



## **EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT**

# What Really Engages the Federal Workforce?

By Donald G. Zauderer and Ruth T. Zaplin

Evidence shows that six intrinsic needs motivate workers. Here are several concrete actions government leaders can take to address these needs—and fully engage the federal workforce.

**A recent publication from the Partnership for Public Service, *Embracing Change***, likens working in federal service to the reality television show *Survivor*, which follows a group of people who work together to reach specific goals while dealing with every obstacle flung their way. According to the report, the federal workforce also has major hurdles to overcome, such as operating with “outdated hiring laws, across-the-board cuts, widespread employee furloughs; a three-year pay freeze ending with a 1 percent pay increase; and a budget dispute culminating in a 16-day government shutdown.”

Further, some politicians continue to fuel deep distrust in government by attacking agencies, hoping to gain votes by demonstrating that government is inherently inefficient and ineffective. Under these conditions, it would be perfectly natural for many eligible public-sector workers to retire, find employment elsewhere, or simply do a reasonable day’s work for a reasonable day’s pay while seeking real fulfillment outside of work.

So, is there anything well-intentioned public managers can do to engage those they lead to expend their discretionary energy toward achieving organizational purposes, even when very real impediments exist?

## Intrinsic Needs and Human Nature

To address the issue of engagement, the Key Executive Leadership Conference for federal leaders held at American University in May 2014 focused on the theme, “The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us.” The idea was inspired by the Daniel Pink book, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, which refers to neuroscience experiments that demonstrate people are motivated by a desire for autonomy, mastery, and purpose. Building on Pink’s framework, the conference included three additional intrinsic needs that strongly influence people’s engagement at work—respect, fairness, and inclusion.

The subject of the conference centered on how federal managers can tap into these six intrinsic needs to engage those they lead. Working in small groups, the conference’s 150 managers and executives provided a long list of ideas on how everyday leadership behaviors can tap into these intrinsic needs to generate a high level of sustained engagement. (See Figure 1.)

Highlighting intrinsic needs by no means suggests that extrinsic needs, such as salary, benefits, resources, and working conditions, are not important. Rather, it is simply that intrinsic needs can go a long way toward creating sustained engagement, even when there are discouraging factors in the environment.

Before we explore the six intrinsic needs, it is important to add perspective on an important aspect of human nature. Psychologist William McDougall’s work on “The Instinct Theory of Motivation” is particularly relevant. In the early 20th century, he explored the question: “What intrinsic needs and inherent tendencies do human beings have naturally and that help them survive?”

This question suggests that human beings are born with innate biological instincts that are essential for surviving. When these needs are not available to humans, their physical and emotional health is compromised.

What are the instincts and inherent tendencies that relate to engagement at the workplace? We assert that most people become engaged when they are:

- able to exercise discretion in how they do their work
- able to master new knowledge and skills
- involved in work that has a higher purpose
- treated with respect
- treated fairly
- feel a sense of inclusion within their work group and organization.

## Figure 1. Six Basic Human Needs

- 1| Autonomy: Desire to be self-directed
- 2| Mastery: Urge to make progress and get better at what we do
- 3| Purpose: Want to contribute and be part of something larger than ourselves
- 4| Respect: Acknowledgement of people’s skills, personal qualities, and contributions
- 5| Fairness: Impulse to compare how people in similar circumstances are treated by others
- 6| Inclusion: Need to avoid isolation from groups—to evade pangs of loneliness, ostracism, and rejection

When these needs are not met, people can become disengaged and may even experience emotional stress and physical decline.

If you think about it, human beings are like flowers. No flower can blossom with vibrant colors and a sweet fragrance without first being pollinated. It follows that people feel distress when basic, intrinsic needs are absent in their work life.

Among the symptoms of distress at work are heart problems, high blood pressure, sleep disorders, anxiety, overeating, and excessive use of alcohol, among others. People who cope in this manner will not likely be able to fully engage at work.

Interestingly, intrinsic needs are so deeply embedded in our nature that we are hardly aware we have them. In the frenetic pace of our everyday work lives, we lose sight of these basic realities.

The point: By becoming more conscious of the intrinsic needs of staff and treating people with common decency, leaders can easily tap into these basic wants and desires fulfilling what Daniel Goleman calls the fundamental task of leaders—priming good feelings in those they lead. More importantly, doing so should lead to higher level of trust, loyalty, commitment, and, ultimately, engagement on the part of team members.

## Actions for Federal Leaders

As a leader you might think, “If I tap into these basic needs on a regular basis, then I will end up having a closer relationship with my staff and this will make it harder for me to hold them accountable.” However, contrary to conventional thought, when you accommodate

people's intrinsic needs, you engender trust. And when you stimulate trust, those you lead will be more receptive to demands for quality and improve their performance.

In the words of Harvard professor Linda Hill, "Even as the person in charge, the one with authority, you can ultimately influence people only to the extent they are willing to be influenced by you. ... As the boss, you can demand compliance but you must earn commitment, and the coin of that realm is trust."

But leaders need the courage to have challenging conversations when the situation calls for it. For some leaders, this means overcoming habits of conflict avoidance. Most staff will make constructive use of the feedback when they trust that their manager's motives are to help them succeed and enhance the success of the organization.

Addressing the intrinsic needs of staff will have one additional benefit. Both you and your staff will be hap-

To accommodate the need for autonomy, leaders need to:

- let go of the assumption that there is one best way
- provide staff with project choices (when practical)
- delegate to foster leadership at all levels
- develop innovation labs to test ideas
- allow staff to self-manage their team
- foster risk-taking without penalty
- involve staff in hiring decisions (when appropriate)
- consider giving people time and resources to work on a new project.

Keep in mind that it's important to ask team members for feedback on how much autonomy they have and want. For example, ask them to anonymously rate, on a scale of 0 (low) to 10 (high), how much autonomy they have over their work. Review the results and ask for input about how to help them exercise their unique intellectual and emotional assets.

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pier in your roles. Richard Cumberland, a 17th century English cleric and philosopher, wrote in his essay "On Natural Law" that "promoting the well-being of others is essential to the pursuit of your own happiness."

So, what specific actions can leaders take to promote the well-being and productivity of the federal workforce? Here are concrete actions that will address each of the six intrinsic needs.

### #1: Autonomy

Pink speaks about the "fundamentally autonomous quality of human nature." When people have discretion in deciding their actions at work, they will be more deeply committed to the work. When they are energized by the trust that has been given to them, they will more likely try new ways of doing things. In short, according to Pink, by giving people "volition and choice" they are energized by the freedom to exercise their unique intellectual and emotional assets and feel like "players rather than pawns."

### #2: Mastery

Most people want to build their capacity to contribute to organizational purposes. For example, professionals who work in the field of training and education search for better ways to

design courses, engage learners, and produce genuine professional growth. Participants in the Key Executive Leadership Conference identified several concrete actions leaders can use to tap into people's desire for mastery:

- inform staff that you believe they have the qualities to master challenging personal development goals
- offer opportunities to rotate positions and take advantage of cross-functional initiatives that enhance skill building
- redesign jobs to enhance learning and skill development
- provide career coaching to align work with staff interests
- train and encourage staff in peer coaching around specific knowledge and skill areas
- initiate "mastery" conversations to encourage people to move out of their comfort zone
- provide staff brown bag seminars
- invest time and energy in professional development planning and execution.

By doing some of these activities, leaders will develop norms that encourage workers to continuously become masterful in different aspects of their work.

### #3: Purpose

According to Pink, those who work in the service of some higher objective can achieve more. Similarly, psychologist David Brings notes, "Purpose is the fixed idea that nourishes the continuous and future expressions of who we are." Here are some managerial actions that can connect people's need for purpose with the organizational mission:

- develop a mission statement and refer back to it to ensure congruity with new initiatives
- inform staff about how their jobs contribute to mission achievements
- conduct feedback meetings with internal and external customers
- ask staff what provides meaning for them at work and tailor jobs to enhance their sense of purpose
- make sure speeches and memos reinforce the importance of the collective mission.

### #4: Respect

Respect is often revealed in how a person's needs, thoughts, ideas, and preferences are taken into consideration by those around them. It also is apparent when peers and leaders acknowledge the skills, personal qualities, and contributions of colleagues. Acknowledging and listening to people, being truthful, and accepting individuality also exhibit respect. Lastly, appreciating the value of all forms of diversity, including style, gender, physical stature, ethnicity, religion, and so forth, also strengthen respect among co-workers.

According to Anjana Mazumbar, an Indian writer and philosopher, "Respect cannot be demanded, it is an asset that has to be earned. Nobody can earn respect by suppression or flaunting power." To exhibit respect on the job, managers need to:

- model the respectful behavior they seek
- get to know staff by providing them with face time
- be sensitive to cultural differences
- use active listening
- communicate in an open and honest manner and encourage input
- be willing to ask for help
- avoid snap judgments, gossip, or bullying
- recognize specific contributions
- address performance issues in a supportive manner.

## Obama Initiative on Employee Engagement

The passing of the Obama Administration's recent initiative on employee engagement encourages government managers to engage those they lead to expend their discretionary energy toward achieving agency goals. To comply with the 2010 Government Performance and Results Modernization Act, the Obama administration outlined nearly 80 two-year agency goals, applicable to 24 federal agencies. Eight management-oriented goals are each grouped under one of four themes: effectiveness, efficiency, economic growth, and people and culture.

Led by Jonathan McBride, director of the Presidential Personnel Office, and Katherine Archuleta, director of the Office of Personnel Management, the new people and culture initiative focuses on employee engagement as measured by employee views about their leaders, supervisors, and work experience. Thus, every manager in the federal service will be assessed, in part, on how well they engage staff to achieve personal and organizational goals.

Some leaders believe that it is important to create an image that portrays them as having such superior intellect and wisdom. The recommendations suggest otherwise. In fact, in most instances, humility and engaging staff in respectful dialogue is a far better way to make enlightened decisions.

### #5: Fairness

Many fairness issues permeate organizational life, such as who gets to come in late, who gets the best assignments, who gets face time with senior management, who gets invited to important meetings, who gets invited for lunch, who gets training, and who gets access to resources.

Granted, managers cannot treat everyone the same; some workers do have better ideas and play a more important role. However, this does not mean that a manager can disregard the needs of other staff members. Remember that people invariably compare how they are treated with others in the same circumstance. Decisions or processes that unduly benefit some at the expense of others often lead to emotional distress.

Treating people fairly takes time and effort, and government leaders, in particular, have some work to do to strengthen the sense of fairness among staff. According to the 2014 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, only 35 percent of federal workers believed that promotions were based on merit. Likewise, less than one-third (31 percent) felt that steps were taken to deal with poor performers,

and a mere 34 percent felt that differences in performance were recognized in a meaningful way.

Let's review some ideas on how federal managers can treat staff fairly:

- clarify roles and performance expectations
- ensure accountability for everyone
- validate information rather than act on assumptions when there is a performance issue
- acknowledge all contributions
- use a variety of recognition tools
- find growth opportunities consistent with abilities
- recognize that workers may think and approach projects differently
- obtain peer input for rewards
- provide group rewards
- remember that breaking a rule may be the fair thing to do
- provide a reasonably equal distribution of work
- consider all viewpoints and strive to find the right balance between conflicting interests.

## #6: Inclusion

Creating a culture of inclusion can help engage people at work. In his book, *Motivation and Personality*, Abraham Maslow asserts that people hunger for inclusion in groups. When isolated from groups, individuals can sharply feel the pangs of loneliness, ostracism, and rejection.

Organizational hierarchy, limited communication channels, and cultures that value certain types of individuals and categories of workers over others may intensify the feeling of exclusion and isolation. It is likely that you have experienced the feeling of being in the inner circle or being outside the inner circle. Interestingly, insiders often complain about the lack of engagement of outsiders without exploring why this might be the case.

Federal leaders should follow the example of acclaimed Duke Basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski, who hosts a dinner for players at his home most weeks during the season. He makes sure to choose starters as well as those who spend a lot of time on the bench. He also carefully moves the dinner conversation to their role on the team, performance goals, and their life interests and aspirations.

If you are a leader, how do you help staff feel part of the group? Do you invite different team members to your office to have lunch? Do you reach out to obtain feedback from those you lead? Do you try to create a sense of inclusion for all staff? Do you acknowledge contributions of all those who deserve it? Is it safe for all staff members,

not just the favored few, to offer opinions that differ from most on the team? How many people perceive they are part of the “outsider” group versus the “insider” group?

Here are some suggestions for leaders wanting to address inclusion:

- create a culture of openness and transparency
- encourage idea sharing for everyone
- hold regular “office hours” when staff can freely discuss concerns or opportunities
- publicly recognize deserving staff
- consistently follow through on agreements
- arrange brown bag lunches with temporary or permanent groups
- generate opportunities to make presentations
- acknowledge unsung heroes
- provide mentors
- create a process of socialization for new staff
- rotate working groups
- use the word “we” to create a norm of group identity, community, and teamwork.

## Final Thought

Accommodating the six basic intrinsic needs of people will generate significant engagement that takes the form of trust, loyalty, initiative, perseverance, resilience, and identification with and focus on goals. Conversely, when these needs are not accommodated, staff will become disengaged, alienated, apathetic, disconnected from the mission, and seek a transfer or employment elsewhere.

These reactions, both positive and negative, are just a reflection of the natural instincts and tendencies of human beings. Most people can only dream of an organizational environment where intrinsic human needs are largely satisfied on the job. But it can be done—even within the context of the highly challenged federal workforce.

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