

2024 SANDAG Ethical Climate Survey



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Message from the Independent Performance Auditor

I am pleased to present the results of SANDAG's first Ethical Climate Survey (ECS). This survey is designed to assist SANDAG in gauging its ethical climate. As the inaugural survey, the results inform the reader of SANDAG's current ethical culture and serve to establish an ethical climate baseline for future surveys. The ECS records employees' perceptions of SANDAG's ethical climate at a point in time.

The Ethical Climate Survey, designed by the Institute for Local Government (ILG), is broken down into three short sections (employees, management, and elected officials). The questions posed in this survey evaluate the **accountability, responsiveness, integrity, trust, fairness, communication, and leadership** present at SANDAG. It tells us the degree to which ethical standards influence organizational and individual decision-making and helps identify ethical blind spots or provide reassurance that SANDAG's ethical house is in order. In short, this survey is SANDAG's ethical report card.

The Results

The Ethical Climate Survey was administered during the early stages of a leadership transition; therefore, it is important to review the survey results noting both past and current practices will impact an employee's perception of the organization.

SANDAG has room to improve. Overall, survey participants gave SANDAG an ethical climate score of 181 out of 300. The ILG categorizes scores between 150 and 224 as a "Medium" score. According to the ILG, this means SANDAG is in a good place but has room to improve.

Employees' perceptions of their own ethics are better than their perceptions of the ethics of management and elected officials. Participants of all levels scored their own ethics much higher than they scored the ethics of executive and elected leadership as a whole. The agencywide score for elected officials was "Low."

Employees' perceptions do not differ across staff roles and years of service with the organization except new employees rated elected officials higher. Most participant groups scored SANDAG's ethical climate for each section similarly, except for one group. Participants who identified themselves as being new employees (less than one year of service) scored each section higher yet remained consistent within the overall category of "High", "Medium" or "Low" – except for "Section 3: Elected Officials" where they gave far higher scores than their counterparts with more years of service.

A significant number of employees reported “not knowing” enough to answer survey questions related to management and elected officials. This demonstrates a gap in an organization’s overall ethical climate. Such responses could mean staff are organizationally disconnected, disengaged or are choosing to not be engaged with management and elected officials.

Employees have myriad opinions about SANDAG. Over 52 percent of the 196 survey participants provided comments regarding how to enhance SANDAG’s ethical climate and what they would change at SANDAG. Participants’ statements were diverse and revealed participants’ feelings about the direction of the Agency, new leadership, the Board of Directors, Human Resources practices, accountability, transparency, and staff capacity.

The following sections provide more details on the results of the 2024 Ethical Climate Survey including employees’ comments organized into seven themes.

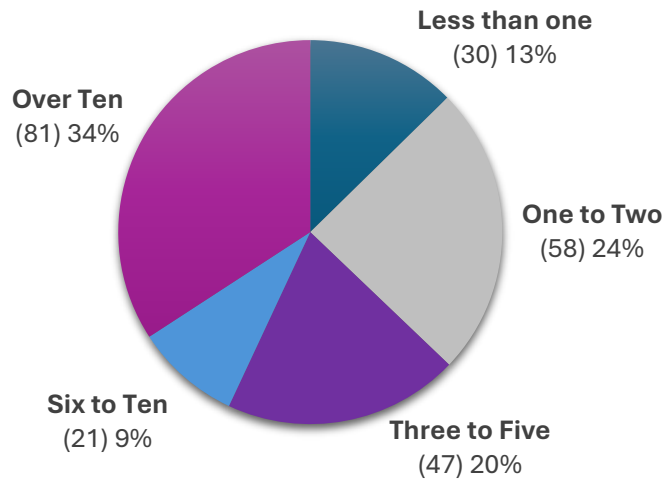
The OIPA plans to administer this survey again in 18 months to assist the Board of Directors, SANDAG Management and employees with identifying changes in the ethical culture of the agency from this baseline survey.

I want to thank SANDAG’s employees for participating in the inaugural ECS and answering the survey’s open-ended questions openly and honestly.

Survey Participants

Participation in the survey was voluntary and completely anonymous. Approximately 196 employees completed the survey in its entirety – 46 percent of SANDAG’s total workforce, and around 20 more employees only completed the survey through the first “employee” section designed to gauge an employee’s self-perception of their ethical decision making. Approximately 40 more employees only completed the identifying questions related to participant’s length of employment and staffing role.

Total Number of Survey Participants by Years of Service with SANDAG

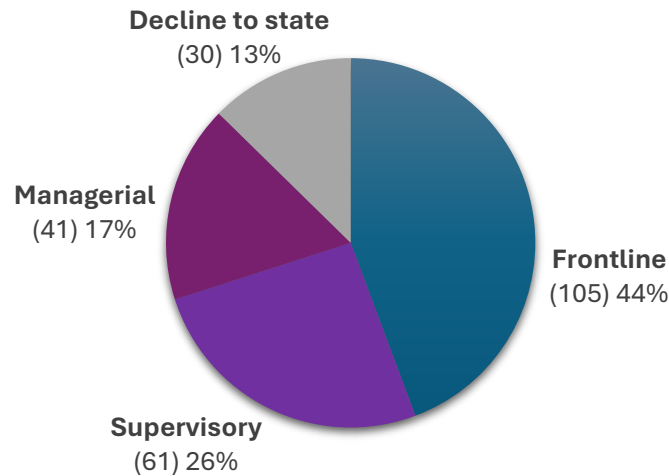


Participants identifying themselves as employees of SANDAG for less than one year gave higher scores in all sections compared to those employed longer.

Years of Service	Section 1 Employees	Section 2 Management	Section 3 Elected Officials	Survey TOTAL
Less than one (>1)	89 High	73 Medium	58 Medium	220 Medium
One to two (1 - 2)	77 High	57 Medium	35 Low	169 Medium
Three to five (3 - 5)	81 High	64 Medium	40 Low	185 Medium
Six to ten (6 - 10)	79 High	68 Medium	38 Low	185 Medium
Over ten (10+)	78 High	57 Medium	37 Low	172 Medium
All Participants	80 High	61 Medium	40 Low	181 Medium

Frontline employees made up 44 percent of all participants, with supervisors and managers comprising 26 percent and 17 percent of respondents, respectively. 13 percent of respondents declined to provide their staffing role.

Total Number of Survey Participants by Staffing Role



Trends were consistent across staffing roles, within the overall category of “High”, “Medium” or “Low. Participants who identified themselves as management notably scored Section 2: Management significantly higher (nine to twelve points). Participants who declined to state their staffing role gave scores far below the average in all sections.

Staffing Role	Section 1 Employees	Section 2 Management	Section 3 Elected Officials	Survey TOTAL
Frontline (Intern / I / II / Associate)	82 High	61 Medium	40 Low	183 Medium
Supervisory (Senior, Principal)	80 High	64 Medium	41 Low	185 Medium
Management (Manager, Director)	85 High	73 Medium	45 Low	203 Medium
Decline to state	63 Medium	45 Low	32 Low	140 Low
All Participants	80 High	61 Medium	40 Low	181 Medium

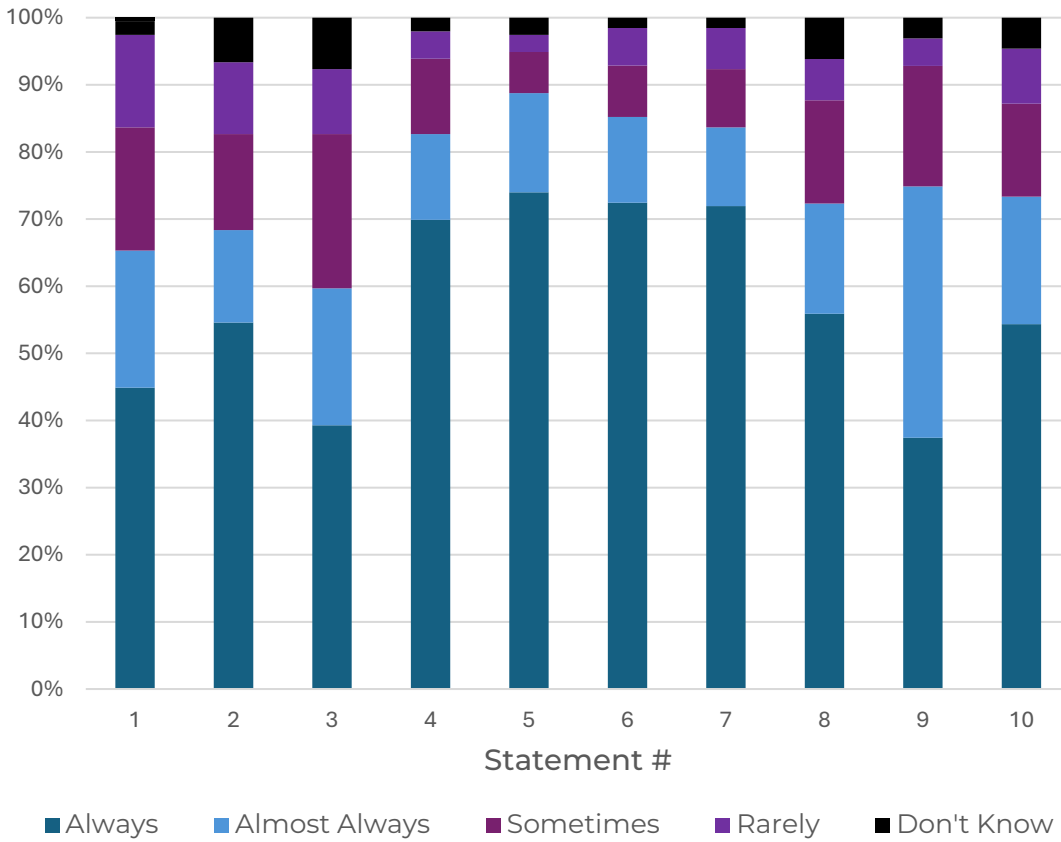
Section One Results: Employees

Participants gave an overall score of **80** in this section, signaling a “High” ethics score. This section, relating to an employee’s expectations and personal responsibilities, was the highest scoring of the survey by far. 7 of the 10 statements scored 7.5 or more, suggesting a “High” perception of ethical standards.

At SANDAG, I am...	Average Score	Ethical Climate Rating ¹
1. Encouraged to speak up about any agency practices and policies that are ethically questionable.	7.32	Medium
2. Expected to report questionable ethical behaviors of others.	7.47	Medium
3. Clear about where to turn to for advice about ethical issues.	6.85	Medium
4. Expected to follow the spirit as well as letter of the law in my work for the agency.	8.61	High
5. Expected to use ethical behaviors in getting results.	8.88	High
6. Expected to tell the complete truth in my work for the agency.	8.72	High
7. Expected to treat everyone who comes before the agency equally, regardless of personal or political connections.	8.66	High
8. Expected to follow stated policy of the governing body and not the desires of individual elected or appointed officials.	7.74	High
9. Surrounded by coworkers who know the difference between ethical and unethical behaviors and seem to care about the difference.	7.55	High
10. Working with one or more trusted confidantes with whom I can discuss ethical dilemmas at work.	7.76	High

¹ Scores were calculated using the [Institute for Local Government’s Ethical Climate Survey](#) rating system. High = 7.50 to 10, Medium = 5 to 7.49, Low = 0 to 4.99 (See Appendix A).

Distribution of Participant Responses to Statements About THEMSELVES²



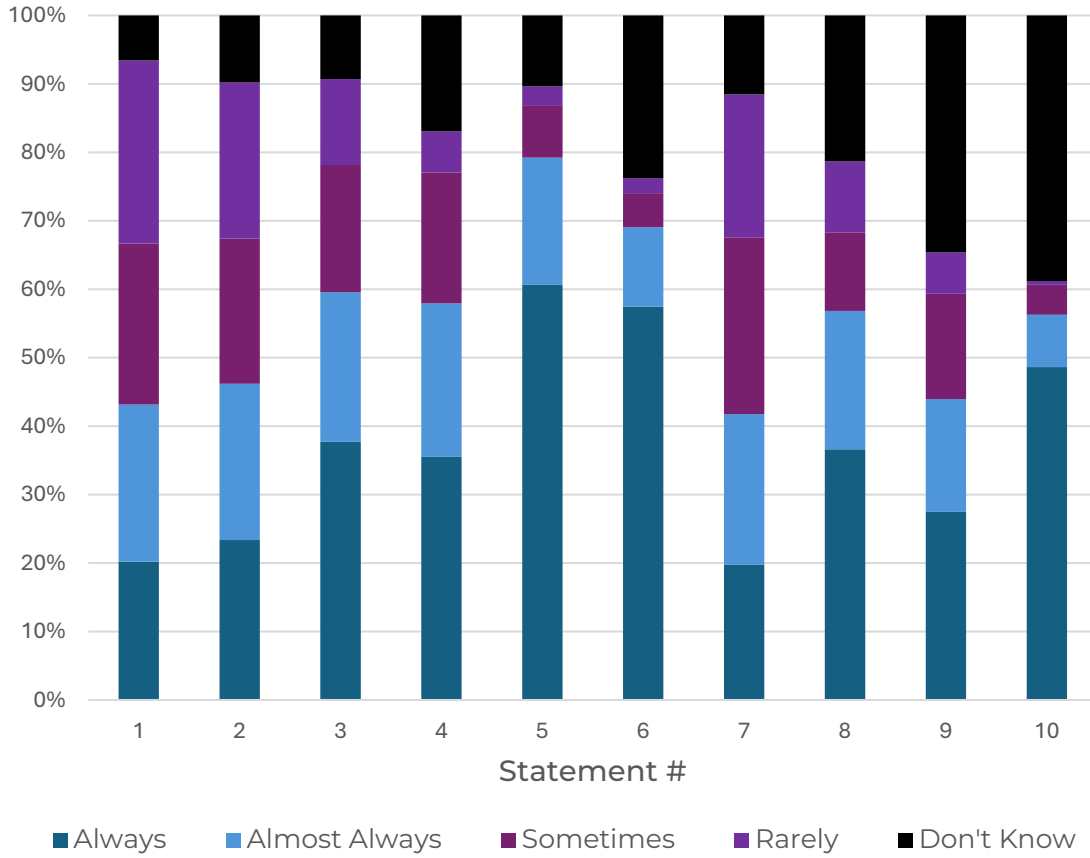
² Respondents indicating they “Don’t Know” represent a gap in an organization’s overall ethical climate and, therefore, factors negatively into the scoring. Sections left blank were not factored into the score.

Section Two Results: SANDAG Management

This section reflected a “Medium” ethics score, with participants scoring it **61**. Overall, this section was scored significantly lower than Section 1, but still much higher than Section 3. Only one statement reflected a “High” ethics score, relating to whether the executives at SANDAG treat the public with civility and respect. This section also received a large percentage of “Don’t Know” responses, contributing to the lower score.

The Executives at SANDAG...	Average Point Score	Ethical Climate Rating	Percent of Respondents Selecting “Don’t Know”
1. Create an environment in which staff are comfortable raising ethical concerns.	5.59	Medium	7%
2. Appreciate staff bringing forward bad news and don't "shoot the messenger" for doing so.	5.68	Medium	10%
3. Expect staff to use ethical practices in getting results - not "whatever it takes."	6.65	Medium	9%
4. Gear their decisions to the spirit as well as the letter of the law or policy.	6.34	Medium	17%
5. Treat the public with civility and respect.	7.91	High	10%
6. Use public resources only for agency purposes and not for their own personal or political uses (such as agency supplies, staff time, equipment)	6.92	Medium	24%
7. Appoint and reward people on the basis of performance and contribution to the organization's goals and services.	5.44	Medium	12%
8. Treat all members of the public equally, regardless of who has "connections."	6.01	Medium	21%
9. Help elected officials work within their policy roles and stay out of the day-to-day work of the agency.	4.90	Low	35%
10. Refuse to accept gifts and/or special treatment from those with business before the agency.	5.67	Medium	39%

Distribution of Participant Responses to Statements About MANAGEMENT

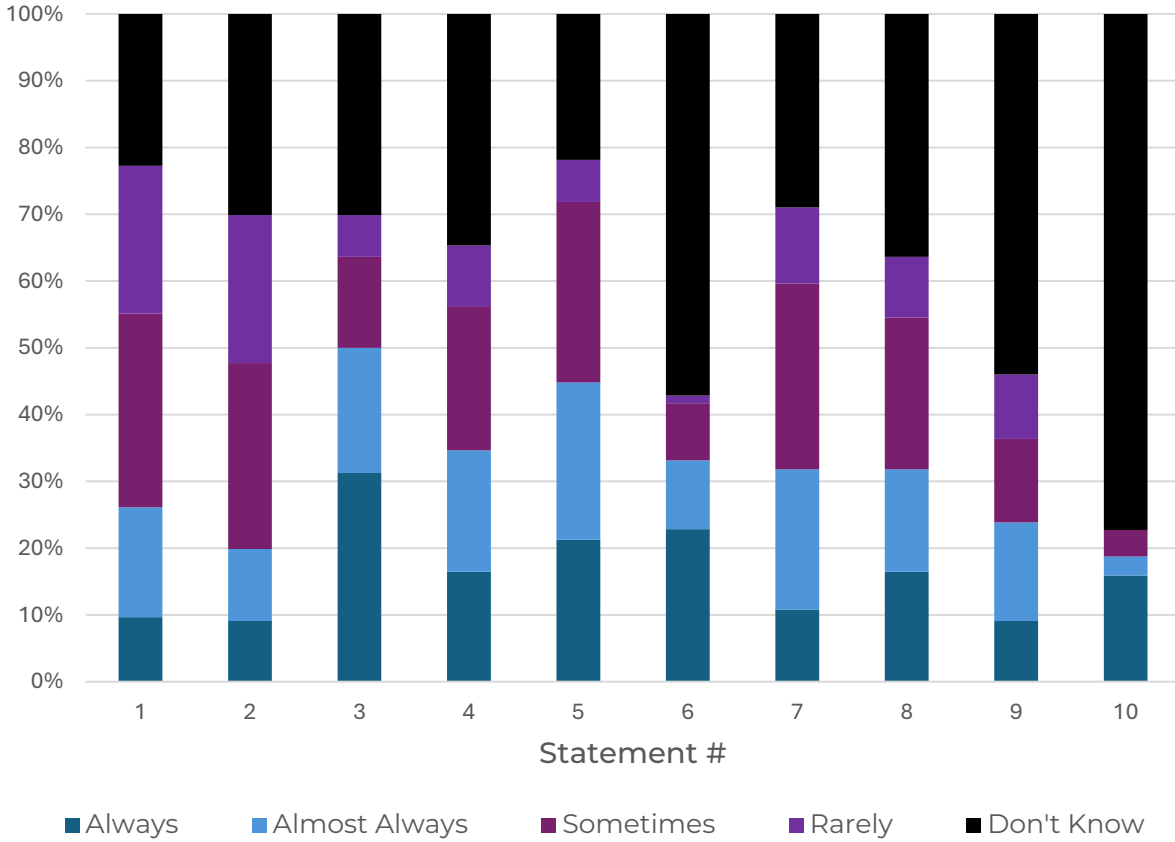


Section Three Results: Elected Officials at SANDAG

The overall participant score for this section was **40**, reflecting a “Low” perception of ethical behavior. This section scored the lowest of the three included in the survey, with only two statements receiving a score of “Medium” and none rated “High.” This section also received the highest percentage of “Don’t Know” responses, contributing to the lower score.

The Elected Officials at SANDAG...	Average Point Score	Ethical Climate Rating	Percent of Respondents Selecting “Don’t Know”
1. Create an environment in which staff are comfortable raising ethical concerns.	4.20	Low	23%
2. Appreciate staff bringing forward bad news and don't "shoot the messenger" for doing so.	3.66	Low	30%
3. Expect staff to use ethical practices in getting results - not "whatever it takes."	5.37	Medium	30%
4. Gear their decisions to the spirit as well as the letter of the law or policy.	4.32	Low	35%
5. Treat the public with civility and respect.	5.40	Medium	22%
6. Use public resources only for agency purposes and not for their own personal or political uses (such as agency supplies, staff time, equipment).	3.51	Low	57%
7. Allow the staff to handle day-to-day management issues and don't try to get involved.	4.33	Low	29%
8. Treat all members of the public equally, regardless of who has people or political connections.	4.16	Low	36%
9. Exclude themselves from decisions when reasonable members of the public might question their ability to make a fair decision.	2.88	Low	54%
10. Refuse to accept gifts and/or special treatment from those with business before the agency.	2.00	Low	77%

Distribution of Participant Responses to Statements About ELECTED OFFICIALS



Insights

The survey results revealed areas for SANDAG leadership to focus attention. For example, participants reported lower scores³ for SANDAG Management in:

- ✓ creating a comfortable environment for staff to raise ethical concerns.
- ✓ appreciating staff who bring concerns forward.
- ✓ appointing and rewarding people based on their performance.
- ✓ refusing special treatment from those doing business with SANDAG.

and a “Low” score for SANDAG Management in:

- ✓ helping elected officials stay in their policy lane and out of day-to-day operations.

Elected officials were ranked low in all but two of ten survey statements, however, a significant number of survey participants responded as not knowing enough to score the statements. This occurred in the management section as well – but to a lesser extent.

These employee perceptions suggest a need for SANDAG leadership to reach out to employees and regularly affirm their rights and responsibilities to bring issues forward, while also ensuring a safe and responsive reporting environment. It is incumbent upon management and elected leadership to self-reflect upon how their actions are contributing to the state of SANDAG’s ethical environment.

Lastly, perceptions regarding human resources’ practices are troubling, as illustrated in the survey comments, and in response, the OIPA will include a hiring and promotion practices audit in next year’s audit work plan.

Prominent themes from the participants’ comments to two open-ended questions are highlighted below to provide greater insight into employee perceptions and concerns.

³ Participants scored these statements between 5.4-5.7, the low range of a “Medium” ethics score (5 to 7.49).

Key Themes

Survey participants provided comments on the following open-ended questions:

In your own opinion, please describe how you would enhance SANDAG's ethical climate and culture.

If I could change one thing about SANDAG, I would change...

The participants' comments centered around seven themes. Two of these themes were pronounced and each garnered over 17 percent of the comments. These themes focused on concerns with the Board of Directors and Human Resources. Additionally, 15 percent of the participants' comments reflected their belief that SANDAG is headed in the right direction. The remaining themes each received 6-8 percent of the participants' comments.

Theme 1: Trust between the Board of Directors (BOD) and staff must be repaired. The BOD, at times, openly disparages SANDAG and repeats misinformation or incorrect information publicly, appearing to distance themselves from SANDAG's work, thus seeding frustration, disappointment and mistrust with the staff.

"I would ask the board members to recognize that staff are doing their best to deliver difficult projects and when problems are brought to them, focus on solutions [not] shooting the messenger or political agendas."

"Board politics - they adversely impact staff morale and the work we need to do, especially when they spread misinformation and bad press in the name of "accountability." They express "appreciation" for our work but then sometimes use that same work against us."

"Acknowledge that there is an issue and that the SANDAG Board has played a role in creating the culture of fear and has the power to make some real changes by working together."

"I would ask the Board to lower the temperature and for leadership [to] filter the Board politics more."

Theme 2: Organizational Effectiveness (Human Resources) needs to improve troubling HR practices and repair trust with employees. This includes hiring and promotion practices, an accountable performance management system with corresponding consequences and a reliable and ethical HR complaint process.

"Despite being a data-driven organization, performance metrics for individuals are seldom evaluated using available data, further undermining transparency and accountability."

"The Human Resources department is good at offering aspirins, but not at solving ethical problems. I have no confidence."

"...a culture that harms staff, and tries to hide and silence complaints and problems through unethical means."

"Implementing equal opportunities for upward mobility and being transparent about job opportunities."

"Looking more at the culture within to promote and appoint people within on the basis of performance and contribution to the organization's goals and services."

"allow for open competition for positions and not appointment of positions or promotions for hand selected individuals. Lack of consistency in hiring & promotions creates an environment of favoritism."

Theme 3: SANDAG is headed in the right direction and many attribute change to the new CEO.

"I am thankful for new leadership. Previously, the agency was heading in the Wrong Direction. The staff are too over-worked and under-resourced to spend time concentrating on being deliberate with climate and culture, and it has not been a priority of past management."

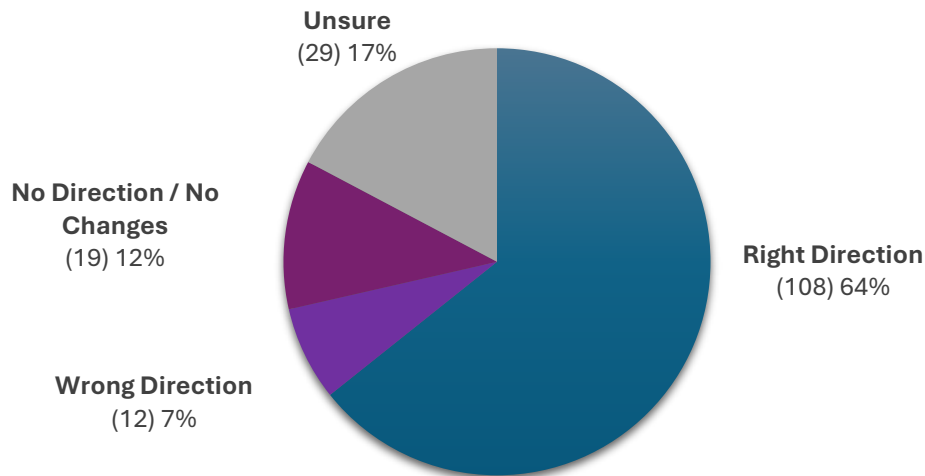
"It starts with internal leadership which from my perspective and due to recent and new executive director we are moving in the right direction."

"I think it's going in the right direction. I am new to this organization, but I am surprised by some of the sentiments from the board and public. The staff I work with are some of the best I've worked with."

"The new CEO is already starting to change the culture tremendously, simply by questioning why we do what we do and not just simply taking answers at their face value."

When participants were asked to respond directly about the current direction of SANDAG relating to ethical climate, 64 percent of the participants stated the agency was headed in the right direction.

I think SANDAG’s ethical culture is headed in the:



Theme 4: Ethics is an inside job and SANDAG’s leadership must lead by example. Employees want more practical ethics training, and a safe and encouraging environment for SANDAG employees to report wrongdoing.

“Eliminate a retaliation culture and encourage employees to speak up.”

“Leadership tends to discourage dissent, fostering a ‘shoot the messenger’ mentality. Executives primarily seek affirmation, and those who express concerns or propose alternatives frequently face professional repercussions. The culture prioritizes compliance with leadership directives over practicality or advisability.”

“There’s a difference between being encouraged and expected to do something, and actually feeling comfortable doing it.”

“Be honest, do things that you say.”

Theme 5: More transparency and open communications regarding SANDAG’s decision-making processes, goals, objectives, and priorities are needed.

“There is becoming more of an outright emphasis on transparency, which is good.”

“I would encourage leadership to be more considerate of the day to day work that frontline employees face. That means reviewing things in a timely manner, being transparent with their goals, critiques, and decision-making processes. When they are non-communicative it erodes the trust between employees and their managers.”

"I would enhance SANDAG's ethical climate and culture by promoting transparent decision making, encouraging open communication across all levels, and ensuring that ethical training and resources are accessible and regularly updated."

Theme 6: All levels of the organization need to demonstrate accountability. This includes the Board of Directors, Executive Management, and Department Directors in setting expectations and tone, owning roles/responsibilities, taking responsibility for the results, and collectively working together to move SANDAG forward.

"The "us vs them" mentality--this is apparent not only within the agency, such as between departments, but also between staff and the Board of Directors/elected officials."

"We should try to foster more of an attitude of cooperation and teamwork between departments."

"The leaders need to learn long term success comes from blending efforts to complete tasks with efforts to develop people ...who are needed to complete the tasks. People who feel valued and feel they are part of a positive effort will stay longer and will help develop others on the team."

Theme 7: SANDAG's capacity to address its workload is strained. Evaluate SANDAG's capacity to ensure the organization can effectively meet its mandates, special projects/requests and the demands of process improvements while retaining and investing in its staff.

"Our established headcount to carry out all the work on our plate; is it the right amount?"

"The thinking that we can continue the same heavy workload without adding additional resources. For years, staff have been overworked and overwhelmed...This has led to frustration and a lack of work-life balance. It has also led to an increased attrition rate. I believe that this philosophy has also contributed to a potential lack of ethics in order to deliver results faster."

"I would change how overworked staff is. Most of us are stretched to the limit with little capacity to take on new/extra work or implement process improvements."

Appendix A: Scoring Methodology

The ILG ethical climate survey uses a 5-point Likert scale, which allows respondents to provide more nuanced feedback. Each response is assigned a point value:

Always	Almost Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Don't Know ⁴
10	7.5	5	2.5	0

Responses are then totaled and divided by the number of participants. Each section receives a final score, as does the entirety of the survey. The ILG interprets those scores as follows:

Point Score	Ethical Climate Rating	What it Means / Recommendations
Per Section: 75 - 100 Entire Survey: 225 - 300	High	Your agency has a strong ethical environment. Keep up the good work, including such steps as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporating ethics into the hiring and evaluation process for staff. • Conducting regular ethics-related learning opportunities, including examples of ethical dilemmas and ways to resolve them. • Going through specific items on the assessment to identify further opportunities for positive change. • Reinforcing the importance of ethical considerations in agency behaviors and decisions.
Per Section: 50 - 74 Entire Survey: 150 - 224	Medium	Take a moment to reflect. Your agency is in a good place but has room to improve by doing the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluating the areas of weakness indicated by the questionnaire and considering targeted remedial actions. • Analyzing the messages that staff and others receive and send about ethics. • Reviewing the agency's policies, including the criteria by which staff are evaluated. • Consider whether having a code of ethics would be helpful for the agency.
Per Section: 0 - 49 Entire Survey: 0 - 149	Low	Your agency's culture needs significant change. Suggested activities include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying the aspects of the agency's culture that foster the problematic behaviors and analyze how to remediate them. • Consulting with your agency's attorney about potential violations of laws and agency regulations. • Following best practices indicated in the boxes above.

⁴ Respondents indicating they “Don’t Know” represent a gap in an organization’s overall ethical climate and, therefore, factors negatively into the scoring.

Appendix B: About the Survey Tool

[The Institute for Local Government](#) (ILG) is a nonprofit organization that was founded in 1955 with the intention of promoting cooperation and information sharing among California's local public agencies. The ILG has become a leader in addressing urgent public policy issues through its research, publications, and training programs.

The ILG and the International City/County Management Association developed an assessment tool in 2006 to assist public managers in determining the ethical climate of their organizations. Employees are surveyed on their perception of ethical standards upheld by employees, managers, and elected officials within the organization. Those answers are then assigned point values and tabulated to provide a clear snapshot of the internal ethical culture of the agency.

The survey can provide assurance that an agency's ethical culture is in order, and/or highlight potential blind spots that may need to be addressed. This assessment is also used to track progress in the ethical climate of an organization.

Appendix C: OIPA's Independent Whistleblower Hotline

Purpose

The Whistleblower Hotline is an independent, safe and reliable way for SANDAG employees, contracted parties, members of the public or other stakeholders to report allegations of fraud, waste, abuse and gross mismanagement at SANDAG. Reports are received via phone, or email and can be made anonymously.

Authority

The OIPA per Assembly Bill 805 (2018) is the official independent oversight function of SANDAG to investigate allegations of potential fraud, waste, abuse, and gross mismanagement identified by SANDAG staff or other stakeholders.

Investigation and Referral Process

The OIPA conducts a preliminary analysis of each complaint submitted through the Whistleblower Hotline. The following five (5) criteria are used to determine if launching an investigation is warranted:

1. Did it involve SANDAG property, infrastructure, employees, officials, contractors, or does it otherwise fall within the OIPA's jurisdiction?
2. Does it meet the criteria of fraud, waste, abuse, or gross mismanagement?
3. Did it occur within the last year?
4. Was sufficient information provided to initiate an investigation?
5. Is the matter not currently being litigated?

In order to protect the confidential reporting process, updates and conclusions of actions will not be provided. Whistleblower complaints should not be discussed with others, including family, friends, and coworkers, as this may jeopardize your confidentiality.

Completed investigations will be reported in the OIPA's Annual Investigations Report or a standalone investigation report and are not discussed with or provided to Whistleblowers directly.



SANDAG

OIPA

Office of the Independent
Performance Auditor

Whistleblower Hotline

Online

[Contact Form](#)

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⁵ Whistleblower Hotline phone and email accounts route directly to the Independent Performance Auditor.