The Good Government Connection

Linking the Federal Employee and Customer Experiences

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PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

Medallia

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Introduction

"Federal employee experience and customer experience are intertwined and really can't be separated," according to Margarita Devlin, who works at the intersection of the two as the deputy assistant secretary for operations and management at the Veterans' Employment and Training Service of the Department of Labor. Indeed, as the engines of government, civil servants profoundly shape the public's experience with federal agencies. This is the case for both front-line staff working directly with federal customers and the mission-support teams providing HR, IT and other internal assistance enabling effective public service.

A Partnership analysis of nearly 150 Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Centers—comparing the VA's Best Places to Work in the Federal Government® rankings produced by the Partnership and BCG with the agency's Strategic Analytics for Improvement and Learning reports—illustrates the connection between the customer experience and the employee experience. VA medical centers with stronger employee engagement, a measure of the broader concept of employee experience, had higher patient satisfaction, better call center performance and lower turnover among registered nurses.[1]

At the same time, improving the customer experience can boost how federal employees experience their life at work. Public servants are generally motivated by their agency's mission, and a good experience for customers is evidence that they are achieving it. In this way, a better customer experience can drive an enhanced employee experience, creating a virtuous circle of good government.

From Medallia EX + CX Essentials Webinar

This connection between the federal employee experience and the customer experience is particularly important now, as the Biden administration and Congress are making historic

[1]Partnership for Public Service and Boston Consulting Group, "A Prescription for Better Performance: Engaging Employees at VA Medical Centers," May 2019, 2. Available at https://bit.ly/42pg0A4

investments in communities around the country through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, Inflation Reduction Act, and CHIPS and Science Act. The agencies rebuilding bridges and roads, expanding the availability of high-speed internet, lowering energy costs, ensuring access to clean drinking water and facilitating economic growth will be most successful in these efforts if a focus on their customers drives their work. Moreover, the civil servants delivering these public benefits will be most effective if they are engaged and empowered at work.

The potential of leveraging the employee experience to improve the customer experience is not yet well understood by federal leaders, however, even though presidential administrations for decades have supported efforts to bolster the experience of both federal employees and customers.[2] In part, this is because the connection between the employee and the customer experience in government has not been thoroughly researched.

With support from Medallia, the Partnership for Public Service undertook a research study to fill this knowledge gap and to support agencies as they deliver new and enhanced services supported by these historic public investments. We conducted an in-depth literature review as well as a series of interviews and workshops with current and former federal leaders who have worked to strengthen the experience of their agency's employees or customers—or both. We aimed to better understand the relationship between the employee and the customer experience. We also looked for best practices for enhancing the employee experience to improve the customer experience. Ultimately, our goal is to help federal agencies, presidential administrations and Congress see the far-reaching benefits of improving the employee experience to benefit the customer experience and to adopt practices to achieve improvements in both.

Our research found that positive employee experiences in the federal government often lead to better customer experiences, that agency leaders at all levels are the driving force behind great employee and customer experiences, and that adept leadership is the linchpin linking them. Based on these key findings, this paper highlights six strategies for how supervisors, midlevel managers, members of the Senior Executive Service and political appointees can improve the experience of their teams in ways that can lead to better experiences for federal customers:

1. Solicit and value staff contributions.
2. Engage employees in the mission and foster their professional growth.
3. Express empathy, compassion and care for the whole person.
4. Create a good work culture with a continuous learning and growth mindset.
5. Provide enabling technology.
6. Turn timely experience data into action to improve service delivery.

It also identifies four challenges to connecting the employee experience to the customer experience and offers recommendations for overcoming them:

[2] Examples of this support include President Biden's Presidential Management Agenda (2021); OMB Circular A-11 Section 280 (2022); Executive Order 14058—Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government (2021); Executive Order 13985—Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government (2021); Executive Order 13707—Using Behavioral Science Insights To Better Serve the American People (2015); Executive Order 13571—Streamlining Service Delivery and Improving Customer Service (2011); and Executive Order 12862—Setting Customer Service Standards (1993).

CHALLENGES	RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OVERCOMING THEM
Getting leadership buy-in	1. Demonstrate alignment with the priorities of leaders whose support is vital. 2. Be realistic about the staff capacity, budget and potential realignment of resources that may be necessary for employee and customer experience efforts. 3. Include employee and customer experience metrics in career leaders' performance plans and provide them with training on improving both.
Getting staff buy-in	1. Co-create employee and customer experience strategies with staff members, using human-centered design.
Sustaining and scaling up efforts within agencies to link the customer experience	1. Develop holistic strategies linking the employee and the customer experience using human-centered design. 2. Foster a responsive and constructive learning culture that embraces data, evidence and feedback as valuable resources.
Collecting and analyzing data effectively and making it actionable	1. Integrate effective data practices into all agency policies, programs and practices. 2. Adopt a "flight control tower" approach to timely collection and analysis of experience data to expedite actions on improvements.

The paper concludes with a case study illustrating these strategies and recommendations in practice at the Department of Veterans Affairs to inspire similar efforts in other agencies.

Defining Employee Experience and Customer Experience

"Employee experience" is a broad concept, which consists of every moment and interaction throughout an employee's journey with an employer—from the initial job search to exit. This includes employees' sense of their connection to the mission and their ability to contribute to it; the volume and pace of workflow; how their leaders encourage innovation, teamwork, work-life balance and an inclusive office culture; the physical environment they work in; the opportunities to grow professionally and advance their career; the HR, IT, procurement and other mission-support services they receive; and the technology available for their work, among other things.

While often used interchangeably with employee experience, "employee engagement" is a narrower concept. The Partnership defines it as "the commitment of the workforce, its job and organizational satisfaction, and the willingness of employees to put forth discretionary effort to achieve results."[3] As such, employee engagement is a product of all the conditions of the employee experience and a measure of it.[4]

"Customer experience" is also expansive. For federal agencies, every policy, program and system affects the customer experience—which the Biden administration's December 2021 executive order on the issue and OMB Circular A-11 Section 280 define as the public's perceptions of and overall satisfaction with all interactions with an agency, product or service. Federal employees shape the customer experience, especially front-line staff working directly with the public such as nurses at VA medical centers or customer service representatives at the IRS. Customer experience also includes navigating federal websites, filling out applications for benefits, filing tax returns and seeking publicly available information from individual agencies.

[3] Partnership for Public Service, "Best Places to Work in the Federal Government: Methodology." Available at https://bit.ly/42k0Z2l

[4] Medallia, "What is Employee Experience." Retrieved from https://bit.ly/3LjYNlb

Photo credit: U.S. Department of Education

Strategies

In the private sector, improving the employee experience leads to a better customer experience, research shows. Employees who enjoy their jobs, thrive in their work environment and have the tools they need are more likely to be enthusiastic and committed to what they do, which often translates to better products and services.[5] They are also more likely to remain in their jobs and develop the expertise to become more effective.[6] This may explain why 70% of executives in the private sector think that improving the employee experience leads to a better customer experience.[7]

The federal leaders who contributed to this study described seeing similar dynamics at play in their agencies, noting that adept leadership is necessary for efforts to improve the customer experience by bolstering the employee experience. Because the employee experience is all-encompassing, leaders at all levels have many opportunities to enhance it and strengthen the customer experience in the process. Such efforts must be well-planned to be transformative. Below are strategies that can help.

1. SOLICIT AND VALUE STAFF CONTRIBUTIONS

Listening to and seeking input from staff may be the simplest and most direct way to improve the employee experience. Employees want to be heard, and they want to contribute to their agency's mission by sharing ideas on policies, programs or procedures. Their input can directly improve service delivery,

[5] Medallia, "Forever Unified: Customer and Employee Experience," 2022, 4. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/3lmNw9B
[6] Ibid
[7] Medallia, "The Definitive Guide to Employee Experience," 2021, 10. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/3Z2pY7t

leading to a better customer experience and contributing to mission fulfillment. For example, front-line staff members may be able to point to aspects of their own experience—such as outdated technology—that could be undermining customers' experiences.

Acknowledging staff suggestions, even if only to explain why they cannot be adopted, demonstrates that leaders are paying attention and shows that they value and trust their staff—important factors for a good employee experience.

To this end, the Department of Labor's Division of Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation created a system to solicit "bright ideas" from employees about policies, programs or processes. Every submission is recognized and reviewed. "Nobody's opinions, nobody's thoughts, nobody's ideas will fall into a black hole," said Doug Pennington, the division's customer experience executive sponsor. Employees whose bright ideas are fully or partially implemented receive monetary or other special awards.

2. ENGAGE EMPLOYEES IN THE MISSION AND FOSTER THEIR PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

For civil servants to enhance the federal customer experience, supervisors, managers and other leaders must demonstrate how their work helps achieve mission priorities. Pride in public service can motivate front-line teams to deliver better customer experiences. The same is true for employees working in policy or mission-support positions, even if not all of them recognize their work's impact on federal customers. "Sometimes when you work on the backstage, you can get disconnected," said Airis McCottry Gill, executive director of employee experience and organizational management in the Veterans Experience Office at the Department of Veterans Affairs. "It's important that we continue to remind each other and our team members that every piece of the puzzle is key."

Supervisors also should help staff members identify career paths at their agency and ensure they have access to training, mentorships and other professional development opportunities. This is especially important for younger civil servants, according to a Partnership and BCG analysis of 15 years of Best Places to Work data.

3. EXPRESS EMPATHY, COMPASSION AND CARE FOR THE WHOLE PERSON

Being empathetic and demonstrating compassion and care for staff members as individuals can improve the employee experience without any additional funding or resources, but it requires focus and dedicated time. Treating staff members as whole people can reduce their stress, encourage commitment to the mission and, as a result, increase efficiency and productivity. This support may be especially welcome by employees in high-pressure or high-risk roles, such as call center staff or disaster aid workers.

Employee experience strategies are not one-size-fits all, however, and commitment to staff well-being must be targeted to be effective. For example, in response to a sharp increase in the number of customers seeking help while in crisis during COVID-19, the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Office of Field Policy and Management provided trauma-informed care training to its front-line staff. This helped employees supporting people in dire situations care for themselves as well by managing the effects of vicarious trauma.

By offering work flexibility, supervisors and managers can help their teams meet the mission while also recognizing employees as people. For example, telework agreements and alternative work schedules can help employees maintain a work-life balance—especially during times of stress and turmoil. NASA successfully buoyed its employees' experience and effectiveness throughout the pandemic because leaders continually asked their teleworking teams if they had the technology, communication and leadership support to be successful, according to Keith Krut, former head of analytics and deputy director of talent strategy and engagement at NASA. As a result, during the height of COVID, "We were still launching major missions with something like 80% of the workforce working from home," Krut said.

Work flexibility remains important to the federal employee experience post-pandemic, however. Recent Partnership research found that work flexibility drives staff retention, especially for employees balancing family responsibilities and younger civil servants who entered the workforce during the pandemic. Many of the youngest members of the federal workforce think of remote or hybrid work as the norm and not the exception. They might be more likely than older colleagues to seek positions with greater flexibility.

4. CREATE A GOOD WORK CULTURE WITH A CONTINUOUS LEARNING AND GROWTH MINDSET

A work culture built on mutual respect, trust and care among staff members, as well as between the staff and their leaders, is the foundation of a good employee experience, according to federal leaders who contributed to our study. Private-sector research indicates that it is also fundamental to customer-centric cultures[8] and that the customer experience improves when front-line staff members feel "safe, respected, cared for, and treated equitably."[9]

One way to cultivate positive work culture is to encourage staff members to adopt a growth mindset and to prioritize learning. This includes seeking feedback and considering it constructively, and learning from both what works well and what doesn't. "A learning culture means that feedback is a gift," said Matisha Montgomery, HUD's chief learning officer, as it empowers employees to suggest ideas for improvements and to think innovatively.

Leaders can also promote positive work culture by publicly recognizing good work through formal performance award programs or informal praise at meetings. Tactics for private recognition, like watercooler conversations or a simple thank you, can be just as effective. Leaders at all levels also can show their staff that they have their back by reaffirming the importance of their work if their agency receives negative media attention. More indirectly, leaders can encourage staff members to support one another and share their experiences and advice, which can reduce the potential for burnout and lower employee turnover, according to research.[10]

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility

Fostering diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility in the workplace is critical for a good employee experience, and it can improve the customer experience, too. For example, staff members who feel encouraged to bring their whole selves to work are more likely to have a better experience than those who feel discouraged from sharing their authentic personalities. Moreover, employees who work for inclusive organizations that prioritize diversity and equity are more likely to be mindful of how their work impacts different customer constituencies. They also might be better prepared to consider their implicit bias relative to specific customer cohorts and to make decisions based on data instead of assumptions about customers' needs.

[8] Deloitte and Medallia Institute, "The Business Case for a Customer-Centric Culture," 2017, 5. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/44w7Tmh

[9] Qualtrics XM Institute, "Six Analytical Pathways That Link Employee and Customer Experience," August 2022. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/42paxZU

[10] Linos, Elizabeth and Ruffini, Krista and Wilcoxen, Stephanie, "Reducing Burnout and Resignations among Frontline Workers: A Field Experiment," Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory 32(3), July 2022, 473–488. DOI:10.1093/jopart/muab042. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/40ppLMV

To create an inclusive and equitable work culture, supervisors and team leaders can evenly distribute workloads and access to career growth opportunities among employees, preventing perceptions of unfair advantages. Senior leaders can help by implementing safeguards. HUD, for example, developed a training council to ensure supervisors' unconscious bias would not limit their direct reports' access to professional development, according to Michele Perez, an assistant deputy secretary in the agency's Office of Field Policy and Management. All agency leaders—from direct supervisors to members of the SES and political appointees, including the secretary—can wholeheartedly support DEIA efforts, modeling the actions and behaviors that lead to a more welcoming and fair work environment. For example, it is not enough to make sure people have a seat at the table, said Devlin of the Labor Department: "It's incumbent on the top leader at that table to also give voice to all the people there."

5. PROVIDE ENABLING TECHNOLOGY

"The digital transformation [of the workplace] aligns so much with both employee experience and customer experience," Krut said. Customer relationship and feedback management systems, project management tools, digital signatures, chatbots and other technological innovations can improve the customer experience while also enabling civil servants to achieve the agency's mission more efficiently and effectively. Supervisors and team managers must be aware of technological innovations that could improve both the employee and the customer experience—such as safe and ethical artificial intelligence applications that can help provide insights at scale—and advocate for the funding and organizational alignment necessary to adopt them. Agency leaders developing budget requests need to clearly explain to those reviewing them how these technologies are critical for mission fulfillment and effective government.

It was through the implementation of a new customer relationship management system that the Small Business Administration in 2020 was able to quickly increase its capacity to keep millions of businesses open during COVID-19, during a time when "we went from getting tens of thousands to tens of millions of calls and emails," said Amber Chaudhry, HUD's customer experience lead, who previously served in a similar role at SBA. The agency not only met the surge in demand but also improved the customer experience in the process. At the same time, staff members were able to meet the mission efficiently and effectively despite the increased workload, an accomplishment that benefited the employee experience.

6. TURN TIMELY EXPERIENCE DATA INTO ACTION TO IMPROVE SERVICE DELIVERY

While leaders can shape the employee experience to improve the customer experience, their ability to do so effectively is generally limited to their understanding of their teams, what will benefit them and how their work affects the public they serve. For this reason, it is imperative to strategically collect, analyze and share timely employee and customer experience data. Data is only valuable, however, if it can be turned into action. Human-centered design—a technique of utilizing feedback about people's experiences to identify and implement improvements—is an effective tool to design data-based strategies for improving the experiences of internal teams and external customers. So too is data analysis focused on the connections between the employee and the customer experience.

Simple but effective tactics for collecting employee experience data[11] include supervisor check-ins, town hall meetings, email suggestion boxes and having a designated employee ombudsman. The annual Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey administered by the Office of Personnel Management is a rich source of employee experience data. So is the annual Best Places to Work in the Federal Government from the Partnership and BCG, which uses data from the FEVS to rank federal agencies and their subcomponents based on levels of employee engagement as well as on employees' perceptions about leadership, pay, teamwork and diversity, among other things. New hire, exit and other milestone surveys are effective tools for collecting data at key moments in the employee journey. Pulse surveys can provide staff perspectives on virtual work policies, workload or other topical issues. Also useful is the ability to continually gather insights on the employee experience from mission-support teams such as the IT service desk, which can provide insights on the effectiveness of digital tools.

"Stay" interviews and feedback mechanisms—through which individual staff members describe "what's keeping them here and what would entice them away," according to Montgomery of HUD—can yield more precise data but can be more time-intensive than more generalized data collection strategies. HUD is providing supervisors and managers with guidance on how to conduct stay interviews. This will enable them to collect insightful data directly from their teams and to respond more nimbly to it than the agency's central leadership can. HUD is also introducing a stay survey tool to be used by leaders from across the agency and plans to correlate what it learns through it with data from the FEVS, exit surveys and other existing measures of the employee experience.

[11] This report highlights employee experience data collection methods as they appear to be used less widely in government than customer experience research methods. Common ways for collecting customer experience data include point-of-contact surveys, focus groups, and direct observations of service provision. More interactive research methods include journey mapping, which is the process of visually representing customers' experiences and perceptions of their interactions with service providers, and techniques for understanding the user experience of digital platforms. Many agencies already employ these and other customer experience research techniques. Agencies designated as high impact service providers document their research efforts in the annual customer experience assessments they conduct in compliance with President Biden's December 2021 executive order on customer experience and OMB Circular A-11 Section 280.

Comparing Employee and Customer Experience Data

While individual agencies can collect and compare employee and customer experience data[12]—via the FEVS and point-of-contact customer surveys, for example—too little data is currently available for such comparisons across multiple agencies. But this type of analysis may be possible soon.

Federal high-impact service providers such as the IRS, FEMA and TSA are required—per the Biden administration's December 2021 executive order on customer experience and OMB Circular A-11 Section 280—to collect post-transaction feedback from their customers and report the resulting data to the OMB on a quarterly basis.[13] This data, available on Performance.gov, can be compared with the FEVS data of these HISPs to identify any correlation between the experience of their employees and customers. For now, however, there needs to be more HISP customer experience data on Performance.gov to enable a conclusive comparison with employee experience data. As the dataset grows, it promises to be a rich source of evidence about the connection between the two across the federal government.

[12] Provided their data practices comply with the Federal Privacy Act.
[13] More specifically, HISPs are to ask their customers to rate their experiences relative to seven indicators of customer experience: satisfaction, trust, quality, ease, efficiency, equity and employee helpfulness.

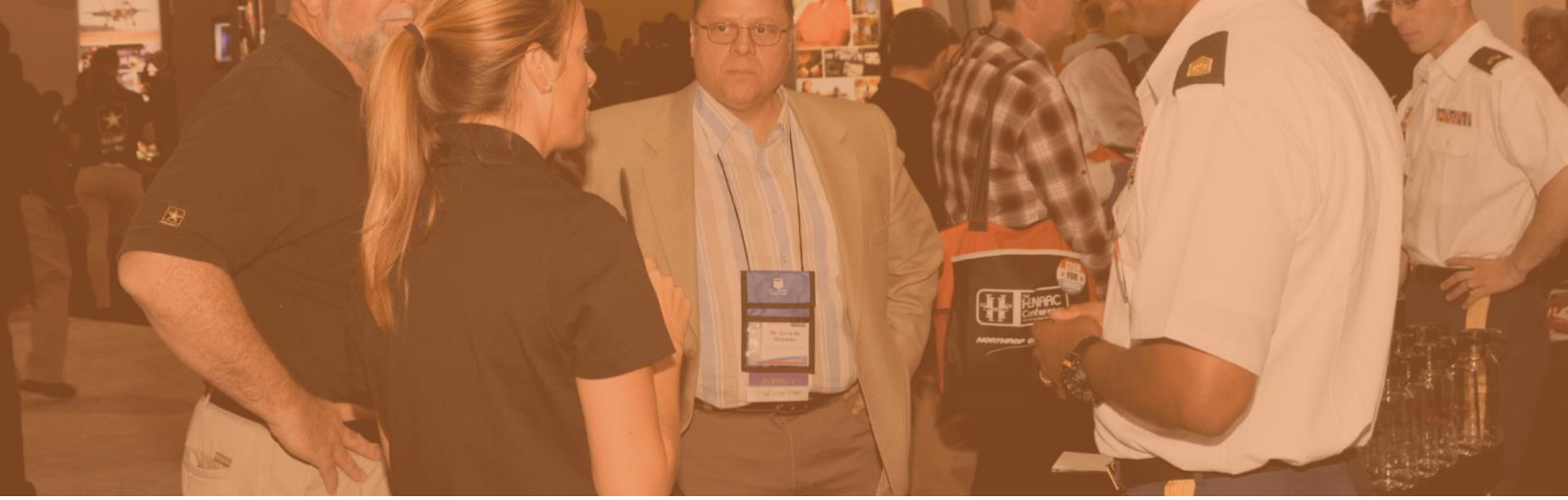


Photo credit: U.S. Army DEVCOM

Challenges and Recommendations

While our research highlights the benefits of linking the employee and the customer experience, several challenges impede the connection. Below are challenges highlighted by the federal leaders who contributed to our study, along with recommendations for overcoming them.

CHALLENGE: GETTING LEADERSHIP BUY-IN

To effectively rely on the employee experience to improve the customer experience, "leaders have to be fully bought in," said Devlin from Labor. "Leaders at all levels." Such leaders might include political appointees—including agency secretaries—chief customer experience officers, chief human capital officers, chief learning officers, chief information officers, chief data officers, members of the SES, midlevel managers and even direct supervisors.

Leaders who have not been involved directly in employee or customer experience efforts—or have not seen their results firsthand—might be slow to understand the benefits of connecting them. But even leaders open to the concept may be reluctant to put it into practice due to their workload and competing priorities.

"One of the biggest challenges of improving employee experience is that it's really hard to maintain because it requires a lot of conscious commitment from all levels of leadership," said Misty Reed, the chief of the customer liaison and marketing services office at the U.S. Census Bureau. Leaders "have to take that time on top of all of the other things that they are required to get done," she said.

LEADERSHIP BUY-IN RECOMMENDATION 1

Agency leaders who already work to foster the employee or the customer experience—such as chief human capital officers or chief customer experience officers—should demonstrate the benefits of connecting the experiences to supervisors, midlevel managers, members of the SES and senior political appointees whose support would advance their goals. When possible, such efforts should illustrate how the benefits align with the priorities of leaders not yet bought in—such as achieving specific mission or performance goals—and build on their previous work. For political appointees, it helps to highlight that the ultimate goal of improving the employee and the customer experience is serving the public more efficiently and effectively.

Data related to staff retention, strategic goals or the President's Management Agenda can be very useful to this end. "It's not just providing that data, but also telling the story of the data and bringing in the human or emotional aspect of it," said Ted Wong, a communications lead in the VA's Veterans Experience Office.

LEADERSHIP BUY-IN RECOMMENDATION 2

Agency leaders working to connect the employee and the customer experience should prioritize getting the support of critical stakeholders—including call center supervisors, managers of agency websites, program and operational leaders, members of the SES and political appointees who can facilitate agencywide initiatives. Efforts to get buy-in should be realistic, in terms of the staff capacity, budget and potential realignment of resources necessary for the work.

To get early buy-in for its work to improve employee experience, for example, the VA's Veterans Experience Office formed a working group of about 20 career employees at various levels from across the agency, including VA medical center directors, contracting officers, attorneys, and benefits and cemetery experts. This group helped design the effort and focused on implementing sustained improvements. "We wanted this to be administration agnostic," said McCottry Gill of the VEO. "We wanted this to be something that is felt and embedded across the department for years to come."

LEADERSHIP BUY-IN RECOMMENDATION 3

Career leaders—such as direct supervisors, midlevel managers, and senior leaders, including those at the GS-13 to GS-15 levels and members of the SES[14]—should receive employee and customer experience training. For example, they should have opportunities to learn about developing trusting relationships with their teams and the current best practices in customer experience. In addition, career leaders' performance plans should account for the employee experience and, for leaders who work closely with the public, the customer experience. While SES performance plans already must assess efforts to maximize employee potential, seek employee input and foster inclusive work environments, assessment resources such as the Partnership's Public Service Leadership 360 assessment tool, which involve many

[14] Other senior career leaders include those in Senior Level positions and those in Scientific or Professional (ST) Positions. For more information, see: OPM, "Scientific & Senior Level Positions." Retrieved from https://bit.ly/3o2mIw5

raters of an individual, should be used to hold all supervisors, midlevel managers and senior career leaders accountable for their commitment to improving the employee experience. Performance plans for career leaders working for a HISP agency should also account for their agency's customer experience scores posted quarterly on Performance.gov.

CHALLENGE: GETTING STAFF BUY-IN

No matter how well designed by federal leaders, initiatives to improve the employee and the customer experience that do not have staff buy-in might have limited success, especially efforts that do not address a team's particular goals and needs. Absent a vision of the mutual benefits of improving the customer experience by bolstering the employee experience, staff members may see such plans as a deviation from their core responsibilities and be reluctant to participate. For example, staff members who are not fully on board may be less likely to take employee experience surveys or share ideas about improving the customer experience.

STAFF BUY-IN RECOMMENDATION 1

Agency leaders working to connect the employee and the customer experience should co-create the necessary strategies with staff members, using human-centered design. Seeking staff input on improving their experience gives them ownership over the process, a morale boost that would make them more likely to adopt changes that come out of the process. Plus, employees who work directly with customers are likely able to suggest solutions for both their challenges and those of their customers. As part of this, agency leaders need to be transparent about how they are using staff feedback and continuously communicate progress on employee and customer experience efforts.

CHALLENGE: SUSTAINING AND SCALING UP EFFORTS WITHIN AGENCIES TO LINK THE EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE TO THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Few federal agencies are currently working to link the employee and the customer experience, and existing efforts are so far limited in scope. Scaling up such initiatives and sustaining them agencywide could be difficult without models to emulate. Coordinating efforts to improve the customer experience through the employee experience within agencies could be stymied by differences among their divisions'

goals, budgets, work cultures, geographic locations and customer bases. Getting leaders and staff members to fully engage in them could be another challenge.

SUSTAINING AND SCALING UP RECOMMENDATION 1

Agency leaders with a history of fostering the employee experience or the customer experience should help coordinate in developing a holistic strategy to link the two. For example, initiatives should be based on clear definitions of employee and customer experience. Moreover, existing experience standards and measures should guide program design and data collection and analysis strategies. Human-centered design with input from all participating stakeholders should inform every aspect of this work.

SUSTAINING AND SCALING UP RECOMMENDATION 2

Agency leaders working to improve the employee and the customer experience—collaborating with chief learning officers, chief information officers and chief data officers as appropriate—should foster a responsive, constructive learning culture that embraces data, evidence and feedback as valuable resources. By encouraging staff members to be open to new ideas, a learning culture can help agencies adopt specific employee and customer experience practices and advance the work needed to link them. Direct supervisors and other leaders who work closely with staff members involved in such efforts can be allies. They can demonstrate the value of identifying risks and using mistakes as opportunities for growth. Another tactic, according to Kelly Zsamar, a customer experience analyst at the Social Security Administration, is to routinely ask, "How will this affect employees or the customer?"

CHALLENGE: COLLECTING AND ANALYZING DATA EFFECTIVELY AND MAKING IT ACTIONABLE

Clear evidence is the basis of well-designed strategies to connect the employee and the customer experience, but many challenges can impede efforts to collect, analyze and turn data into usable evidence. For one, not all federal offices are fully equipped to routinely collect and extract insights from experience data, making it difficult to incorporate evidence into employee and customer experience initiatives. Another challenge is employee distrust of efforts to collect feedback due to perceptions that they are uncoordinated or redundant. This "survey fatigue" is often due to opaque information-collection efforts and the lack of noticeable action in response to evidence.

DATA RECOMMENDATION 1

Chief data officers, chief information officers and chief learning officers should work with agency leaders at all levels—especially supervisors and others working closely with employees—to develop an evidence-based work culture and to ensure that effective data practices are deeply integrated throughout their agency's workstreams. Tamieca Hamlin, who is the deputy chief customer experience officer at the

Department of Agriculture, recommends a "continuous feedback model: Listen, analyze and then act. Simply put, listen better to serve better." To this end, plans for timely data collection, analysis and sharing should be built into all agency policies, programs and practices. Agencies may need to invest in technology and staff training to support this.

DATA RECOMMENDATION 2

Chief data officers, chief information officers, chief learning officers and other agency leaders responsible for collecting, analyzing and sharing data in support of efforts to improve the employee experience to benefit the customer experience should adopt a "flight control tower" approach. By intentionally coordinating data collection activities, survey fatigue can be mitigated, and employees might be more likely to share their perspectives. Such coordination could include consolidating surveys; collecting data from diverse cohorts of employees who represent the workforce as a whole; developing standard survey questions; and implementing data platforms that enable data analysis, sharing and integration.

Data about both employee and customer experiences should be shared transparently with staff. One option is to create data dashboards on agency intranets or websites, illustrating the correlation between employee and customer experiences. Such dashboards could serve as models for Performance.gov if OMB began collecting employee experience data from the federal agencies and their subcomponents designated as high-impact service providers, just as it currently collects customer experience data from them. Additionally, data about both the employee and the customer experience should be analyzed in as close to real time as possible to expedite actions to improve both experiences. Leaders responsible for action taken in response to experience data should widely share information about their efforts.

Fundamental to this control-tower approach is using an effective technology toolset that can aggregate data and provide timely insights at scale to facilitate decision-making. Ensuring that every part of an agency is able to use this toolset—empowering the right people with the right information at the right time—would enhance the benefits of this approach.

VA Case Study

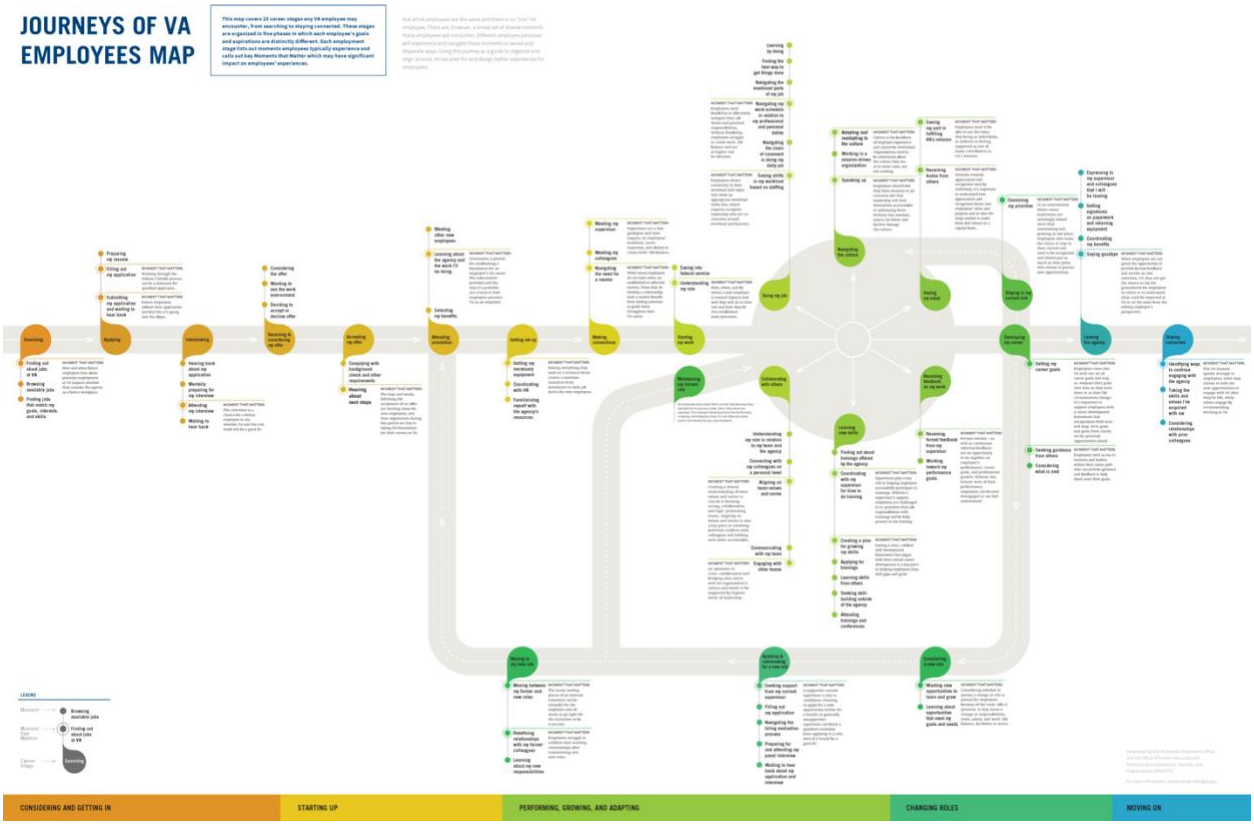
Through the work of its Veterans Experience Office, the Department of Veterans Affairs is blazing the path for how federal agencies can strategically link the experience of their employees and customers. An outgrowth of the MyVA Taskforce that former Secretary Bob McDonald launched in 2014 to improve the VA from the perspective of veterans, the VEO was formalized in 2016 as an independent office charged with leading the VA's customer experience efforts. Since then, veterans' trust in the VA has grown. In 2016, 55% of veterans reported trusting the agency.[15] In 2022, more than 77% did—and nearly 90% said they trusted VA health care in particular.[16] In the same time frame, the agency's employee experience improved, according to Best Places to Work data from the Partnership and BCG. In 2016, it ranked 17th out of 18 large agencies in the annual index. By 2022, the VA ranked fifth out of 17 large agencies.

The VEO, in partnership with offices across the VA, is working to provide "a world-class employee experience that empowers all team members to serve our veterans, their families, caregivers and survivors with pride," according to the VEO's McCottry Gill. "By investing in our people, they can then pay that forward, investing in the improved experiences that they give those that we serve."

Below are four ways the VEO works to improve the employee experience to elevate the customer experience, including a strategy for assessing the effects of these efforts.

[15] Department of Veterans Affairs, "Veterans Experience with VA.gov: FY 2020, Q4 Update." Retrieved from https://bit.ly/43wDXWL
[16] Department of Veterans Affairs, "Serving America's Veterans: October 1, 2021 – September 30, 2022." Retrieved from https://bit.ly/3USaLFT

EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE JOURNEY MAP



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Inspired by its veterans experience journey map, in 2019 and 2020 the VEO created an employee experience journey map—the first in federal government—in collaboration with the VA's Office of Human Resources and Administration/Operations, Security and Preparedness. The employee map was developed with input from a diverse array of VA staff members from 33 different geographic regions, including doctors, nurses, attorneys, contracting officers, food service workers and others. For this map, the office distilled 11,000 distinct insights it collected into five phases of VA employment, encompassing 23 career stages and 30 "key moments that matter" to employees. By reflecting shared experiences related to work, people, technology and other attributes,[17] the map was designed to guide improvements to all aspects of the employee journey at the VA. It already has informed efforts to foster career growth, strengthen the agency's onboarding process, and facilitate better communication between leaders and their teams. The map is also a resource for leaders in other agencies, serving as a template for thinking critically about what contributes to positive or negative experiences for their workforce.

[17] The six relational attributes for employee experience are: work, people, places, technology, mission and well-being.

PROGRAMS TO IMPROVE THE EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

Using the new employee journey map as a guide, the VEO worked with the VA's Employee Engagement Council—a governance body consisting of representatives from across the VA—to identify three employee priority areas: learning new skills, getting feedback and developing careers. A subsequent deep dive into career development issues, focusing on the experience of management and program analysts, resulted in the development of a blueprint for an "ask-me-anything" program. Through the forthcoming program, staff members will have opportunities to meet monthly with their leaders to hear unscripted answers to unscripted questions. Another product is an anonymous job application enabling candidates for senior executive level positions to apply without initially including identifying information that could bias applicant evaluations.

Developing the employee journey map also led the VEO to give special attention to improving the VA's onboarding practices. Staff input indicated that negative onboarding experiences—such as not being warmly welcomed or not receiving clear information on roles and responsibilities—can leave lasting impressions. In response, the VEO created a separate journey map focused on new employees before designing a new-employee buddy program and welcome kit. These were built with, not for, staff members in effort to make new employees feel included, knowledgeable about VA work culture and processes, and empowered to succeed.

Finally, the VEO is working with the VA's Whole Health program to identify how wellness strategies and resources might be beneficial at specific points in an employee's journey at the agency. Whole health support might include self-care practices such as yoga and mindfulness as well as nutrition guides, acupuncture resources and health coaching.

IDENTITY INSIGHTS

In 2021, the VEO's Employee Experience and Organizational Management Directorate partnered with the agency's Office of Resolution Management, Diversity & Inclusion to improve the employee experience from a perspective of intersectionality. The resulting project—Identity Insights—aims to pinpoint employees' challenges, needs and opportunities attributed to one or more of their identities, such as race, ethnicity and gender. Through a series of two-week sprints of interviews and focus groups with eight

different groups of employees historically underrepresented at the VA,[18] the project team was able to create a heat map of pain points relative to each group and to the six attributes related to the employee experience: work, people, places, technology, mission and well-being.

The Identity Insights project is being expanded to examine the experiences of groups of VA employees who have one or more of eight additional identities.[19] Furthermore, the project team is collaborating with the VA Women's I-DEA Sub-Group (formerly the Federal Women's Program Coalition) to improve the experience of women working at the VA. Using human-centered design, the initiative will identify their VA career phases and the characteristics of them. By surfacing critical information on the experiences of women employees—such as their needs and priorities and the opportunities they encounter—this project will inform retention and career advancement efforts.

EMPLOYEE SIGNALS

To use data to assess the efficacy of its employee experience efforts, the VEO developed the Employee Signals—or ESignals—program. It is based on Veterans Signals, the VEO's strategy and platform to measure customers' experiences in real time, which yields a quarterly assessment of veterans' trust in the VA. ESignals has a three-pronged approach: pulse surveys deployed to understand particular issues; recurring surveys capturing the employee experience at key moments in the staff journey, such as when onboarding or leaving the agency; and quarterly employee trust and experience surveys. These surveys focus on understanding employees' experiences and the levels of their trust relative to several key performance indicators—ease, effectiveness (responsiveness and empowerment) and emotion (belonging, recognition and purpose)—derived from customer experience principles.

Collectively, the ESignals insights and the VA's annual All-Employee Survey, which the agency uses instead of the FEVS, will provide a rich source of employee experience data that can be compared with the customer experience data gleaned through Veterans Signals. Data collection began in December 2022, and initial comparative analysis is ongoing. The VEO is developing an online dashboard to make office-level and agencywide data more accessible. Ultimately, it plans to use the dashboard to illustrate connections between the ESignals and Veterans Signals data. "We'll have an opportunity to see where there is a correlation between the data … and I think that's really where we start to talk about the connection" between the employee experience and the customer experience, said McCottry Gill.

[18] The eight cohorts that participated in the first phase of Identity Insights consisted of staff who identified as American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian American and Pacific Islander, Black/African American, Hispanic, Baby Boomers, Individuals with Disabilities, LGBTQ+ or Women.
[19] The eight groups of employees that participated in the second phase of Identity Insights consisted of veterans, gender nonconforming people, Generation Xers, Millennials, Generation Zers, religious/nonreligious people, Middle Easterners and North Africans or white people.

Photo credit: U.S. Department of Agriculture

Conclusion

Though the federal government has worked for decades to better understand and improve the experience of its employees and customers—and though research on private sector companies shows that bolstering the employee experience can lead to a better customer experience—few federal agencies are working to link the experiences of their teams and the people those teams serve to strengthen both.

With historic investments in the nation's infrastructure, economy and health made by the Biden administration and Congress, the need for effective government is paramount. Recognizing that improving the employee experience to elevate the customer experience could be an instrumental strategy for maximizing the potential of public service, the Partnership and Medallia undertook this research study to help federal agencies, presidential administrations and Congress to see the connection and adopt strategies to capitalize on it.

Now, supervisors, midlevel managers, members of the SES and political appointees have the opportunity to move forward using the six strategies we identified for improving the experiences of their teams in ways that can lead to better experiences for federal customers. They also can employ the recommendations we offer to overcome four common challenges to connecting the employee experience to the customer experience. Finally, the case study highlighting the VA's efforts to improve the customer experience by strengthening the experience of staff members serves as a model of these strategies and recommendations in practice.

Authors

Paul 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.

Anthony Vetrano supports the Partnership's qualitative research work, including projects on civil workforce and using foresight in Congress. He first developed a love for research at university through his favorite course titled Gender, Migration, and International Development which gave him the opportunity to assist in a research project on how COVID-19 impacted the Latin American immigrant communities in the DMV. Anthony then developed a strong passion for public service while interning at the State Department's Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs. Anthony's favorite public servant is his grandmother Ellen Vetrano who dedicated many years at their local branch of the Social Security Administration.

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Header image credit: U.S. Department of Agriculture

Workshop Participants

Federal employees from the following agencies attended at least one of the three workshops convened as part of this study. The workshop attendees participated as individuals and not as official representatives of their agencies. The contents of this report do not necessarily reflect their views or the positions and policies of the federal government or its agencies.

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Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services

Department of Agriculture

Department of Defense

Department of Homeland Security

Department of Housing and Urban Development

Department of Interior

Department of Labor

Department of Veterans Affairs

Federal Aviation Administration

General Services Administration

Internal Revenue Service

National Aeronautics and Space Administration

National Institutes of Health

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

Small Business Administration

Social Security Administration

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

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