# Defense Climate Portal Surveys

# Guide to Interpreting Written Comments

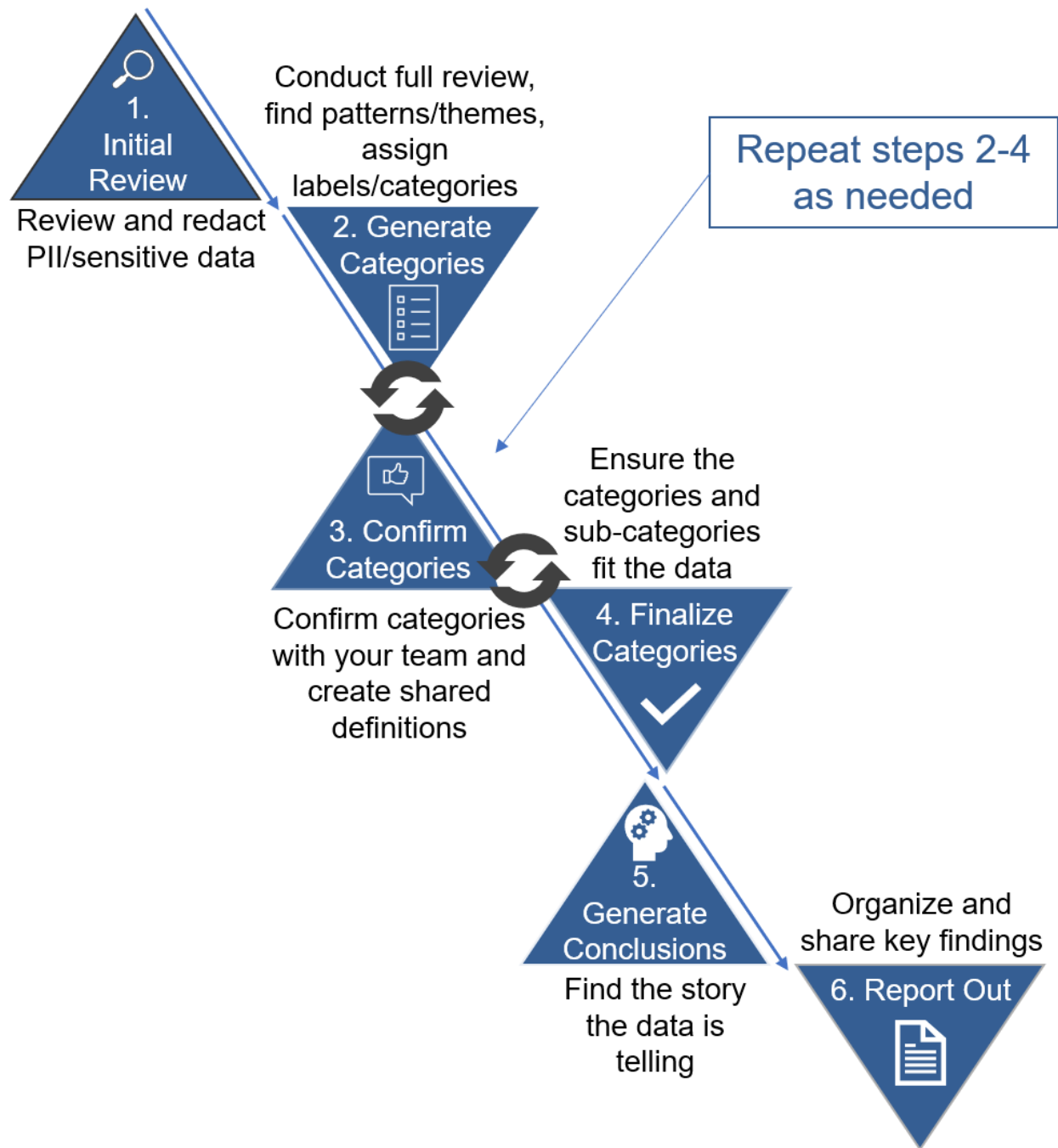## Guide to Interpreting Written Comments

### Table of Contents

## Introduction

When interpreting feedback from the Defense Organizational Climate Survey (DEOCS) or Defense Organizational Climate Pulse (DOCP) survey, valuable command climate insights come from the written (open-ended) responses. Although these responses provide detailed feedback, they can be difficult to accurately summarize. This is particularly true in larger commands with a greater number of responses. This document provides guidance for interpreting the written comments from your open-ended questions. Due to historic naming conventions, these items are referred to as short answer questions (SAQ) in the DEOCS System within the Defense Climate Portal (DCP).

## Overview of the Qualitative Analysis Process

Open-ended survey questions, a type of qualitative research method, are designed to collect richer, more nuanced information than closed-ended survey items can often provide. Analysis of such data begins by conducting a high-level review of the responses to get a sense of their scope. Once this is understood, the reviewer begins the process of identifying themes and patterns that are apparent within the data. These patterns and themes can then be grouped into broader categories. This stage requires an open mind. While it can be helpful to have a general framework of response types in mind before beginning your analysis, it is important to not limit this process to only things you expect to see.

Below is an overview of the qualitative process described in this document.

1. Initial Review — Review and redact PII/sensitive data

Conduct full review, find patterns/themes, assign labels/categories

2. Generate Categories

Repeat steps 2-4 as needed

3. Confirm Categories — Confirm categories with your team and create shared definitions

Ensure the categories and sub-categories fit the data

4. Finalize Categories

5. Generate Conclusions — Find the story the data is telling

Organize and share key findings

6. Report Out

## Common Pitfalls to Avoid

There are some common mistakes that can occur when interpreting and analyzing the written responses to DEOCS and DOCP survey open-ended questions.

- **Confirmation Bias.**  When analyzing written comments, be aware that you and your working group/team members may have preconceived notions that could bias your interpretation.  Confirmation bias occurs when a reviewer searches for, overemphasizes the importance of, or better remembers data patterns that support their preconceived beliefs.  Although this is a natural human tendency, keep in mind that comments that stand out most to you may not be most representative of your unit/organization.

- **Overfocusing on Individual Comments.**  Inflammatory or "hot comments", or comments of a sensitive nature, can easily distract reviewers from the bigger picture.  It is important to look across *all* comments for themes and patterns and not overly fixate on notable but less commonly reported ideas.  Remember that just because a comment is the "loudest," it may not reflect a shared experience among survey participants.  Note: This is not to discourage noteworthy responses—especially those that speak to particularly problematic behaviors— from being taken seriously if only reported by a small number of participants.

- **Overreacting to Negative Comments.**  Negative comments in your report do not necessarily mean there are major weaknesses within your unit/organization.  It is important to keep an open mind, reflect on each comment, and do your best to respond in a deliberative manner.  Negative comments can often feel harsh and personal but aim to focus on their constructive aspects to best address concerns raised by personnel.

- **Jumping Too Quickly into Solution Mode.**  There is a common tendency to spring into action to address an issue at hand.  Sometimes this is appropriate and necessary.  However, often, spending additional time exploring the issue, seeking input from subject matter experts, and weighing different courses of action is more effective.

- **Using Absolute language.**  Avoid using absolute or definitive terms (e.g., "always," "never," "causes").  Instead use terms such as "many," "often," "few," "associated with," etc.

## Written Comments Analysis Steps

Identifying patterns and themes within your data and categorizing or labeling those patterns and themes are the main steps of the qualitative analysis process. This process is often iterative, requiring several readings and reviews of your data, refining your categories, and taking time to confirm that other reviewers are interpreting the data similarly. This process can be broken down into the following four steps:

**Prepare for written comments analysis:**

- Designate personnel from the unit/organization for a working group/team to assist with analyzing written comments/data. This group may consist of Integrated Primary Prevention Workforce (IPPW) personnel, subject matter experts (SME), key leadership and/or trusted representatives from the unit/organization. Optional: Because comment data is extremely sensitive, it is recommended the working group/team members review and sign a local non-disclosure agreement form to ensure confidentiality is maintained.
- Designate a limited number of personnel for the initial restricted review (e.g., survey administrator, commander/leader, legal officer, Chief of Staff).

**Step 1: Conduct an initial review of your data.**

- Provide the written comments report to previously designated personnel for the initial restricted review.
- It is recommended that you use the Excel version of the written comments report so that responses are grouped by question.

| | A | B |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | **Defense Organizational Climate Survey (DEOCS) 5.0** | |
| 2 | **Unit/Organization Title:** | DEOCS Testing |
| 3 | **DEOCS ID:** | 6702d9ae |
| 4 | **Service Component:** | [DEOCS DEMO TRAINING] Military DEOCS |
| 5 | **UIC/PAS/OPFAC Code:** | 1234567890 |
| 6 | **Commander/Leader Name:** | John Smith |
| 7 | **Survey Administrator:** | Laura Jones |
| 8 | **Survey Date:** | 2/16/2022 - 2/23/2022 |
| 9 | **Subgroup:** | Overall Unit/Organization |
| 10 | | |
| 11 | | |
| 12 | | |
| 13 | | |
| 14 | | |
| 15 | | |
| 16 | | |
| 17 | | |
| 18 | | |

Survey_Details | Question_Text_Key | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q5 | Q6 | Q7 | Q8 | (+)

- Provide guidance for what to look for during the initial review. This might include subjects that would prompt an investigation such as violations of the Uniformed Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), illegal activity, threats to harm self or others and/or presence prohibited behaviors.
- The initial review also includes a comprehensive search for and redacting of Personal Identifying Information (PII) or sensitive topics that should be limited to personnel with a need to know (e.g., through context clues that point toward the unique experience(s) or situation of a certain individual).
- Redact any PII or information pertaining to official investigations (i.e., create a "restricted copy").

| | A | B |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | **Group_Name** | **Q1** |
| 2 | Overall Unit/Organization | Everything has been horrible so far. **I hate SGT [redacted] and I think she is stealing from the [redacted] funds.** |
| 3 | Overall Unit/Organization | I don't know why there are so many questions |
| 4 | Overall Unit/Organization | I have had a good experience with my unit. |
| 5 | Overall Unit/Organization | **I would like to report sexually harassing behaviors from leadership in the [redacted] Department.** |
| 6 | Overall Unit/Organization | I joined this unit about 6 months ago but I've had a lot of bad experiences so far with this unit. |
| 7 | Overall Unit/Organization | I love my unit and couldn't be happier with it. |
| 8 | Overall Unit/Organization | I'm really happy with my decision to join the National Guard! I love my unit and I'm so lucky to be with great people! |
| 9 | Overall Unit/Organization | My experience has been good so far. Nothing to complain about. |
| 10 | Overall Unit/Organization | My experience has been okay. There are definitely some issues but I feel like it could be worse. |
| 11 | Overall Unit/Organization | My experience has been really poor. **CPT [redacted] is a toxic leader and I wish I didn't have to work with him.** |
| 12 | Overall Unit/Organization | My unit is cool. Lots of really cool dudes. |
| 13 | Overall Unit/Organization | My unit is good. Honeslty a lot better than some of my friends' units. Everything runs super well. |
| 14 | Overall Unit/Organization | My unit is great so far, no bad experiences. |
| 15 | Overall Unit/Organization | My unit is just okay. Nothing crazy has happened and everyone is pretty chill. |
| 16 | Overall Unit/Organization | my unit is so great. |

Survey_Details | Question_Text_Key | **Q1** | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q5 | Q6 | Q7 | Q8 | (+)

- Provide the additional working group/team members who will be reviewing and interpreting the written comments with the restricted copy of the closed-ended question responses so that each team member can perform their own independent review.

## Step 2: Familiarize yourself with your data and generate categories.

- Provide a restricted copy of the written comments report to all members of the working group/team.
- Carefully review all written responses. Group open-ended question responses into categories and, if appropriate, subcategories. Identify noteworthy patterns/themes (e.g., communication, morale, leadership)
- The example below shows how you might review responses to parse out different categories and sub-categories. This step would occur after a preliminary review of all responses to an open-ended question, such that you would know that "communication," "negative experiences," and "deployment" are themes that broadly appear across responses.

**Example open-ended question: "What three change(s) would you make that you feel would most improve the unit's/organization's climate?"**

| Review | Possible category/label | Possible sub-categories |
|---|---|---|
| **Review 1:** More information pushed down from leadership about how and why decisions are made. I feel like we are left in the dark and that leadership is just making our lives harder with the decisions they make, especially with deployment coming up, even though that's most likely not the case. More communication with the cadets that is honest would help build more trust between us and leadership. | The primary subject in this concerns **communication** and how it could be improved. | A possible sub-category for might be **leadership**. Other subcategories could include **peers**, and **transparency**. |
| **Review 2:** More information pushed down from leadership about how and why decisions are made. I feel like we are left in the dark and that leadership is just making our lives harder with the decisions they make, especially with deployment coming up, even though that's most likely not the case. More communication with the cadets that is honest would help build more trust between us and leadership. | This respondent noted that the perceived lack of **communication** is a negative experience for them. | Possible sub-categories might be **negative experiences** and **transparency**. |
| **Review 3:** More information pushed down from leadership about how and why decisions are made. I feel like we are left in the dark and that leadership is just making our lives harder with the decisions they make, especially with deployment coming up, even though that's most likely not the case. More communication with the cadets that is honest would help build more trust between us and leadership. | Even though this text highlight is identical to the one above, an additional major category might be **Deployment**, particularly if this is a known topic of interest to leadership. | A possible sub-category be **decision-making** (or **policy**). |

## Step 3: Reach consensus about categories among working group/team members.

- Discuss the categories you have generated with the working group/team.
- Reconcile any discrepancies in how different reviewers interpreted and labeled the data.

## Step 4: Finalize categories and continue with the review process.

- Plan to leave the working group/team discussion with a single, consolidated list of categories.
- Establish definitions for all categories, especially for those that feel vague, or may be easy to interpret differently.
  - o For example, defining "deployments" as a broad category is likely simpler to understand and apply than "social stressors." Having a

detailed definition of "social stressors" will benefit reviewers and increase the quality of the findings.

- Organize your data across the categories.
    - o Option 1: Using a spreadsheet, create a row for each unique category and sub-category. Copy and paste the relevant written comment responses into the applicable categories. An example of this is provided below.

**Example open-ended question: "It is important for us to understand your experience in your unit organization. If you choose, you may use this space to add anything else you want to say."**

| Category | Sub-category | Written Response 1 | Written Response 2 | Written Response 3 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mess Hall | Offerings | The mess hall has not been able to feed all of us properly and there has been days where I haven't had a full meal because the mess hall is short staffed. | The new mess hall policy almost exclusively relied on Fish as the primary protein source. This is widely unpopular as it took away many of our favorite meals, such as pizza, wings, chicken tenders, etc., and it does not allow us to control our own diet. | |
| | Nutrition | I don't like how there are no nutrition facts/calorie guidelines for the food in the mess hall. I want to be able to make an informed decision about what I am putting in my body | It is hard to stick to a 1200 calorie diet a day, when there are no serving sizes or calorie counts on the mess hall food (my main source of sustenance). | we also do not know what we are eating because nutrition is not posted, we need calorie and macronutrient counts. |
| | Times/waits | Shorter mess hall lines would be nice. | The mess hall has lines out the door and one can wait for an hour to receive food in the middle of the workday. | |
| | Space | Regarding the mess hall, we are packed into a single area to grab food and there are usually not enough tables and chairs to fit everybody. | | |

| Category | Sub-category | Written Response 1 | Written Response 2 | Written Response 3 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Fairness | Discipline | Discipline is not something this unit is familiar with, let alone administered fairly. Multiple instances have occurred where corners have been cut, regulations ambiguously interpreted outright disobeyed | NCO's in the unit should be holding their soldiers accountable and enforcing discipline at the small unit leadership level. The issues happening within the unit may be due to the relaxed environment that they enforce because of this, soldiers are becoming complacent. | Self-discipline and ownership. Empower subordinate leaders to discipline Soldiers effectively. Ensure all Soldiers understand the importance of owning and caring for their equipment. |
| | Respect | Ensure leadership is following the policy of people first and treating people with respect. | The unit is good at showing respect, the staff has been built up since last year. Now everyone has a voice and all opinions are heard. That was not how it was two years ago or even just last year. | Respect should be instilled in this unit, not just as a solider but as human being because at the end of the day we're all human beings. |
| | Favoritism | Those who work hard are not rewarded. Those who know how to look good on paper (or to a more experienced individual who knows how to make them look good on paper) obtain all recognition. Those not favored by leadership are excluded and/or forgotten. | Certain Staff NCO's play favoritism which causes some to skip the chain of command and cause more drama in the unit. | |

[Note: The example is only for illustrative purposes.  These text examples were taken from real DEOCS comments, but may have been responses to other questions, and/or edited.]

- o Option 2: Another way to organize your data is similar to the previous highlighting example (p. 7), where text is color-coded (i.e., with each snippet of text highlighted a different color to denote a different category.  This often works well for short and simple responses that do not have many sub-categories.
- o Option 3: You can tag text or leave comments with the category name, and you can search and find all text tagged or commented for a category to begin generating findings from your data.  This

also works well for short and simple responses that do not have many sub-categories.

- Regardless of the approach selected, you may need to scrutinize and review your data several times. It is not uncommon to repeat steps 2-4 a few times to produce a final list of categories. It is beneficial to take a thorough, back-and-forth approach among the working group/team that includes review, assessment, and comparison and consensus building.
    - o For example, some initially identified categories may prove to be too broad. Breaking those down further into more specific categories will make the story being told clearer.
    - o Conversely, you may find that some categories are too niche or specific and combining similar categories to make a new, broader category will ultimately help you tell a clearer story.
    - o Finally, some categories may need to be redefined as more data is reviewed.
- If the working group/team does not include one or more IPPW personnel or SMEs, the working group/team should consider consulting with higher echelon IPPW/SMEs to determine whether the final categories are sufficiently clear and comprehensive.
- It's suggested that categories should not be considered final until all the data has been read through and the labeling scrutinized at least twice. It is important that, by the end of this phase, the working group/team can clearly define what the themes/categories are and what they are not.

## Step 5: Generate Conclusions

Build a story from the patterns and themes. Using your spreadsheet or identified text, read through all responses assigned to each category at least twice to get an understanding of scope and tone. For example, if you are reviewing comments pertaining to deployment, note how many participants discussed deployment and begin drawing conclusions. Review the sub-categories as individual categories of their own. It may help to begin by reviewing all text pertaining to the most common theme or tone to help you paint the fullest, most accurate picture of the survey responses.

Although it can be helpful to include counts (e.g., five of 10 participants expressed a similar belief or perception), it is important to recognize that these numbers may not be representative of the entire unit/organization. That is, just because 50% of your focus group respondents shared a similar viewpoint does NOT mean that 50% of the unit/organization does.

## Step 6: Report Findings

A common way to report open-ended question findings is to organize them first by the overarching questions (i.e., the open-ended questions themselves), then by categories with the greatest number of responses, and finally any sub-categories. It may look like this:

1. **Open-ended Question #1**
    a. *Category 1 –* Include overall findings of what participants had to say about this category.
        i. **Sub-category a –** Include findings specific to this sub-category.
        ii. **Sub-category b** [see above]
        iii. **Sub-category c** [see above]
        iv. **Category 1 conclusion –** Include a summary of this category's findings, as well as any implications. Also note what other categories, if any, did this category overlap with? If there is overlap, are there many similarities or differences?
    b. *Category 2* [see above]
        i. **Sub-category a** [see above]
        ii. **Sub-category b** [see above]
        iii. **Category 2 conclusion** [see above]
    c. *Category 3* [see above]
        i. **Sub-category a** [see above]
        ii. **Category 3 conclusion** [see above]
2. **Open-ended Question #2**
3. **…**

Here is an example based on the open-ended question responses on page 8 and 9 of this document:

1. **Open-ended Question #1**
    a. *Mess Hall*
        i. **Offerings –** Lack of various protein sources and the mess hall is short staffed which leads to long wait times.
        ii. **Nutrition –** Serving sizes, calorie counts, and other nutritional facts are not posted.
        iii. **Time/waits –** Mess Hall wait times and lines are long.
        iv. **Space –** There is limited space for individuals to sit and eat.
        v. **Conclusion –** The mess hall has long wait times for food, some feel there should be more food options, individuals want nutrition information posted, and some note there is limited dining space.
2. **Open-ended Question #2**
    a. *Fairness*
        i. **Discipline –** Currently a lack of discipline and discipline is not being administered consistently.

ii. **Respect –** According to one individual, respect has shown signs of improvement, but most soldiers want the command to respect them more individually.

iii. **Favoritism –** Favoritism occurs and impacts perception of fairness within the command.

iv. **Conclusion –** Some personnel feel that discipline is lacking and favoritism is present. While perceptions of respect are improving within the organization, the majority of soldiers are looking for more respect within the command.

Though definitive terms and counts represented in charts are not recommended, there are ways to visually represent qualitative data to make it more digestible. These include:

- Concept or process mapping
- Callout boxes to highlight items of particulate interest
- Word clouds or phrase nets, where the size and color of the words can demonstrate broad frequency of the word/phrase

The most important aspect of reporting is to let the data dictate what will be included and, as mentioned previously, to take care that biases do not interfere with what findings are emphasized and presented.

## Additional Steps

Now that you have analyzed your written comments, here are some additional actions you might pursue:

- Provide the findings to the commander/leader.
- Collaborate with IPPW personnel for further development or updating of the Comprehensive Integrated Primary Prevention (CIPP) Plan.
- Report the themes to the unit/command personnel.
- If you were analyzing comments for a DEOCS, consider incorporating this information into your DEOCS Results Unit/Organization Brief, DEOCS Commander's Supervisor Brief, Initial DEOCS Results Preview Brief, and DEOCS Results Brochure.
- Collaborate with the prevention services to generate corrective measures.