



Best and worst places to work: How your agency stacks up

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Deidre Lee has little doubt why the Federal Emergency Management Agency is considered one of the worst places to work in government by its employees.

“FEMA’s a tough place to work,” said Lee, who joined the agency in October as head of management and acquisition. “We don’t have a work-life balance. We have people working long hours and weekends, being deployed for long periods of time.”

In the past four years, the agency was socked with a one-two punch that severely damaged employee morale. First, FEMA was merged into the Homeland Security Department, where it lost its independence and singular focus on helping communities prepare for and respond to disasters. Then came Hurricane Katrina, a monumental catastrophe that highlighted the agency’s serious organizational failings and landed it on the front page of every newspaper in the country for months.

The results are evident in a new study tracking employee satisfaction on the job. FEMA is mired near the bottom, ranking 211th out of 222 agency subcomponents governmentwide.

Since the last study was done two years ago, FEMA’s employee satisfaction score has dropped nearly 13 percentage points to 54.3. This score falls on a scale of zero-to-100, with 100 being best.

Many agencies with such a poor showing might be inclined to retreat from public view. But Lee was front and center at a Washington luncheon April 19 that focused largely on agencies considered the best among their peers.

Readily admitting that FEMA’s score was disappointing, Lee said she and other members of the senior team are working to turn things around. Taking a page from some of the agencies where employees are most satisfied, FEMA is trying to better communicate its goals and accomplishments both inside and outside the agency and get employees motivated about the valuable work they do.

“We have to tell our employees what we’re doing and get employees engaged,” she said.

Getting better, getting worse

Many agencies face a similar challenge. While employee satisfaction governmentwide is virtually unchanged from two years ago, the gap is widening between satisfaction rates at agencies deemed the best places to work and those considered the worst, according to the study, “Best Places to Work in the Federal Government.”

The study, which is based on a 2006 survey of 221,000 federal employees, finds little progress in agencies’ attempts to improve how employees feel about their work environment. The overall satisfaction score was virtually unchanged — at 61.8 points — from the 2005 results.

Of the 55 large and small agencies included in both the 2005 and 2007 studies, more than twice as many saw their rankings drop rather than increase. That’s a stark contrast to the sharp gains reported between 2003 and 2005, when 75 percent of agencies increased their individual scores.

Another troubling sign is the widening gap between agencies at the top and those at the bottom.

Compared with 2005, the spread increased 19 percent in 2007 between the top-ranked agency, the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, and the second lowest-ranked agency, the Broadcasting Board of Governors. The survey analysis excludes the lowest-ranked agency, the Federal Labor Relations Authority, because its score is so far below all other agencies that including it would unfairly skew the results. FLRA's ranking plunged 56.3 percent from 2005 to 18.1 points.

Among the 26 agencies included in all three studies, the spread has increased by 83 percent since the first rankings were released in 2003.

"The best are getting better, and the worst are getting worse," said Max Stier, president of the Partnership for Public Service, which compiled the rankings with American University's Institute for the Study of Public Policy Implementation.

Gains at SSA

There have been some gains, however. The Social Security Administration, for instance, increased its 2007 score by nearly 10 percent from 2005 to become the most improved large agency, defined as those with more than 2,000 employees. Among smaller agencies, the Federal Housing Finance Board reported the biggest turnaround, increasing its ranking by nearly 18 percent.

Stier said the study shows "you have a capacity in agencies in very short order to move a great deal." Social Security's improvements are particularly noteworthy, Stier said, because the agency has a larger proportion of employees at low- and midlevel grades than most of the highly ranked agencies. Research from the partnership and elsewhere consistently shows lower-level employees are less satisfied on the job than colleagues who earn more.

Unlike FEMA, Social Security got strong marks for how it dealt with the public following Hurricane Katrina. Reginald Wells, the agency's deputy commissioner of human resources, said Social Security has invested in computer upgrades and prioritized its growing workloads to help achieve management and performance goals set by the president.

"All that sends a message that employees are valued," Wells said.

NRC ranks at top

Among large agencies, the top-ranked agency is the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, which scored 76.2 points, up 1.9 percent from the previous study. An independent agency with 3,200 employees, NRC prides itself on providing employees with employee-friendly benefits like flexible work schedules and onsite

day care and on encouraging workers to speak up when they have suggestions on how to do the job better, agency chairman Dale Klein said.

"We expect each of our subdivision leaders to communicate, listen and promote good ideas from the bottom up," Klein said.

The rankings include a breakdown of results by satisfaction categories such as employee leadership and strategic management and by demographics.