



PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

OUR VISION FOR A BETTER GOVERNMENT

Our reform agenda outlines five foundational reforms to improve government performance, support the federal workforce and rebuild public trust. In these documents, we'll dive deeper into the five priorities.

Read the full agenda at: bit.ly/3SWWxnd

PRIORITY 3

HOLD POOR PERFORMERS ACCOUNTABLE

When a company's services or products do not work well or an employee does something wrong in the workplace, people expect the problem to be dealt with quickly. These same expectations hold true for our federal government—and the bar is even higher because the public has a vested interest in ensuring its tax dollars are put to good use.

Yet the current process for addressing poor performance in government is difficult for managers and confusing for workers, leading to a lack of accountability for government employees who do not carry out their roles and responsibilities effectively. Most federal employees do their jobs well, but a small number who do not make it challenging for everyone else to succeed and deliver for the American public.

It is important to ensure that federal employees cannot be fired for politically motivated or unjust reasons, but there are ways to update and simplify the current system that would make it easier to deal with poor performers.

LAYERS OF CHALLENGES IN PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

There is a long-standing narrative that the government is filled with problem employees, and they are never fired. While this narrative is far too simple to encompass the range of complexities that any business must confront when dealing with its people, it does hold a kernel of truth—the current system to hold employees accountable for poor performance, and encourage stronger performance, is challenging for leaders, managers and employees alike.

Employees may not understand what their role entails or what good performance looks like, particularly if the job's responsibilities are not clearly communicated or are outdated, or if they do not meet regularly with their supervisor. Others may have bad managers and do not know where to turn for help. And sometimes, employees are legitimately not executing their job effectively but are allowed to continue that poor performance unchecked.

Managers often do not have the necessary tools to deal with employee performance issues, whether it is a lack of training on how to manage people or limited knowledge of federal disciplinary procedures. They are expected to hold employees accountable but exist in a federal performance management culture that does not prioritize thoughtful performance plans or accurate evaluation of employee performance.

Leaders should view people as the most important factor to the government's success and impact—but oftentimes strategic human capital management is not included in their own performance plans or agency goals, and they may hesitate to take action against poor performers due to the perceived hassle or cost (in both time and money). This tends to be particularly challenging for political leaders, who lack performance plans and potentially the strategic talent management experience needed for large organizations.

Recommendations for Improving Performance Management



Hold managers and leaders accountable for employees' performance

THE CHALLENGE

More than 40% of respondents to the 2023 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, the annual nationwide survey of federal employees, reported that poor performers usually remain in their work unit and continue to underperform. This shows that the process is broken and is not used as intended to deal with legitimate performance issues.

SOLUTIONS

Managers should be skilled and supported to hire, onboard, develop, set performance goals, and fairly address performance issues and discipline when needed. Employees who are identified as possible supervisors, or those who want to manage people, should have to take supervisor training courses and meet supervisory skills requirements. There also should be alternate nonsupervisory paths for technical experts to progress in their careers. In addition, political leaders and members of the Senior Executive Service should have performance plans weighted toward leading people, in addition to driving results.



More effectively use probationary periods to evaluate employees

THE CHALLENGE

The probationary period for new employees is meant to give supervisors time to evaluate whether someone is a good fit for the job. It is typically one year long and designed to be the final assessment in the hiring process. However, supervisors often do not use this period to take proactive steps, including removal, if someone is not the right fit or ensure new employees have the skills they need to thrive in their new role.

SOLUTIONS

Supervisors should be required to determine whether employees are qualified, unqualified or the right fit during their first year on the job. If an employee is not performing well, agencies should have a process to provide them with additional training, move them to a different position or terminate them before the probationary period ends. New hires should not be automatically advanced to full-time employment if their supervisor does not formally decide whether they are qualified or unqualified. Rather, supervisors should have to evaluate these new employees and conclude that they meet their job expectations to move them to full-time status.



Streamline the disciplinary process

THE CHALLENGE

Generally, federal employees can appeal a suspension, demotion or removal, but the process is complicated. In fiscal year 2023, it took agencies an average of 102 days to process an employee's initial appeal, according to the Merit Systems Protection Board, the body that adjudicates some employment cases. During that time, employees, managers and agencies are in limbo.

SOLUTIONS

If an employee is disciplined or terminated for poor performance or misconduct, there needs to be a quick and streamlined review and appeals system, one that provides due process protections and ensures decisions are not politically motivated. The process should be easy to understand, leading employee and employer alike to a fair and expeditious resolution.

A New Era of Performance Management?

Maintaining merit system principles should be a paramount concern for all policymakers, but that does not mean the current system cannot be reimaged. Agencies, the administration and Congress should undertake an evidence-based approach to performance management and inject some flexibility and creativity into the process to hold all employees accountable.

The best way to do this would be through a series of performance pilots or demonstration projects with evaluation and reporting requirements. A few ideas for where to start:

DESIGNATE A POINT OF CONTACT FOR ACCOUNTABILITY ASSISTANCE

Employees or managers with performance-related issues often do not know where to turn for help. Establishing an HR point of contact, performance desk, liaison or ombudsperson would be one way to triage these issues, connect employees to resources and help all parties navigate the process—from writing good performance goals to having tough performance conversations to taking disciplinary action.

DUAL TRACK AT LOWER GS LEVELS

Not everyone desires or is well-suited to manage people, yet oftentimes federal employees must take on a supervisory role to move up at work. Dual tracking at lower GS levels between technical specialists and supervisors would help ensure that people who have technical expertise can advance without managing employees. Additionally, employees on a supervisory track could have certain developmental and skills requirements.

PILOT NEW APPROACHES TO PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

There is not one way to do performance management, and companies in the private sector continually work toward better systems. Government should follow this example and experiment with different ways to create strong performance systems. The Office of Personnel Management should create a series of demonstration projects to test different models and evaluate their outcomes, with an eye toward updating policies and scaling effective performance management practices. Some ideas include equipping HR professionals with the coaching skills needed to advise managers, syncing job descriptions with actual role responsibilities and performance goals, and developing stronger internal communications around performance management standards and resources.

Research and Resources

- [Building the Enterprise: A New Civil Service Framework](#)
- [Taking Measure: Moving from Process to Practice in Performance Management](#)
- [Best Places to Work in the Federal Government® rankings](#)