Using organizational science research to address U.S. federal agencies' management & labor needs

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abstract

Employee performance often moves in lockstep with job satisfaction. Using the 2015 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, we have identified important and common management and labor needs across more than 80 federal agencies. Drawing on the vast trove of organizational science research that examines the effects of organizational designs and processes on employees' and organizations' behaviors and outcomes, we offer specific evidence-based interventions for addressing employee dissatisfaction or uncertainty that breeds lackluster performance, managerial shortcomings, and needed supports. Our intervention and policy recommendations have the synergistic goals of improving employee well-being, employee productivity, agency performance, and agency innovation, all resulting in increased efficiency and effectiveness, which benefit the taxpayer. Our top recommendations directly target the goals of improving employee motivation through engagement, empowerment, and embeddedness; enhancing the employees' voice; and fostering both internal and across-agency cooperation, communication, and collaboration. These recommendations are general enough to apply across diverse government agencies yet specific enough to yield results in discrete agency units.

Core Findings

What is the issue?
Analysis of the 2015 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey reveals that efforts to increase job satisfaction among federal employees are likely to yield improvements in productivity, agency performance and innovation, and efficiency, benefiting the taxpayer.

How can you act?
Selected interventions include:
1) Rapid response teams with 100-day project mandates
2) Training managers to actively solicit employee input and reduce the fear of reprisal for disagreement
3) Reversing the "continued decline in cooperation" by examining union-management partnership experiments

Who should take the lead?
Policymakers who want to maximize the value delivered to taxpayers, and managers within federal agencies.

Organizational science is a long-established multidisciplinary field of study that seeks to understand and improve the well-being and performance of employees and the effectiveness of organizations. Research in this field, conducted over the past 100 years, has involved millions of people across industries and occupations, resulted in studies published in hundreds of scientific journals, and yielded a mother lode of empirical evidence that is now widely accepted. The findings show, among other things, that employees experience greater levels of well-being and produce better outcomes when they are happy with and knowledgeable about their jobs, when they trust their leaders, and when they are respected and empowered to participate in decisions involving their jobs.[1–3]

Cognizant of these and other findings on the importance of employees to agency success, the Office of Personnel Management has, for over a decade, conducted the annual Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS), which provides government employees with the opportunity to candidly share perceptions of their work experiences, agencies, and leaders.[4] The latest (2015) edition of the FEVS summarizes the 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.[5]

Using the 2015 FEVS,[5] we have identified important management and labor needs across agencies and suggest interventions aimed at

- increasing employee motivation through engagement, empowerment, and embeddedness;

- giving employees a greater voice; and

- enhancing cooperation, communication, and collaboration within and across groups.

Overall, our recommendations have the synergistic goals of improving employee well-being, employee productivity, agency performance, and agency innovation, with a result of increased efficiency and effectiveness, which benefit the taxpayer. Although in some cases we've drawn on research conducted in the private sector, our suggested interventions are likely to be effective for federal workers and agencies also. Thus, we offer suggestions for future research that can be readily conducted within the context of U.S. federal agencies. Such future research might best be directed at occupations that the 2015 FEVS has designated "mission critical" to agency success.[5]

The Three Es for Motivating Workers: Engagement, Empowerment, Embeddedness

During the past three decades, empirical research on employee motivation has yielded valuable insights concerning three motivational forces: 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.

Engagement is strong when employees respond positively to work: when the job makes them feel physically energetic and resilient, emotionally attached and dedicated, and cognitively focused and absorbed. Engaged employees are more 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*, which are behaviors beneficial to the organization but not directly included in job descriptions.[6,7]

Empirical studies of empowerment focus on feelings of meaningfulness, self-determination, competence, and impact.[8,9] Management practices promoting these feelings reap many benefits, including improved individual and team performance, greater innovation, more frequent acts of helping among colleagues, reduced feelings of strain, and lower likelihood of employee turnover. Empowerment is particularly motivating in the service sector.[10]

Embedded employees feel enmeshed or pulled into their workplace and harbor a strong sense of psychological attachment. Such workers perform better, are more likely to exhibit organizational citizenship behaviors, and are less likely to leave their employers.[11,12] The importance of embeddedness was demonstrated by the individuals responding to the FEVS, who often did not answer affirmatively to questions such as "I feel encouraged to come up with new and better ways of doing things," "My work gives me a feeling of personal accomplishment," or "My talents are used well in the workplace."[5]

The findings point to a number of evidence-based strategies for enhancing employee motivation. On the basis of FEVS responses that showed some federal agencies could work to improve employee motivation and available scientific evidence, we make the following recommendations.

Interventions for Enhancing Employee Motivation

- **Redesign Jobs.** Well-designed jobs share a number of features, such as they allow the worker to use a variety of valued skills, the worker understands how his or her work contributes to larger organizational objectives, and the worker has sufficient autonomy to determine how to perform the work. The act of job redesign leverages these features to sculpt jobs that improve employee motivation by creating feelings of engagement, which, in turn, promote improved work performance. In one technique, called the *rapid results* method, leaders work with staff members to identify problems, develop solutions, and set goals for making changes over the course of about 100 days.[13] Used successfully by many organizations worldwide, the rapid results method can empower employees to make changes that address obstacles to their own motivation.

- **Institute a Formal System for Employee Suggestions.** Organizational science findings show that employees enfranchised to participate in decisions and initiatives affecting an entire work unit or agency feel trusted, effective, and competent. In a word, these

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employees are empowered.[10] Furthermore, the empowerment of employees with diverse perspectives and knowledge bases results in enhanced creativity and innovation. Sophisticated employee suggestion systems have been used in a wide range of companies as well as in several federal agencies. These programs often allow employees to organize themselves into teams charged with developing ideas for new products and services during normal work hours. Such programs involve a formal system for evaluating proposed ideas, a commitment to dedicate resources to worthwhile ideas, and recognition and rewards (often nonmonetary) for the employees who offer the best suggestions. For example, across two studies involving almost 1,500 employees organized into hundreds of teams in the metalworking and banking sectors, units that supported employee empowerment had employees who were more passionate (as reported by the employees themselves) and creative (as reported by the leaders) in doing their work than were employees in nonparticipating units.[14]

- **Use Digital Performance Dashboards.** Performing well in one's job is motivating, whereas performing poorly is demotivating and contributes to a downward spiral of poor performance. It is important to note that motivation is influenced by the competence of one's managers and coworkers as well as by 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 management system ensures that employees are placed in jobs they are competent to perform doing work that contributes to an organization's bottom-line financial health.[3,15] If employees have the required skills but are not performing well, their managers may need assistance in setting meaningful performance goals and providing frequent performance feedback.[16] Performance dashboards that display a few key performance metrics for an individual (including people in leadership positions), a team, or an entire organization are increasingly used to provide the feedback so important for sustaining employee motivation and performance and making decisions about issues such as who requires training and who needs to be terminated. Indeed, digital performance dashboards are increasingly being used for a diverse range of jobs, from salespeople and nurses to delivery drivers and chief executive officers.[17]

Giving Employees a Voice

In healthy, high-performing organizations, employees are comfortable identifying challenges and problems and feel empowered to suggest ideas for improvement, which is what is labeled *employee voice*.[18,19] However, empirical evidence suggests that employees often withhold such information and that they do so for three primary reasons: they fear retribution, they think providing feedback is futile, or they lack the motivation to speak up.[20,21] An example of this phenomenon is that DC Metro employees were aware of dangerous track conditions prior to the July 2016

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derailment of the Silver Line train outside East Falls Church that caused $150,000 in damages, but they feared retaliation for reporting problems.[22]

Moreover, whistleblowers often suffer negative consequences for speaking up.[23] For example, results of a survey of more than 13,000 federal employees revealed that about 25% of whistleblowers had personally experienced some type of reprisal—or threat of reprisal—by management for having reported misconduct.[24] Employee silence has led to disasters that have made headlines, as well as to smaller and much more frequent losses in the form of reduced efficiency, missed opportunities, worker disengagement, and worker turnover.[25,26]

Empirical evidence[18] reveals employees stay silent at all hierarchical levels within not just private sector organizations but also major federal agencies. Close to half of federal employees surveyed expressed uncertainty about the wisdom and safety of speaking up about organizational improvement or ethics-related issues. The 2015 FEVS reported tepid responses to such questions as "I feel encouraged to come up with new and better ways of doing things" and "I can disclose a suspected violation of any law, rule or regulation without fear of reprisal."[5] These results are consistent with a number of more specific investigations in recent years that have identified cultural impediments to the expression of employee voice in places like the Veterans Health Administration,[27] the New York Federal Reserve Bank,[28] and some parts of the U.S. intelligence[29] and military communities.[30] 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 employee voice. For instance, immediate supervisors who actually solicit input (for instance, by walking around the workplace during working hours) rather than merely saying they are open to employee voice (by announcing an open door policy) receive more input.[31] Also,

managers who act on ideas received and report back to employees on those actions encourage employee voice.[32]

The evidence gives us a number of potent tools for improving employee voice. We describe some of the most promising of these tools below.

Interventions for Enhancing Employee Voice

- **Train Leaders to Encourage Dialogue.** Individual leaders strongly influence employees' self-expression. Thus, it is essential to train managers in the art of encouraging employees' voice.[31,33] Such training is most effective when, as a result of their efforts, leaders establish a trusting and supportive relationship with followers.[34] Training leaders is a very effective intervention because it is more efficient and scalable than those solely focused on a unit's individual members. However, in the absence of additional interventions, such as those described next, training alone is unlikely to be successful in the long run.

- **Reduce Barriers to the Flow of Information.** Centralized decisionmaking and separated divisions tend to decrease information flow.[35,36] Therefore, it follows that reducing these structural barriers could encourage employee participation and expression of employee voice.[25,37] For example, consider instituting skillfully conducted, unscripted *skip-level meetings*, in which upper management skips middle management to meet directly with nonmanagerial workers two or more levels down the chain of command;[18] casual coffees or lunches can work here as well. Also, consider using 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.[38] Skip-level meetings and facilitated strategic input processes can be implemented to increase transparent communication and organizational learning. Both of these methodologies have been found to facilitate information flow and reduce employee silence around key strategic issues.

- **Learn to Understand & Encourage Employee Voice Within the Federal Government.** To examine the relative effectiveness of various types of interventions, within a given agency, future research could involve training some leaders to actively engage in voice solicitation[31] and others to act on the input received,[32] while having still other units serve as control groups. Alternatively, such research could compare the strategy of *voice accountability* (evaluating employees for their input and managers for creating healthy voice climates) with *upside sharing* (those who suggest or enact solutions share what has been gained).

- **Improve the Understanding of Union–Management Partnerships.** Employee voice can also be delivered through collective processes. Where unions exist, joint sponsorship with management of employee engagement and problem-solving teams could serve to enhance job satisfaction, union satisfaction, and possibly organizational performance. This is evidenced by the encouraging positive effects of Executive Order 12871, signed in 1993 by then president Bill Clinton, mandating that federal agencies and departments establish formal labor–management partnerships to reinvent government.[39] A study that examined the operations and outcomes of 60 partnerships that covered several hundred thousand federal employees revealed encouraging effects in the form of more harmonious labor relations climates and a reduced number of workplace disputes.[40] In terms of organizational performance, cost savings were achieved because of the smaller number of disputes, but other benefits were not easily discernible. This is an ideal area for experimentation and evaluation in the future.

Creating a Collaborative Spirit

Classic models of organizations depict them as systems of cooperation and coordination:[41] ideally, members collaborate effectively within teams and across divisions or groups for mutual benefit.[42] Collaboration has had a central place in organizational science research because it enhances knowledge acquisition and creation,
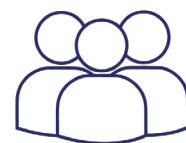
420,000 employees across **80** agencies were surveyed in FEVS 2015

25%

Percentage of whistleblowers who personally experience reprisal

1.16M

Number of federal employees who are represented by unions

"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."

organizational learning, resource sharing, the quality of work relationships, the quality of labor–management relations, innovation, managerial success, goal attainment, and performance.[42,43]

Yet cooperation in the workplace, at least within the federal government, appears to be at risk. The 2015 FEVS report noted a "continued decline" in cooperation and found that leaders themselves may be at the root. Indeed, many respondents answered negatively to such questions as "Managers promote communication among different work units" and "Managers support collaboration across work units to accomplish work objectives." More generally, respondents seem satisfied with their immediate supervisors but less so with higher levels of management. Of note, some agencies did much better than others: 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%).[5]

A high level of cooperation in some departments suggests the potential for considerable improvement among less cooperative counterparts. We've identified some of the most useful strategies for enhanced cooperation, communication, and collaboration below.

Interventions for Enhancing Workplace Cooperation, Communication, & Collaboration

- **Set Clear & Achievable Goals.** Managers, especially senior leadership, need to clearly articulate, explain, and set realistic, specific, and attainable goals for communication and collaboration across an entire unit or between units, when appropriate, rather than announcing more general or vague "do your best" kinds of goals.[44] For both specific projects and agencywide work culture, a widely used shorthand for these kinds of clear goals is SMART, which stands for *specific*, *measurable*, *achievable*, *realistic*, and *time-bound*.[3] Encouraging employees to identify with commonly shared goals will reduce conflict and competition over subgroup goals,[45] especially when this friction arises at the boundaries between different organizational groups.[46] Setting and meeting those goals is likely to result in enhanced social capital, where resources can be found embedded in relationships between individuals and across work units.[47] It should come as no surprise that social capital improves performance and retention in settings ranging from for-profit enterprises to public schools.[48]

- **Enable Interdependent, Cross-Work-Unit Teams.** These teams, comprising individuals with different specialties, would have specific goals and be equipped with the information, resources, and support they need to execute a creative or innovative project. Such teams would be given adequate time for cross-unit communication and collaboration and would be empowered to work together to find creative solutions to problems, such as is done by the innovation teams at IDEO.[49,50]

- **Reinforce Collaboration Through Incentive & Performance Measurement & Management 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 described as a managerial folly: "rewarding A, while hoping for B."[51] If there is an interest in improving cross-unit collaboration, there must be formal and informal ways to reward it.[52] Leader follow-through in aligning goals with reward systems is key.

- **Improve the Understanding of Collaboration Through Union—Management Partnerships.**

- Approximately 880,000 federal employees (that is, 27% of the total federal workforce) are unionized. Approximately 1,160,000 individuals (that is, about 32% of the total federal workforce) are represented by unions.[53] Although union–management partnerships have been encouraged at various points in the past,[39] it is unclear how much effort is under way to build and support them today. 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.[54,55] Specifically, experiments could be conducted in which interventions are randomly assigned to some agencies but not others to learn about their effect. This type of empirical effort would result in valuable knowledge about what works and why, and results could be used for future evidence-based wide implementation.

Conclusion

In summary, responses to the federal survey of employees reveal both good news and bad news: on the one hand, overall, federal employees are generally satisfied with their jobs, but on the other hand, employee attitudes vary widely across agencies and aspects of the work environment could be improved to achieve better levels of performance. When examining the results of the recent FEVS study in light of research in the organizational sciences, it's clear that federal agencies can improve well-being and performance by enhancing employee motivation through engagement, empowerment, and embeddedness; by cultivating employee voice; and by encouraging cooperation, communication, and collaboration both within and across departments. Interventions and innovations should be designed and governed by the full range of stakeholders, from nonmanagerial federal employees to top-level managers.

Top Policy Implications Gleaned From a Review of the 2015 FEVS

Organizational science interventions have already been used to great effect, as shown in the many published studies cited in this article and actions by many agencies such as the Veterans Health Administration.[56] But more data are still needed, and we recommend continuing to monitor trends from the FEVS within agencies and occupational groups to identify future needs. For example, performance should be gauged in the context of varying work and job demands. Research is needed to explore how to improve job conditions (for example, workload and time constraints) and also how best to increase individual and team resilience, especially for mission-critical jobs. Given the size and decentralized structure of federal agencies and work units, as mentioned above, we suggest designing randomized controlled experiments that can identify what would work best where.

Finally, a common denominator of all of our recommendations is that they involve some type of change, and research indicates the need for a systematic process that builds motivation and the chance to improve the workplace and its products in positive ways.[57,58] A coherent vision of the change needs to be communicated, understood, and acted on across all levels of the hierarchy. Leaders must be trained and their actions reinforced through additional training and development of those reporting to them.[59] Leaders should be held accountable for the degree of employee motivation, engagement, performance, and innovation in their units. They should experiment and encourage innovation to achieve successful change. Across the organization, employees must learn to adapt to the change as they connect and collaborate with colleagues to solve the problems they face.[60] Leaders who systematically evaluate and implement evidence-based management practices will inspire employee trust and confidence and greater organizational effectiveness overall. We look forward to collaborating with federal agencies to design and implement interventions as well as research with the synergistic goals of improving employee well-being, employee productivity, agency performance, and agency innovation. These will be win-win results, leading to increased agency efficiency and effectiveness and thus benefiting the taxpayer.

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