

*A Working Paper by the Standing Panel on
Executive Organization and Management*

**NATIONAL ACADEMY OF
PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

January 2018

*Strengthening Organizational
Health and Performance in
Government*

Accompanying Working Paper #6

**Case Studies of U.S. Federal Approaches to Improve Employee
Engagement and Organizational Health**

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Case Study 6-1: U.S. Department of Agriculture The Most Improved Large Agency in the 2016 Best Places to Work Rankings

Background

The mission of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is to provide economic opportunity through innovation, helping rural America to thrive; to promote agriculture production that better nourishes Americans while also helping feed others throughout the world; and to preserve our Nation's natural resources through conservation, restored forests, improved watersheds, and healthy private working lands. USDA agencies help to keep America's farmers and ranchers in business and ensure that the nation's commercial supply of meat, poultry, and egg products is safe, wholesome, and properly labeled. They also help to ensure the health and care of animals and plants and the health of the land through sustainable management, and they work to improve the economy and quality of life in all of rural America. USDA is made up of 29 agencies and offices with nearly 100,000 employees who serve the American people at more than 4,500 locations across the country and abroad.

Organizational Health and Performance Assessment

In 2009, the White House told the Secretary of Agriculture to prioritize improving USDA's *Best Places to Work* (BPTW) score. At the time, USDA ranked in the lowest quartile of the rankings for large agencies. While a few agencies used survey data to assess employee engagement, there was no department-wide, systematic organizational approach. The Secretary began requesting data on a monthly basis on aspects of employee engagement and included the goal of a Top 10 ranking in the BPTW by 2018.

Follow Through Routines

Following the 2013 government-wide shutdown, USDA accelerated its efforts around improving employee engagement, with a particular focus on effective leadership, an area that showed room for major improvement. As part of a Secretarial Initiative on Cultural Transformation, new strategies were developed to improve employee engagement, empower employee voices and recognize best practices.

Individual agency action plans were developed and a program manager for employee engagement was hired to focus exclusively on assisting agencies with improving the job satisfaction and work life experiences of employees. These two actions resulted in a new level of accountability, with agencies reporting monthly on their progress.

In order to empower employee voices, Employee Advisory Councils were established, where employees interacted with and provided direct input to their leaders. Work-life balance was one of the important issues surfaced, which resulted in an effort across USDA to improve employee participation rates in telework and flexible work schedule agreements.

To support senior leaders and managers, USDA conducted biannual executive forums to help leaders understand the value of telework and flexible schedules, as well as, how to manage in this environment so that these programs are used to promote high performance, recruitment and retention.

Mentoring and the implementation of individual development plans were two other areas of keen interest to employees. Consequently, leaders were asked to assist in these areas in order to ensure the development of a leadership pipeline among current employees. These initiatives resulted in a significant increase in both the number of leaders mentoring and the number of employees with individual development plans.

Incentives

In recent years, USDA leaders visited field offices (county, state, and regional) across the country and hosted town hall meetings to solicit feedback and answer questions directly from employees. USDA has recognized employees for their good work on the front lines, highlighted best practices from high-scoring agencies in the Best Places to Work rankings and profiled employee achievements in *My USDA*, a monthly newsletter.

Conclusion

The USDA was the 2016 most improved Best Places to Work in the Federal Government large agency, registering an employee engagement score of 63.1 out of 100. The score represents a 3.7-point increase from 2015 and a 7-point jump since 2013.

This year also marks the first time that USDA has been among the top 10 agencies in the Best Places to Work rankings, moving from 16th place in 2013 to a tie for ninth place. USDA's strategic plan included a specific goal that the agency would rank in the Best Places to Work top 10 by 2018, an achievement that was accomplished ahead of schedule.

The department also notably showed improvement in all 10 workplace categories measured in the Best Places to Work rankings, with the largest increase of 3.3 points since 2015 coming in the category of effective leadership.

Prepared by: Gregory Parham, former Assistant Secretary for Administration, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and NAPA Fellow.

Reference: <http://bestplacestowork.org/BPTW/rankings/detail/AG00>

Case Study 6-2: U.S. Army's Approach to Conducting Operational and Organizational Assessments

Background

The United States Army is the largest branch of the United States Armed Forces, with 1,018,000 members in the combined Active Component, Army National Guard, and United States Army Reserve. Its mission is to fight and win wars by providing both rapid and sustained land dominance across the full range of military operations. The Army fights in conflicts worldwide, participates in joint and combined training exercises and strategic planning with ally and partner nations, and provides rapid disaster response and humanitarian aid to countries in need.

Managing the mission, personnel, and equipment of the United States Army is a complex process that requires continuous monitoring, evaluation, and assessment. The Army uses a number of different tools to accomplish this, and develops new tools through the employment of its over 600 Operations Research and Systems Analysts (ORSAs, Army Functional Area 49) and the engagement of its analytical agencies, including but not limited to the Center for Army Analysis (CAA), The US Army Manpower Analysis Agency (USAMAA), Training and Doctrine Command Analysis Centers (TRAC), Army Research Labs, and others.

Operational Assessments

Commanders, assisted by their staffs, subordinate commanders, interagency partners, and other key stakeholders, must continuously assess the progress of their mission and the state of their operational environment. The primary method for this is operational assessment, which includes monitoring key indicators; evaluating these indicators when divided into measures of effectiveness (MOEs) and measures of performance (MOPs) to determine progress relative to the mission, objectives, and desired end-states; and developing recommendations to the commander for improving performance, reevaluating the environment, or changing the mission.

The process used to develop an operational assessment is not vastly different from the procedures the Army uses to develop any evaluation framework, and consists of four stages – Planning, Directing, Monitoring, and Assessing. During the planning phase, operational planners determine what objectives the organization must accomplish along with success criteria for reaching those objectives. Those success criteria, generally comprised of qualitative and quantitative indicators, are the basis for determining MOEs and MOPs. The organization then directs the execution of tasks to accomplish those objectives or achieve the developed success criteria. During this process, the organization monitors the environment and performance to determine status of the MOEs and MOPs. Finally, the organization uses its assessment framework to evaluate actual progress against that indicated in the plan to make recommendations to the commander. Those recommendations inform future planning, adjustments to the mission, and reevaluation of the environment, and the cycle begins again.

While commanders and analysts both prefer quantitative metrics and concrete statistics, human judgment is essential to the assessment process. Even quantitative metrics must be put in proper context to inform decision makers.

Organizational Assessments

The Army assesses more than mission accomplishment. Army analytical agencies have developed a battery of assessments to determine both individual and organizational health, to monitor the status and effectiveness of an organization, and to identify areas for improvement. One of the most broadly used of these assessments is the Multi-Source Assessment and Feedback (MSAF) tool. This feedback tool conducts a survey of an Army leader's peers, superiors, and subordinates, and helps the leader identify strengths and weaknesses, and provides focused feedback. Another commonly used tool is the Command Climate Survey. These surveys, conducted on an annual basis, focus on everything from the organization's ability to prevent harassment to how much senior leaders are perceived to care about their employees and how comfortable those employees might be in addressing a problem with that leader. Analytical organizations external to the organization being surveyed compile the anonymous results and provide a complete report to the commander.

More recently, commanders have focused on using assessment tools to improve organizational effectiveness. US Pacific Command (USPACOM) recently completed a comprehensive organizational assessment to evaluate how effectively its staff executed critical functions, including information sharing and communication, competency development and sustainment, support to command decisions, and ability to synchronize planning and staffing efforts. This evaluation allowed the USPACOM commander to identify focused areas for communication and overall staff competency improvement.

The Army uses other analytical tools and studies beyond these to improve its organizational performance. Its various analytical agencies conduct in depth studies to determine the health of every mission function from logistics to medical evaluation to the effectiveness of testing and fielding a new piece of equipment. These studies often range from 6 months to multi-year projects, all geared toward delivering new insights on the effectiveness of the Army process and where it can improve.

Prepared by: MAJ Kristin Saling, an operations research analyst in the Strength Analysis and Forecasting Division of the Headquarters Department of the Army G-1 Personnel Office, where she applies both computational and strategic analytical techniques to problems involving large data sets as well as providing strategic input to the Army's manpower strategy

Case Study 6-3: How Did the Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Service Increase Employee Engagement?

Background

The Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) is a small agency within the Department of Labor. VETS's mission is to prepare veterans and their spouses for meaningful careers, especially those who are homeless or with disabilities, through counseling, training, and pre-separation preparation. It has staff of about 250 and a budget of about \$275 million. The staff is largely comprised of job counselors in Department of Labor's local job centers around the country, with offices in each state, with most staff delivering services and programs to the general population with funding from Labor's Employment and Training Administration. Most offices have only one VETS staff person, and many more Employment and Training Administration-funded staff; the largest have 6-7 VETS staff.

In 2012, the organization was in disarray and its political leadership was replaced. About 90 percent of staff are veterans and are very committed to their jobs but felt they were not supported. This was reflected in employee survey results in the Federal Employees Viewpoint Survey, showing high employee commitment to mission but very low morale. Its employee engagement index score of 54.7 ranked the agency as being in the bottom quartile across the government. In addition, VETS had a low participation rate in the survey, which was considered a signal that employees believed that no one was going to act on the survey's results.

The new VETS leadership, with strong support from the departmental Secretary, turned around the results so that by 2017, VETS had a 90 percent survey participation rate in the annual survey, and an engagement index score of 69.4, so it ranked fifth in the department, and close to the top quartile government-wide.

Initiatives Undertaken

What happened to create this 30 percent increase in employee engagement with their work? There was a three-part approach that was substantially based on annual employee survey results and active employee participation in a series of targeted initiatives.

First, beginning in 2013, at the VETS headquarters level, its new leadership developed an integrated set of initiatives to increase employee trust and engagement. This included:

- Better communication with staff via quarterly all-hands video links; the goal was to just get started talking.
- Reviewed and updated the agency's mission, vision, and values statements, with bottom-up input.
- Targeted training investments, and provided greater transparency on who is getting trained for what, where employees had to complete an "individual development plan" in order to get support for their training requests.

In addition, in 2014, VETS modified its service delivery model for employment support, necessitating changes in internal management processes. It delegated more authority to the federal regional offices (in order to mitigate the complaint that “you can’t build trust from afar”), and, it brought in regional staff as detailees for temporary periods to help develop tailored regional improvement plans. They combined employee survey data with other administrative data sources, providing information that was more useful to each office and to the regional administrators.

Second, in 2014, the new departmental Secretary set a target of 5 percent improvement in employee engagement scores in the FEVS survey across the department in the department’s annual operating plan. The departmental approach encompassed three elements: better performance measurement; improvement in employee survey scores related to engagement; encouraged staff detail rotations department-wide; and stronger use of a “learning agenda” and collaboration with the Data Analytics Unity in the Chief Evaluation Office. The Secretary’s commitment helped create an environment where VETS could leverage faster improvements via departmental leadership training programs, awards, and recognition

And third, to create longer-term sustainability, the VETS and departmental initiatives were cascaded down to the field level. Beginning in 2015, regional administrators developed regional operating plans that translated the VETS operating plan into priorities and activities within their regions. Each regional director was required to develop their approach for responding to the results of the employee survey.

Over this four-year period, VETS headquarters became more transparent in how the employee survey data was being used, by extending the availability of analyses to each region so they could develop focused improvement plans and institutionalize improvements. VETS also rotated selected field staff into headquarters so they could gain a better understanding of the overall mission and to develop some analytic skills for use in the field.

For example, in 2016, two staff members were temporarily assigned to the national office and they developed more detailed analyses by region. They prepared 3-year trends of clusters of FWVS questions that could indicate results at a glance and how each year compared to previous years’ responses.

This focused use of data and active staff involvement at all levels allowed regional leaders and their subordinate management teams to understand their results with greater granularity. They used these results to prioritize their efforts for the coming year. This time, they were able to be more targeted in their intervention. For example, in one region, communication was a challenge; in another region, staff wanted more collaboration and input on work projects; and in a third region, the staff indicated challenges with the organizational culture.

In each of the examples, regional leaders designed focused strategies rather than trying to address all three issues (likely with less positive impact), which might have been tempting had results been aggregated at the national level.

Conclusion

The actions taken by VETS over the past four years were catalyzed by a need to turn around an organization that was recognized as being poorly managed, which was reflected in employee survey results. Its new leadership developed a management and performance improvement plan with concrete commitments to change. The new leaders leveraged the results of the employee survey and did not undertake a more detailed organizational diagnostic assessment to develop a plan of action, largely because the new leadership had prior federal executive leadership experience, the organization was fairly small and singularly focused, and the diagnosis of why survey results were low was self-evident.

Sources: Terry Gerton, President, National Academy of Public Administration and former Deputy Assistant Secretary for Veterans Services at the Department of Labor; and Bill Methany, Field Operations Director, Veterans Employment and Training Service, Department of Labor