



PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT **ROADMAP**

Building a high-performance culture



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The Partnership for Public Service is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that works to revitalize the federal government by inspiring a new generation to serve and by transforming the way government works.

PDRI is a premier research and consulting firm in the field of industrial-organizational psychology. PDRI has built a global reputation of excellence by designing, developing and implementing human capital and training solutions that incorporate the most recent advances in the behavioral sciences and adhere to the highest principles of professional practice.

As government agencies face reduced budgets and greater demands for accountability and efficiency, federal leaders need to adopt strong performance management approaches to help motivate employees, increase productivity and ensure high-quality services are being provided to the American people.

Performance management is the process of aligning employees' work with mission requirements, inspiring high performance and engagement and holding employees accountable for achieving results. In practice, most performance management approaches fall far short of accomplishing this goal. Additionally, employees and managers alike tend to complain that performance management approaches in their agencies are cumbersome and do little to actually improve performance.

At the heart of the problem is the emphasis on formal requirements and processes, such as rating scales and documentation requirements, and not on fostering the day-to-day employee and manager behaviors that drive individual and organizational results. Years of research have demonstrated that it is these behaviors, not the design of the formal system, that leads to high performance. The critical elements of performance management include:

- Ensuring employees understand the organization's mission and how their work fits into the bigger picture
- Providing clear expectations and working collaboratively to solve problems
- Delivering honest, candid and timely feedback between managers and employees and among teammates
- Creating challenging on-the-job professional development experiences

Although these behaviors are widely recognized as an important part of performance management, many organizations struggle to ensure they occur consistently. To that end, the Partnership for Public Service, in collaboration with PDRI, conducted pilot projects at organizational units in the Social Security Administration (SSA) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to identify and implement small but meaningful changes that focus on what really matters—improving communication, feedback and trust among managers, employees and teammates.

The emphasis was on building the informal skills and behaviors that occur on a day-to-day basis without altering or interfering with the performance appraisal systems used by the agencies. Our belief was that an approach centered on improving relationships between employees and their managers would yield far more effective performance and increased capacity to meet mission requirements than one focused on administrative requirements.

We worked closely with employees at both agencies to engage key stakeholders, appropriately reflect each work unit's needs and interests and provide participants with meaningful opportunities to develop and apply the desired behaviors. At the VA, we delivered a series of seven workshops designed to improve day-to-day performance management behaviors in the work unit. At the SSA, we worked with team members and their managers to identify and implement a customized process for improving the team's practice of feedback, communication and trust.

This guide outlines our experience implementing the pilots at the VA and the SSA. It provides practical guidance that agencies can use to identify and improve day-to-day communication, feedback and trust to support effective work relationships and organizational outcomes. It involves five key stages:

- 1** Understand the agency's performance management culture
- 2** Identify key stakeholders and champions
- 3** Empower staff participation
- 4** Gather feedback
- 5** Develop strategies for embedding positive behaviors into the culture



STAGE 1

Understand the agency's performance management culture

At each agency, we conducted in-depth preliminary assessments to better understand the state of the current activities and the quality of day-to-day communication, feedback and trust. The assessments consisted of a web-based survey of participants, interviews with each manager and executive champion and an analysis of agency surveys and other workforce data. The assessments provided a more informed understanding of the context in which the work was being performed as well as valuable insights into the performance management challenges facing each agency.

Executives interested in piloting this framework should thoroughly analyze the current performance management state, context and culture in their agencies. This step is critical for two reasons. First, while federal agencies tend to experience performance management challenges, they also have unique histories, cultures and contexts that directly influence success. Senior leader directives, agency mandates and agency-specific challenges can influence the extent to which various approaches will be successful. Second, a review of the current state of performance management is important in considering whether the work group is ready and appropriately prepared to successfully participate in a performance management pilot. For example, if the group is experiencing significant employee–manager relationship challenges, a major transition is occurring or leadership changes are underway, the timing may not be ideal for participation in this type of effort.

When considering the current performance management environment, the following are some key areas to assess:

- The perceived state of employee–manager relationships in the agency and organizational unit
- The linkage between the agency's culture and desired performance management behaviors—for example, to what extent candid performance conversations are genuinely encouraged and valued in the organizational unit and the agency
- The context surrounding performance management in the agency and the organizational unit—for example, recent events, decisions, initiatives or activities that have impacted performance management efforts

It is recommended that interested work units review Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey and *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government*[®] data, internal agency surveys, climate assessments or other similar workforce indicators as a starting point for assessing the current state of performance management in their agencies. Looking at performance management perspectives at multiple levels in the agency (e.g., the agency, organizational unit and the employee level) is also recommended.



STAGE 2

Identify stakeholders and champions

Identifying stakeholders and champions with the right mix of skills and influence is critical. Our experience piloting this initiative demonstrated that success hinges on involving stakeholders and identifying champions to communicate the value of the effort and generate high levels of participant engagement throughout the process.

Below is a description of the stakeholders we involved in the pilots.

EXECUTIVE CHAMPIONS

The executive champions were senior HR managers or HR leaders. Their role involved securing approval for the performance management initiative, generating and maintaining staff support, approving staff time and involvement and integrating the effort with related agency efforts. The executive champion should review and approve the proposed performance management effort, including the overall timeline, the proposed activities and the expected outcomes.

INTERNAL CHAMPIONS

Another central element for success involves identifying internal agency champions to assist in developing and delivering content. We were fortunate to work with SSA and VA participants in the Partnership's *Emerging HR Leaders Forum*, a year-long professional development program for human resources professionals. The emerging HR leaders initiated their agencies' involvement in the pilot and enthusiastically volunteered to serve as champions for each organizational unit. They invested significant time and effort in creating customized content, leading workshops and other activities, soliciting staff interest and participation in the effort, alleviating concerns and soliciting and responding to feedback.

ORGANIZATIONAL UNIT PARTICIPANTS

A key challenge was to ensure that work unit staff were actively engaged in pilot activities and motivated to apply lessons learned on the job. This was accomplished, in part, by soliciting extensive staff feedback about the pilot design and proposed content at the beginning of the effort. We solicited advice and insights from the participants about each topic and incorporated their thoughts and suggestions into the pilot structure and materials, which gave them ownership over the process. In addition, we took steps to establish clear staff expectations by emphasizing that the value of the pilot was grounded in their active participation and willingness to share ideas and experiences openly.



STAGE 3

Empower staff participation

Allowing staff to help design and implement an approach to improving communication, feedback and trust in the workplace builds increased commitment as well as accountability for change. It is important to focus on improving communication through the medium that the work unit uses to interact with each other on a regular basis. For example, at the VA, a majority of the participants and managers in the pilot group work remotely, so we conducted a majority of the project activities virtually. Virtual interactions can present challenges in engaging participants in the conversation, but it is important to model the format that the office uses on a day-to-day basis.

At the VA, we conducted a kick-off meeting with all stakeholders to share our assessment of the current state of performance management behaviors in the group, and to request input on topics of interest and a desired pilot structure. We discussed the project scope, expectations and outcomes we were driving toward. Given the size and geographic distribution of the group, we proposed a series of interactive workshops on staff-identified topics of interest. Based on staff input, we designed the workshops to progressively build on previous topics; supplemented workshop content with specific tools, resources and on-the-job activities to reinforce learning; and made each session as accessible as possible to virtual employees. Depending on the topic, workshops were targeted to either managers, non-managers or all staff. Particular care was paid to facilitating sessions that generated active engagement from all participants.

Most workshops involved a team of facilitators (comprising the emerging HR leaders, Partnership and PDRI staff) who worked collaboratively with the executive champion to design the workshop content and structure. A typical workshop included participant pre-work (e.g., an introduction to the topic and reflection questions) sent a few days in advance of the meeting, topic guides containing reference information on the topic such as articles and summary tips, discussion questions used to generate conversations around the issue and interactive activities that provided participants with an opportunity to apply their skills. In addition, we introduced reflection sessions in between workshops to give participants the opportunity to reflect on lessons learned and share how they used the tools and tips from the previous session. The emerging HR leaders also developed an online repository to make workshop materials and toolkits easily accessible in one central place.

At the SSA, our approach involved conducting individual interviews with staff and providing feedback and coaching sessions to managers. This approach served two purposes. First, it provided managers with feedback from their staff, which was something they explicitly requested during

the assessment. Second, it gave each of the participating employees and managers the opportunity to critically review the team's existing day-to-day performance management behaviors. Instead of developing one set of workshops and activities targeted to the organizational unit, we focused on issues unique to each group and manager.

We conducted interviews with every staff member in the work units to better understand how well their managers communicated a clear vision, provided and welcomed feedback, set clear expectations and provided staff with developmental opportunities. Individual responses were compiled, sanitized for anonymity and shared with the managers. The information revealed issues specific to each work group and that cut across teams, specifically related to communication, feedback and clarity on the way work is assigned.

Before providing comments from employees to the managers, it is important to first assess whether they are ready and willing to accept feedback. If managers are unwilling to listen to possible criticism or make changes, the feedback process will break down.

Using the results of the interviews, the emerging HR leaders met with the workgroups to develop a more detailed set of recommendations that were presented to the managers. They also collaborated with the managers and the workgroup participants to develop a plan of action. Each manager responded to the feedback favorably and indicated they were open to exploring and acting on some of the proposed recommendations. This model provided the staff with the opportunity to candidly share concerns, challenges and recommendations, with the understanding that the emerging HR leaders would confidentially convey their thoughts to the managers.

FEEDBACK TO MANAGERS: SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- To what extent does your supervisor communicate a clear vision and strategy for you?
- To what extent does your supervisor set clear expectations for you and describe what success looks like?
- To what extent does your supervisor let you make decisions within our scope without micromanaging?
- To what extent does your supervisor provide candid communication about your performance relative to your role?
- To what extent does your supervisor provide you with stretch assignments that allow you to develop your skills as well as grow and advance?

SAMPLE WORKSHOP TOPICS

- Establishing the Foundation for Effective Relationships: Strategies and Tips for Building Trust (all staff)
- Foundational Coaching Skills and Practice (managers)
- Tips for Receiving, Giving and Using Feedback to Your Advantage (non-managers)
- Building High-Performing Virtual Teams (all staff)



STAGE 4

Gather feedback

At the VA, the consensus was that the pilot activities were helpful in communicating to staff the effect of their interactions and everyday communications on performance. The pilot project emphasized the value of work relationships in driving and sustaining a high-performance culture, something the workgroup had not previously explored at this level. The pilot also provided the opportunity for the organizational unit's four program areas to work together. The sessions created a platform for sharing individual perspectives, concerns, best practices and lessons learned. Working together in this way helped the organization—established in 2010—to function more as one team, a goal the executive champion has been working toward since the organization was created.

The executive champion at the VA described the performance management pilot as a wonderful opportunity to learn and apply best practices. “The general consensus is that these workshops have been extraordinarily helpful, with employees engaged in open and honest discussion and better able to understand and appreciate their behavior and those around them,” he said.

At SSA, the process brought many issues to the managers' attention and gave staff the opportunity to be heard, which was considered a huge success by both the participants and the executive champion. The pilot created an opportunity for managers to engage with their staff on issues identified during the feedback process and brought focus to the soft skills of performance management, including open and honest communication. The participants indicated that having the pilot occur in their office showed that management cared and actually desired to improve the workplace culture. It gave them the opportunity to review daily work activities and best practices and illustrated that with communication and trust, the office could become a better and more productive place to work.

The executive champion noted that the pilot was extremely helpful in improving office interactions to create a more efficient team, commenting that “the feedback my subordinate managers and I garnered allowed us to do a better job of leading our organization.”

The emerging HR leaders indicated that the initiative offered them a tremendous learning opportunity. In addition to cultivating and enhancing their facilitation, project management and leadership skills, they were able to develop subject-matter expertise on performance management and learn firsthand about the unique challenges facing both managers and employees.



STAGE 5

Develop strategies for embedding positive behaviors into the culture

A key discussion at both agencies centered on how to incorporate the day-to-day behaviors highlighted during the pilot projects into the larger agency culture.

At the VA, the efforts of the pilot became part of the agency's formal commitment to the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to improve in the area of performance management on the annual Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey. The executive champion also made a commitment to share applicable workshop materials and toolkits with larger offices within the VA. In addition, the Partnership and PDRI scheduled a check-in for six months after the end of pilot activities to assess the extent to which the work unit was successful in implementing the performance management behaviors on an ongoing basis.

At the SSA, the emerging HR leaders are creating a training course highlighting the customized, soft-skills approach to performance management. The course will be included in a training toolkit available to both managers and employees at the agency. They developed a workflow process document that will be distributed to the larger offices at the agency in order to improve accountability and transparency in agency operations. The SSA's emerging HR leaders also agreed to complete a check-in with the workgroup participants and workgroup leaders six months after the conclusion of the pilot to see what long-term changes have resulted from the process.

By involving the emerging HR leaders in the process and working with them to co-facilitate and deliver content, we prepared them to replicate the process at other offices throughout their organizations. Although our formal involvement in the workgroups has concluded, it is our hope that the agencies continue to see the emerging HR leaders as valuable resources in the area of performance management.

Key elements needed to improve performance management at your agency

IDENTIFY CHAMPIONS

To be successful, performance management transformation requires identifying one or more internal individuals with the passion, time and capacity to commit to the effort. Having an executive champion and other leaders in the organization trained and ready to assist and deliver content was central to the success of the pilot at both agencies.

MOTIVATE CHANGE AT MULTIPLE LEVELS

Buy-in from agency leaders, managers and front-line staff is critical to success. If staff or managers do not see the value in the project objectives, it will not be successful. To gain buy-in, consider conducting a baseline survey to identify current strengths and gaps in communication, feedback and trust. This type of feedback is often a powerful way to motivate change.

FOCUS ON BUILDING TRUST BETWEEN MANAGERS, EMPLOYEES AND TEAMMATES

Our experience showed that for many of the activities in this performance management process to be successful, especially those dealing with feedback and communication, a basic level of trust must exist between managers, employees and teammates. When adequate levels of trust are present, participants are much more likely to share openly and invest in the new approach. Building trust is an ongoing process that requires open dialogue and the sharing of each party's perspective in a safe environment.

CHOOSE THE RIGHT GROUP TO START

For many organizations, emphasizing day-to-day performance management behaviors is a departure from standard practice. Therefore, it is important to start with a group that is open to changing processes and practicing a new framework. As was the case with the pilot participants, these groups tend to be high-performing teams that are eager to engage in continuous improvement and willing to experiment with new approaches. Testing this approach with a current high-performing team will yield a useful model for how to engage more broadly in the organization.

Conclusion

We had the unique opportunity at two federal agencies to explore whether performance management could be improved by focusing on small but meaningful behavioral changes that would enhance the quality of informal, day-to-day conversations and working relationships.

The feedback from pilot participants demonstrates that performance management challenges are not insurmountable. By shifting from approaches directed at “fixing” performance management systems to initiatives that emphasize day-to-day behaviors, performance management can incrementally become what it is meant to be—a valuable tool for helping agencies accomplish their missions and improve employee engagement, satisfaction and productivity.



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