



Leading with Experience

A Framework for Customer-Focused
Leadership in Government

SEPTEMBER 2021



MAXIMUS[®] Federal

About the Authors

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.

About Maximus Federal

For more than 40 years, Maximus has partnered with federal, state and local governments to transform public policy into programs that change lives. We leverage our extensive experience to develop high quality services and solutions that are cost effective and tailored to each communities' unique needs.

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Introduction

Our 20-year effort to make government more effective has taught us a critical lesson at the Partnership for Public Service: Leadership is the most important factor in federal performance. Each year, data about the federal workforce supports this statement. According to our Best Places to Work in the Federal Government® analysis, for example, effective leadership is the strongest driver of employee engagement and morale across agencies.¹

Our research on improving the federal customer experience also highlights the importance of effective leadership. Responding to public needs requires agency leaders to prioritize customer experience as a mission, understand the diversity of their customer base, measure agency performance and act on feedback from various stakeholders.

To deliver results and restore public trust in government, federal employees need to lead with a customer focus. But how to be a customer-focused leader in government, where concepts like profit motive and customer retention are usually irrelevant, is not well understood. The goals of customer experience improvements are different in the public and private sectors. In government, it is about supporting the mission and helping to achieve desired program outcomes, which requires a different set of approaches than the private sector focus on financial performance. This report will outline what those approaches look like—with specific examples of how leaders have employed them.

Despite their best intentions to enhance services and meet public needs, government leaders sometimes try to improve the customer experience in counterproductive ways. They may jump to address specific customer pain points—for example a clunky agency website—without stepping back to examine the root causes or larger organizational practices that lead to less-than-user-friendly services. Or they may rely too heavily on their own personal experience—perhaps as a customer of the agency itself—and fail to account for the diversity of their customer base.

¹ The Partnership produces the Best Places to Work in the Federal Government® rankings with Boston Consulting Group: best-placestowork.org.

To ensure that federal leaders are positioned to understand the needs and perspectives of their customers, government leadership should reflect the diversity of the people it serves. But according to our analysis, presented in the recommendations section below, women and people of color² remain disproportionately underrepresented in federal leadership positions—especially within the Senior Executive Service, the highest level of career leaders. Leadership positions are also highly concentrated in the Washington, D.C., region, potentially limiting their insights on the issues communities across the country face.

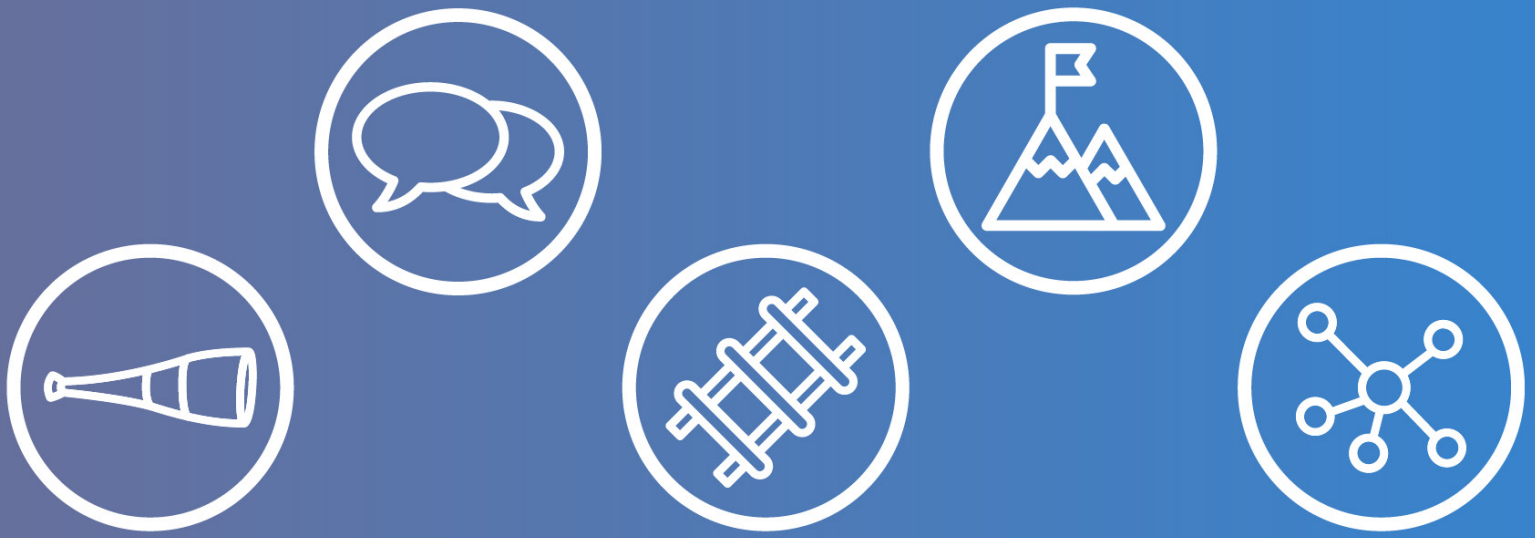
To develop a framework that helps government leaders more responsively serve the public, the Partnership for Public Service and MAXIMUS conducted interviews with federal leaders who use a customer-focused approach to deliver effective public services. These leaders employed five strategies that helped their agencies move beyond fixing one-off customer service problems and instead put a larger organizational emphasis on continually responding and adapting to shifting customer needs. These strategies are key to creating a customer-focused mindset among federal leaders, driving organizational change and unlocking government’s broader public impact.

The leadership competencies highlighted in this report are directly connected to the Partnership’s [Public Service Leadership Model](#). This report examines what the model’s core competencies—such as leading change and engaging others—look like in action and shows how they can transform the federal customer experience.

DEFINING GOVERNMENT LEADERSHIP

We define government leadership as career employees at the top end of the General Schedule—the GS-13, -14, and -15 levels—and members of the Senior Executive Service. The former are career senior managers within agencies, while SES officials are executive-level leaders that act as a civil service cadre of managers, supervisors and policy experts. There are about 464,000 of these leaders in government, representing almost a quarter of all full-time federal employees. Though political appointees also make up the top layer of government leadership, their demographic data are not publicly available.

² For the purposes of this report, “people of color” refers to members of certain racial and ethnic groups, including Black and Latinx individuals, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Native Americans and others.

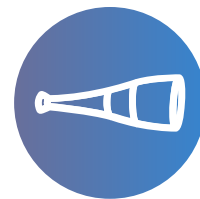


Five Elements of Customer-focused Leadership in Government

To distill the key elements of customer-focused federal leadership, the Partnership and MAXIMUS interviewed 16 leaders who spearheaded critical customer experience improvements and transformed the way agencies delivered services. The interviews captured different service contexts and environments across 14 agencies—from agencies that deliver direct services like the Department of Veterans Affairs to others that focus on security like Customs and Border Protection, to more policy-focused ones like the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. We also interviewed the co-chairs of the Partnership’s Government Leadership Advisory Council—executives who have led large public and private sector organizations and helped shape the Partnership’s leadership development strategy.

Five key leadership approaches—each of which transformed agencies’ customer experience delivery—emerged from these interviews. These approaches share a common thread: Leaders did more than just fix stand-alone problems; they created organizational cultures that put customers first and continually responded and adapted to changing customer needs.

Focus on the mission and set a tangible vision for change



Federal leaders care deeply about the missions of their organizations and the customers they serve. But driving customer-focused change in government is hard work that requires mobilizing staff and revamping long-standing processes. To do this, leaders need to go beyond caring about customers—they need a concrete narrative about why they care and a specific vision for what a better customer experience looks like.

Barbara C. Morton, the VA's deputy chief veterans experience officer, described how an experience she had assisting a World War II veteran helps her communicate what she is trying to achieve at the agency and keeps her grounded in its mission.

It all began with a phone call from a veteran. It was unusual for Morton to receive a phone call directly from a veteran, given her role at the VA at the time. But a veteran of World War II had become lost in the VA's process for appealing a benefit decision and somehow made his way to Morton's phone line.

Morton could tell the veteran was anxious about his appeal, and stepped out of her normal responsibilities to personally help him, modeling a behavior that would later be enshrined as one of the core principles of the VA's service culture. She reached out to the relevant offices to understand the status of the appeal and coordinate possible solutions, while updating the veteran regularly to reassure him that she was working on the issue.

Eventually, the appeal was put back on track. When delivering the news, Morton recalled the veteran saying, "Thank you, I trusted you because I knew you would take care of me." According to Morton, this experience impacted her deeply and epitomizes the empathetic and responsive customer experiences that she and her team at the Veterans Experience Office now work to replicate across the VA. By sharing this story with her staff and colleagues Morton provides a powerful, palpable example of what the office is trying to accomplish and why it matters—both to the VA and veterans, and to her personally as a leader. It also provided her with a powerful example of the office's impact—one she could share with staff and colleagues across the VA and other agencies to build support for making exceptional customer experiences the norm, not the exception.

LEADERSHIP TAKEAWAYS

- **Tell your story.** There is no substitute for storytelling, especially when it comes to energizing staff and articulating the need for change. Leaders should share compelling stories that show why they care about the mission and improving services—whether those stories draw from their own experiences or reflect interactions with customers. Even in offices that do not interact directly with the public, leaders can still highlight stories of how the work they are doing benefits people and makes a difference in their lives.
- **Get specific.** It can be easy for leaders to rely on high-level platitudes like “delivering world-class customer service” without concretely defining their vision of what is—and is not—a quality experience. Do they want employees to focus on speedier service? Or on going the extra mile for customers to show they care? Or on providing more transparency? Clearly articulating what needs to change and the ideal customer experience ensures that staff drive toward the same goals and, as importantly, understand what perfunctory tactics are not worth their time.

- **Connect to the broader mission.** Leaders need to connect customer experience improvements to agency mission and goals—especially in organizations that do not focus on direct service delivery. Other Partnership research demonstrates how a customer-focus helped agencies promote public safety, minimize waste and reduce the burden of government regulations. Customer experience can also help address equity issues, a key priority of the Biden administration, by ensuring that agencies understand the perspectives and challenges faced by people from underserved communities.

“Your colleagues have to buy in to your vision, not just because of your title but because they care and they believe in your passion, and because they believe in what you’re trying to accomplish.”

Abraham Martinez

Director of the product design group at the Office of Federal Student Aid, Department of Education

Listen to a diverse set of stakeholders and practice empathy

Federal leaders are often top experts in their field who have years of experience at their agencies. Unfortunately, this strength can become a weakness. Based on their expertise, leaders may believe they have a very clear sense of their customers’ needs and how to address them. But to improve the customer experience—especially given most agencies’ diverse customer base—leaders need to continually listen, develop empathy and challenge their assumptions. And they should pursue these practices with clear goals in mind, such as understanding and identifying concrete steps to improve the experiences of those they serve.

When Congress passed the Taxpayer First Act in 2019, Jim Clifford and his colleagues at the Internal Revenue Service needed to move quickly. Among its 46 provisions, the act required the IRS to develop a comprehensive taxpayer experience strategy, design a new approach to training and examine options to restructure the organization—all with an eye toward improved service. Congress gave the IRS just 12 months to design and execute these changes, during which the agency also had to implement changes from a separate, sweeping new tax law.

Clifford, one of the directors of the agency’s Taxpayer First Act Office, may have been tempted to dive right into meeting the law’s requirements. Instead, he and his colleagues dedicated the first three months—a quarter of the overall project timeline—to listening. Following a commitment to “listen, learn and then design” the team talked to customers, stakeholders and representatives from organizations with which it frequently collaborates. The group also used existing customer information to guide its plans, distilling key themes from verbatim comments found on 61 different IRS customer and stakeholder surveys.



Perhaps just as importantly, IRS leaders also listened to their employees—and they were surprised by what they heard. “Customers often tell us that the IRS is hard to navigate—that it feels like you are dealing with more than one IRS,” Clifford said. “What surprised us is that our employees told us the same thing. They don’t know where to get an answer or how to resolve an issue when they face a question that is outside of their normal responsibilities.” This critical insight showed leadership that certain customer issues would never be addressed without improving the larger organizational systems used by employees.

That knowledge helped the agency create a bold long-term vision to build a more consistent customer experience. By combining the taxpayer experience strategy with a rejuvenated approach to training, the IRS will enable its employees to provide taxpayers with the information they need or personally connect them with a subject-matter expert who can assist. When employees receive a call or contact that they are not trained to address, they will be equipped with the knowledge and tools to guide the taxpayer to a subject-matter expert who can provide that assistance.

Improving the federal customer experience also requires empathy—tapping into people’s deeper emotions and understanding the reactions people experience when they engage with a service.

One strategy for developing empathy is linking back to personal experiences with comparable resonance. For example, Linda Mastandrea, head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s Office of Disability Integration and Coordination, said her personal experience living with a disability “doesn’t make me an expert in all things disability,” but nonetheless informs her work and helps her better understand the customers she serves. The challenge in such circumstances is for leaders to recognize the import of similar experiences to customers while not mirroring their own reactions or preferences.

But leaders can also engage in practices to build empathy for customers even when they have not lived through the same experiences themselves—for example, by talking directly to those they serve, listening to sample phone calls in which someone is struggling to access or use a service, or visiting a service center that people visit to resolve specific issues. Many of the leaders we talked to also said that they spend significant time mapping the journey of their customers through their agencies’ systems. These practices can help leaders plug into customers’ emotions more effectively than analyzing more traditional reports or survey data.

LEADERSHIP TAKEAWAYS

- **Have a listening strategy.** Broadly asking for customer or employee feedback might yield vague or less helpful information. Leaders should start by identifying what they want to learn, the hypothesis they want to test, the full range of mechanisms they should access for inclusive feedback and what they might do with the information they get.
- **Consider implicit bias.** Leaders should be mindful of any implicit bias that might affect who they ask for feedback and consider approaching underrepresented groups or those who may be less likely to engage in the feedback process. These efforts will enable leaders to gain insights from a diverse set of stakeholders.
- **Be ready to invest.** Listening to customers is essential to creating a better experience for them, but it costs time and money to conduct outreach and analyze results. Leaders need to take responsibility to make sure their organizations invest in this important process even when things are busy.

- **Relate customer perspectives to personal experience.** Ken Corbin and David Alito, two of the most senior career leaders at the Internal Revenue Service, said they harken back to their early career experience of opening and responding to mail in IRS processing centers. They noted that this approach of putting themselves in their “employee’s shoes”—while not a substitute for talking to employees—helps them stay grounded and consider how their decisions might affect and be interpreted by front-line employees.

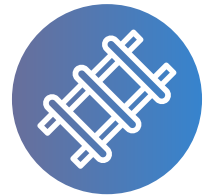
“You have to lead by listening and with great humility. Because nobody is going to listen to you until you listen to them.”

Doug Conant

Founder and CEO of ConantLeadership; former CEO and president of Campbell Soup Company; Partnership for Public Service Board Member

Stay curious and seek continual improvement

Customer experience challenges are often more complex and nuanced than they first appear. As a result, leaders may address the wrong customer experience problem or overlook its root cause. Truly understanding customer experience challenges requires curiosity, detective-like skills and a willingness to “go down the rabbit hole,” at times deeply investigating the experience of one individual to help explain larger trends. Leaders also need to act on the information they learn and establish a culture of continual improvement at their agencies.



Michele Bartram, the customer experience officer at the U.S. Census Bureau, is not afraid to get her hands dirty by digging through detailed customer feedback. When reviewing such feedback on the census website, Bartram noticed many comments suggesting people could not find the non-English versions of the online questionnaire to complete the census.

Rather than dismissing these comments, Bartram kept digging. Eventually, she discovered that a specific user—a Spanish-speaking woman over the age of 60—was unable to find the Spanish form because she was looking for it on her mobile phone rather than on a desktop computer, where the non-English form links were openly displayed on the home page. In turn, Bartram formed a hypothesis: Older users and non-English speakers might be less familiar with the “hamburger menu” icons that people needed to click on in the mobile 2020 Census site to access the form for Spanish speakers.

Bartram and her team confirmed this hypothesis through additional data analysis and user testing. While it was too late to redesign the mobile site, the census team accelerated communications and developed new messaging for non-English respondents—and particularly for Spanish-speaking audiences and partners who work in Spanish-speaking communities—to promote the online form and direct people where to find it.

Linda Mastandrea of FEMA had a similar experience. After a deadly 2017 hurricane season had pronounced effects on people with disabilities, Mastandrea and her colleagues examined data showing how the agency serves this group. But they quickly noticed an anomaly: Only 3% of those who applied for assistance from the agency identified as having a disability even though CDC data estimate that about 26% of the U.S. population identifies similarly.³ Realizing they needed to identify which FEMA customers had disabilities to provide more responsive services, Mastandrea and her team stepped back to look at how the agency collected information about those it serves.

They discovered several factors that caused people to not identify their disability when applying for help. Some people were confused by the wording of the question, some did not consider themselves disabled even though they had a condition that qualified and some were hesitant to self-identify for other reasons. Mastandrea and her team tackled each of these root causes. They made the application question easier to understand and added new text that explained the purpose of the question and how the information would be used. As a result, the number of applicants identifying that they had a disability increased from 3% to 15%.

LEADERSHIP TAKEAWAYS

- **Consult a wide variety of sources.** Leaders may miss the point if they draw all of their conclusions from one survey or source. Bartram recommended casting a wide net to get a sense of what information people want to know about them and what answers are being presented to your customers. Reviewing surveys, website search reports and customer interviews as well as talking to front-line staff who assist customers and Googling your product or program are all ways to investigate your customers' experiences.

“Knowing as much information as we can about the customer—what they’re doing, what their challenges are and what their day-to-day operations are—is so helpful to our work.”

Nancy Kennedy

Chief of the safety measurement and analysis division, Volpe National Transportation Systems Center, Department of Transportation

³ Okoro, C., Hollis, D., Cyrus, A. and Griffin-Blake, S., “Prevalence of Disabilities and Health Care Access by Disability Status and Type Among Adults — United States, 2016,” 2018. Retrieved from bit.ly/3nggcZC.

- **Be your own customer.** Leaders can learn more about the processes or services they oversee by engaging with them as a customer. For example, Bartram made time to take the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey, the largest household survey the bureau administers. Doing so helped her appreciate how much information people need to collect to complete the survey, including utility bills and a myriad of other financial documents. As a result, Bartram and her team are now considering how to use website content and FAQs to improve the respondent experience before and during the survey, and the Bureau at large is researching how to reduce respondent burden and streamline the process.
- **Measure success from the customers’ perspective.** Government often relies on output-related performance measures, such as the number of customers served or how fast a service is delivered, but the best way to know if your services are improving is to ask your customers.

“We have lots of measures of efficiency. If you want to know if you are effective, you have to ask the person who the service was intended for.”

Chelsea D’Angona

Former customer experience administrator at the Patent and Trademark Office

Embrace risk and foster resilience

Leading customer experience improvements often requires disrupting long-standing practices or viewpoints and may entail asking people to do things outside of their comfort zone—like adopting new technologies or being held accountable to customer feedback. To be successful, leaders need to take risks and respectfully challenge the status quo.

In customer experience roles at both FEMA and the Patent and Trademark Office, Chelsea D’Angona saw the need for leaders to build a culture that encouraged and rewarded risk-taking.

At FEMA, D’Angona and her colleagues observed that staff often identified opportunities to improve the customer experience but often lacked the time or a dedicated forum to decide which projects to pursue. The executive leading the office decided to hold a series of “shark tank” sessions where employees could pitch and vote on these ideas.

The forum created a sense of safety even though staff had to take risks and present outside-the-box ideas—some of which would affect other offices. The exercise was also risky for executives, who had to be prepared to act on and potentially find funding for atypical ideas that had broad support. According to D’Angona, the process generated excitement and energy among staff and yielded new ideas to improve a few customer issues. The team was able to fund some of those improvements with leftover budget at the end of the fiscal year.



When pushing for innovations, leaders also need to be resilient, persistent and patient, recognizing that big changes in government do not happen overnight. Especially in organizations with small customer experience teams, leaders need to “start a movement” by generating interest in different parts of the organization. “You have to be the flame and be able to light other people’s candles,” said D’Angona. At the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, she helped lead orientations to introduce employees across the agency to principles of customer experience.

Those in more senior positions are critical not only to moving employees’ innovative ideas forward, but also to building the habit of thinking about customer experience at the agency. Morton, who helped integrate customer experience principles into the VA’s internal regulations, said it is important to work customer experience into every “nook and cranny of the organization so that it doesn’t become a flavor of the month that changes as leadership or priorities change.”

LEADERSHIP TAKEAWAYS

- **Build a culture of intelligent risk-taking and innovation.** Leaders need to create organizations where employees at all levels feel comfortable asking questions, proposing new ideas and stepping outside their job descriptions to address an issue.

“If you want a culture where people feel like they can innovate and take risks, you have to provide psychological safety—you have to have their backs when they try something that doesn’t work or if something goes wrong.”

Bob McDonald

Former Secretary of the VA and retired chairman, president & CEO of The Procter & Gamble Company; former Partnership for Public Service Board Member

- **Lead by asking customer-focused questions.** According to Martha Dorris, former deputy associate administrator for the Office of Citizen Services at the General Services Administration, leaders at all levels should ask questions to help surface challenges and spark curiosity among their colleagues. Consider asking questions like: How are people currently experiencing this service? How long are applications taking to process? Where are our customers getting their information from? What data do we have to support our assumptions? These questions can jump-start customer experience thinking—especially when teams realize they do not currently have the answers to them.
- **Foster resilience when facing roadblocks.** Customer experience improvements do not happen overnight. Build your team’s resilience by celebrating quick wins and accomplishments along the way, and by modeling the resolve to persevere through roadblocks.

Make the case to build partnerships



Improving the customer experience can be difficult because customer interactions often cross organizational boundaries, requiring coordination among partners whose interests may not always fully align. In these cases, leaders need to deftly build relationships and speak to the goals of various stakeholders. In other cases, an agency might “own” all aspects of a service, but partnerships can still help in building trust and communicating with the public more effectively.

John Wagner, former deputy executive assistant commissioner at Customs and Border Protection, had a difficult and high-profile assignment to improve the international arrival experience at international airports. A poor arrival experience for international travelers was causing consternation among senior leaders across government and the travel industry, with concerns about negative effects on tourism. Miami International Airport became a focal point and test case for improving the arrival experience at these airports.

One of Wagner’s biggest challenges was that CBP did not control many aspects of this experience. For example, the county government owned the physical arrival space, which many passengers found unpleasant, and airline decisions to bring in most international flights simultaneously caused huge lines at customs checkpoints.

Wagner focused on fixing the things CBP could control and building partnerships to address the things it could not. He led improvements on the CBP side—for example, working with Disney to streamline the queuing process based on the company’s extensive experience in managing lines and efficiently moving people along at amusement parks. Wagner also asked CBP officers to find small ways to improve the customer experience, like saying “Welcome home” to returning Americans.

While the above improvements to CBP’s processes helped, Wagner also needed the support of partners who affect aspects of the arrival experience, like airlines and airport authorities. To get them involved, Wagner had to speak to their goals. Emphasizing the increasingly competitive environment for airports he got Miami’s airport authority to enhance the customs processing areas to make them more welcoming and install upgraded processing kiosks. He also got buy-in from airlines, emphasizing how a speedy experience at customs could limit missed connections—a costly issue for airlines flying through Miami. These efforts led to reduced wait times at customs and less missed connections, according to Wagner. Trusted relationships with stakeholders—at national and local levels—that continue today made it possible to resolve these tough challenges.

LEADERSHIP TAKEAWAYS

- **Understand the full ecosystem.** Map out the full landscape of organizations that impact or connect with your agency’s services, including other offices, federal agencies, state and local governments and private sector entities. Understand what role these organizations play, how they influence the services you provide, as well as their motivations and objectives.

“There is not a single process at CMS that someone owns start to finish.”

Karen Jackson

Deputy chief operating officer, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services

- **Connect to the goals of others.** Speak directly to the goals of others to build the case for partnerships. When possible, use data to demonstrate the potential impact of collaboration.
- **Build trust in communities.** Even if no other organizations directly impact the services you provide to customers, consider partnering with community organizations that could help you reach customers where they are and build trust. For example, Michele Bartram, the Census Bureau’s customer experience officer, said the agency built partnerships with over 300,000 trusted national and community-based organizations like nonprofits, businesses and faith-based groups to highlight the importance of completing the 2020 Census. In doing so, the bureau recognized that people may be more receptive to messages from these organizations than from the federal government.



Recommendations and Conclusion

Strengthening Customer-Focused Leadership Across Government

While this report focuses on how individual leaders can improve the federal customer experience, there are government-wide actions that agencies and the Biden administration can take to create a culture of customer-focused leadership.

The Office of Personnel Management should strengthen the Executive Core Qualifications. Many of the leadership qualities identified in our research align with the Office of Personnel Management’s ECQs, which outline leadership standards for members of the Senior Executive Service. However, the ECQs do not explicitly mention the competencies of listening and practicing empathy even though they were the most frequently cited leadership traits in our research.

OPM could address this through a modest modification of the language in the ECQs. Currently, the ECQs focus on “customer service,” with an emphasis on meeting customer needs and delivering high-quality products and services. A more modern approach would be to concentrate on “the customer experience,” which prioritizes listening, practicing empathy and using proven practices like human-centered design to ensure that services are built around user needs, rather than the government’s preferences. This shift would also support the Biden administration’s priority to make federal services more equitable by focusing government leaders on the need to listen to and develop empathy for a diverse set of customers.

Agencies should invest in training leaders on customer experience principles and related strategies like human-centered design. Customer experience is a well-defined business discipline in the private sector, with companies cultivating deep technical expertise in fields such as service design, user experience and customer research. Very few federal leaders are experts in these areas—but they need to know the basics to provide strategic guidance to staff who are designing and delivering services.

The federal government should build a leadership core that reflects America’s diversity. According to our analysis, women and people of color remain disproportionately underrepresented in federal leadership positions—especially within the Senior Executive Service, the highest level of ca-

reer leaders.^{4,5} A more diverse leadership would position agencies to understand and relate to the needs and experiences of the varied customers they serve. Agencies can accomplish this goal by rooting out and eliminating bias that may exist in performance management and professional development systems and ensuring that key hiring programs that feed into leadership positions consider a diverse set of candidates.

Government leadership by sex (2019)

Sex	GS-13 to GS-15	SES	U.S. Population
Female	40.1%	34.9%	50.8%
Male	59.9%	65.2%	49.2%

Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Government leadership by race/ethnicity overview (2019)

Race/Ethnicity	GS-13 to GS-15	SES	U.S. Population
People of color	32.1%	22.4%	40.0%
White	66.7%	77.1%	60.0%

Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Government leadership by specific race/ethnicity (2019)

Race/Ethnicity	GS-13 to GS-15/SES	U.S. Population
Native American, including Alaskan Native	0.8%	0.7%
Asian/Asian American	7.0%	5.6%
Black/African American	15.4%	12.4%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.2%	0.2%
Hispanic/Latinx	6.9%	18.4%
More than one race/ethnicity	1.6%	3.4%
White	66.8%	60.0%

Created with [Datawrapper](#)

4 All data on government leaders are from [FedScope](#)—an online database maintained by the Office of Personnel Management—and covers all full-time, nonseasonal, permanent employees. All comparisons of FedScope data with general population data are from December 2019, to align with the most recent American Community Survey estimates, also from 2019. Other FedScope data are from March 2021.

5 Data from the general population: US Census, “ACS 1-Year Estimates-Public Use Microdata Sample,” 2019. Retrieved from bit.ly/2Wrc0BD.

In terms of racial and ethnic composition, the biggest gap in government leadership is among Hispanic/Latinx employees, who comprise more than 18% of the U.S. population, but just 6.9% of federal leadership.

Where federal leaders work (2021)

Location	GS-13 to GS-15/SES	All Workforce
Washington, D.C., region	38.3%	20
Outside of the Washington, D.C., region	61.7%	80

Created with [Datawrapper](#)

It is also important for government to focus on geographic diversity of leadership. Federal leaders could better understand the challenges facing communities across the country if offered more opportunities to live and work outside of the Washington, D.C., area.

While over 80% of federal employees are based outside of this area, only about 62% of leadership positions are. Leaders in the rest of the country are spread out across states, with highest concentrations in Texas, California and Georgia.

“Designing and delivering services equitably means being in the communities we serve and having an agency work-force that reflects those communities.”

Ken Corbin

Chief Taxpayer Experience Office at the Internal Revenue Service

Most federal leaders care deeply about improving services and meeting the needs of government’s diverse customer base. But achieving those goals can be challenging even for the most experienced leaders—especially given the fact that federal leaders must often operate within certain budget constraints, and navigate shifting priorities, complex laws and complicated policies. The framework and examples in this report can help leaders tackle the root causes—and not just the symptoms—of the challenges customers face. And they can help keep federal leaders driving towards their ultimate objective—providing better and more equitable services to the American public.

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