

A Culture of Fear: Leadership Deficits at Customs and Border Protection and Immigration and Customs Enforcement

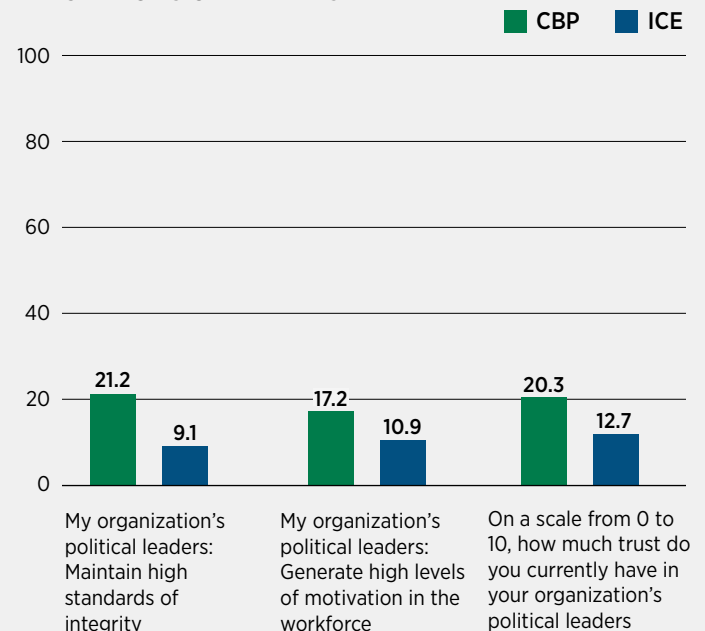
A Lack of Leadership

For decades, the Partnership for Public Service has found that trust in senior leadership is among the biggest drivers of overall employee engagement and organizational performance. When this trust is broken, there is frequently a direct impact on the quality of services that federal agencies provide to the American public.

Last fall, the Partnership conducted the [Public Service Viewpoint Survey](#) after the 2025 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey was canceled by the Trump administration despite a legal requirement for agencies to conduct a workforce survey. While the results of this survey are not directly comparable to the Office of Personnel Management's annual FEVS, it contains similar questions and presents the best data sources available about the current state of the federal employee experience.

Our survey found a breakdown in trust and a loss of faith in political leadership inside Customs and Border Protection and Immigration and Customs Enforcement that is impacting organizational culture. In our survey, ICE respondents sounded the alarm about a critical deficit in ethical behavior among political appointees, with only 9.1% saying their leaders maintain high standards of integrity. At CBP their perceptions are also deeply troubling with only 21.2% responding positively to the question.

PERCEPTIONS OF LEADERSHIP



| | CBP | ICE |
|--|-------|-------|
| My organization does not tolerate arbitrary action, favoritism, or political coercion against employees. | 18.0% | 14.5% |
| How confident are you that you can report a suspected violation of a law, rule or regulation without experiencing retaliation? | 22.7% | 17.9% |

When asked about trust in their leaders and the motivation they feel from them, the employee scores continue this trend, strongly suggesting leadership teams that are detached from the workforce and lacking the ethical and professional standards to be entrusted to lead in the public sector.

When leadership fails, the culture of the organization does as well. This is exemplified through data points in our survey which strongly suggest a workplace where respondents are afraid to speak out and have fears that they will be subjected to political coercion. This demonstrates a dysfunctional culture in which managers can feel empowered to disregard the law, skirt regulations and pressure employees to make poor decisions.

The Impact of Poor Leadership


Organizations reap the consequences of this type of leadership in the form of low employee retention, a negative customer experience and poor results for the public.


Our survey demonstrated clear warning signs that such challenges are taking place at CBP and ICE through flailing employee engagement metrics. While both [CBP](#) and [ICE](#) have struggled for years to improve their Best Places to Work in the Federal Government Engagement and Satisfaction score, they had made gradual gains in the last several years.


When survey respondents were asked the same questions about employee satisfaction and engagement that are included in our Best Places to Work rankings during the Public Service Viewpoint Survey, scores for ICE and CBP were notably lower.


Solutions

The data from our survey demonstrates that our respondents at CBP and ICE are demoralized and dissatisfied with their leadership and feel the organization is not adequately serving the public. The warning signs from this survey point to the need to focus on a series of operational and management reforms. We urge Congress and DHS leaders to pursue the following actions to provide greater oversight, worker protections and improved engagement at the agency:

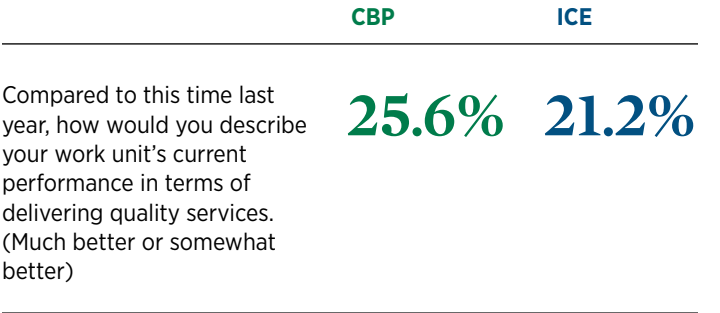
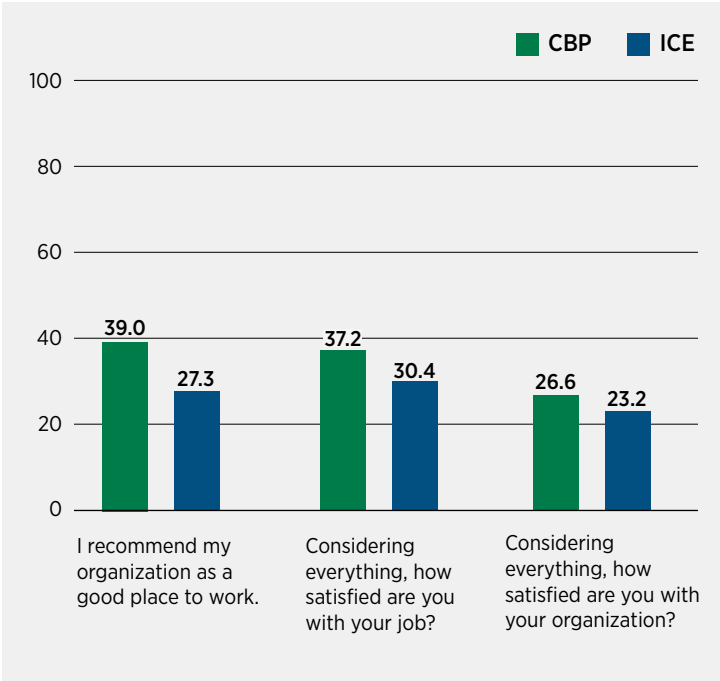
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Conduct rigorous congressional oversight of the Department of Homeland Security with a focus on CBP and ICE to ensure that workplace challenges are being addressed, that the law is being followed and that employee needs are being addressed.
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Ensure whistleblower protections are adequately implemented that allow DHS staff to confidently report violations of the law they may encounter in their agency without a fear of retribution.
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Conduct quarterly employee pulse surveys to better understand perceptions of staff, make the data publicly available and take meaningful action to address staff feedback.
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Require political leaders to have performance plans that hold them accountable for the outcomes of the agencies they lead.



Methodology

The Public Service Viewpoint Survey was open to responses from current federal employees between Nov. 10 and Dec.19, 2025. It was carried out due to the Trump administration's decision to cancel the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, which has consistently been administered across administrations for over two decades. Employees were invited to participate through outreach conducted both by our partner organizations and our own communications.

Our survey gathered the perceptions of 1,121 DHS employees with 395 from Customs and Border Protection and 56 at the Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

To ensure the survey results are valid and as representative as possible of the opinions of the workforce, we modeled our eligibility requirements and approach to response weighting to align with the [methodology](#) used in the 2024 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey as closely as possible.

A comprehensive detailing of our methodology will accompany the release of the full Public Service Viewpoint Survey data in mid-March.

| Question | CBP 2025 PSVS | CBP 2024 FEVS | ICE 2025 PSVS | ICE 2024 FEVS |
|---|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Compared to this time last year, has your engagement at work changed? | 15.2 | — | 26.8 | — |
| My job inspires me. | 35.2 | 56.7 | 30.4 | 59.3 |
| How satisfied are you with the information you receive about what's going on in your organization? | 25.3 | 46.0 | 17.9 | 51.2 |
| It is important to me that my work contributes to the public good. | 87.2 | 87.0 | 94.6 | 90.3 |
| Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job? | 37.2 | 62.9 | 30.4 | 65.5 |
| I identify with the mission of my organization. | 67.9 | 70.8 | 42.9 | 70.0 |
| How would you describe your current workload? | 57.1 | — | 34.5 | — |
| The work I do gives me a sense of accomplishment. | 60.1 | 65.5 | 42.9 | 69.3 |
| I feel a strong personal attachment to my organization. | 36.5 | 56.2 | 30.4 | 56.8 |
| Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your organization? | 26.6 | 54.9 | 23.2 | 57.8 |
| In my organization, employees are protected from health and safety hazards on the job. | 38.5 | 58.7 | 30.4 | 68.8 |
| How confident are you that you can report a suspected violation of a law, rule or regulation without experiencing retaliation? | 22.7 | 55.1 | 17.9 | 60.4 |
| I recommend my organization as a good place to work. | 39.0 | 62.1 | 27.3 | 63.9 |
| In terms of knowledge, how prepared is your work unit to use artificial intelligence tools in your work? | 37.0 | — | 29.5 | — |
| I can influence decisions in my work unit. | 39.1 | 61.7 | 49.1 | 68.5 |
| Compared to this time last year, how would you describe your work unit's current performance in terms of meeting important deadlines (Much Better or Somewhat Better) | 19.1 | — | 16.3 | — |
| Compared to this time last year, how would you describe your work unit's current performance in terms of delivering quality services (Much Better or Somewhat Better) | 25.6 | — | 21.2 | — |
| Compared to this time last year, how would you describe your work unit's current performance in terms of fulfilling stakeholder needs (Much Better or Somewhat Better) | 22.3 | — | 17.0 | — |
| I understand my organization's priorities. | 63.2 | 71.9 | 56.4 | 70.9 |
| My organization does not tolerate arbitrary action, favoritism, or political coercion against employees. | 18.0 | 41.0 | 14.5 | 46.7 |
| My organization's career leaders: Generate high levels of motivation in the workforce | 22.7 | 39.7* | 20.0 | 43.9* |
| My organization's career leaders: Maintain high standards of integrity | 30.8 | 49.3* | 32.1 | 55.6* |
| My organization's political leaders: Generate high levels of motivation in the workforce | 17.2 | 39.7* | 10.9 | 43.9* |
| My organization's political leaders: Maintain high standards of integrity | 21.2 | 49.3* | 9.1 | 55.6* |
| My supervisor holds me accountable for achieving results. | 72.5 | 78.3 | 72.7 | 86.4 |
| On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means 'no trust at all' and 10 means 'completely trust,' how much trust do you currently have in your colleagues in your work unit (6 to 10) | 73.3 | — | 81.8 | — |
| On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means 'no trust at all' and 10 means 'completely trust,' how much trust do you currently have in your immediate supervisor (6 to 10) | 65.2 | — | 51.9 | — |
| On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means 'no trust at all' and 10 means 'completely trust,' how much trust do you currently have in your organization's career leaders (6 to 10) | 33.5 | — | 32.7 | — |
| On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means 'no trust at all' and 10 means 'completely trust,' how much trust do you currently have in your organization's political leaders (6 to 10) | 20.3 | — | 12.7 | — |

*The closest match in the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey asks about "senior leaders," which would include both political and career leaders.

Not all Public Service Viewpoint Survey questions have an equivalent item on the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey. These have been marked by a dash (—) in the FEVS columns.