



Three Burning Questions for the Next President: A Roundtable Discussion about People Management in the Next Administration

As we approach a presidential transition, government agencies must prepare for the changes that will come. Similarly, the next president must prepare for the looming management issues awaiting the next administration. On March 12, 2008, the Partnership for Public Service, The CNA Corporation, and the Coalition for Effective Change sponsored a roundtable discussion to address burning issues for the next president. All three organizations are members of the Government Performance Coalition, which supports the “Transitions in Governance 2008” initiative (www.transitionsingovernance.org). This event brought together top level officials from both the public and private sectors to discuss the impact of the upcoming elections on the federal workforce. Moderated by Chris Mihm of the Government Accountability Office, the panel included representatives from Office of Personnel Management, the Office of Management and Budget, government employee unions, good government groups, and other agencies and organizations.

OVERVIEW

Every incoming presidential administration faces pressing management challenges. After taking office on January 20, 2009, the next president will confront a particularly thorny set of “people management” issues related to the 1.9 million civilian employees of the executive branch. The next administration and Congress must answer several key questions regarding the federal workforce that will influence the effectiveness of the government. This forum gathered a small, diverse group of experts and key stakeholders to discuss and offer advice on three important workforce management issues:

- **Federal pay, job classification, and performance management:** There are currently a variety of pay systems in the federal government -- from the 1949 era General Schedule (GS) system to more recent pay-banded systems intended to be more market and performance sensitive with broader job classifications. *What position should the next administration take regarding pay, classification, and performance management reforms?*
- **Managing a multi-sector workforce:** The work of the federal government is increasingly conducted by a combination of federal employees, private and non-profit contractors, grantees, and others. *What changes (e.g., size, competencies, hiring process) should be made to more effectively manage a multi-sector workforce?*
- **Building collaboration within the government:** The effectiveness of the federal government is frequently dependent on the development of strong, constructive working relationships between different individuals and groups (managers, employees, unions, political appointees, and other stakeholders) within and among agencies. *What should be done to enhance collaboration across government?*

These questions sparked a conversation that was both insightful and provocative. The panel provided many perspectives on the three questions, how they should be addressed, and what the next administration needs to keep in mind. Overall, there was consensus about the need for stronger leadership and better support for and development of managers, as well as for improving communication with employees around agency mission, expectations and objectives. There was an emphasis on adjusting to the needs of a changing workforce and attracting a new generation of employees, specifically by making federal service a more attractive career choice. Pay for performance was a more contentious issue, with various opinions on how to move forward and no clear consensus. In spite of these differences, participants broadly noted that pay is an important issue and that improvements could affect the federal sector’s standing as an “employer of choice.”

A common thread among participants was a strong commitment to the federal workforce and a desire to strengthen the foundation of our government – its people. One of the primary take-aways from the conversation was that none of these issues stands alone; each influences another, and they ultimately have an impact on the effectiveness of the federal government as a whole. The day closed with a sense that, though challenges lay ahead, a lot can be accomplished as we work together, and with others invested in this dialogue.

FEDERAL PAY, JOB CLASSIFICATION, AND PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

The audience agreed that to attract and retain top talent, there needs to be a greater emphasis on supporting managers, developing leaders, and providing our federal workforce with the resources they need to succeed. Pay schedules and performance measurement are one part of this process. “Find the right people at the right price,” said one representative, regarding the issues of attracting talent and government being a more competitive employer. Many participants called for revisiting the current pay system, specifically how to use it in a way that encourages talent in the public sector – an important step in becoming an employer of choice. The pay schedule also has implications for retaining staff. The greatest amount of time, and the greatest variance in opinions, involved the question of whether moving to a more market- and performance-sensitive pay system was a viable option. Although there was not agreement on how pay reforms should be approached, there was support for transparency in whatever system is used and striving for improved performance. Several panelists mentioned the underlying need for trust: employees have to trust in the system and in their supervisors and managers, part of which means understanding how decisions are made.

Participants felt that building this kind of trust primarily falls on management. There was a shared view that managers are at the front lines of overseeing day-to-day employee satisfaction. As one panelist noted, “People join organizations, but they leave managers.” With that in mind, managers need to be trained and supported to cultivate those relationships. Part of that process, which ultimately affects retention, involves creating communication channels. Communications should include performance feedback mechanisms that help employees understand how to effectively achieve results. One panelist stressed that the workforce needs to be recognized for the work they do – and to be supported in their efforts to achieve results that help to move our nation forward.

MANAGING A MULTI-SECTOR WORKFORCE

Throughout the panel’s conversation, there was an underlying question of what is inherently governmental. As we try to improve employee engagement, in addition to managing more complex workforces, we have to have a clearer sense of government’s mission. Management and employees need to have an idea of where their organizations are headed, what they want to achieve, and how can they achieve that together. One panelist suggested that managers define goals, set objectives and then link the work to the objectives so that there is a sense of connection. As another panelist noted, money isn’t the only driving force for employee satisfaction – staff members want to see how their work contributes to achieving the mission of the organization.

BUILDING COLLABORATION

Panelists observed a greater emphasis on collaborating to achieve goals than ever before. They felt that government agencies work with private firms and non-governmental organizations to deliver services to the public on a far greater scale. A big challenge cited was the increase in contractors, leading to a shift in how the government manages its workforce. More and more projects involve mixed workforce teams from the private, public and nongovernmental sectors; each of these has different approaches to their work and varied stakeholders. One panelist remarked on how this increased complexity changes the expectations of managers, which can highlight other problems like a lack of adequate training on how to manage networks with so many layers or stretched schedules that do not allow the kind of time needed for appropriate oversight. In this new era, a different skill set is required of leaders, and it is imperative that these skills are developed.

Collaboration does not just involve external partners. Government must improve its internal collaborative ability as well, particularly in cross-cutting activities where several agencies share common goals. One panelist called for leadership to encourage collaboration as an expectation. Other representatives felt that, to retain talent, agencies need to break out of the silos that keep them insular and promote employee assignments throughout the federal system to foster professional development.

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION PANELISTS
MARCH 12, 2008

Moderator: Chris Mihm, Managing Director, Strategic Issues, Government Accountability Office

Panel Participants

Scott	Cameron	Grant Thornton
Matt	Crouch	Presidential Management Alumni Group
John	Crum	Merit System Protection Board
Maureen	Gilman	National Treasury Employees Union
Dan	Hilbert	OrcaEyes
Lynn	Jennings	Council for Excellence in Government
Mary	Lacey	Department of Defense
Sue	Meisinger	Society for Human Resource Management
Joseph	Miniace	Federal Aviation Administration
John	Palguta	Partnership for Public Service
Neil	Reichenberg	International Public Management Association - HR
John	Salamone	Chief Human Capital Officer Council
Ron	Sanders	Office of the Director of National Intelligence
Robert	Shea	Office of Management and Budget
Jacque	Simon	American Federation of Government Employees
Max	Stier	Partnership for Public Service
Vince	Taylor	The CNA Corporation
Kate	Walker	Young Government Leaders
Howie	Weizmann	Office of Personnel Management