



Tip Sheet: Improving Response Rates on the AHRQ Surveys on Patient Safety Culture

This Tip Sheet will help you understand the importance of high survey response rates and provide suggestions for improving your response rates.

What is a survey response rate?

A survey response rate is the number of completed surveys returned by eligible respondents divided by the number of eligible people who were invited to participate in the survey.

Why do response rates matter?

Response rates are important for data quality. You want your survey results to represent the views of staff in your facility. If your response rate is low, your results may not accurately represent the views of all the staff you invited to participate in the survey. If your results are based on only 10% of your staff, you don't know whether the other 90% would answer differently and therefore lead to different results. If you have a high response rate, you can be more confident that your results accurately reflect the views of your staff. Your goal should be to obtain the highest response rate possible.

How can I increase my survey response rate?

There are many ways to increase your survey response rate, but it will require effort and careful planning. Here are some strategies to consider:

1. Engage Leadership

Involve leadership in your facility in sponsoring and promoting the survey within your organization. Ensure that leaders support the survey effort and understand how the results can help assess and improve patient safety culture. Leadership at all levels should be a vocal and visible presence by:

- Providing resources (budget, staff, materials, etc.);
- Announcing the purpose of the survey and encouraging staff participation; and
- Actively displaying support throughout data collection, particularly with staff groups or departments with lower response.

2. Publicize the Survey

Publicizing the survey before and during data collection is critical for high response rates. Develop a campaign to announce the survey through multiple sources such as e-mail, newsletters, message boards, on flyers posted throughout the facility, and on your organization's intranet or Web site. Identify survey champions in every department to promote the survey and encourage participation. Consider giving staff time to complete the survey during regularly scheduled staff meetings.

3. Use Survey Best Practices

- Keep your promotion communications brief, focusing on the purposes of the survey and how the results will be used. Highlight the benefits or changes that resulted from previous survey efforts.
- If you are conducting a Web survey, send an advance email announcing the survey several days before launch so staff will be less likely to ignore or delete the survey invitation email.
- Include your CEO or President's signature on the survey invitation email or paper survey cover letter to indicate the importance of the survey and show top leadership's support.
- Track survey response by department throughout data collection and focus promotion efforts where you need to increase response. For Web surveys, send short weekly thank you/reminder emails. Have survey champions remind staff to complete the survey.
- Distribute the survey results to all staff. Provide department-specific results. Engage staff in action planning efforts to improve patient safety culture within their departments and across the organization.

Staff are more likely to participate in future surveys when they know the results will be used for improvement.

4. Create a Competitive Spirit

A friendly spirit of competition may help increase response rates. Throughout data collection, distribute response rate reports by department to allow them to compare to one another. If one department has a very high response rate, it will encourage the others to step up their efforts. If you are administering the survey in multiple facilities, distribute response rate reports comparing facilities to one another.

5. Provide Survey Incentives

Research shows that survey incentives can increase response rates. Incentives do not need to be big or expensive, but should be considered valuable to staff. For example, consider:



- Small token gifts such as candy, pens, clipboards, or stickers for staff that complete the survey (see example sticker);
- A lottery drawing for prizes such as movie or concert tickets, gift cards, electronics, or a few hours of paid leave; or
- Prizes for departments with the highest response rates---fruit baskets, dessert trays, breakfasts, lunches, or ice cream socials.

Pay for the incentives through a designated resource fund or ask community retailers to donate items, entertainment tickets, coupons for discounted or free items or services, etc.

What other resources can help me?

Please visit the Survey User's Guides and other tools and resources available on the AHRQ Web site at <http://www.ahrq.gov/professionals/quality-patient-safety/patientsafetyculture/index.html>. You may also send your technical assistance questions by email to SafetyCultureSurveys@westat.com or call 1-888-324-9749.