

Leaders: “Recognizing” Employees Requires More Than Just Knowing Who Works for You

Results of a 2012 American Psychological Association (APA) survey of working Americans indicate that feeling valued was a key driver of engagement and job performance¹. For example, among employees who indicated that they were valued, 93% agreed that they were motivated to do their best at work and 88% reported that they felt engaged. In sharp contrast, employees who thought they were not valued indicated agreement levels of only 33% and 38%, respectively, to these same questions about motivation and engagement.

MSPB’s research confirms that appreciation is similarly important to Federal employees and Federal agencies. Our analysis revealed that employees who believed that their effort would result in higher performance and that they would receive recognition for that performance were more likely to perform well².

For these reasons, appreciation and recognition for a job well done are more than a matter of courtesy. Unfortunately, the trend in Federal employees’ experience of recognition is not positive, as illustrated in the chart to the right³.

This is not surprising in light of on-going fiscal austerity, proposals to reduce Federal employee pay or benefits, and public criticism of Federal agencies and Federal officials. It is quite likely that many Federal employees interpret these occurrences as signs of how *little* their work is valued, rather than how much.

Although Federal leaders may be unable to prevent or change these adverse circumstances, or erase them from their employees’ memories, it is important that leaders take steps to try to mitigate their negative effects. Below, we outline some ways that leaders can better recognize and support Federal employees for their valuable work.

- *Reaffirm the value of the agency’s mission and how employees contribute to its accomplishment.* Every employee plays a vital role. Helping each employee see—and affirming that you understand—how his or her work directly or indirectly supports mission success is one way to value employees.
- *Regularly recognize employees for their contributions and express appreciation for what they do.* Make recognition and appreciation a habit rather than an occasion. One strategy for establishing this habit is to maintain a gratitude journal and express appreciation daily.⁴ This strategy has the additional benefit of improving tracking and documentation for purposes of feedback and formal performance evaluation.
- *Emphasize the agency’s successes.* Every agency has functions that bring value to the American people. Spotlight accomplishments in those functions. Help employees and work units to see how the work they did contributed to the agency’s success. Be as clear as possible when outlining such linkages; leaders who can express, in concrete terms, why *this* agency, *this* function, and *this* work unit matter are better positioned to

¹ American Psychological Association Survey Finds Feeling Valued at Work Linked to Well-Being and Performance, March 8, 2012, accessed at: <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2012/03/well-being.aspx>.

² U.S. MSPB. *Federal Employee Engagement: The Motivating Potential of Job Characteristics and Rewards*, December 2012.

³ Data for the chart obtained from OPM’s Federal Employee Viewpoint survey data, percent favorable responses to the question: “How satisfied are you with the recognition you receive for doing a good job?”. See: <http://www.fedview.opm.gov/>; and <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/data-analysis-documentation/employee-surveys/>.

recognize employees credibly and effectively—and to represent their agency to the public and stakeholders.

- *Set high (but realistic) standards—be honest about what employees can achieve with available resources.*

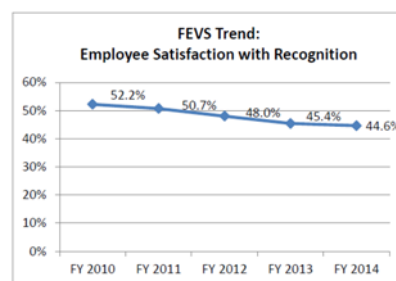
In these challenging times, it is essential that agencies use their limited resources effectively. But leaders should not imply to stakeholders nor employees that it is possible to do everything with nothing⁴. Leaders must have the courage to say when expectations for performance and productivity are inconsistent with resources allocated. For example, the commissioner of the Internal Revenue Service, John A. Koskinen, has been candid in his testimony before Congress about the difficult choices that become necessary when the resources allocated to the IRS are not commensurate with the demands for its services⁵. In Mr. Koskinen's closing remarks he warned that:

*“Even with the demonstrated capacity of our work force to successfully meet these challenges to open filing season on time, I remain deeply concerned that the significant reductions in the IRS budget will degrade the agency's ability to continue to deliver on its mission during filing season and beyond.”*⁶

- *Advocate for the workforce and for investments in employee development and recognition.* For example, in his testimony, Mr. Koskinen also took care to make the case for continuing to recognize high performance:

*“As part of this investment in our workforce, the IRS will continue to recognize qualifying employees who do exceptional work. Performance awards are a necessary incentive to motivate the workforce and retain highly qualified employees, and in that regard, I firmly believe they provide the agency and taxpayers with a good return on the dollar.”*⁷

Federal employees may continue to struggle to find recognition and appreciation in the current environment. This makes it all the more important for agency leaders to take steps to recognize and defend the value added by their agency and the employees who keep it running.



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⁴ See, for example, Paul C. Light (Brookings Institution, Center for Effective Public Management, 2014), "A Cascade of Failures: Why Government Fails, and How to Stop It," for a discussion of how unrealistic expectations can contribute to poor organizational performance.

⁵ Testimony of John A. Koskinen, Commissioner, Internal Revenue Service, before the Senate Finance Committee, February 3, 2015, accessed at: <http://www.finance.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2015%20JAK%20testimony%20SFC020315%20-%20FINAL.pdf>.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*