



Government Personnel

How to Effectively Manage the Federal Workforce

By Max Stier

Our government is broken. The new president and his leadership team need to fix it. The work required will not be easy, and it certainly will not be glamorous. But it will be critical to realizing every single one of the new administration's goals. Making government work better will start with the improved management of its greatest asset—its people.

Rather than feeling inspired, too many of our 1.9 million federal employees feel they are underutilized and under attack—and for good reason. Elected officials have engaged in bureaucrat bashing for decades. In addition, federal human capital issues, and operational matters in general, consistently fail to get the attention they deserve, largely because our government is run by short-term political leadership that has little or no incentive to focus on long-term organizational health issues.

The new administration has a powerful incentive to reverse this trend. Political appointees do not sign up for a grueling job in government to help pass a one-time health care reform bill or climate change bill. They do so to increase the number of people who have access to quality health care, or to reduce greenhouse gas emissions because of the threat to our planet's health. That requires not only approving policies but implementing them. An investment in management issues is an investment in achieving the new president's ultimate goals.

The key to improving our federal government's operational health is a robust management agenda that tackles challenges from federal budgeting to the use of technology to deliver services. The new president needs to make sure his administration's management agenda is not just some box that gets checked, but a high-profile initiative that is viewed by all federal leaders and the general public as integral to the realization of the new president's goals. The centerpiece of the 44th president's management plan needs to be a strategy to restore prestige to our federal workforce. Every single policy of the next administration will be influenced by the people charged with executing it. Simply put, good government starts with good people.



This chapter is part of an online effort by the Center for American Progress Action Fund and New Democracy Project to offer expert advice to the new administration as part of its *Change for America* book project.

The right talent

Our federal government expects to lose roughly one-third of its employees in the next five years, the majority through retirement. Many factors make filling these looming talent gaps a daunting proposition. A general lack of knowledge about federal service prevents most in-demand job seekers from even considering government jobs. Increases in the average debt burden of college graduates drive them toward more lucrative private-sector jobs. The federal hiring process takes too long, is too complicated, lacks transparency, and often fails to produce the right talent for the right jobs. Finally, our government's nearly 60-year-old compensation system is inflexible, antiquated, and lacks market and performance sensitivity.

To attract the right talent, the new president and Congress should expand the use of financial incentives to attract new talent. We should establish a new government-wide scholarship program to fund graduate-level study in exchange for a federal service commitment in targeted mission-critical jobs. The bipartisan Roosevelt Scholars Program, proposed by Reps. David Price (D-NC) and Chris Shays (R-CT), is a Reserve Officer Training Corps-like program that could restore prestige to federal service by raising awareness about federal opportunities and rebranding our government as a place where the best and brightest go to make a difference.

The new president then needs to use his bully pulpit to promote government service. A recruiting strategy with the greatest chance of success is one accompanied by a call to service from the newly elected president. Promoting federal service will also boost the morale of current federal employees.

The next step would be to make the federal pay system more sensitive to the marketplace and to performance. The existing General Schedule compensation system, which bases pay primarily on longevity and offers limited flexibility to reward high performers, should be re-engineered through negotiations with government unions, and with extra care to ensure new systems do not unfairly reward political appointees at the expense of career staff.

Separate from these negotiations, the Office of Management and Budget and the Office of Personnel Management should fix the federal hiring process to eliminate redundancies and better reflect the experience applicants expect. The new president should encourage all agencies to adopt a Federal Job Applicant's Bill of Rights, which ensures all candidates will be treated fairly and their applications handled openly and promptly.

Agency leaders then should take ownership of talent issues. Many federal managers see recruiting as a human resources function. While being careful not to politicize hiring, federal managers should play an active role in making sure their agencies are bringing in the right talent. They need to engage in more aggressive, strategic recruiting, and expand their agencies' outreach to young people, retiring baby boomers, and ethnically diverse candidates of all ages by promoting opportunities to do good and do well in government service.

An engaged workforce

Research consistently shows that increases in employee engagement lead directly to improvements in organizational performance. Engaged employees are satisfied with their jobs and organizations; they derive a sense of personal accomplishment from their work; and they believe their talents are used well and given the chance to develop and innovate. Professional development opportunities can be a critical tool for engaging workers, but federal training dollars are often unavailable or unspent. In addition, most federal agencies miss a huge opportunity to engage their employees by making scant effort to integrate new employees.

To boost civil servant engagement with their jobs, the new administration's agency leaders should meet early with career managers and union officials. New political appointees should reach out aggressively to career staff and unions and make clear that they want to work in partnership with them. Appointees should also set clear expectations and provide regular feedback. At a minimum, every federal employee should receive an annual written review from a capable supervisor who can effectively communicate performance expectations and provide constructive feedback. As importantly, employees should receive ongoing feedback about their work.

More broadly, agency leaders need to link job assessments to broader objectives. Managers should build a clear line of sight from an employee's work to the agency's mission. Then they need to enhance formal training. Agencies should develop and implement skill- and competency-based training curricula geared to key occupational and employee groups such as first-line supervisors, managers, HR professionals, engineers, language specialists, and procurement specialists. On-the-job improvement, though, is equally critical. Senior agency managers need to make greater use of mentoring and coaching to prepare employees for advancement, including into supervisory and managerial positions. They also need to provide cross-training and rotational assignments to broaden employees' experience bases and competencies and prepare them for advancement.

Federal leaders should employ smarter onboarding practices, viewing the way they integrate new hires as a year-long process of acculturating new employees. Priority should be given to making a positive first impression and quickly providing employees with challenging work and the tools and resources to do it.

Strong leadership

The Partnership for Public Service's *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government* rankings consistently show that the quality of leadership is the greatest single determinant of workforce engagement and effectiveness. Yet employees in the federal sector are twice as likely as their counterparts in private industry to report that their supervisors do not

have the leadership skills needed to do their jobs effectively. Consequently, the Office of Management and Budget and the Office of Personnel Management should prioritize core competencies for public-sector leaders. The administration should develop a checklist of competencies to assess whether or not an individual is qualified to be a federal leader, and then establish a leadership team at each agency.

The senior political team at all agencies should include at least one person with a strong background in managing people. Agency leaders should then hire managers based on leadership abilities, making sure they promote or hire employees into supervisory positions only if they possess essential managerial skills, not purely because of technical skills or seniority. Federal agencies should also invest in the training and development of political and career leaders. Leadership development programs should include a blend of classroom training, performance feedback from supervisors and subordinates, and challenging job assignments.

Better organizational metrics

All of the efforts to get the right talent, engage employees, and improve leadership only matter if they help to achieve the ultimate goal of improving organizational performance. The problem is that our government lacks a proven system of indicators to measure programmatic success and determine if federal agencies have the right people with the right skills to do our nation's work.

Measuring operational performance is much harder in the public sector, where one cannot simply look at profits as a yardstick of success. Developing real, outcome-oriented performance metrics for the federal government has been, and will continue to be, a major challenge. The process will be iterative, requiring work with multiple stakeholder groups over time to ensure that results are clear, accurate, and practical.

A performance measurement tool can help pinpoint major problems in government when there is still time to do something about them. It can also uncover notable successes and best practices that can be replicated across the government. This information will also help federal managers understand what factors may cause these problems and successes, such as a lack of resources.

The Bush administration's Program Assessment Rating Tool, or PART, represents progress toward measuring program performance and making data transparent to the general public. Some people saw PART as an instrument to justify the elimination of federal programs, which means the new administration will not only need to revise PART to address its shortcomings, but also rebrand it so people will use it for its strengths, not resist it because of its weaknesses.

PART also suffered from being poorly understood by federal employees, policymakers, and the public. As a next step, PART should be improved by emphasizing public outcomes rather than programmatic activities. Assessing how government deals with a subject such as food safety across agency lines would offer the American people a better sense of how government is performing than only grading individual programs.

Operational metrics are integral not only to promoting the ultimate goal of improved performance, but also to gauging efforts to secure the right talent, engage employees, improve federal leadership, and build public support. If the new administration prioritizes management and workforce development issues and creates operational metrics to gauge government effectiveness, it will greatly enhance its chances of achieving its goals.

About the author

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