UNESCO 2030 Staff Survey shows strong belief in effectiveness heading into the next decade

Climate change and loss of biodiversity, discrimination and inequality, violence and conflict, and health and disease, are the main transversal challenges that will require the action of UNESCO over the next ten years, according to UNESCO staff.

These were among the key results of an unprecedented staff survey launched by the Strategic Transformation Support Unit, which will help shape UNESCO’s programmes over the next decade as we develop our new C/4 Medium-Term Strategy for 2022-2029.

In general, more than 80% of staff think that UNESCO is currently living up to its mission statement, with an average of 69% saying UNESCO is effectively addressing each of the major global challenges being faced around the world. Traditions and cultures at risk was the challenge for which UNESCO was deemed to be most effective (87%).

The results clearly demonstrate the potential transversality of UNESCO’s response to these challenges over the next decade: education notably came through as the most needed solution across most challenges, with solutions favoring international cooperation, intercultural dialogue and access to information also needed.

In further support of this, a full 96% of respondents agreed that cooperation between sectors is critical to the success of UNESCO’s work, but only half reported doing so regularly, and only 44% in Programme Sectors at HQ.

Important insights were also gained into the views of staff on key areas such as Global Priorities, communication, youth engagement, partnerships and wider UN presence. The vast majority believe that the existing Global Priorities – Africa and Gender Equality – should be maintained, with 71% suggesting that efforts should be increased for one or both. Staff training and a greater focus on partnerships were also identified as major needs to improve communications, fundraising, youth engagement and UN presence.

1,870 colleagues from around the world took part in the survey. There was an excellent balance between HQ and Field colleagues, and strong representation from staff in Africa (25%), the Asia-Pacific (25%) and Latin America and the Caribbean (17%). Around 60% of respondents were women and 38% were under 40. Responses were relatively consistent across these different lines, although staff in Africa indicated that violence and conflict was the most important challenge there. Women and younger staff were notably more likely to favour gender-related solutions to the various challenges.

Collecting the views and comments of staff is seen as critical to ensuring the work of the Organization is responding to real world trends and developments. The survey comes at a time of profound transformations and crises around the world, with the COVID-19 pandemic adding to an already-dire list of issues that provide a direct challenge to UNESCO’s mandate to build peace in the minds of men and women around the world.
Many HRM reforms play a powerful organizational role in strengthening and sustaining the values of the organization. The Performance Management Policy, together with the recent leadership training, will strengthen the work of UNESCO's leaders and help the staff achieve their potential.

The new Performance Management Policy aims to create a culture of dialogue and discussion and facilitates reactivity to changing realities by implementing a check-up every 6 months. These kinds of changes open the door for greater innovations and helps us to respond effectively to crisis situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. We are on a way to creating a high-performing culture in our Organization.

New online workplace tools allowed our team to maintain effective communication with all 20 Field Offices participating in our project, which was translated into prompt action to identify, adapt, tailor and implement activities in response to the challenges posed by COVID-19. This subsequently re-emphasized the comparative role that UNESCO plays globally and in the field, and its capacity to efficiently respond to emergencies. The online tools also allowed us to organize the annual bilateral meetings as planned.

Lastly, they greatly facilitated our efforts to strengthen inter-sectoral collaboration and synergies with other programmes, mainly the Culture Sector, boosting our capacity to deliver multidisciplinary programmes efficiently through transversal teams across the Organization.

I participated in both the Agile and Leadership training, which are Strategic Transformation initiatives. I learned skills that help me in change management, particularly creating and managing transversal teams using Agile Methodology.

As a result, I have been able to support the digital transformation to fully benefit from the new digital tools and having our team trained properly on platforms such as Microsoft Teams. With these new skills, we were able to respond to the COVID-19 crisis efficiently with my team and, through the use of trello, improve communication and increase motivation and satisfaction in our team. Collaboration is now much faster, efficient and more accurate. I have been happy to share our lessons learned with other colleagues.

I had the opportunity to be part of the Agile Team workshop put in place for the Strategic Transformation in March 2019, and I was member of the Agile Girls and Women’s Education task team on communication. The team consisted of colleagues from HQ, Field Offices and the Institutes. Thanks to the different perspectives, experiences and backgrounds of the team members, we were able to build new ideas on gender equality and women and girls’ education in a mutual learning process that showed the potential and advantages of diversity in team work. The Agile approach is enabling a change of culture within UNESCO towards an interdisciplinary, transversal, One Family, with a solidarity mentality and opening the horizon for new perspectives on partnerships. It also empowers young staff to contribute to decision-making and shape the strategic and management approach in the organization. This engagement of the young staff encourages and motivates them to act with high efficiency and enthusiasm because they feel the value of their voices and contributions. This approach turned out to be essential during COVID-19 as UNESCO managed to be one of the first UN organizations responding and reacting as the crisis hit.

In the future, I believe this Agile approach will increase UNESCO’s comparative advantage, productivity and responsiveness, which will make the organization shine at the heart of the UN and of the world.