



Trustworthy: INCREASING CIVIL SERVANTS' TRUST AT WORK

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BY PAUL PIETSCH



Deloitte.

About the Partnership

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. The Partnership teams up with federal agencies and other stakeholders to make our government more effective and efficient.

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Photo Credit: Department of Agriculture/Farm Production and Conservation/Preston Keres

Introduction

Public trust in the federal government has been a spotlight issue in recent years, serving as a barometer of the health of our democracy and the political environment as the country has experienced serious social, public health and economic challenges.¹

But federal employees' trust in government institutions is largely overlooked. The importance of such trust is starting to be understood but deserves more focus. Research indicates that [public servants' trust at work is associated with their engagement and productivity](#) as well as the longevity of their federal careers. Another study shows that [engaged federal employees tend to provide better customer service](#), which in turn helps improve the public's experience with and trust in government.

Recognizing that workforce trust is an indicator of government effectiveness and a driver of public trust in government,² the Partnership for Public Service, with support from Deloitte, examined civil servants' trust in two key dimensions of the federal government—(1) government leaders and (2) civil service rules and their enforcement—and what agencies, administrations and Congress can do to improve it. Trust in leaders is a critical condition for government effectiveness as it can motivate employees to be innovative, to collaborate, to invest extra effort

¹ Recent research about public trust in government includes an October 2021 survey of 2,300 people conducted by the Partnership and Freedman Consulting, which found that 40% of respondents said they trust the federal government a lot or somewhat, and 56% did not trust the government much or at all. A November 2020 survey of 4,000 people by Deloitte, meanwhile, found that public trust in government overall is less than the sum of its trust in individual agencies and that the public trusts the federal government less than it trusts local and state governments and companies in the private sector.

² Sung Min Park, "Toward the Trusted Public Organization: Untangling the Leadership, Motivation, and Trust Relationship in U.S. Federal Agencies," *The American Review of Public Administration* 42(5), September 2012, 563. DOI: 10.1177/0275074011410417. Retrieved from bit.ly/3jYPrMV

in their work and to perform beyond expectations.^{3,4} Trust in the framework of the civil service is necessary for civil servants' faith in the integrity and sustainability of their work and careers.

Specifically, we sought to understand the levels, drivers and effects of civil servants' trust in:

- Politically appointed and career government leaders—including supervisors, higher-level managers and members of the Senior Executive Service.⁵
- The laws and regulations that guide and protect civil servants and hold them accountable, as well as the entities that enforce these rules to ensure fair, ethical and effective federal workplaces—which together we call the framework of the civil service.

This report includes insights gathered from 20 one-on-one interviews and two roundtable discussions with current and former civil servants, career leaders and political appointees, as well as an online survey of 475 federal employees at more than 35 agencies. It details what we learned from the more than 500 people who contributed to this study about the dynamics and impacts of federal workforce trust—and highlights opportunities to increase it. Though not statistically representative, our research findings provide an important snapshot in time of the civil service that we believe can inform efforts to increase workforce trust government-wide. (See the report's Methodology for more details.)

According to the federal employees who shared stories and ideas for this study, there are a number of opportunities to increase their trust in leaders and in the framework of the civil service. This report includes the most practical recommendations for improving workforce trust that could be undertaken by Congress, administrations, the entities that safeguard the civil service and individual agency leaders—including supervisors, other career leaders and political appointees. These recommendations could also be useful to frontline staff and others interested in the wellbeing and effectiveness of the federal workforce.

³ Hugo Asencio and Edin Mujkic Academic, "Leadership Behaviors and Trust in Leaders: Evidence From the U.S. Federal Government," *Public Administration Quarterly*, 40(1), March 2016, 157. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3KBONjG>

⁴ SHRM, "Why Trust Matters at Work," May 2018. Retrieved from bit.ly/38DCNR5

⁵ The Senior Executive Service consists of executive positions—including managerial, supervisory and policy positions—classified above General Schedule grade 15 or equivalent positions in most executive branch agencies of the federal government. USAJobs.gov, "Senior Executive Service." Retrieved from bit.ly/3N4c7c3

What is Trust?



Because workforce trust is a subjective experience, we asked research questions that allowed interviewees, roundtable participants and survey respondents to define what trust means to them through their stories of working in the federal government.

The federal employees who contributed to this study described trust in terms that align with the definition of trust in individuals and institutions synthesized from academic literature by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. The definition was created in an effort to improve the international comparability of trust measures: “a person’s belief that another person or institution will act consistently with their expectations of positive behavior.”⁶

In addition, Deloitte’s TrustID model informed our research design. The model, which Deloitte’s [research](#) suggests can help increase public trust in government, is based on four trust signals—humanity, transparency, capability and reliability—that demonstrate the two foundational attributes of trust: competence and intent. Deloitte developed this model through in-depth research grounded in the existing body of evidence that trust is relational in nature and that increasing workforce trust improves employee engagement and productivity.⁷ Using the TrustID model as a template, we asked interviewees and survey respondents about their trust in the intent and competence of career and politically appointed leaders.

⁶ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD Guidelines on Measuring Trust, November 2017, pp. 11 and 42. Retrieved from bit.ly/3uxThCQ

⁷ Deloitte developed the TrustID model based on research that included a market scan of existing definitions of trust from academic experts and other organizations that investigate trust (such as Edelman’s Trust Barometer) as well as a study of 3,000 customers and 4,500 employees of retail, travel, and hospitality and other consumer industries.



Photo Credit: Department of Agriculture/Tom Witham

Trust in Career and Politically Appointed Leaders

We pursued this research to better understand the nature of trust in the federal workplace. To start, this study considered the levels of civil servants' trust in career and politically appointed federal leaders as well as what drives their trust in them. Interpersonal trust between public servants and their leaders is important as it is associated with efficient and accountable federal agencies and public trust in government.⁸

We saw the importance of interpersonal trust at the heart of our research design. Even when asked specifically about their trust in the framework of the civil service—which was the other focus of our research—most participants focused on how their leaders understand, adhere to and implement civil service rules. This suggests that the utility of these rules and the entities that enforce them is not only a matter of policy, but also good leadership. “We rely on leadership to give life to the guardrails of the civil service,” noted John Palguta, former director of policy

Findings in Brief— Trust in Leaders



- Leaders are a primary influence on civil servants' trust at work.
- Civil servants appear to have somewhat more trust in career leaders than in political appointees, as well as more trust in leaders they work closely with.
- Civil servants have similar levels of trust in their leaders' intent and competence—though they appear to have slightly more trust in their intent.
- Trust is personal, and seven interconnected attributes of interpersonal leadership are the basis for building workforce trust in leaders.

⁸ This indicates that government leaders have a large amount of influence over federal workforce trust, which accords with other research that shows effective leadership is the key driver of federal employee satisfaction and commitment.⁹ It also suggests that leaders bear a large responsibility to act in ways that maintain if not increase the trust of their staff.

and evaluation at the Merit Systems Protections Board and former vice president for policy at the Partnership for Public Service.

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Levels of Trust in Leaders

Similar Levels of Trust in Leaders' Intent and Competence

Through an online survey, we asked current civil servants about their levels of trust in the *intent* and *competence*—[the two foundational attributes of trust](#)—of career and politically appointed leaders relative to 11 factors that reflect commitment to civil service rules, effective leadership and employee engagement.¹⁰ As illustrated in the charts below, survey respondents¹¹ indicated that on average they have similar levels of trust in career leaders' *intent* and *competence* but that they trust their *intent* slightly more. Their levels of trust in political appointees show a similar pattern.

⁹ Partnership for Public Service and Boston Consulting Group, "15 Editions of Best Places to Work Imagining the Next Era of Federal Employee Engagement," July 2021. Available at bit.ly/3rBQoz9

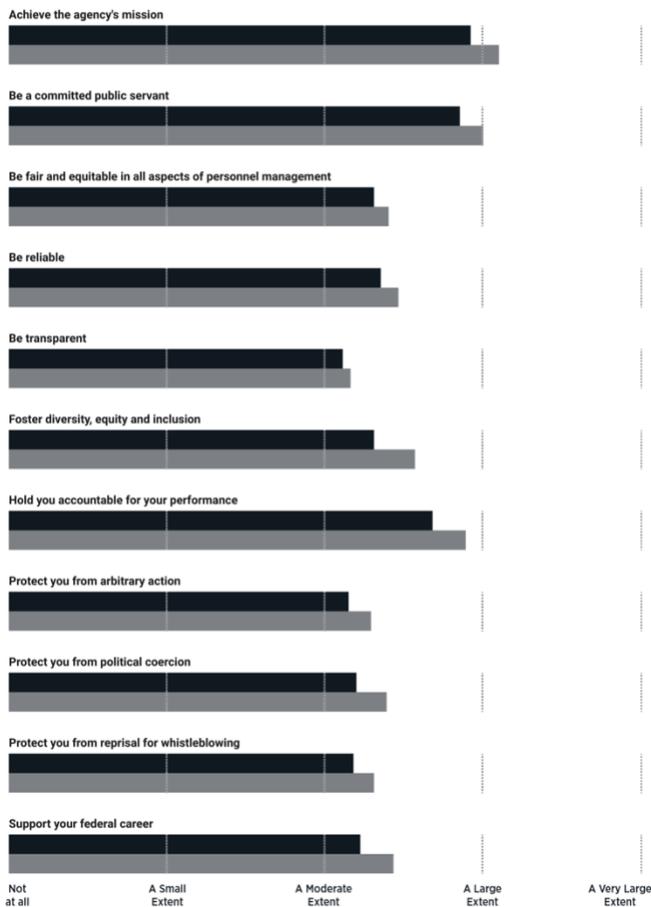
¹⁰ Specifically, we asked about respondents' trust in the intent and competence of their agency's career and politically appointed leaders to (1) be a committed public servant; (2) achieve the agency's mission; (3) be fair and equitable in all aspects of personnel management; (4) foster diversity, equity and inclusion; (5) hold you accountable for your performance; (6) support your federal career; (7) protect you from political coercion; (8) protect you from arbitrary action; (9) protect you from reprisal for whistleblowing; (10) be transparent; and (11) be reliable.

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How much do you trust the competence and intent of *career* leaders in your agency to do the following?

AVERAGE RESPONSES

■ Competence ■ Intent

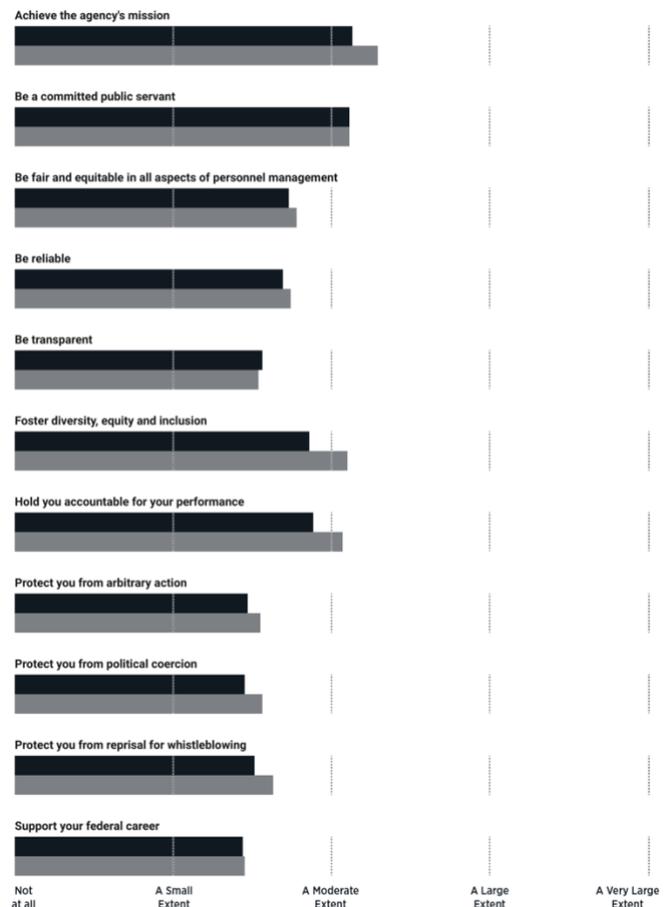


Source: Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

How much do you trust the competence and intent of *politically appointed* leaders in your agency to do the following?

AVERAGE RESPONSES

■ Competence ■ Intent



Source: Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

One possible reason for this small difference may be a predisposition of public servants to preemptively trust the *intent* of their leaders. Civil servants’ perceptions that leaders share common motivations or mission interests could induce assumptions of their good intent.

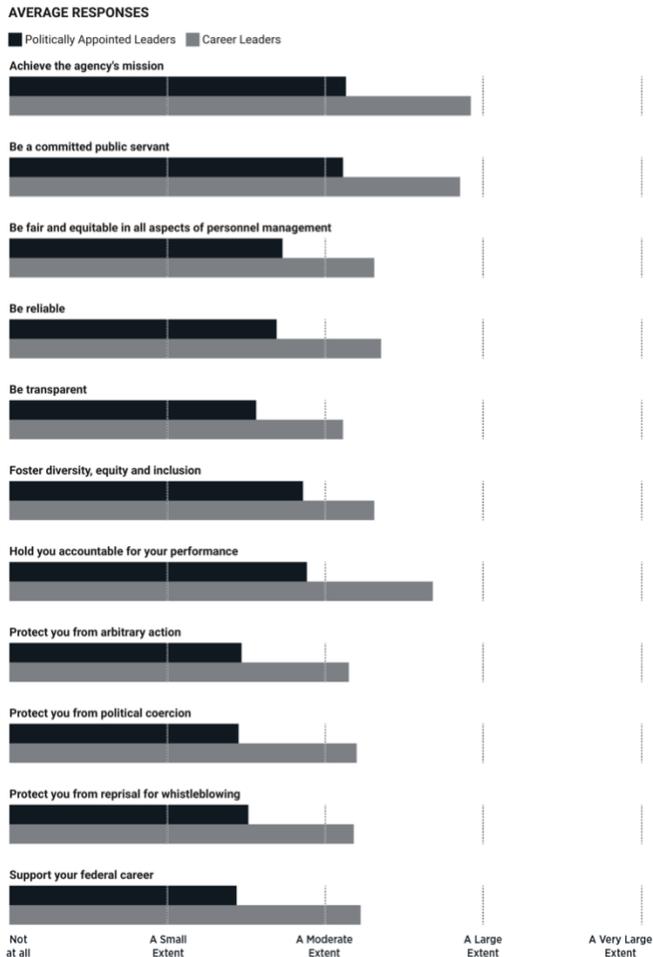
A related reason may be the greater difficulty in assessing intent than competence. Whereas measures of competence can be objective—such as whether leaders succeed or fail to achieve stated goals—the benchmark for intent is subjective. Efforts to support diversity and inclusion can highlight this distinction. As one survey respondent wrote, “Our leaders say all the right words [about diversity], but then do not hold officials accountable to hard metrics for hiring and promotion.”

Greater Trust in Career Leaders Than in Politically Appointed Leaders

Interviewees and survey respondents indicated that civil servants tend to have somewhat more trust in career leaders than in politically appointed leaders, with some noting that appointees can have difficulty earning trust if staff perceive them to lack the institutional knowledge that many

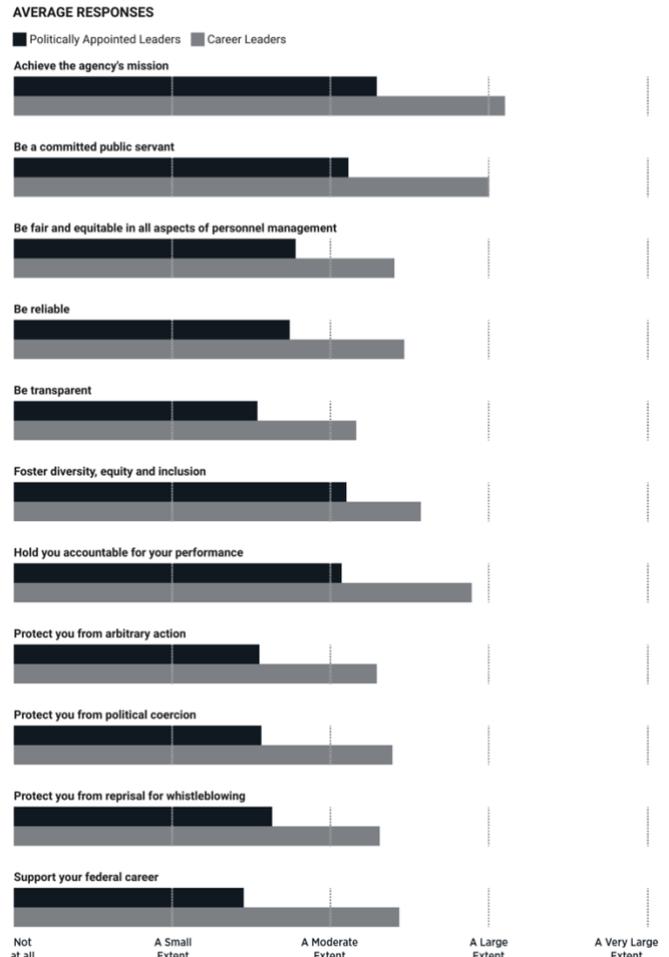
career leaders have or perceive them to be driven by a political agenda. Survey respondents specifically reported on average between a “moderate extent” and a “large extent” of trust in career leaders. As seen below, this is slightly higher than their trust in politically appointed leaders, which they reported being between a “small extent” to a little more than a “moderate extent”.¹²

How much do you trust the *competence* of politically appointed and career leaders in your agency to do the following?



Source: Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

How much do you trust the *intent* of politically appointed and career leaders in your agency to do the following?



Source: Partnership for Public Service • Created with Datawrapper

Survey respondents said that they most trust the intent and competence of both career and politically appointed leaders *to achieve mission* and *to be committed public servants*. This accords with the observation of many interviewees that career leaders tend to be motivated public servants dedicated to their staff and government effectiveness. Despite small differentials in trust in career and political leaders, this finding also suggests that civil servants see the potential of political appointees to be good stewards of government.

¹² Respondents ranked their level of trust on a five-point scale: Not at All, A Small Extent, A Moderate Extent, A Large Extent, and A Very Large Extent.

On the other end of the spectrum, survey respondents reported lower levels of trust in both career and politically appointed leaders *to be transparent* and *to support their federal careers*. They also indicated similar levels of trust in both types of leader *to protect them from arbitrary action, political coercion* and *reprisal for whistleblowing*, which may be due to communication issues. If leaders do not demonstrate their commitment to civil service rules and their motivation and ability to enforce them, federal employees may be left to assume the opposite. Regarding appointees specifically, survey respondents said they least trust them to *support their federal careers*, which aligns with interviewees' perceptions that some appointed leaders are more focused on implementing political agendas than on supporting their staff.

The finding that civil servants tend to have more trust in career leaders than in political appointees aligns with exploratory analysis of the Partnership's [Best Places to Work in the Federal Government](#)[®] rankings and the [Political Appointee Tracker](#), a resource compiled by the Partnership and The Washington Post. This analysis found that there is a small but statistically significant increase in the average employee engagement scores of federal agency subcomponents led by career members of the Senior Executive Service compared with those led by political appointees.¹⁴

Workforce Trust and Employee Engagement

Survey respondents reported a positive relationship between their trust in their leaders and their engagement and performance at work, echoing findings in academic literature.¹³ In particular, respondents said that when they trust career leaders, they experience on average a moderate increase in:

- Their ability to work effectively with colleagues
- Their commitment to agency mission
- Their overall satisfaction with their agency
- Their overall satisfaction with their job
- Their productivity
- Their sense of belonging in the workplace.

When they trust political appointees, they also experience an increase in these factors—but only between a minor and moderate extent.

¹³ Yoon Jik Cho, "Trust in Managerial Leadership within Federal Agencies: Antecedents, Outcomes, and Contextual Factors," 2008, 131. Retrieved from bit.ly/3Q7jYXL

¹⁴ Partnership for Public Service Center for Presidential Transition and Boston Consulting Group, "Leading Together: An Exploration of the Relationship Between Leadership Type and Employee Engagement," February 2022, 12. Available at bit.ly/3Oybkky

Drivers of Civil Servants' Trust in Leaders

Overall, our government works best when it has a full team of capable and committed individuals serving in career and politically appointed leadership positions, matched with missions, agendas and teams that align with their distinct approaches and perspectives. As [prior Partnership research](#) has shown, however, several dynamics can work against their success. The current and former federal employees who contributed to this study indicated that the trust imbalance between career leaders and political appointees is generally due to several differences in the nature of their positions, which should be better understood when developing and appointing leaders.

- **Leadership Proximity:** Echoing [research from Deloitte](#), a number of interviewees said that they generally have more trust in leaders with whom they have close working relationships—such as their supervisor or a manager who is a career leader—than in senior leaders with whom they have little to no contact. This may be because the responsibilities of higher-level leadership can distract senior leaders from developing relationships with the people they oversee, according to Bob Tobias, director of the Institute for the Study of Public Policy Implementation at American University.¹⁵
- **Institutional Knowledge and Subject Matter Expertise:** Career leaders, who often rise through the ranks, generally bring institutional knowledge and program and policy expertise to their management practices. Conversely, some politically appointed leaders have little to no previous experience working in the federal government, and those new to government may face a steep learning curve even if they bring subject matter knowledge and critical managerial experience from other sectors.
- **Leadership Longevity:** Career leaders tend to have longer tenures than political leaders, who typically leave their federal appointments after two or three years.¹⁶ It can take considerable time to cultivate trusting relationships, and leaders with a short tenure may leave before they establish strong connections with their staff.¹⁷ Furthermore, leadership longevity is associated with stability and accomplishment, according to the National Academy of Public Administration: “Two years [of leadership] is about long enough to start new initiatives and begin to see them implemented but not long enough to see them fully carried out.”¹⁸
- **Perception of Partisan Interests:** Since appointees carry out the president’s policy agenda, civil servants may occasionally perceive their actions to be excessively political,

¹⁵ Michael O’Connell, “Analysis: Trust Doesn’t Exist Without Employee Engagement,” Federal News Network, May 21, 2014. Retrieved from bit.ly/3jYShBz

¹⁶ National Academy of Public Administration, “Memo to National Leaders: Strengthening Administrative Leadership, Fixing the Appointment Process,” 2012, 9. Retrieved from napawash.org/uploads/FINAL_AppointeeProcess.pdf

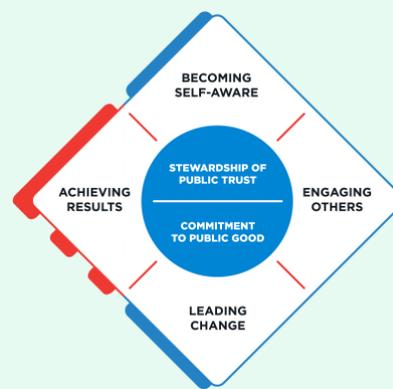
¹⁷ Tiina Kähkönen, Kirsimarja Blomqvist, Nicole Gillespie and Mika Vanhala, “Employee Trust Repair: A Systematic Review of 20 Years of Empirical Research and Future Research Directions,” *Journal of Business Research* 130, June 2021, 98. DOI: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.03.019. Retrieved from bit.ly/3y14Qou

¹⁸ Tiina Kähkönen, Kirsimarja Blomqvist, Nicole Gillespie and Mika Vanhala, “Employee Trust Repair: A Systematic Review of 20 Years of Empirical Research and Future Research Directions,” *Journal of Business Research* 130, June 2021, 98. DOI: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.03.019. Retrieved from bit.ly/3y14Qou

particularly in comparison to the mandate of their career leaders.¹⁹ This phenomenon is not generally widespread, but it does have impact. As one survey respondent described a negative example, “I have grown to distrust and feel unprotected by the political interests of appointees and to observe them place their personal interests above the mission of the agency and the responsibilities of the career staff.”

More generally, many contributors to this project agreed that trust is personal—all trust is local—indicating that cultivating interpersonal leadership skills is a fundamental strategy of increasing civil servants’ trust in their leaders.

Public Service Leadership Model



Based on the core values of stewardship of public trust and commitment to public good, the Partnership’s [Public Service Leadership Model](#) is a roadmap for leadership growth. The model can be used by career leaders and political appointees to cultivate workforce trust. In addition to the core values, it consists of four critical competencies for effective federal leadership, which complement the Office of Personnel Management’s [Executive Core Qualifications](#). These competencies operationalize leadership attributes that foster trust:

Critical Competencies

1. Becoming Self-Aware
2. Engaging Others
3. Leading Change
4. Achieving Results

Core Values

1. Stewardship of Public Trust
2. Commitment to Public Good

¹⁹ Partnership for Public Service Center for Presidential Transition and Boston Consulting Group, “Leading Together: An Exploration of the Relationship Between Leadership Type and Employee Engagement,” February 2022, 12. Available at bit.ly/3Oybkkky

Interviewees, roundtable participants and survey respondents identified seven interconnected attributes of interpersonal leadership that cultivate trust, which our literature review validated. These attributes can be adopted by career and politically appointed leaders at all levels, and they align with the Partnership’s Public Service Leadership Model—which is a tool career and politically appointed leaders can use to evaluate their performance, assess their leadership development and chart a course for self-improvement.

Below are the attributes of interpersonal leadership that drive workforce trust as well as examples of them shared by contributors to this study.



Transparency, Two-Way Communication and Mutual Trust

Federal leaders can cultivate trust by being transparent in their decision-making and actions and by communicating honestly, clearly and frequently with their staff. Such demonstrations of respect are often reciprocated by mutual trust. Bilateral communication is especially effective to this end. This involves not just seeking input or inviting feedback, but also responding to it.

“If you want to build trust, you need staff to feel like they’re part of the solution not the problem,” explained John Palguta, the former MSPB official.

Examples of this attribute shared by interviewees, roundtable participants and survey respondents include the following.

Looks Like

- “We have weekly meetings with the whole branch where we can actually ask our supervisor about what his supervisor or what his leadership is doing. And we often have meetings and communication with those leaders. The leadership makes a point to come talk to us—not just me, but my colleagues and interns as well,” said Haroon Khan, a project manager at NASA’s Ames Space Center.
- “Roundtables with career staff in which the decision-makers can discuss policy in its formative stages and learn about possible implementation challenges from those who will actually have to put the policy in place,” suggested a survey respondent.

Doesn’t Look Like

- Leaders not explaining big decisions like budget and personnel cuts, leaving staff to speculate the reasons.
- Goals or recommendations derived from staff listening sessions or surveys that do not reflect the input of employees.

- Supervisors and managers sharing with only select staff news about developmental and promotion opportunities.



Reliability, Consistency and Accountability

“Promises are the building blocks of trust,” said Kevin Mahoney, senior advisor at the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. “Whether staff like the outcome has less bearing on workforce trust than whether the promise is kept.” A survey respondent agreed, noting that nothing breaks trust faster than a leader saying one thing and doing the opposite, suggesting that reliability, consistency and accountability are critical factors of federal workforce trust. Furthermore, according to Palguta, “A culture of mutual accountability creates a culture of trust.”

Looks Like

- Leaders who keep their promises or explain why they are not able to follow through on them.
- Leaders’ performance plans and reviews are transparent and account for the results of employee engagement surveys.²⁰
- “Civil service rules applied equally to all employees,” wrote one survey respondent.

Doesn’t Look Like

- Leaders who do not enact agency changes in response to Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey scores.
- Unexpected or unclear changes in policy, project timelines or management practices.
- “Our agency managers are not held accountable in terms of the climate they create in their work unit, and 360-degree reviews for them are not performed,” wrote one survey respondent.
- “The worst thing leaders can do for team morale is to ignore festering personnel problems, [which can] be disruptive, distracting, and stoke feelings of unfairness and inequity among the rest of the employees,” wrote a survey respondent.

²⁰ For example, leaders’ performance plans at the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services and the Government Accountability Office account for staff survey data. Partnership for Public Service and Boston Consulting Group, “15 Editions of Best Places to Work Imagining the Next Era of Federal Employee Engagement,” July 2021. Available at bit.ly/3rBQoz9



Fostering Professional Growth

Fostering professional development can engender workforce trust because it demonstrates leaders' commitment to their staff as well as to the principles of the civil service.²¹

Looks Like

- “Development involves not just giving people key assignments,” explained former Office of Personnel Management official Rita Sampson, “but also involves feedback so that you can learn and grow from your efforts. When people do not receive timely, honest feedback, then they’re unable to make adjustments to perform and grow.”
- “My direct supervisor actually joined us when we were deployed ... and worked directly with us. He was training us on our jobs and he was teaching us how to run an operation in the field,” said Nickelle Reid, an operations engineer at NASA’s Armstrong Flight Research Center.

Doesn’t Look Like

- Leaders who do not prioritize professional development in budgets and in employee performance plans—or do not make sure staff have time to pursue growth opportunities.



Empathy and Care for the Whole Person

Genuine care for others is fundamental to gaining trust, so federal leaders need to intentionally and actively understand the perspectives and experiences of their staff. “When you care for the individuals in your workforce, they have the ability to accomplish the mission in a much more effective and sustained way,” Sampson said.

²¹ According to the Merit System Principle #7, “Employees should be provided effective education and training in cases in which such education and training would result in better organizational and individual performance.” Merit Systems Protection Board, “Merit System Principles (5 USC § 2301).” Retrieved from bit.ly/3Jq4b2J

Looks Like

- “A leader who recognizes staff concerns, takes action and says, ‘You need staffing, you need more equipment, you need self-care days,’” said Amin Vafa, the lead of enterprise data strategy in the State Department’s Center for Analytics.
- “NASA has a culture of safety, and they’re very big on preventing burnout,” said Haroon Khan, “There’s been times when leaders, not just my boss, but his bosses or their bosses have literally told us take time off if you need it ... I just feel like I’m encouraged to have a work-life balance.”

Doesn’t Look Like

- Senior leaders glossing over challenges related to diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility instead of acknowledging the reality of biases and the tangible negative impacts they have on the workforce.
- “Too often there is talk about work-life balance or putting people first, but when the rubber meets the road, the demand is to get the job done regardless,” wrote one survey respondent.



Creating a Culture of Trust, Respect and Mutual Care

“Leadership that prioritizes creating a culture of trust can transform a workplace from one with low levels of trust to one with high levels of trust,” explained Adhir Kackar, the acting director of the federal and state division of the Environmental Protection Agency’s Office of Community Revitalization. According to the federal employees who contributed to this study, a workplace culture of trust is built on respect and mutual care, factors that incorporate the other attributes of interpersonal leadership described here.

Looks Like

- Leaders fostering workplace values or codes of conduct—such as ethical behavior and transparency—that cultivate trust. Prioritizing such organizational ethos is especially important when onboarding new staff.
- Leaders who choose courage over comfort—for example, by speaking up and challenging the status quo, by being honest about their own strengths and weaknesses, by engaging in rather than shying away from difficult conversations, and by asking for help. Courageous

leadership can be a particularly important asset for diversity, inclusion, equity and accessibility.²²

Doesn't Look Like

- Supervisors and managers assigning tasks but not giving staff the authority and space to determine the best way to complete them.
- Leaders who do not encourage staff to contribute their ideas and perspectives, which can instill a fear of risk and stifle innovation.



Fostering Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility

To cultivate a workplace culture of trust, it is necessary to support a diverse workforce and to foster equity and inclusion for all employees. “I will trust only when I feel everyone is treated equitably and with respect,” explained one survey respondent.

While agencies government-wide have developed—per a June 2021 executive order—a strategic plan “to advance diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility in the [federal] workforce” and must do so annually going forward,²³ it is critical that these plans be realized through concrete and meaningful actions. Pro forma efforts will likely be seen as hollow gestures, according to interviewees, and could undermine trust in leaders’ support of DEIA.

Looks Like

- Organizational cultures where people trust that if they’re experiencing harassment or any kind of discriminatory behavior, the processes for redress are in place and leaders will respond empathetically, consistently and fairly.
- Providing detailed education about civil service rules—especially those that bar discrimination and promote equitable employment practices like the Merit System Principles, Prohibited Personnel Practices and the Equal Employment Opportunity Act—and how to engage the agencies that enforce them.

²² For more about courageous leadership and workforce trust, see SHRM, “Brené Brown: Drop the Armor, Dare to Lead,” June 2019. Retrieved from bit.ly/3qHCaMP

²³ The White House, “Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce,” Executive Order 14035, June 25, 2021. Retrieved from bit.ly/3EqREue

Doesn't Look Like

- Leaders avoiding diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility issues or limiting informed, honest and safe conversations about the experience of people of color in the federal workforce.
- Leaders who do not seek expert support. As one survey respondent wrote, “My trust would increase if there was more willingness [among leaders] to engage experts to advise them on things like disability and bias in the workplace—I believe their abstract intent is good, but they have seemed resistant to hiring experts from outside.”
- Leaders overlooking the connections between fostering diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility in the federal workforce and agency program delivery.^{24,25}

Though lasting DEIA change is dependent on evidence-based, holistic strategies, leaders can use concepts like the [LEAD \(Listen. Engage. Acknowledge. Do.\)](#) framework created by Deloitte to launch and guide such efforts. This model highlights traits of inclusive leadership and details concrete DEIA actions leaders can take, including those described above.

Traits of Inclusive Leadership

1. Demonstrate commitment to DEIA.
2. Have the courage to better support DEIA.
3. Be cognizant about diverse experiences and perceptions.
4. Be curious about the issues of and strategies to improve DEIA.
5. Build cultural intelligence around current events related to DEIA.
6. Collaborate with leaders and employees from underrepresented groups and their allies.

Learn more [here](#).

²⁴ Research shows that customer experience strategies are most equitable when staff are prepared to effectively deliver benefits and services to all Americans, including those in underserved communities. Partnership for Public Service and Accenture, “Government for the People: Designing for Equitable and Trusted Customer Experiences,” November 2021. Available at bit.ly/3j0rMLX

²⁵ A January 2021 executive order calls on all agencies in the executive branch to “recognize and work to redress inequities in their policies and programs that serve as barriers to equal opportunity.” The White House, “Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government,” Executive Order 13985, Jan. 20, 2021. Retrieved from bit.ly/3uD3mgG



Competent, Nonpartisan Leadership

Intention alone is not sufficient for federal leaders to cultivate workforce trust. They must also be competent administrators who are focused on mission over politics and who are deeply knowledgeable about and committed to upholding the rules of the civil service.

Looks Like

- “Leaders modeling the correct behavior in a consistent way,” according to a survey respondent.
- “Leaders’ willingness to be honest about what can be accomplished with the resources they have,” suggested a survey respondent. “The fallacy and fiction of being able to ‘do more with less’ erodes both trust in and effectiveness of public institutions and their leaders.”
- “A performance review process [for leaders] that takes into consideration the impact their leadership has made on the workforce that they are leading,” wrote a survey respondent.

Doesn’t Look Like

- Career and politically appointed leaders distracted by political pressure from agency goals and mission priorities.
- Civil servants being promoted into supervisory or other leadership roles without demonstrated leadership skills or without an interest in being a leader.



Photo Credit: Department of the Interior

Recommendations for Increasing Trust in Leaders

Administrations and agencies should support leadership development efforts that focus on cultivating workforce trust.

- For career leaders, professional development opportunities and resources provided by agencies should prioritize interpersonal leadership skills associated with workforce trust—such as two-way communication, transparency, reliability, consistency, accountability and empathy. A useful tool for this is the [Public Service Leadership Model](#). The Office of Personnel Management should reexamine and update the [executive core qualifications](#)—which are a standard for joining the Senior Executive Service and used by many agencies’ performance development and management indicators—to ensure they reflect the most current thinking on the skills federal executives need to be successful.
- For political appointees, the Presidential Personnel Office—which helps recruit, vet and nominate political appointees—should implement and coordinate trust-focused professional development requirements for appointees that prioritize interpersonal leadership skills that foster workforce trust.

Administrations and agencies should emphasize the importance of trust in accountability mechanisms.

- Career leaders’ performance appraisals should include the use of a 360-degree performance assessment instrument or other comprehensive, multi-rater assessment tools to gather feedback that helps them improve their leadership competencies. Some agencies already leverage the power of such assessments, such as the Administration for Children and Families and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which use the Partnership’s [Public Service Leadership Model](#). Other agencies use the [OPM Leadership 360™](#) tool.
- Political appointees should have specific and measurable performance goals aligned with agency missions and effective public service leadership. Such goals can help hold

appointees accountable for their roles in executing policy and shaping an agency's organizational culture.

Congress should establish a standard for leadership development and performance for both career and politically appointed leaders. Such a standard should account for knowledge about and commitment to civil service rules as well as for interpersonal leadership skills associated with workforce trust. Currently, federal leadership development programs are fragmented across government. By offering a common leadership standard by which to develop and assess federal executives, Congress can ensure leaders receive the necessary training and are evaluated via annual performance plans according to competency standards.

Leaders should cultivate workplace cultures of trust by adopting management practices that emphasize interpersonal leadership. Specific actions toward this end could include:

- Dedicating time to engage openly with staff of all levels
- Investing in the “whole person” by extending flexibilities such as teleworking and staff-set schedules to help employees maintain work-life balance and remain focused on mission, especially during tough times like the COVID-19 pandemic
- Recognizing excellence in public service by calling out good work during staff meetings, by allocating [cash or time-off awards](#) or by nominating employees for the [Samuel J. Heyman Service to America Medals](#)[®], the “Oscars” of government service award bestowed annually by the Partnership.

Administrations and agencies should strengthen leaders' knowledge of and commitment to civil service rules and the processes and entities that enforce them.

- For politically appointed leaders, the Presidential Personnel Office and center-of-government agencies should convey the administration's commitment to upholding civil service rules and expectation of appointees' support of them. For example, a December 2021 [Office of Management and Budget memorandum](#) called on agency secretaries to cooperate with their inspectors general. The Presidential Personnel Office also should coordinate with individual agencies to ensure that appointees' onboarding includes a focus on the civil service framework and their responsibilities related to it.
- For career leaders, individual agencies' senior managers should encourage and facilitate professional development opportunities and performance management practices that prioritize knowledge about and commitment to the civil service. Furthermore, evidence of such knowledge and commitment should be tied to career leaders' professional advancement.

Leaders should demonstrate their commitment to upholding civil service rules and their expectations of staff to do the same. This could be done by establishing values—like the [Mission Values and People Values](#) of the Government Accountability Office—that set the tone for office culture.

Leaders should encourage and facilitate professional development and other growth opportunities. Such opportunities include mentorship programs, inter- or intra-agency detail assignments, and cross-sector collaborations via the [Intergovernmental Personnel Act Mobility Program](#) or [talent exchanges](#), such as the [Department of Defense’s Public-Private Talent Exchange](#) program. These investments of time, focus and budget demonstrate leaders’ dedication to and belief in their staff—and can yield mutual trust between them. For the greatest return on such investments, they should be part of a continual effort to enhance the skills of public servants.

Congress, administrations and agencies should actively foster diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility in order to ensure that all civil servants are able to thrive in public service by working in a fair and ethical environment that reflects the demographics of our country. Career and politically appointed leaders at all levels should take concrete and measurable steps to implement their agency’s annual DEIA plan²⁶—such as prioritizing equity in promotion opportunities, sponsoring staff affinity groups and proactively organizing safe spaces for honest dialogue about workplace and societal challenges. Administrations, meanwhile, should share government-wide successful DEIA strategies from individual agencies. Finally, Congress should assess each agency’s DEIA performance and hold hearings on DEIA progress.

²⁶ According to President Biden’s Executive Order 14035, each year federal agencies must develop and submit to the White House, Office of Personnel Management, and Office of Management and Budget a DEIA Strategic Plan that identifies “actions to advance diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility in the workforce and remove any potential barriers to diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility in the workforce,” and quarterly goals to those ends. The White House, “Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce,” Executive Order 14035, June 25, 2021. Retrieved from bit.ly/3EqREue



Photo Credit: Shutterstock

Trust in the Civil Service Framework

In addition to trust in leaders, this study explored public servants' perceptions of the rules of the civil service and entities that enforce them, which were designed to help the federal government operate effectively, efficiently and equitably—all factors that drive public trust in government. Notably, when asked about the civil service framework, interviewees, roundtable participants and survey respondents focused more on their trust in federal leaders to adhere to the rules than on the actual rules and enforcement processes.

Findings in Brief– Trust in the Civil Service Framework



- Civil servants have limited, generalized awareness of the civil service framework, which appears to be due to the opacity of civil service rules, processes and enforcement entities, as well as to insufficient efforts to educate federal employees about the civil service.
- Public servants' level of familiarity with civil service rules and the entities that enforce them appears to mirror their trust in them—indicating that familiarity is a driver of trust.
- Trust in civil service rules and the entities that enforce them can be eroded by the lack of data about investigations of civil service violations and related enforcement actions; evidence or perceptions of civil service rules applied incorrectly or inefficiently; negative experiences with reporting a violation; and capacity limitations of the entities that safeguard the civil service.

When federal employees trust the enforcement of the Merit System Principles and Prohibited Personnel Practices—the guardrails of their conduct—they know they are protected from political pressure, discrimination, arbitrary actions and retributions. These protections enable them to avoid the distractions of watching their back or second guessing the motivations of their leaders, colleagues and direct reports. “Trust in the institution helps those who go to work show up with confidence,” explained a current federal leader. A former civil servant agreed, noting that as a result, “A great deal goes right in government every day.”

The civil service framework is also a key factor in the accountability that bolsters public trust in government. Civil service rules and enforcement processes exist to help supervisors and managers address and resolve workplace problems—such as sexism, waste and conflicts of interest—by holding federal employees accountable. They are also designed to hold leaders accountable, helping to prevent nepotism, whistleblower retaliation, inefficiency and other behaviors that erode public trust in government. By instilling a sense of responsibility in staff and leaders, the civil service framework helps ensure federal employees fulfill their missions and serve as stewards of public trust.

Why the Civil Service Framework Matters

The rules and entities highlighted in this report maintain the guardrails of federal employment. They set the standards of public service, providing critical guidance to all civil servants, including career leaders. They also protect employees from discrimination, retaliation, favoritism and other threats to fair, ethical and effective federal workplaces. Finally, they are the mechanisms for holding civil servants accountable to each other, their leaders and the American public.

Specifically, Title 5 of U.S. Code is the legal framework for federal employment. It covers hiring practices, the General Schedule salary scale, and most of the other civil service rules and enforcement entities highlighted in this report—including the Merit System Principles; Merit Systems Protection Board; Prohibited Personnel Practices; Office of Government Ethics; Office of Special Counsel; and inspectors general.

The entities that safeguard the civil service addressed in this report—the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, inspectors general, the Merit Systems Protection Board, the Office of Government Ethics and the Office of Special Counsel—enforce civil service rules by investigating workplace challenges like inequitable pay, fraud and financial conflicts of interest; by holding violators of these rules accountable; and by providing redress to employees who report or experience them.

Familiarity with the Civil Service Framework

To understand federal employees’ trust in civil service rules and the entities that enforce them, it is first necessary to assess their knowledge about them.

For this reason, we asked survey respondents about their familiarity with the parts of the civil service framework that, according to initial research, are most prominent in federal employees’ work experience:

- [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission](#)
- [Inspectors general](#)
- [Merit Systems Protection Board](#)
- [Office of Government Ethics](#)
- [Office of Special Counsel](#)
- [Title 5 of U.S. Code](#)

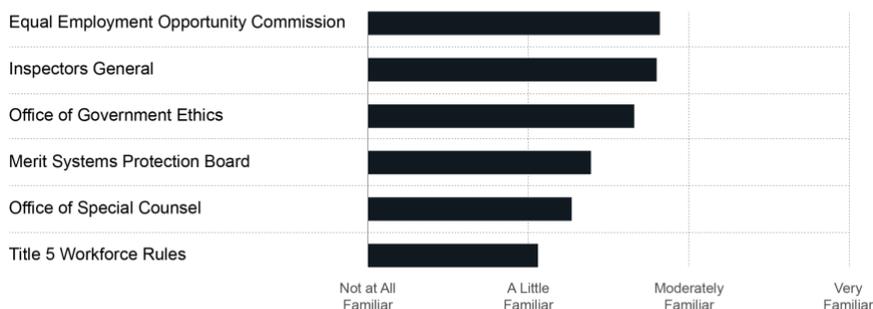
Together, these served as a proxy of the overall civil service framework for this study.

According to interviewees, roundtable participants and survey respondents, federal employees typically have limited, generalized awareness of the framework of the civil service. Many have some knowledge, but few have detailed understanding of specific rules, let alone the entities and processes that enforce them.

On average, survey respondents reported being “a little familiar” to “moderately familiar” with the civil service framework.²⁷ They were most familiar with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission—which combats hiring and workplace discrimination—and agencies’ inspectors general, who investigate waste, fraud and abuse. They were least familiar with Title 5, the statutes that govern pay, benefits, performance management and other aspects of their day-to-day work experience.

How familiar are you with the role of the following civil service institutions?

AVERAGE RESPONSES



Source: Partnership for Public Service

²⁷ Respondents ranked their level of familiarity with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, inspectors general, Merit Systems Protection Board, Office of Government Ethics, Office of Special Counsel and Title 5 of U.S. Code on a four-point scale: Not at All Familiar, A Little Familiar, Moderately Familiar and Very Familiar.

One striking example of limited familiarity is that only 62% of survey respondents said they know how to report a violation of a civil service rule.

Survey respondents and interviewees largely attributed their lack of familiarity to insufficient efforts to educate federal employees about civil service rules and the mandates of the entities that enforce them. As one respondent wrote, “I have been a civil servant for 30 years, and almost nothing I know about these institutions came through official work channels.” This echoes a 2016 study by the Merit Systems Protection Board, which estimated that less than half of federal managers and supervisors had received extensive training on the Merit System Principles and Prohibited Personnel Practices, and that some had received no training on them.²⁸

Federal employees also cited the opacity of civil service processes such as investigations and enforcement actions as a reason for their limited knowledge. One survey respondent described the need for clearer guidance on the civil service framework, “written for laypersons and published transparently on OPM’s website.” Without additional transparency, another survey respondent explained, “I think many people get these different offices [responsible for safeguarding the civil service] confused or don’t even know that these protections exist.” Given that, according to Rita Sampson, former director of OPM’s Office of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility, “We have to do a better job of letting people in the [federal] workforce know that when you follow these processes or use these processes, positive change can and will happen.”

To that end, some contributors to this study called for digestible summaries of investigations of civil service violations (without identifying information). “Real case studies, better stories that government employees can read in five minutes and see the scope and values of the civil service institution reflected,” suggested one survey respondent. They also said that just aggregated data—which ensures privacy—about the number and types of civil service violations and what was done in response to them helps improve the understanding of the rules and enforcement mechanisms.

Levels of Trust in the Civil Service Framework

The federal employees we interviewed and surveyed reported modest levels of trust in the civil service framework on average, similar to their levels of familiarity with it. This finding suggests neither a crisis of faith nor overweening confidence in the existing system—and also indicates efforts to increase civil servants’ trust in the civil service framework are warranted.

For example, survey respondents who are familiar with the Merit Systems Protection Board, the Office of Special Counsel, the Office of Government Ethics, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and inspectors general reported trusting them to enforce the rules and protections of the civil service a little more than “a moderate extent” on average.²⁹ While they most trusted

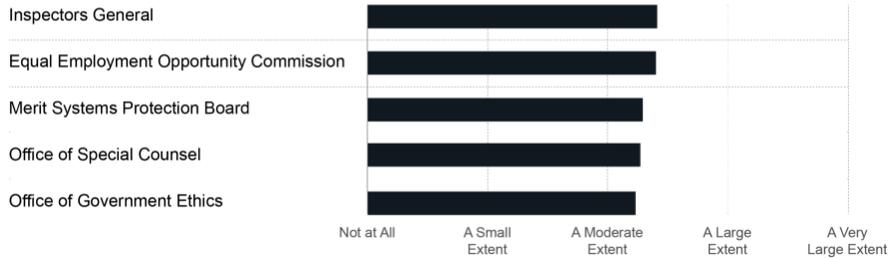
²⁸ Merit Systems Protection Board, “The Merit System Principles: Guiding the Fair and Effective Management of the Federal Workforce,” September 2016, viii. Retrieved from bit.ly/3vAZ37m

²⁹ For all survey questions about trust in the civil service framework, respondents ranked their level of trust a five-point scale: Not at All, A Small Extent, A Moderate Extent, A Large Extent, and A Very Large Extent.

inspectors general and the EEOC and least trusted OGE, the trust differential is small, as seen in the following chart.

How much do you trust the following institutions to enforce the rules and protections of the civil service?

AVERAGE RESPONSES

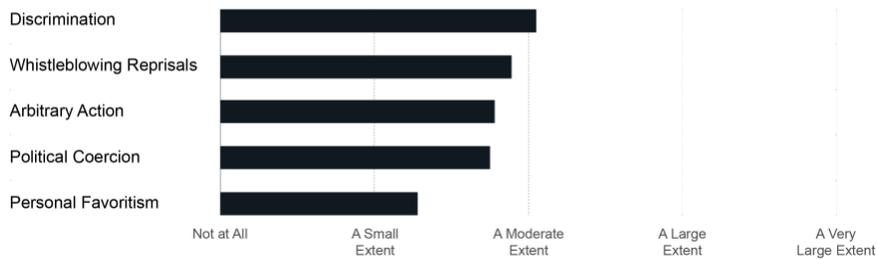


Source: Partnership for Public Service

Survey respondents reported on average between “a small extent” and “a moderate extent” of trust in the laws and regulations designed to protect civil servants, which is a slightly lower than the levels of trust in the entities that enforce them. Many civil service protections are codified in Title 5 of U.S. Code—including the [Merit System Principles](#), which guide federal workforce management, and the 14 federal [Prohibited Personnel Practices](#)—and the lower levels of trust in them echo respondents’ lower familiarity with Title 5 rules.

How much do you trust federal laws and regulations to protect you from the following?

AVERAGE RESPONSES

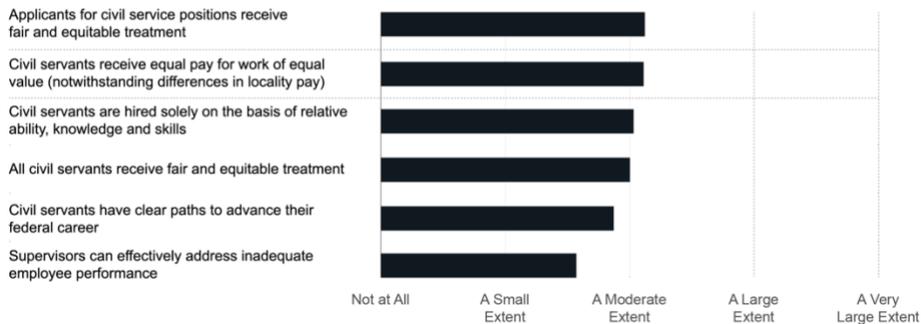


Source: Partnership for Public Service

Respondents familiar with Title 5 rules reported trusting their effectiveness—to ensure fair hiring, employee equity, clear paths for career advancement and effective performance management—between “a small extent” and “a moderate extent” on average. They least trust Title 5 to ensure supervisors can effectively address inadequate performance. Otherwise, as seen in the following chart, their levels of trust are similar across categories.

How much do you trust Title 5 Workforce Rules to ensure the following?

AVERAGE RESPONSES



Source: Partnership for Public Service

Remarkably, of the 62% of survey respondents who know how to report a civil service violation, 90% said they would, indicating a high level of trust in protections from retribution despite a moderate level of familiarity with them.

Drivers of Trust in the Civil Service Framework

The apparent connection between respondents' familiarity with and trust in the rules of the civil service and the entities that enforce them suggests that familiarity is a driver of workforce trust in the civil service framework. Because it is hard to fully trust something not well understood, increasing federal employees' knowledge of the framework may be a way to improve their trust in it. Furthermore, according to a 2019 Merit Systems Protection Board study, increasing familiarity with civil service guardrails like the Prohibited Personnel Practices could improve their effectiveness, which also could increase workforce trust.³⁰

In addition, according to contributors to this study, a number of other interconnected dynamics influence workforce trust in the civil service framework. These factors are explained below:

- Expectations
- Previous experiences and perceptions
- Transparent processes
- Enforcement efficiency
- Leadership commitment

³⁰ Merit Systems Protection Board, "The Perceived Incidence of Prohibited Personnel Practices," June 2019, 1. Retrieved from bit.ly/3s3A6zq



Expectations

Limited knowledge about civil service rules and the authority of the entities that enforce them can skew civil servants' expectations about them. When federal employees' expectations of the civil service framework are not met—even if such expectations are unrealistic—the ensuing disappointment can easily morph into mistrust.

For example, not all public servants understand the role of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which adjudicates allegations of workplace discrimination and is authorized to provide “make whole” relief—such as monetary payments and job placements that put the person who experienced discrimination “as near as possible in the situation [they] would have occupied” if it had not occurred.³¹ What the EEOC does not do is discipline federal employees. Those who do not understand this may be dismayed when EEOC adjudications end without the agency directly punishing violators of civil service and EEO laws.

“They want EEOC to come in and put managers in handcuffs and bring them out of the building,” explained Dexter Brooks, associate director of EEOC’s Office of Federal Operations. “And when they don’t see that type of accountability it creates kind of a frustration and a distrust— ‘Oh, these laws are not doing anything.’”



Prior Experiences and Perceptions

Previous direct or indirect experiences federal employees have had with civil service rules and processes can also influence their trust in them. Based on personal experience with or perceptions of colleagues reporting a civil service violation, for example, many survey respondents said they think investigations of violations usually side with agency management over staff—in part because they believe agencies are better equipped than staff to navigate civil service processes. “The chances of prevailing are slim,” one wrote, “because the deck is stacked in favor of the government.” Another respondent added, “The entire structure for reporting and addressing issues is designed to put the victim in a more vulnerable position.” As a result, wondered a third, “How do you prove favoritism? You can’t really.”

³¹ Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, “Front Pay.” Retrieved from bit.ly/36zaSBs

Furthermore, of the 10% of survey respondents who said they know how to report a civil service violation but would not, many cited their perception of insufficient protections from retribution as the reason why. “Actual real-world evidence shows that whistleblowing remains a very dangerous endeavor,” one wrote. Similarly, fear of retaliation is one reason why employees of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Food and Drug Administration have not reported perceived instances of political interference, according to a 2022 Government Accountability Office report.³²

Some survey respondents and interviewees, however, described frustration with the civil service framework’s ability to hold low-performing employees accountable. Others said their trust in the framework is undermined by what they described as employees’ “frivolous” claims for civil service protections.



Transparent Processes

Transparent civil service investigations, enforcement actions and other processes may be able to bolster confidence in civil service rules as accountability mechanisms. Such transparency can help ensure, according to survey respondents, “that there is no bias,” “that the civil service workforce is protected from political coercion and unfair treatment” and that “employees who abuse various systems are actually held accountable for their actions.”

Transparency can be rooted in efforts to educate federal employees about the civil service framework, including onboarding sessions, routine professional development and other trainings focused on the rules of the civil service, the enforcement entities and how to engage them to redress civil service violations.

For example, according to the Merit Systems Protection Board, when agencies conclude that alleged violations of Prohibited Personnel Practices have not occurred, they “should seek to do a better job of explaining to employees the reasons behind management decisions [perceived to be violations] so that employees can better understand the merit-based reasons for a particular outcome and avoid misperceptions in the future.”³³

Available data about investigations, enforcements and other civil service processes is another important part of this transparency—but availability alone is insufficient. Such data must also be

³² Government Accountability Office, “HHS Agencies Need to Develop Procedures and Train Staff on Reporting and Addressing Political Interference,” GAO-22-104613, April 2022, 12. Retrieved from bit.ly/3FbPChN

³³ Merit Systems Protection Board, “Prohibited Personnel Practices: Employee Perceptions,” August 2011, iv. Retrieved from bit.ly/38ljAh8

easily accessible, widely promoted and in compliance with federal privacy rules to influence workforce trust.³⁴

“Prohibited Personnel Practices work. But I think there’s a transparency problem where not everybody sees that they work,” explained Rita Sampson, former director of OPM’s Office of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility. “If people don’t know what happened to the person who filed the complaint or the outcome of their complaint, then sometimes they just don’t want to go that route [of seeking redress for civil service violations].”

The [No FEAR Act of 2002](#) requires agencies to collect and publicly report statistical data about violations of employment discrimination and whistleblower protection laws and the outcomes of the resulting investigations.³⁵ While we did not specifically ask interviewees and survey respondents about the statute, the fact that only a few federal employees acknowledged it when asked about their familiarity with civil service rules is further evidence of the need to improve awareness of and access to data that tracks civil service processes. (Awareness of such data, however, may increase with the passage of the [Elijah E. Cummings Federal Employee Antidiscrimination Act of 2020](#), which updates the No FEAR Act by requiring agencies to post notifications on their website about findings of discrimination or retaliation. These notifications must remain posted for at least one year.³⁶)

³⁴ The Whistleblower Protection Act prohibits disclosing the identity of civil servants who bring a whistleblowing complaint to the Office of Special Counsel (5 U.S.C. 1213: [bit.ly/3mrijyD](https://www.govinfo.gov/link/uscode/5/1213)); the Inspector General Act prohibits disclosing the identity of civil servants who bring a whistleblowing complaint to an agency’s office of inspector general (5a U.S.C. 7: [bit.ly/3xFEhol](https://www.govinfo.gov/link/uscode/5/7)); and the Privacy Act of 1974 prohibits any disclosure of personal information of government employees without their consent (5 U.S.C. 552a: [bit.ly/3xfFilx](https://www.govinfo.gov/link/uscode/5/552a)).

³⁵ Per the No FEAR Act of 2002, each agency is required to file an annual report with Congress, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the Department of Justice and the Office of Personnel Management. That report must include—among other things—data about the number of pending and resolved investigations each year; the number of employees disciplined for discrimination, retaliation, harassment and the nature of the disciplinary actions taken; and an analysis of the trends and causes of complaints of discrimination. Additionally, each agency is to post quarterly data on its website about the number of Equal Employment Opportunity complaints filed; the number of persons filing those complaints; the number of persons filing multiple complaints; the issues alleged in the complaints; the average length of time of the complaint process; the number of final agency actions in which discrimination is found, broken down by issue; the number of pending complaints that were filed in previous fiscal years; and the number of complaints in which an investigation was not completed in a timely manner. “Notification and Federal Employee Antidiscrimination and Retaliation Act of 2002,” 5 U.S. Code 2301 Note. Retrieved from [bit.ly/3mulRiS](https://www.govinfo.gov/link/uscode/5/2301)

³⁶ For details about the updates to the No FEAR Act, see Title XI, Subtitle B-Elijah E. Cummings Federal Employee Antidiscrimination Act of the “William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021,” H.R.6395, 116th Congress, 2021. Retrieved from [bit.ly/3NIG33w](https://www.govinfo.gov/link/uscode/5/2301)



Enforcement Efficiency

Another driver of trust, according to survey respondents and interviewees, is the ability of the agencies and offices charged with protecting the civil service to operate effectively. Sufficient staffing of these entities is critical as position vacancies and the disruptions of turnover can backlog investigations and delay their resolutions. Suggested one survey respondent, “Fully staff them so they can adequately respond to situations and strengthen their enforcement powers.” For example, the Merit Systems Protection Board [operated without a quorum](#) between January 2017 and March 2022, leaving it unable to issue final decisions on employee appeals of agency personnel actions. In addition, staff shortages can limit communication about these prolonged processes, leading to frustrations with the black-box effect that can harden into doubt about efficiency, integrity and reliability.



Leadership Commitment to the Civil Service Framework

According to the Merit Systems Protection Board, “The primary responsibility for avoiding [Prohibited Personnel Practices]—and attaining the ideals described in the [Merit System Principles]—lies with the employing agencies.”³⁷ This may be why the federal employees who contributed to this study indicated that the biggest driver of their trust in the civil service framework is how career and politically appointed leaders understand, adhere to and implement civil service rules. For example, consistent enforcement of rules cultivates trust in their equity, whereas inconsistency can erode that trust. Similarly, supervisors and managers who prioritize the merit principles when hiring and promoting staff may engender confidence in them, whereas those who do not might undermine faith in the guardrails designed to prevent nepotism. This underscores the importance of leaders’ commitment to the civil service framework. It also suggests that workforce trust in the framework can be bolstered by ensuring leaders have a fluent understanding of civil service protections, accountability mechanisms and the responsibilities of the entities that enforce them.

³⁷ Merit Systems Protection Board, “The Merit System Principles: Guiding the Fair and Effective Management of the Federal Workforce,” September 2016, vii. Retrieved from bit.ly/3vAZ37m



Photo Credit: Department of Housing and Urban Development

Recommendations for Increasing Trust in the Civil Service Framework

The Office of Personnel Management and the entities that safeguard the civil service should increase the transparency of their processes and make it easier for the workforce to understand and access protections and the mechanisms of accountability.

- Safeguarding entities should optimize the user experience of their websites to ease access to their services and related information. Models for highlighting resources and services for federal employees include the websites of the [Office of Government Ethics](#) and [Office of the Special Counsel](#), which make it easy to find things like standards of ethical conduct, contact information for each agency’s designated ethics officials and information about disclosing wrongdoings. Additionally, the entities that enforce the rules could evaluate the effectiveness of their existing efforts to educate federal employees about the civil service framework. Such reviews could result in improvements to or even create new training programs and resources.
- OPM should create an online clearinghouse of all the rules of the civil service, the roles of the entities that safeguard them, and the rights and responsibilities of staff, supervisors and agency leaders—made real through pertinent real-life examples—similar to [telework.gov](#). As one survey respondent suggested, “A one-stop shop or a single port with options for assistance. Currently, it’s difficult to figure out which pieces of the overall rules are enforced by whom.”

Agencies and the entities that safeguard the civil service should more prominently highlight data they are authorized to share about investigations of civil service violations and related enforcement actions.

- In compliance with the No FEAR Act of 2002, agencies already release metadata about civil service violations and their efforts in response to them. The lack of familiarity with such data among the federal employees who contributed to this study, however, indicates that agencies should more widely promote the availability and utility of this data, as well as make sure it is easily accessible online.

- Similarly, the entities that safeguard the civil service should consider how they could better disseminate the data they already publish. Models for proactive data sharing are the annual reports the Office of Government Ethics sends to agencies that summarize [prosecutions of violators of criminal conflicts-of-interest statutes](#) and review [compliance rates, enforcement actions and other aspects of the government-wide ethics program](#). “We drive home that this is your government and anyone can use these documents and have access to them,” said Patrick Shepherd, a senior instructor in the Office of Government Ethics Institute for Ethics in Government, elaborating on the agency’s commitment to transparency.

Agencies should increase the accessibility of civil service framework resources and prioritize professional development opportunities focused on building knowledge about civil service rules and how to report violations of them to the proper enforcement entities.

- While existing laws and regulations do require individual agencies to provide information and/or training to their staff about some civil service rules and enforcement processes, research indicates the need for agencies to do more to increase civil servants’ familiarity with the civil service framework. In particular, agencies should create and regularly promote easy-to-find, comprehensive resources about the framework—like a dedicated intranet page.
- Agencies should ensure their existing efforts to educate staff about the civil service framework are thorough. They also should consider creating additional educational opportunities that go beyond training requirements, such as workshops that focus on civil service rules especially pertinent to specific job responsibilities—or trainings that illustrate how the many pieces of the civil service framework interconnect. Agencies should work with the entities that safeguard the civil service to identify or develop effective resources for such education efforts, which should be delivered equitably to prevent demographic disparities in knowledge.

For example, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission provides ongoing training to federal agencies. “We offer customized training for federal agencies and about 54 open enrollment classes on a wide variety of topics to our federal community,” said Patricia St. Clair, an assistant director for federal sector program in EEOC’s Office of Federal Operations.

Civil Service Framework Training Requirements



Existing requirements for agencies to educate their staff about the civil service framework include:

- Per the No FEAR Act 2002, agencies must annually notify all employees of the rights and protections available to them under federal antidiscrimination and whistleblower protection laws and to provide related training to all employees, including supervisors and managers, every two years.³⁸
- Each agency's designated ethics official is required to provide ethics trainings for all new employees and provide additional trainings for Senate-confirmed presidential appointees and for staff whose jobs put them at greater risk for conflicts of interest.³⁹
- Each agency is required, in consultation with its inspector general and the Office of Special Counsel, to inform its employees of the rights and remedies available to employees via the Prohibited Personnel Practices, Merit System Principles, the Civil Service Reform Act, the Whistleblower Protection Act and the Whistleblower Protection Enhancement Act. Agencies are to provide information about the Prohibited Personnel Practices and whistleblower disclosures within 180 days of employees' start date and annually thereafter. They also must provide triennial training to supervisors on these rules and provide them with annual trainings on "how to respond to complaints alleging a violation of whistleblower protections."⁴⁰

"We also work with managers and senior leaders across the federal government to ensure that they are working to advance EEO objectives and to create model EEO workplaces. We communicate a lot of this through our social media and through our various communication initiatives.... And we recently started about two years ago a community of practice. It's our EEOC Education Consortium, which is for federal EEO practitioners. It's a meeting place for them to come together and discuss federal laws as well as the trends and the leading and promising practices that we're seeing for EEO across the federal government."

The entities that safeguard the civil service—with support from administrations and Congress—should maintain adequate staff capacity to effectively support federal agencies and employees.

- Because the efficiency of enforcement actions is a driver of trust in the civil service framework, the entities charged with safeguarding the civil service should develop staff

³⁸ 5 U.S. Code 724.202 – Notice obligations. Retrieved from bit.ly/3KXGbVe. 5 U.S. Code 724.203 – Training Obligations. Retrieved from bit.ly/3OkwBxV

³⁹ 5 U.S. Code Part 2638 Subpart C - Government Ethics Education. Retrieved from bit.ly/3EnUksy

⁴⁰ Office of Special Counsel, 2302(c) Certification Program. Retrieved from bit.ly/3uQ1ume

retention strategies that help prevent the loss of critical institutional knowledge that would disrupt effective operations. In addition, they should strengthen their talent pipelines, recruitment strategies and hiring capacity so they can quickly fill position vacancies as they arise and add staff capacity as necessary to ensure streamlined investigations, adjudications and other civil service processes.

- Administrations should prioritize leadership appointments for these entities as well as ensure they are well-resourced.
- Congress, meanwhile, should provide sufficient funding to the entities that enforce civil service rules and ensure timely confirmations of their politically appointed leaders to avoid disruptions of their work. An example of such a disruption is the five years that the Merit Systems Protection Board was unable to issue final decisions on employee appeals of agency personnel actions because it operated without a quorum of members.

Recommendations for Increasing Trust in Both the Civil Service Framework and Federal Leaders



Future efforts by Congress, administrations or individual agencies to better understand and increase federal workforce trust should incorporate data from the annual [Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey](#) administered by the Office of Public Management and the [Merit Principles Survey](#) periodically administered by the Merit Systems Protection Board. Previous iterations of both surveys included questions about workforce trust.⁴¹ In addition, federal leaders may want to use other existing or develop new tools to collect statistically representative trust data from their staff.

⁴¹ For example, relevant questions from the 2020 FEVS include: “I can disclose a suspected violation of any law, rule or regulation without fear of reprisal”; “In my work unit, steps are taken to deal with a poor performer who cannot or will not improve”; “I have trust and confidence in my supervisor”; “My supervisor is committed to a workforce representative of all segments of society”; and “My supervisor listens to what I have to say.” Office of Personnel Management, 2020 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey: Governmentwide Management Report, pp. 24 – 39. bit.ly/3L76Sqf. The 2021 Merit Principles Survey included a number of relevant questions, such as those about favoritism, arbitrary action, equitable pay and protections from retaliation. U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 2021 Merit Principles Survey, 2021, bit.ly/3qtBDO6



Photo Credit: National Aeronautics and Space Administration/Joel Kowsky

Conclusion

This study examined federal employees' trust in their career and politically appointed leaders as well as their knowledge of and trust in civil service rules and the entities that enforce them.

Federal workforce trust is an important indicator of government effectiveness, as civil servants who trust their leaders and the rules that guide and protect them are more likely to be engaged in their work, dedicated to their mission and productive. As a result, workforce trust also may influence public trust in government.

Regarding workforce trust in career and politically appointed leaders, we found that:

- Leaders are a primary influence on civil servants' trust at work.
- Civil servants appear to have slightly more trust in career leaders than political appointees, as well as more trust in leaders they work closely with. This trust gap reflects other research that has found that trust is built over time and strengthened by proximity.
- Civil servants have similar levels of trust in their leaders' intent and competence—though they appear to have slightly more trust in their intent.
- Trust is personal, and seven interconnected [attributes of interpersonal leadership](#) are the basis for building workforce trust in leaders.

Regarding trust of the civil service rules and the entities that enforce them, we found that:

- Civil servants have limited, generalized awareness of the civil service framework, which appears to be due to the opacity of civil service rules, processes and enforcement entities as well as to insufficient efforts to educate federal employees about the civil service.
- Public servants' level of familiarity with civil service rules and the entities that enforce them appear to mirror their trust in them—indicating that familiarity is a driver of trust.
- Trust in civil service rules and the entities that enforce them can be eroded by the lack of data about investigations of civil service violations and related enforcement actions; evidence or perceptions of civil service rules applied incorrectly or inefficiently; negative experiences with reporting a violation; and capacity limitations of the entities that safeguard the civil service.

The findings, recommendations and resources offered in this report provide practical steps to increase federal employee trust in government leaders and the civil service framework. Workforce trust cannot be taken for granted, and it is up to both career and political leaders at all levels to champion ongoing efforts to earn public servants' trust—and in the process strengthen the workforce and make government more effective and responsive to public needs.

Author



Paul Pietsch, Senior Research Manager, oversees the Partnership’s federal workforce research portfolio. He believes in the ideal of government of the people, by the people and for the people—which is why he served in the Peace Corps, attended state universities with pride and owns the “West Wing” box set. Paul’s research career has focused on improving policy, programming and management practices at state and federal agencies. His favorite public servants are the career staff of the National Endowment for the Arts, who work tirelessly to increase access to the arts in communities big and small throughout the country.

Appendix I: Research Methodology

Our research included a literature review, 20 one-on-one interviews and two roundtable discussions with past and present civil servants, as well as career and politically appointed leaders. Through the interviews and roundtables we talked to a total of 33 people from 22 different agencies. They did not officially represent their respective agencies but rather shared their personal perspectives.

To encourage candid conversations, we conducted the roundtable discussions on a not-for-attribution basis. Most interviews were done on a not-for-attribution basis as well—though we did several for-attribution interviews with the consent of the interviewees. We are not including in this report the names, titles, job functions or other identifiable information about the contributors to this study who did not wish to be quoted.

To supplement the interviews and roundtable discussions, we also conducted an online survey of current public servants and career leaders.

In total, this study engaged with more than 500 current and former federal employees who shared their personal experiences at 49 different federal agencies.⁴²

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

We administered an online survey from Nov. 23 through Dec. 10, 2021. We sent the survey to 4,692 current civil servants and career leaders who are alumni of four of the Partnership’s federal-employee training programs—[Excellence in Government Fellows](#), [Foundations in Public Service Leadership](#), [Mission Support Leadership](#) and [Preparing to Lead](#). In total, 475 people from 38 agencies responded, for a response rate of 10%. Respondents ranged between the GS-11 and Senior Executive Service levels. They shared their personal perspectives and did not officially represent or identify their agency. We removed any potentially identifying information

⁴² These agencies are AmeriCorps; Architect of Capitol; Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board; Department of Agriculture; Department of Commerce; Department of Defense; Department of Education; Department of Energy; Department of Health and Human Services; Department of Homeland Security; Department of Housing and Urban Development; Department of Interior; Department of Justice; Department of Labor; Department of State; Department of Transportation; Department of Treasury; Department of Veterans Affairs; Environmental Protection Agency; Equal Employment Opportunity Commission; Export-Import Bank of the United States; FBI; Federal Maritime Commission; Federal Reserve Board of Governors; Federal Trade Commission; General Accountability Office; General Services Administration; Internal Revenue Service; Merit Systems Protection Board; Millennium Challenge Corporation; NASA; National Archives and Records Administration; National Credit Union Administration; National Institutes of Health; National Science Foundation; National Security Agency; National Transportation Safety Board; Office of Government Ethics; Office of Management and Budget; Office of Personnel Management; Office of the Director of National Intelligence; Patent and Trademark Office; Presidential Personnel Office; Securities and Exchange Commission; Small Business Administration; Smithsonian Institution; Social Security Administration; and U.S. Agency for Global Media.

from the dataset before conducting our analyses to preserve anonymity and ensure responses could not be connected to a specific person.

Designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, the survey included 15 closed and seven open-ended questions about respondents' familiarity with and trust in civil service rules and the entities that enforce them; respondents' trust in career and politically appointed leaders; whether respondents' trust in leaders influences their engagement and productivity; and whether respondents' perception of public trust in government influences their trust in federal leaders and the civil service framework. The closed questions consisted of 10 matrixed Likert scale questions and five yes/no questions.

The survey also included 14 closed and two open-ended demographic questions.

Respondents were allowed to skip any questions in the survey they did not wish to answer, which resulted in the total number of responses per question varying from 473 to 337.

SURVEY LIMITATIONS

The survey was not deployed to a population identified through probability sampling, and the results are not statistically representative of the federal workforce. In addition, because all the respondents are alumni of Partnership training programs, survey results may reflect a response bias.

Because far fewer respondents answered the demographic questions than the trust questions, the sizes of individual demographic cohorts are insufficient to enable statistically accurate comparative analysis between them. For this reason, the report does not break down survey results demographically. Future research about federal workforce trust should include statistically representative surveys that enable conclusive demographic analysis.

Header photo credit: Department of Agriculture/Tom Witham

Appendix II: Project Team

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