



Three Burning Questions for the Next President: A Roundtable Discussion about People Management in the Next Administration

As we approach a presidential transition, government agencies must prepare for the changes that will come. Similarly, the next president must prepare for the looming management issues awaiting the next administration. As part of an ongoing series, the Partnership for Public Service and CNA sponsored a roundtable discussion on August 11, 2008, to address burning issues for the next president. Both organizations are members of the Government Performance Coalition, which supports the “Transitions in Governance 2008” initiative (www.transitioningovernance.org). The Atlanta Federal Executive Board gathered a diverse group of agency officials to discuss the impact of the upcoming elections on the federal workforce and to gather their insights and recommendations for the next administration and Congress.

OVERVIEW

Every incoming presidential administration faces pressing management challenges. After taking office on January 20, 2009, the next president will confront a particularly thorny set of “people management” issues related to the 1.9 million civilian employees of the executive branch. The next administration and Congress must answer several key questions regarding the federal workforce that will influence the effectiveness of government. This forum gathered a small, diverse group of federal managers and employees in the Atlanta area to offer advice on three important workforce management issues:

- **Federal pay, job classification and performance management**
- **Managing a multi-sector workforce**
- **Building collaboration within the government**

FEDERAL PAY, JOB CLASSIFICATION AND PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

Atlanta’s roundtable participants considered how the existing General Schedule (GS) satisfies the needs of the federal workforce. Some participants expressed concern about the current classification system lacks flexibility to be competitive with the private sector. To be competitive, agencies may classify jobs at an artificially high level, occasionally leading to what is referred to as “grade creep” to offer enough pay to attract good talent. Other contributors suggested that a pay-banded system would relieve the problem by allowing for greater pay flexibility for similar types of work, which might help agencies retain their skilled workers, who might have left for high-paying private sector contracting positions in the past.

Many identified the need for better market sensitivity in the federal pay system. An effective pay scale, they argued, should offer sufficiently adjusted pay to attract highly skilled professionals such as scientists and IT technicians. Others felt that the federal workforce is too top-heavy, arguing that it is difficult to retain younger workers who reach high GS levels quickly and see few opportunities for growth.

Forum contributors emphasized that the best recruitment and retention practices take more into account than just pay. They stressed that recognition, growth opportunities, challenges, and the chance to contribute to the greater good are just as important in attracting and keeping top talent. Since commitment to public service is a common quality of new government employees, young federal workers may benefit from projects that help them take pride in serving the country, and managers should remind them of their positive contributions.

Forum members shared the concern that more needs to be done to improve workforce performance. Some believed that a pay-for-performance system would offer better results, but cautioned that performance must be evaluated fairly and holistically, such as through a 360°-type assessment tool. As with the previous roundtable discussions, this group expressed a positive view of being a “Fed.” Several participants suggested that the next administration launch a campaign to highlight federal workers and the importance of government work.

MANAGING A MULTI-SECTOR WORKFORCE

Asked to evaluate their working relationships with contractors, participants were largely positive. They recognized that even though many of their agencies do not work with contractors daily, their roles are inevitably influenced by contractor work. Contributors pointed out, though, that one distinguishing characteristic is the commitment to public service that federal employees pledge when assuming their roles, which may not be the same for contract workers. Participants agreed that – in certain cases – contractors offer valuable services. One panelist stated that few tasks actually need to be performed by government employees and said that agencies will and should continue to offer work to private contractors (or even volunteers) as long as they can perform jobs at a lower cost.

The participants stated that agencies need to find diverse and creative people – and to convince recent college graduates to view federal employment as a desirable option. The federal government offers many valuable benefits to its employees that contractors cannot, such as job stability, training, and a generous pension plan. Additionally, participants believed that agencies must help students (and other potential federal employees) understand the roles of federal agencies, including their positive impact. Stream-lining or simplifying the recruiting process for federal agencies is one step the government could take to transform into a more desirable place of employment.

BUILDING COLLABORATION

By a show of hands, participants voted on how well their organizations were encouraging collaboration within the government; half reported their agencies were doing “at least OK.” Generally, they coordinate well with state and local government; participants also reported success in working across organizations to achieve results. They reported that we have come a long way and are now successful in coordinating for emergency preparedness. At all levels of the government, participants stated that they could better utilize the internet to effectively save time and money and share best practices.

Some members of the discussion thought that inter-agency cooperation should be facilitated by Federal Executive Boards or through direction from agency leaders. Washington, D.C.-based agency leaders should encourage inter-agency collaboration, highlighting its necessity and benefits.