



BEST PLACES TO WORK IN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT®

ENGAGING A REMOTE WORKFORCE

In response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, many federal agencies have transitioned operations to remote work—or teleworking—to protect the health of their employees. According to the 2019 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, however, only 2% of respondents reported teleworking on a full-time basis. This means that for many supervisors and leaders across government, the move to remote work represents a new way of doing business that undoubtedly poses many challenges, including how to maintain engagement when employees are physically isolated.

From the Best Places to Work in the Federal Government® rankings—produced by the Partnership for Public Service and Boston Consulting Group—we know what keeps federal employees satisfied and committed to their work are their leaders and missions. We also know that an engaged workforce is a more productive workforce. At such a critical time when the public needs an effective government, it is imperative that federal leaders prioritize the engagement of their employees.

Based on our research, the Partnership and BCG have identified steps to engage employees working away from the office. To support employees and maintain organizational performance, leaders should:



Communicate



Empower



Recognize

While these recommendations also apply to traditional office environments, leaders must use different tools and prioritize these methods in the context of telework to compensate for the lack of in-person interaction.

COMMUNICATE



In 2019, over 95% of federal employees said they were willing to put in extra effort to get a job done despite the challenges they often face. That is because federal employees are mission driven. What keeps them committed to their work is a commitment to their agency's goals and their ability to achieve them. Working remotely for extended periods of time, however, can cause employees to feel detached from their colleagues, leaders and mission. Frequent, reliable communication is one way to overcome this challenge.

Agency leaders should:

- Communicate with employees on a regular basis—even more than in a traditional office setting. To build trust and accountability, communicate consistently with employees about organizational goals and actions that may impact day-to-day work.
- Establish communications channels, like virtual town halls, where leaders and employees can share their thoughts and maintain a sense of community.

Supervisors should:

- Reiterate messages from leadership and be available to answer questions from direct reports.
- Clearly communicate expectations regarding working hours while providing employees with a degree of flexibility given individual circumstances. Remote employees should be encouraged to take breaks and communicate openly about available hours to be on the job.
- Hold regular check-ins, both as a group and one-on-one, to discuss goals and priorities with direct reports. As appropriate, also give employees space to talk about nonwork-related topics and check-in on physical and mental health.

Examples:

- At the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, Vice Admiral Robert Sharp, the agency director, has been holding weekly virtual town halls to connect with the NGA workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - At the Department of Homeland Security, Chief Human Capital Officer Angela Bailey has been using regular email messages to not only update employees on ongoing activities related to the coronavirus response, but also to share inspiring stories from across the workforce, provide encouragement and connect employees with external resources.
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EMPOWER



According to the 2019 Best Places to Work rankings, less than 50% of federal employees reported feeling empowered in their work. And being physically isolated can often lead remote employees to feel even more powerless. Where possible and appropriate, leaders should empower employees to make decisions, independently deliver on their work and improve their skills.

Agency leaders should:

- Clearly define roles, responsibilities and decision rights for supervisors and employees.
- Encourage employees to share feedback on internal processes and procedures.
- Promote collaboration between employees, teams and business functions.

Supervisors should:

- Encourage direct reports to come up with new ways of doing business.
- Regularly discuss feedback on internal processes and procedures.
- Coach direct reports through challenges and help remove work-related obstacles.
- Set clear expectations and performance milestones for direct reports and offer support when they meet difficulties.

Examples:

- After hearing that employees were looking for ways to help respond to the COVID-19 crisis, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration launched an internal ideation competition to leverage employee ingenuity and the agency's unique capabilities.
 - The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office has long relied on telework for their patent examiners and created a robust system that gives them autonomy and clear definitions of success along with appropriate oversight from supervisors.
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RECOGNIZE



Recognition has always been a critical component of employee engagement, but also an area where agencies have consistently struggled. According to the 2019 Best Places to Work rankings, less than 50% of federal employees reported satisfaction with how they are rewarded, promoted and acknowledged. In a remote environment where opportunities for appreciation can easily be overlooked, it is particularly important that leaders prioritize recognizing employees for their contributions and good work.

Agency leaders should:

- Ensure that recognition programs can function in a virtual environment. Highlight the work of employees through various channels such as organization-wide calls and webinars, social media posts, or intranet messages.
- Connect personally with staff, preferably through a face-to-face channel like a video conference, to recognize individuals or teams for their work.

Supervisors should:

- Create a virtual forum and regular cadence to publicly acknowledge great work.
- Encourage team members to recognize each other for their contributions and collaboration.
- Recognize the work of direct reports in one-on-one conversations.

Example:

- A number of agencies have developed virtual recognition programs where supervisors and employees can nominate their colleagues for awards and share kudos through a simple online platform.

An Opportunity to Appreciate: Public Service Recognition Week

Celebrated the first full week in May since 1985, Public Service Recognition Week is a time set aside to honor our nation's federal, state and local government employees. PSRW is an ideal time to recognize outstanding individuals, teams or programs. Federal agency leaders and supervisors can show appreciation during PSRW by:

- Organizing a virtual employee appreciation event, including remarks from agency leadership and elected officials.
- Creating a virtual "thank you" card and invite employees and the public to write what public service means to them.
- Posting a PSRW message on agency webpages.
- Using agency newsletters and social media to publicize PSRW and employee accomplishments.

Additional Resources

For more information on the Best Places to Work in the Federal Government rankings, see bestplacetowork.org.

For more information about Public Service Recognition Week, see psrw.ourpublicservice.org.

For more on how to engage a diffuse workforce, see our [Beyond the Beltway](#) issue brief.

For more on the essential competencies of effective federal leadership in the 21st century, see the Partnership's [Public Service Leadership Model](#).