Author's response to reviews

Title: Using focus groups to understand causes for morale decline after introducing change in an IM residency program:

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Below we summarize the concerns and suggestions of the reviewers, and detail in each case how we addressed the concern. In addition, our manuscript is submitted with track-changes, so that it is easy to find the revisions.

REVIEWER 1:

1. Why were external facilitators not used? Could internal facilitators really be impartial? Did they also have morale decline and axes to grind? We have now added material acknowledging this risk, and describing training of the facilitators designed to mitigate bias in both the Methods section (p. 4, para 3) and in the Limitations (p. 13, para 2) since obviously this is a potential limitation.

2. The dissenting positive comments should be elaborated on. We have added several examples of countervailing positive comments by residents (p 7, lines 7-9 and para 2; p 8-9, last line, lines 1-5; p 9, para 2; p 10, para 1). It is important that outliers had a positive reaction – what were factors that might explain this. What protected them? Unfortunately, we do not have much specific information about the “protective factors” contributing to the positive outliers’ responses. In the Discussion, p 13, para 1, we have added speculative thinking as to why these residents might have differed from the majority.

3. Would individual interviews have been more effective? Did the overall negativity of the FGs “infect” the rest of the group? Would you have gotten more accurate information from individual interviews? These are all valuable queries, and may indeed have been a limitation of the study. As such, we discuss it under Limitations, p 14, para 2 and 3, and explain how the methodology of the focus group itself attempts to ameliorate “group-think”; and also compare the various pros and cons of focus groups vs. individual interviews, and have added a reference supporting this discussion (#26). Certainly there is no perfect approach to the conundrum of soliciting honest opinions from research subjects.
4. Theme 3 'Much of the responsibility for morale decline was unfairly.....' Who says it was unfair? How was this judged? The reviewer makes an excellent point. The adverb “unfairly” has been removed, as it suggests a certain subjectivity in interpreting the finding (p 8, para 2). We have retained the descriptor of “surprising” as this connotes the unexpectedness of this finding in the eyes of the research team, given their previous knowledge of the perceived competence of these individuals and the respect in which they were held. We hope that this point is now clarified in the text.

5. Theme 4 'moral outrage and bitterness': how is this defined? This language arose as a result of the research team’s group meetings and discussions. We have now defined moral outrage as the term is used in the social sciences and explained why the research team chose to use it to sum up their interpretation of the transcripts (p 10, para 2, p 11, para 1). We have also added an explanatory reference (#23).

REVIEWER 2:

1. Giving more detail about the quantitative survey would strengthen the study. We provided more information about the survey, both in the narrative (p 3, para 2) and by including a table reporting results of the survey for the trigger year, as well as the two preceding years.

2. Better title: The reviewer suggests two alternative titles to better reflect the focus of this study. We agree that the original title of the article missed the main issue of our research – the fallout from introducing programmatic change, and appreciate the suggestions of reviewer 2 to improve the title. We chose TITLE #1.

In addition, we reviewed the entire manuscript and made minor changes to improve readability and flow.