence to do what a trustor expects and needs of them. In this case it is the perception that the university has the capability and competence to do what a faculty member expects and needs of them.

Benevolence refers to the extent to which a trustee is believed to voluntarily do good to/by the trustor. In this case it is the perception that the university seeks to act in the best interest of the faculty.

Integrity refers to the trustor's perception that a trustee adheres to a set of principles considered acceptable by the trustor, and acts consistently with those principles. In this case it is the perception that the university holds a clear and consistent set of principles by which it reliably abides, and which faculty relate to or agree with.

3) ORG. ALIGNMENT



Communication Alignment Facilitates:

- Higher Average Trust
- Trust Growth Over Time

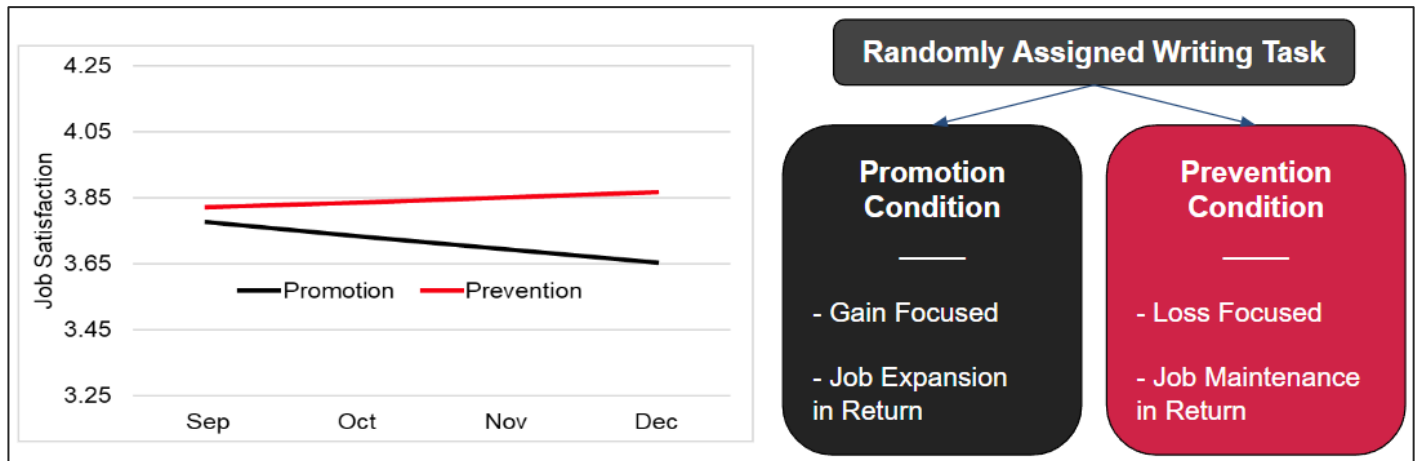
Overview

Streamlined Messaging and Organizational Alignment (when information, messaging, and action are aligned and complementary across multiple sources) facilitated higher average trust as well as trust growth over time.

More Detail

In addition to message framing (discussed previously); *Organizational Alignment* refers to the consistency and complementarity of both messaging and action across multiple sources such as the university, college, and department. To use a classic adage, alignment (closely tied to streamlined communication) can be described as the left hand knowing what the right hand is doing and working in consort to accomplish a goal. The reverse of alignment is misalignment and mixed messaging, in which employees feel as though they are being given different and potentially contradictory information, values, goals, and/or directives across multiple sources such as the university, college, and department. To return to the prior metaphor, misalignment would be described as the left hand being unaware of what the right hand is doing, thus working separate from or even contradictory to the intended goals of the right hand. For this research, we examined employee’s perceptions of organizational alignment and found that perceived alignment related to higher average trust as well as to trust growth over time. This study also expands research by Mayer & Williams (2021) further develops the construct of organizational (mis)alignment as an advancement in the field of organizational behavior and management.

4) MESSAGE FRAMING



Overview

In times of dynamism and flux, prevention-focused (loss-avoidant) message framing in communications may be more beneficial to sustaining important work-related attitudes such as job satisfaction.

More Detail

This research examined Promotion and Prevention framing (a concept based on the Nobel prize winning work by Kahneman & Tversky (1979) on Gain and Loss Framing) in order to understand how university communications may prime certain motives in the recipients of its communications. Findings indicate that individuals prompted towards a promotion focus (a motive where individuals seek to make gains and expand their jobs) experienced declines in job satisfaction throughout the course of the Fall 2021 academic semester, whereas individuals prompted towards a prevention focus (a motive where individuals seek to maintain stasis and limit potential losses) experienced relatively stable job satisfaction. *The following are two hypothetical examples of message framing provided to briefly illustrate the two forms of messaging, they are not all-inclusive; and each situation will require slightly different wording to achieve the desired frame in practice.*

Promotion-Focused Framing Example

Promotion focused message framing directs attention towards maximizing potential gains (*gain focused*) and expanding or innovating upon elements which currently exist (*job expansion*). An applied example of promotion focused messaging is; “*As we return to the workplace, let us use this opportunity to engage our newly developed skills and aspire to make our courses even better!*” ← This phraseology exemplifies doing more, expanding upon one's responsibilities, and aspiring to greater ideals.

Prevention-Focused Framing Example

Prevention focused message framing directs attention towards minimizing potential losses (*loss focused*) and maintaining elements which currently exist (*job maintenance*). An applied example of prevention focused messaging is; “*We know that the return to the workplace may be difficult for a number of reasons, we hope to help make this transition as smooth as possible while we return back to normal!*” ← This phraseology exemplifies maintaining consistency, returning to and operating at a normal level, and acknowledges that for the moment, the focus may be on returning to and then simply maintaining a normal or new normal. We find that in times of dynamism and flux, prevention-focused (loss-avoidant) message framing in communications is more beneficial to sustaining important work-related attitudes such as job satisfaction.

5) SHARE FEEDBACK



Overview

It is important to share feedback with the faculty who participated in this study, let them know that they have been heard and that their voices have mattered. The research team plans to share a version of this research summary with the faculty who participated in this study.

- Share results of this research with the surveyed population
- Share results with the Office of the Provost to share with larger campus community
- Share actions being taken and actions planned for the future with the surveyed population
- Continue to collect relevant information from the surveyed population

More Detail

We know both from this work as well as from wider psychology and organizational health research, that acknowledging peoples' voices and demonstrating that you hear what they are saying can be incredibly powerful, especially in an organizational context (Hirschman, 1970; Mowbray et al., 2014; Zhu et al., 2022). Feedback, as well as felt perceptions of voice, and can play an integral part in the repair of trust here at NC State. This logic follows directly from the ABI model of trust and trust repair mentioned in the prior section of this document.

Sharing these results, acknowledging the contents of the findings, and providing a transparent view of the action steps both actively in progress and planned for the future begins the process of creating an environment primed for trust repair and sustainable growth. The university can establish and maintain perceptions of having the *integrity* to transparently acknowledge current deficits; the *benevolence* to take action directly intended to benefit the faculty; and the *ability* to understand, come to grips with, and make tangible action steps at present as well as in the future to realistically enact those benevolent plans.

ONGOING AND FUTURE WORK

University Actions and Strategic Plans

It is not uncommon for faculty across the nation to respond to a variety of survey endeavors; however, it is incredibly rare for institutions to truly take that feedback to heart, openly acknowledge both the good and the bad, and further take tangible action based on the information provided. These findings present NC State and its constituent colleges with an opportunity to truly *Think* and *Do* – to be national leaders at the forefront of research and practice related to trust repair and overall faculty wellbeing.

- 1) This research has been funded and enabled through cooperation with the NC State Office of the Provost with the intention of identifying how factors, which can be actively managed by the Provost's Office, facilitate high-level adaptation and resilience among university faculty. Another primary intention of this work was to provide the university with actionable steps to take to maximize resilience and wellbeing of the university population moving forward.
- 2) During the course of this research, the research team had an opportunity to present a summary of key findings to several College Deans and associated university leadership.
- 3) Members of the research team are actively consulting with collaborative interdisciplinary work facilitated by Dr. Rob Dunn, Senior Vice Provost for University Interdisciplinary Programs, regarding the benefits and facilities implications of contact with nature for the larger university population.
- 4) The Office of the Provost continues to support the incorporation of the findings of this study into the practices of university leaders as well as into the structural components (process, practice, policy) of university operation. To this end, and with the continued support of this research team, the Provost will soon announce the appointment of a designated faculty member who will act as a resource within the Office for Faculty Excellence and will focus on understanding extant problems within the University community and on meaningfully improving faculty well-being.

Continued Research Involvement

The research team is actively seeking additional funding from agencies such as the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation to continue, expand upon, and ultimately realize further benefits from this work; both directly for the NC State population, as well as more broadly for the population of faculty, staff, and students in academic settings nationally and internationally.

Research Presentations and Publications

This study has given rise to six conference presentations: two presentations delivered at the 82nd Annual Academy of Management (AOM) conference, one delivered at the 12th Annual First International Network on Trust (FINT) conference, and three delivered at the 83rd Annual Academy of Management (AOM) conference. Additionally, this research produced a completed doctoral dissertation, and the research team plans to publish multiple papers from this study in top academic journals in management and psychology.

CONCLUDING NOTE

Concluding Note

This study collected a wealth of information over the course of six months of repeated measures surveys. Five key take-aways from the collected data are explored within the present report: 1) the benefit of contact with nature in reducing faculty burnout, 2) identification of the concerning state of faculty trust in the university, 3) the critical importance of organizational alignment in both messaging and action, 4) the utility of prevention-focused message framing during times of organizational dynamism, and 5) the importance of acknowledging input and sharing feedback with the university, leadership, and with the surveyed population.

This study paints an initial descriptive picture of the existing state of the university and its faculty, providing multiple avenues for further action and research. Members of the research team have provided initial recommendations and continue to act as consultants to ongoing university initiatives relating to the findings of this study. The Office of the Provost maintains ongoing support for these research endeavors and a firm dedication to the betterment of faculty well-being here at NC State. The research team retains active communication with the Office of the Provost regarding planning of actionable next steps in the domains of both research and organizational practice.

The primary hope and intention of this research is that its findings may serve as a launching point for continued action and ongoing research that will meaningfully benefit the faculty, staff, students, and community both here at NC State as well as within university communities across the country. As the physical, psychological, and emotional wellbeing of university staff and student populations becomes ever more salient, we hope that this research acts as one of many building blocks to enable a better future.

Special Acknowledgements

Thank you to everyone who empowered this research team to conduct its research. Thank you to those who reviewed various iterations of related presentations and those who listened intently and provided invaluable feedback on each of those variations (they were certainly not always this streamlined). And of course, thank you to all of the faculty who took time out of their busy lives each month to respond to our surveys – without your engagement, none of this would have been possible.

A special thank you to Senior Vice Provost Katharine Stewart and Provost Warwick Arden for providing ongoing supporting this research project. Additionally; we would like to thank Dean Frank Buckless, Associate Dean Richard Warr, Kimberly Zugay, and many others for providing feedback throughout the research and results delivery process.

We deeply look forward to continuing this work moving forward and to enacting meaningful change for the benefit of the entire community here at NC State!

RESEARCHER BIOGRAPHIES

Dr. Patrick J. Flynn is an Assistant Professor of Human Resource Management in the Department of Management, Innovation, and Entrepreneurship in the Poole College of Management at North Carolina State University. Dr. Flynn joined the Poole College of Management team from the University of South Carolina at Columbia's Darla Moore School of Business. There, he completed his doctorate degree in organizational behavior and human resources while serving as an academic research assistant. His research is focused on theory, design, and analysis of dynamic individual and group level processes, including the process of adaptation and emergence in teams. His articles have appeared in *Psychological Medicine* and *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*.

Dr. Roger C. Mayer is a Professor of Management, Innovation & Entrepreneurship at North Carolina State University. He previously served on the faculties of the University of Notre Dame, Purdue University, Baylor University, Singapore Management University and The University of Akron, where he served four years as department chair. He received a Ph.D. in Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Management from the Krannert School of Management at Purdue University. Mayer's research is focused on trust, employee decision making, attitudes and effectiveness. As one of the world's leading scholars on trust in organizations, his trust research has been published in many premiere scholarly journals. It has been cited over 40,000 times in the published literature across a wide variety of fields as diverse as psychology, computer science, medicine, and neurobiology.

Dr. Paul W. Mulvey is an Alumni Distinguished Undergraduate Professor in the Department of Management, Innovation, and Entrepreneurship in the Poole College of Management at North Carolina State University. He earned a Ph.D. from the Fisher College of Business at The Ohio State University. His research focuses on employee reward systems, work teams, recruitment, and toxic leadership. His research has been published in journals such as *Academy of Management Executive*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Compensation and Benefits Review*, *Industrial Relations*, *Journal of Applied Management and Entrepreneurship*, *Organizations and People*, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *Journal of Social Psychology*, *Small Group Research*, *The Journal of Social Psychology*, and *WorldatWork Journal*.

Ian O. Siderits is a Graduate PhD Student and primary instructor in the Psychology Department at North Carolina State University as well as an adjunct instructor in the Department of Behavioral Sciences at Southeastern Oklahoma State University. He has a bachelor's degree from The George Washington University. Ian focuses his research on the topics of trust, technology, and employee health and wellbeing. He has co-authored a book chapter and journal article on the topic of workplace technology and technology research respectively and has presented on the topics of technology, trust, and work-life balance at conferences such as the Society for Industrial-Organizational Psychology (SIOP), the Academy of Management (AOM), and the First International Network on Trust (FINT).

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NC STATE BACK TO CAMPUS FACULTY STUDY

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