

Improving Performance: The Role of Contextual Behavior

In good times and in tough times, Federal agencies need employees to direct their capabilities, energy, and effort towards more than just their core job duties. Mission success requires that employees also recognize—and seize—opportunities to support the agency in ways not necessarily specified in their position descriptions (PDs) nor tied to their formal job tasks. Indeed, agencies need employees to think and behave “outside the box” of formal job tasks and to do, support, or help with what needs to be done in the name of broader mission accomplishment. Agencies need employees to direct their effort towards both *task* and *contextual* performance.

What are Task and Contextual Performance?

Employees’ performance at work can be divided into task and contextual performance¹. Task performance is the “meat” of an employee’s job: the technical, core duties that directly feed into creation of an organization’s products and services. Meanwhile, contextual performance behaviors are the “gravy” or those employee actions that season the work environment where task performance occurs. In essence, contextual performance behaviors make the work environment more conducive to the generation of task performance. There are five general categories² of contextual performance behaviors:

- Putting in extra effort and persistence on formally-prescribed job tasks;
- Being cooperative and helpful to other employees;
- Volunteering or taking the initiative on duties beyond one’s job;
- Being respectful of agency rules; and
- Supporting the agency and its goals.

Although many work units (and agencies as a whole) undoubtedly rely on these kinds of behaviors to successfully accomplish work, such behaviors are less likely to be specified-requirements of an employee’s job compared with task-focused activities. For example, consider the following behaviors expected of an analyst:

A: “Writes reports summarizing research findings.”

B: “Voluntarily edits peers’ research reports.”

Although both of these behaviors are important and necessary, you are more likely to see “A” as a Behavior B has a greater degree of employee choice, which is a hallmark of contextual performance behaviors. Contextual behaviors tend to be more discretionary and less easily observable than task behaviors and are also less likely to be formally recognized or rewarded. performance element for an analyst compared with “B.”

How Can Agencies Encourage Contextual Performance Behavior?

Informal recognition. Since contextual performance behaviors are less likely to be formally recognized than task behaviors (e.g., through an appraisal or reward system), one way to encourage them is to *informally* recognize them. As discussed in a previous MSPB newsletter³,

¹ See Borman and Motowildo (1997). *Task Performance and Contextual Performance: The Meaning for Personnel Selection Research*. Human Performance, 10, pgs. 99-109.

² *Id.*

³ U.S. MSPB. Informal Recognition: A Little “Thanks!” Can Mean A Lot, *Issues of Merit Newsletter*, June 2013, pgs. 1 & 3.

informal recognition—such as giving a simple “thanks”—is easy to do and free, yet can be a very effective way of reinforcing a desired behavior. Employees may not realize how valuable certain behaviors are to others and expressing appreciation for them can serve as a “spotlight” to them (and to all other employees) that can help encourage similar behaviors in the future. Further, past MSPB research found that appreciation received was rated as important to seeking and continuing employment in their organization by 84% of survey respondents⁴. Clearly, Federal employees appreciate appreciation. Leaders should make sure employees receive it for their contextual performance behaviors in addition to their task behaviors.

Establish explicit expectations. Supervisors may want to explore complementing *informal* encouragement of contextual behaviors with *formal* performance management strategies such as incorporating contextual behaviors into performance plans and standards. Of course, it would be wise to work with HR and any unions on executing this change, and all modifications would need to be communicated to all affected employees to provide them with a fair and equal opportunity to perform.

Review and revise hiring criteria and methods. Supervisors may also want to revisit job competency models and assessment methods to ensure they recognize and value contextual behaviors. Although they require more effort, these formal strategies would more clearly emphasize (and encourage) the performance of any valued contextual behaviors.

Efficient and effective mission accomplishment requires employees who engage in behaviors that transcend the job as described on paper. While agencies will always need employees to focus on task performance, they also need employees to seize opportunities to engage in contextual performance. Informal recognition can do much to encourage contextual behaviors. When certain contextual behaviors are routinely necessary, more formal strategies like changing performance standards and selection criteria could also be considered.

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⁴ U.S. MSPB. *Federal Employee Engagement: The Motivating Potential of Job Characteristics and Rewards*, December 2012, pg. 21.