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**Using Organizational Science Research to Address U.S. Federal Agencies' Management and Labor Needs \***

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# **Using Organizational Science Research to Address U.S. Federal Agencies' Management and Labor Needs**

## **Summary**

We describe important and common management and labor needs across more than 80 federal agencies as identified by the annual Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) and offer evidence-based interventions for addressing them based on organizational science research. Our recommendations have the synergistic goals of improving employee wellbeing, employee productivity, and agency performance and innovation, which will result in increased agency efficiency and effectiveness for the taxpayer. Specifically, we describe empirical findings and offer suggestions for interventions to improve (a) employee motivation through engagement, empowerment, and embeddedness; (b) employee voice; and (c) within- and across-unit cooperation, communication, and collaboration. We offer recommendations that are sufficiently general to be relevant to many agencies, while also being concrete and actionable. We also offer suggestions for associated research that could be conducted in federal agencies interested in these topics.

## **Using Organizational Science Research to Address U.S. Federal Agencies' Management and Labor Needs**

The United States government is committed to “improving the performance of government at every level”<sup>1</sup>. Organizational science research conducted over the past 100 years, involving millions of people across industries and occupations and published in hundreds of scientific journals, has produced empirical evidence that is now widely accepted: Employees produce better outcomes when they are happy with and knowledgeable about their jobs, are respected, trust their leaders, and are able to participate in work-related decisions<sup>2,3,4</sup>.

Recognizing the importance of employees as a key factor in determining agency performance, for over a decade the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has conducted the annual Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS), which provides government employees the opportunity to candidly share perceptions of their work experiences, agencies, and leaders<sup>5</sup>. The latest (2015) edition of FEVS summarizes responses of over 420,000 employees in more than 80 large and small departments and agencies on three major indices: employee engagement, overall job satisfaction, and workplace inclusion. Accordingly, FEVS results offer the most up-to-date evidence regarding employees' perceptions of management and labor needs. Moreover, federal agencies seem to care about FEVS results, which as noted in the 2015 FEVS report, provide “important focus for future strategic initiatives” (p. 1)<sup>6</sup>.

Using the 2015 FEVS, we identified management and labor needs important and common across agencies. In this article, we use an evidence-based approach relying on cumulative scientific findings to explain what is known about these issues and suggest interventions aimed at increasing (a) employee motivation through engagement, empowerment, and embeddedness; (b) employee voice; and (c) within- and across-agency cooperation,

communication, and collaboration. Overall, our recommendations have the synergistic goals of improving employee wellbeing, employee productivity, and agency performance and innovation, which will result in increased agency efficiency and effectiveness for the taxpayer<sup>1</sup>.

Before we describe our recommendations, we highlight five important clarifications. First, we focus on actions that federal agencies themselves can feasibly carry out without changes in legislation or regulations in order to emphasize what agency leaders already have the power to accomplish. Second, we focused on those needs (a) for which many agencies have scored in ways that evidenced clear room for improvement, and (b) for which evidence-based interventions are tangible, actionable, and doable. There are additional needs that have also been identified (e.g., related to employee coping, employee resilience, and job conditions) and for which there is relevant evidence-based organizational science literature, but we are not able to address those due to space constraints. Third, although our recommendations are intended for the federal government, we rely on research conducted in both public and private sectors, and our recommendations are broadly applicable. Fourth, although our recommendations do not identify specific occupational groups, interventions could focus initially on critical occupations such as IT specialists. For example, the 2015 FEVS report noted that “A number of occupations have been identified as critical to the achievement of agency missions, including IT specialists” (p. 2). Fifth, in addition to interventions we offer suggestions for future research to be conducted specifically within the context of federal agencies. For example, it would be informative to compare those employed directly by the federal government (i.e., civil service employees) with contractors and assess whether differences in employment status are related to performance outcomes and other metrics of critical concern such as safety, communication, and cohesion.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout our article, we refer to specific items from FEVS. The item list is available on pages 28-31 of the 2015 FEVS report at [https://www.fedview.opm.gov/2015FILES/2015\\_FEVS\\_Gwide\\_Final\\_Report.PDF](https://www.fedview.opm.gov/2015FILES/2015_FEVS_Gwide_Final_Report.PDF).

## **Goal #1:**

### **Enhancing Employee Motivation through Engagement, Empowerment, and Embeddedness**

During the past three decades, empirical research on employee motivation has yielded valuable insights concerning three motivational concepts: engagement, empowerment, and embeddedness. For each of these concepts, robust empirical evidence is available to guide organizational interventions to improve employee motivation and reap its benefits.

Strong employee engagement is present when employees report positive physical (feeling energetic and resilient), emotional (emotionally attached and dedicated), and cognitive (focused and absorbed) responses to their work. Engaged employees are fully invested in their work and believe it is meaningful. Numerous studies have demonstrated that employee engagement results in better job performance and enhanced organizational citizenship behavior (i.e., behaviors beneficial to the organization but not directly included in job descriptions)<sup>7,8</sup>.

Empirical studies of empowerment have focused on feelings of meaningfulness, self-determination, competence, and impact<sup>9,10</sup>. Management practices promoting these feelings reap many benefits including improved individual and team performance, greater innovation, enhanced organizational citizenship behavior, reduced feelings of strain, and lower likelihood of turnover. The motivating value of empowerment appears to be particularly great in the service sector<sup>11</sup>.

Employee embeddedness refers to the extent to which individuals feel enmeshed or pulled into their workplace, creating strong psychological attachment. Research shows that employees who report feelings of being highly embedded demonstrate better job performance, are more likely to exhibit organizational citizenship behaviors, and are less likely to subsequently voluntarily leave their employers<sup>12,13</sup>. The FEVS includes numerous items addressing motivation

including for example: item #3: “I feel encouraged to come up with new and better ways of doing things”; item #4: “My work gives me a feeling of personal accomplishment”; and item #11: “My talents are used well in the workplace.”

### **Evidence-based Recommendations for Enhancing Employee Motivation through Engagement, Empowerment, and Embeddedness**

***Redesign jobs.*** Important features of job design are: using a variety of valued skills, understanding how one’s work contributes to larger organizational objectives, and having sufficient autonomy to determine how to perform one’s work. A technique leveraging these features is the “Rapid Results” method. This structured process involves leaders working with staff members to identify problems, develop solutions, and set goals for making needed changes that can be completed in approximately 100 days<sup>14</sup>. Used successfully by many organizations worldwide, the Rapid Results method can engage and empower employees in making changes that address obstacles to their own motivation.

***Use a formal employee suggestion system.*** Empowerment involves providing a path through which employees can influence the setting and achievement of strategic objectives and operational activities. It also involves employees in decisions and initiatives that affect an entire work unit or agency, signals management’s trust, and affirms employees’ feelings of efficacy and competence. Furthermore, when decision-making processes ensure participation of employees with different perspectives and knowledge bases, creativity and innovation result<sup>15</sup>. Sophisticated employee suggestion systems have been used in a wide range of companies as well as several federal agencies. These programs often involve allowing employees (often working in self-organized teams) to develop ideas for new products and services during normal work hours, a formal system for evaluating proposed ideas, a commitment to dedicate significant resources to

ideas that are judged to be worthwhile, and giving recognition and rewards (often non-monetary) to employees who offer the best suggestions.

***Use performance dashboards.*** Being able to perform well in one's job is motivating, while performing poorly is demotivating and contributes to a downward spiral of performance. Importantly, motivation is influenced by the competence of one's managers and co-workers as well as one's own competence. Allowing poor-performing individuals to remain in their jobs for too long may seem kind, but it is demotivating for other employees. An effective human resource management system ensures that employees are placed in jobs they are competent to perform doing work that contribute to an organization's bottom-line financial health<sup>16,17</sup>. If employees have the required skills but are not performing satisfactorily, their managers may need assistance in setting meaningful performance goals and providing frequent performance feedback<sup>18</sup>. Performance dashboards that display a few key performance metrics for an individual (including leaders), team, or an entire organization are increasingly used to provide the types of feedback so important to sustaining employee motivation and performance and making decisions such as who requires training and whom to terminate. Indeed, digital performance dashboards are increasingly being used for employees working in jobs as diverse as sales, nursing, delivery drivers, and Chief Executive Officers<sup>19</sup>.

## **Goal #2: Improving Voice**

Healthy, high-performing organizations are ones where employees are comfortable identifying challenges and problems as well as ideas for improvement<sup>20,21</sup>. However, empirical evidence suggests that employees often withhold such information, and that they do so for three primary reasons: they are afraid, they think it is futile, or they lack the motivation to speak up<sup>22,23</sup>. Moreover, whistle-blowers often suffer negative consequences for speaking up<sup>24</sup>. But, the



costs of this information withholding, called “employee silence,” involve not just the disasters that eventually make headlines, but also smaller and much more frequent losses such as reduced efficiency, missed opportunities, and employee disengagement and turnover<sup>25,26</sup>.

Empirical evidence<sup>27</sup> suggests that employee silence is seen at all hierarchical levels and not just within private sector organizations, but also within major federal agencies. Specifically, as indicated in the 2015 FEVS report, it appears that close to half of the federal employees who responded to the survey are unsure about whether it is worthwhile or safe to speak up about organizational improvement- or ethics-related issues (e.g., see responses to item #3: “I feel encouraged to come up with new and better ways of doing things,” and item #17: “I can disclose a suspected violation of any law, rule or regulation without fear of reprisal”). These broad survey results are consistent with numerous more specific investigations in recent years that have identified problems with the voice culture in places like the Veterans Health Administration<sup>28</sup>, the New York Federal Reserve Bank<sup>29</sup>, and some parts of the U.S. intelligence<sup>30</sup> and military community<sup>31</sup>. Reported problems range from self-censoring based on fear of consequences to reports of actual retaliation for speaking up. Fortunately, organizational science researchers have made significant strides in understanding the key drivers of voice behavior. For instance, immediate supervisors who actually solicit input (e.g., by walking around) rather than merely saying they are open to voice (e.g., announcing an open door policy) receive more input<sup>32</sup>. In addition, managers who act upon ideas received and report back to employees on those actions encourage employee voice<sup>33</sup>.

### **Evidence-based Recommendations for Improving Voice**

*Target leaders to influence groups and units.* Because individual leaders strongly influence employees’ voice beliefs and behavior, it is not unusual to see different structures,

processes, and climates for voice across units even within the same organization<sup>34</sup>. In other words, people are influenced by those around them perceived to have power including leaders and peers.<sup>35</sup> This means that interventions targeting leader training and effective behavior, which can be done with relatively less time or resource investment, could be very powerful in terms of having a positive downward effect in the entire unit. In short, interventions focused at the unit level, such as those focusing on leaders, are more likely to be effective, efficient, and scalable compared to ones solely focused on a unit's individual members.

***Reduce information flow barriers.*** Because centralized decision making and separated divisions tend to decrease information flow<sup>36,37</sup>, interventions could be adopted to either reduce these structural barriers or to seek broader input despite them<sup>38,39</sup>. For example, consider skillfully-conducted “skip-level meetings,” which are unscripted, unannounced casual opportunities to have coffee or lunch with a leader two or more levels higher in the chain of command<sup>40</sup>. Also, consider a “facilitated strategic input process,” in which trusted employees are empowered and trained to collect and deliver information about barriers to accomplishing strategic objectives and then work with senior management to develop a response<sup>41</sup>. Skip-level meetings and facilitated strategic input processes can be implemented to increase transparent communication and organizational learning and both of these methodologies have been found to facilitate information flow and reduce employee silence around key strategic issues.

***Improve our understanding of voice solicitation and accountability.*** A variety of alternative approaches might be used to improve our understanding of various types of voice interventions within the federal government. Within a given agency, some units could train leaders to actively engage in voice solicitation<sup>42</sup>, others could train leaders to act upon the input received<sup>43</sup>, and others could be used as control groups. Alternatively, programs focused on

“voice accountability” (e.g., evaluating employees for their improvement-oriented input and/or managers for creating healthy voice climates) versus “upside sharing” (e.g., allowing those who provide and enact solutions to share some of what is saved or gained) could be compared. Pre- and post-intervention assessment of both voice behavior and outcome metrics could be obtained to assess the effectiveness of these changes and their ease of implementation in agency settings.

***Improve our understanding of union-management partnerships.*** Employee voice can occur through either individual or collective processes and can be encouraged and supported by management alone or jointly through union-management partnerships. In unionized settings, joint sponsorship of employee engagement and problem solving teams and partnerships have been shown to enhance job satisfaction, union satisfaction, and organizational performance<sup>44</sup>. There have been a number of efforts to promote labor-management partnerships in federal agencies in the past but limited research on their effects<sup>45</sup>. This would be an ideal area for agency or unit-based experimentation and evaluation.

### **Goal #3:**

#### **Improving within- and across-agency Cooperation, Communication, and Collaboration**

Classic models of organizations depict them as systems of cooperation and coordination<sup>46</sup> in which members collaborate effectively within work teams and across divisions or groups for mutual benefit<sup>47</sup>. Collaboration has had a central place in organizational science research because it affects knowledge acquisition and creation, organizational learning, resource-sharing, high-quality work relationships, quality of labor-management relations, innovation, managerial success, goal attainment, and high performance<sup>48,49</sup>

The 2015 FEVS report (p. 12) noted that “The continued decline in scores for the Cooperative sub-factor indicates an area that leaders government-wide should pay particular

attention to in the future.” Promoting communication and collaboration across work units seems to be a leadership challenge. These declines in the Cooperative sub-factor may be related to declines observed in some of the “Leaders Lead” items (e.g., item #58: “Managers promote communication among different work units [for example, about projects, goals, needed resources],” and item #59: “Managers support collaboration across work units to accomplish work objectives”). More generally, respondents seem satisfied with their (immediate) supervisor, but less so with higher levels of management (e.g., item #52: “Overall, how good a job do you feel is being done by the manager directly above your immediate supervisor?” and item #53: “In my organization, senior leaders generate high levels of motivation and commitment in the workforce”). In addition, while scores on the Cooperative sub-factor are generally low overall, there were significant differences across agencies. Without the need to “name names,” in 2015 a very large department had one of the lowest cooperative scores (37%), whereas the score for another large one was nearly twice as high (72%). High cooperation in some governmental organizations suggests that the potential for considerable improvement exists among their less cooperative counterparts. Leader behavior promoting communication across units and cross-unit leader mentoring are critical factors in this improvement and a focus of the recommendation to which we now turn.

### **Evidence-based Recommendations for Improving Cooperation, Communication, and Collaboration**

#### ***Set clear and achievable goals for cross-unit communication and collaboration.***

Managers, and especially senior leadership, need to clearly articulate, explain, and set realistic, specific and attainable goals for cross-unit communication and collaboration rather than more general or vague “do your best” kinds of goals<sup>50</sup>. A widely-used shorthand for these kinds of

clear goals is SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound Goals for either specific projects or as part of ongoing work flows and processes<sup>51</sup>. Encouraging employees to identify with commonly shared goals will reduce conflict and competition over subgroup goals<sup>52,53</sup>, especially when this arises at the boundaries between different organizational groups<sup>54</sup>. Setting and meeting those goals is likely to result in enhanced social capital (i.e., resources embedded in relationships across individuals or work units<sup>55</sup>). Social capital is important because it improves performance and retention in settings ranging from for-profit enterprises to public schools<sup>56</sup>.

***Enable and support the formation of interdependent, cross-work unit teams.*** These teams would have specific goals and be equipped with the information, resources, and support they need, and organized in a variety of ways. Specifically (a) a purpose-orientation, with individuals having different specialties explicitly tasked with a creative or innovative project such as innovation teams at IDEO<sup>57,58</sup>; (b) adequate time for cross-unit communication and collaboration, perhaps allowing employees to use a portion of their work time; or (c) team empowerment to collaborate in finding creative solutions to problems, much like NASA's Eugene Kranz, in returning the critically damaged Apollo 13 back to earth<sup>59</sup>.

***Reinforce collaborative goals through appropriate incentive and performance systems.*** People tend to engage in behaviors for which they are rewarded, rather than do what their formal roles prescribe or superiors presume they should do. Asking employees to work as a team but rewarding individual performance is what Steve Kerr<sup>60</sup> described as a managerial "folly" – "Rewarding A, while hoping for B." If there is an interest in improving cross-unit collaboration, effective interventions should involve formal and informal ways to reward it. Also, leader follow-through in aligning goals with reward systems is key.

***Improve our understanding of collaboration through union-management partnerships.***

Approximately 27% of federal employees (i.e., about 880,000 individuals) are unionized and approximately 32% (i.e., about 1,160,000 individuals) are represented by unions.<sup>61</sup> Although union partnerships have been encouraged at various points in the past<sup>62</sup>, it is unclear how much effort is underway to build and support partnerships at the present time and to our knowledge no labor management partnerships have ever been evaluated using randomized controlled experiments. The decentralized structure of federal agencies and units provides an ideal setting for designing such experiments<sup>63,64</sup>.

**Concluding Remarks**

Results from the federal survey of employees reveals both good news and bad news: on the one hand, overall federal employees are generally satisfied with their jobs, but on the other hand, there is (a) wide variation in measures of employee attitudes across agencies and (b) clear aspects of the work environment that might be improved to achieve better levels of performance. Based on decades of research in the organizational sciences, this article briefly summarized a comparatively small subset of the potential evidence-based interventions that could be implemented by agencies interested in improving (a) employee motivation through engagement, empowerment, and embeddedness; (b) employee voice; and (c) within- and across-unit cooperation, communication, and collaboration. The use of organizational research evidence to improve performance metrics already occurs regularly in companies such as Google<sup>65</sup> and, if implemented more widely in government, holds great promise. Moreover, interventions should be designed and governed by the full range of stakeholders capable of supporting learning processes and promoting diffusion of successful innovations across the federal government.

Regarding suggestions for research, we recommend continuing to monitor trends from

the FEVS within agencies and occupational groups to identify future needs for organizational science initiatives that address variation in work unit job demands. For example, partnerships might explore how to improve job conditions (e.g., workload, time constraints) and increase individual and team resilience and social capital, especially for mission-critical jobs. Examples would be designing and assessing initiatives to change the work environment to increase social resources for managing job constraints and fostering effective individual and work unit coping strategies. Given the size and decentralized structure of federal agencies and work units, we suggest designing randomized controlled experiments that can identify causal effects.

Finally, a common denominator of all of our recommendations is that they involve some type of change. Research indicates that successful organizational change involves a systematic process that builds leader and employee ability, motivation, and opportunity to act in change-promoting ways<sup>66,67</sup>. A coherent vision of the change needs to be communicated, understood, and acted upon across levels via leader modeling and reinforced through employee training and development<sup>68</sup>. Leaders should be held accountable regarding the degree of employee motivation, engagement, performance, and innovation in their units. Experimentation and encouragement of innovation are characteristics of successful change efforts as leaders and employees learn how to adapt the change to their organizations and build new linkages between people and units that capitalize on the opportunities to solve problems that change makes possible<sup>69</sup>. A key idea throughout this analysis is that leaders who systematically implement and evaluate evidence-based management practices build both employee trust and confidence and overall organizational effectiveness.

We look forward to collaborating with federal agencies to design and implement interventions as well as research with the synergistic goals of improving employee wellbeing,

employee productivity, and agency performance and innovation. These will be win-win results leading to increased agency efficiency and effectiveness for the taxpayer.



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