

Paul C. Light

What Federal Employees Want From Reform

The September 11 terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington reminded the American public once again that a high-performing public service is essential to the security and safety of the nation. As President Bush said the night after the attacks, “the functions of our government continue without interruption. Federal agencies in Washington which had to be evacuated today are reopening for essential personnel tonight and will be open for business tomorrow.”

Unfortunately, the federal service was showing its age and weakness long before September 11. According to a first-of-its-kind telephone survey of 1,051 federal employees conducted on behalf of the Center for Public Service before September 11, at least some of the weakening was due to past efforts to make government work better. Given a rare chance to talk candidly about their work without a supervisor looking over their shoulders, federal employees described a public service that was deluged by “reform” measures, almost none of which had improved their working lives.

The question facing the American public the day after the tragedies was not whether government agencies would be open but whether the federal government had the talent to win the war on terrorism and restore homeland security. As President Bush acknowledged, trust surged in part because of federal employees. “Today we’re seeing one of the highest levels of trust in government since the mid-1960s, which is due partly to the surge of national pride that has swept our country since the terrorist attacks,” he told an enthusiastic crowd of federal civil servants in mid-October. “But it’s also because of how you’ve performed your jobs, particularly during the last month.”

Having endured a decade of downsizing, two decades of bureaucrat bashing, three decades of constant reform, four decades of increasing workloads, and five decades of pay and hiring freezes, it was no longer clear that the federal government work force could pass the following five tests of a healthy public service, which are that it should be:

- Motivated by the public good, not security or a stable paycheck.
- Recruited from the top of the labor market, not the bottom.
- Given the tools to do its job well.
- Rewarded for a job well done, not just showing up day after day.
- Trusted by the people and leaders it serves.



Paul C. Light is vice president and director of the Governmental Studies program at the Brookings Institution. He is also the founding director of the Institution's Center for Public Service and the senior adviser to the Brookings Presidential Appointee Initiative.

In Their Own Words,

In the survey, which involved special sub-samples composed of members of the Senior Executive Service (SES), middle-level managers, middle- and lower-level nonmanagers, and employees who started their careers in government as Presidential Management Interns, federal employees described a public service that works harder and performs better than the traditional stereotype of the fat and lazy bureaucrat. They also described a public service that often has to scrounge for the resources it needs to succeed. Although the majority of federal employees were proud to tell their families and friends that they work for the federal government, believed they are given a chance to do the things they do best, and said the people with whom they work are open to new ideas, almost half also said that their job performance has little or no bearing on whether they get a promotion, three out of five said that the hiring process in their organization is confusing, four out of five said it is slow, and a quarter said it is unfair. Most disturbing, federal employees estimated that nearly a quarter of their peers were not performing their jobs well.

Views of Past Reforms

Federal employees have witnessed countless reforms over the past thirty years, from management by objectives to results management, competition in contracting to the war on waste, total quality management and military base closings to downsizing, voluntary buyouts for senior managers, and procurement streamlining. Federal employees have endured repeated pay and hiring freezes, management experiments, pay-for-performance schemes, and nearly nonstop bureaucrat bashing. They have seen efforts to open government and efforts to close it, efforts to liberate government from needless paperwork and efforts to impose new reporting requirements.

If federal employees do not like the reform of the moment, all they have to do is wait a year or two, and the fashions will change. Twenty years ago, President Ronald Reagan launched a war on waste; twelve years ago, President George H.W. Bush called for total quality management; eight years ago, Vice President Al Gore began reinventing government; last year, President George W. Bush asked for the freedom to manage.

There truly is nothing new under the sun of federal management reform, nor anything particularly bold. "It's three yards and a cloud of dust," NASA Administrator Sean O'Keefe, former deputy director of the Office of Management and Budget, said of the latest reform agenda. "You can read the whole thing and not find the zinger that answers a momentous question."

As this Reform Watch demonstrates, federal employees have a decidedly mixed opinion of past efforts to make government work. Asked whether their organizations had been reformed in the past five years, 73 percent of federal employees said yes but only 42 percent said the action had made their jobs either somewhat or a lot easier to perform. By comparison, a matched sample of private sector employees reported less, but more successful reform. Only

How to Rebuild the Public Service

56 percent said their organizations had been reformed in the past five years, but 59 percent said the action had made their jobs either somewhat or a lot easier to perform.

To be fair, reinventing government was not just about making jobs easier, if that was a goal at all. The reinventors were much more

concerned about downsizing, better customer service, faster decisions, less red tape, and more labor-management partnerships, all of which could have made jobs more, not less, easy to perform. Even acknowledging these broad goals, the lack of enthusiasm for reinventing is palpable. Asked about the amount of reform over the past five years, 29 percent of senior federal employees said there had been too little, 38 percent said there had been just the right amount, and 31 percent said there had been too much.

Table 1:

Government's Greatest Management Hits and Misses

	% Very or Somewhat Successful	% Not too Successful or Not Successful at All
Improve information technology	88%*	11%
Reduce fraud, waste, and abuse	67	21
Streamline procurement	54	29
Improve financial management	50	38
Reduce internal rules	43	49
Measure government results	39	58

*Question restricted to members of the Senior Executive Service and GS 13-15 employees with at least ten years of federal service.

*Out of 310 federal employees

Federal employees gave mixed grades to the most significant reforms of the past decade. On the one hand, 58 percent of senior federal employees said the effort to measure results had been either not too successful or not successful at all, while 49 percent were similarly discouraged about the campaign to reduce internal rules, and 38 percent about the attempt to improve financial management. "They've reformed our processes to the point that they don't work," said one federal employee polled. "We ought to either reverse the reforms we have made or reform them so they work."

On the other hand, 88 percent said the effort to improve information technology was very or somewhat successful, while 67 percent were equally enthusiastic about the battle to reduce fraud, waste, and abuse, and 54 percent about the drive to streamline procurement.

Views of the Present

Even where they said Congress and the president had succeeded with reform, federal employees have their doubts about the lasting impacts. Although senior federal employees overwhelmingly applaud recent efforts to improve information technology, for example, 30 percent of all federal employees surveyed reported that their organizations only sometimes or rarely provide the technological equipment to allow them to perform their jobs well, while only 36 percent said their organizations always have the technological equipment they need.

**Table 2:
Who is to Blame for Poor Performance?**

	Nonmanagers Interns	Managers	Senior Executives	Presidential Management
Poor performers do not have the training to do their jobs well	17%*	13%	13%	17%
My organization does not ask enough of poor performers	37	31	28	56
Poor performers are not qualified for their jobs	31	38	47	23

*Out of 1,051 federal employees

Presumably, the federal government started so far behind that it could simultaneously improve dramatically, yet still leave a significant number of its employees asking for help.

Federal employees were much less positive about access to training. Although

most federal employees said they were either very satisfied (36 percent) or somewhat satisfied (42 percent) with their own opportunities to develop new skills, 40 percent also said their organization only sometimes or rarely provided access to the training needed to do its job well. The problem was seen as particularly acute at the lower levels of the government and among the Presidential Management Interns. Whereas 66 percent of SES members reported that their organizations always or often provided access to training, 55 percent of the Presidential Management Interns said their organizations only sometimes or rarely provide that access.

Federal employees reserved their sharpest criticism for the cumulative impact of hiring freezes, voluntary buyouts, and downsizing. Only 40 percent of federal employees said their organizations always or often had enough employees to perform their jobs well, compared to 59 percent who said sometimes or rarely. Interestingly, members of the SES and the Presidential Management Interns were the most concerned about understaffing: 65 percent of the former and 67 percent of the latter concluded that their organizations only sometimes or rarely had enough employees to do their jobs.

Federal employees also had little good to say about the hiring and disciplinary process. As noted above, they described the hiring process as confusing, slow, and not always fair. Moreover, federal employees interviewed estimated that 24 percent of their fellow federal employees were not performing their jobs well. Only 5 percent of these federal employees said all of their co-workers were performing their jobs well, compared to 32 percent whose estimates fall between 26 and 100 percent. "I think it's difficult for managers to discipline poor performers," said one former Presidential Management Intern, "so they don't do it. I'm not sure how you do it, but it's a hard balance to strike because on the one hand, you're trying to have a progressive labor policy, but on the other it makes it easy for people to get away with poor performance."

Asked what might explain the poor performance they had just identified, federal employees were not particularly forgiving toward either their organizations or the poor performers. Only 16 percent

said that the poor performers do not have the training to do their jobs well, 31 percent said the poor performers are not qualified for their jobs, and 37 percent said their organization does not ask enough of those employees.

Given their role in both appraising and leading employees, members of the SES and managers were less likely to see poor performance under their command than nonmanagers and the Presidential Management Interns. They were also more likely to blame the poor performance they see on employees who are not qualified for their jobs.

Highly motivated, talented employees can only succeed so long without organizational support, nor will they stay long in organizations that refuse to provide the tools, technologies, training, and structures that allow them to grow. Unfortunately, by almost every indicator, the federal government does not give its 1.8 million civil servants the resources to do their jobs well. Far too many federal employees must succeed against the odds.

Despite these concerns, most federal employees did not believe their organizations needed major reform, perhaps because they have been through one reform after another over the past few decades. Just 19 percent of federal employees said their organization needed major reforms, while 18 percent said their organizations did not need much change at all. The rest, 62 percent, said their organizations were basically sound and needed only some reform.

Targets for the Future

Whether they saw the need for major reform or just minor tinkering, federal employees identified plenty of targets for improvement. They certainly saw the need for further flattening of the federal hierarchy, for example. Forty percent said there were too many layers between the top and bottom of their agencies, for example, compared to just 4 percent who said there were too few. At the same time, those surveyed also saw the need for more room at the top. Thirty-two percent were not too or not at all satisfied with their opportunities for advancement, 58 percent said the promotional system was not fair, while 77 percent said there is little room for advancement. In fact, looking back over the five measures of a healthy public service, it is hard not to find an area where reform might help:

On **mission and motivation**, too many federal employees said they joined the civil service for the job security, paycheck, and benefits, confirming the public's doubts about what motivates government workers. In addition, roughly a third of federal employees said they could not easily describe how their jobs contribute to their organization's mission, while more than a half are somewhat, not too, or not at all satisfied with their chance to accomplish something worthwhile in their jobs.

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On **talent and training**, the federal hiring process has created an undeniable long-term decline in the overall quality of the federal workforce. For example, 31 percent of federal employees said the quality of the senior people, career employees and political appointees in their organizations has declined over the past two years, while 42 percent said it has stayed the same, and 24 percent said the quality has improved. The same mixed pattern holds for middle-level managers, middle-level employees, and lower-level employees. In addition, only 19 percent said their organizations do a good job of recruiting talented people, compared to 32 percent who said their organizations are “not too good” or “not good at all” in this activity.

On **resources and tools**, federal employees clearly believed the downsizing of government went too far. The complaints are not unique to federal employees alone, however. Private employees also complained about understaffing. But the private employees interviewed for this report were consistently less likely to complain than federal employees. Whereas 59 percent of federal employees said their organizations sometimes or rarely have enough employees to do their jobs well, only 41 percent of the private employees said the same of their organizations.

On **rewards and discipline**, the federal employees offered a portrait of poor performance sharply at odds with the results shown in the hyper-inflated annual performance appraisal process. They also complained about the disciplinary process. Only 9 percent said their organizations did a “very good” job at disciplining poor performers, compared to 19 percent of private employees, while 67 percent of federal employees answered either “not too good” or “not good at all,” compared to 47 percent of private employees. Although the two groups perceived roughly an equal number of poor performers in their midst—federal employees estimated 24 percent, private employees estimated 25 percent—the two sectors had very different reputations for being able to do something about the problem.

Finally, on **confidence and respect**, there is good and bad news for federal employees. As already noted, trust in government surged dramatically in the wake of September 11. The number of Americans who said they trust the government in Washington to do what is right surged from just 29 percent in July 2001 to 57 percent by October. Trust in virtually every institution of government increased, including presidential appointees, government workers, the president, and vice president. At the same time, Americans also remained dubious about government employment as an option for their children, and skeptical about the true motivations of government employees. Although the number of Americans who would recommend a government job to their son or daughter increased from 30 percent in July 2001 to 39 percent in October 2001, the gains were likely due in part to the worsening economy. The federal government is still viewed as an employer of last resort—that is, the place to go when the economy gets tough.

All departments and agencies do not have the same problems, however. Federal employees who work at big organizations (the Departments of Agriculture, Defense, Justice, Treasury, and Veterans Affairs) were somewhat more likely to say their organizations encourage them to take risks or try new ways of doing work than employees who work at mid-size organizations (Commerce, Health and Human Services, Interior, Social Security, and Transportation) and small organizations (State, Education, Labor, and a host of small agencies), perhaps because risk-taking is less visible in big settings. Employees at big organizations were also somewhat more likely to say they joined the federal government for the job security, not the chance to help people, less likely to say their organizations are trusted, less satisfied with their opportunities to accomplish something worthwhile, and less likely to say their organizations do a good job of attracting talented employees. According to these employees, then, bigger does not necessarily mean better.

Federal employees who work at the prestigious, traditionally inner-cabinet departments of Defense, Justice, State, and Treasury were much more likely to believe that all levels of their work force were improving, and more likely to describe their organizations as trusted than employees who work at middle-ring organizations (Commerce, Health and Human Services, Interior, Transportation, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and Environmental Protection agency) and outer-ring organizations (Agriculture, Housing and Urban Development, and Veterans Affairs). Inner-ring employees were also slightly more likely to say they have the technological equipment and enough employees to do their jobs well. Prestige does appear to translate into resources.

Finally, federal employees who work in or near Washington, D.C., were more likely than those who work in the field to say they joined government for the chance to do something worthwhile; more satisfied with the opportunities to develop new skills and accomplish something worthwhile; more likely to believe that how good a job they do is a big factor in determining whether they get a promotion; think their organizations are doing a good job attracting and retaining talented employees; and more likely to say they have the technological equipment and employees to do their jobs well. They were also more likely to say their organizations are doing a very good job running their programs and delivering services. Simply put, life looks good from headquarters.

Starting Points

Given the many places that need improvement, the question is less what can be done to strengthen the federal public service than it is where to begin. To the extent Congress and the president want to know the answer, they need only ask the federal employees who say their organizations required at least some or major reform. According to these employees, the starting point is absolutely clear. Given an open-ended chance to describe the reforms that were needed in their organizations, just over half said government should give its employees the tools to do their jobs well, another quarter encouraged government to work

**Table 3:
Suggestions for Reform**

Area of Improvement	Total	Nonmanagers	Managers	Senior Executives	Presidential Management Interns
Mission and Motivation	7%*	7%	6%	9%	13%
Talent and Training	25	24	28	28	34
Resources and Tools	51	52	46	50	54
Rewards and Discipline	19	19	16	20	24
Confidence and Respect	2	2	3	3	2

*Out of 756 federal employees

harder at recruitment and training, a fifth focused on the need to reward employees for a job well done and get rid of the deadwood, a twelfth said government should focus more on mission, and a handful said the public should have more trust in government.

Mission and Motivation

The federal employees who focused on mission and motivation as a target for reform divided almost equally between three major areas of concern. Two percent of federal employees said their organizations needed to focus more on the public, 3 percent said that employees should make more decisions, and 2 percent said employees should pay more attention to the mission.

The comments on mission were particularly detailed. “We’re not as results-oriented as we should be,” one employee said. “We need to measure performance.” Another argued that “we need to revisit what the actual mission of our organization is and [ask whether] we have sufficient staff capacity to accomplish that mission in terms of quality, numbers, and, if not, [ask] where do we need to shift staff. Are there areas where we have too many and are there areas where staff aren’t performing at the level we need them to be?” Still another urged “restructuring to better meet the mission and more attention to hiring the right kind of people.”

These employees were also quite clear about giving employees the freedom to do their jobs. “There is not enough consultation with the people who are actually doing the work,” said one employee of new equipment software and procedures. “Eliminate the ‘yes’ men and give responsibility back to the employees,” said another. “We need to include the front line workers in designing changes so we don’t make major mistakes like firing clerical workers to save money.”

“We need to stop fitting everyone in one box,” said one employee. “There is a difference between Los Angeles and North Dakota. There are so many bureaucrats in Washington who don’t deal with the main function in our mission. We have been cutting back on the number of employees. Yet, more bureaucrats in Washington get hired.”

Talent and Training

The federal employees who focused on talent and training as the target for reform put their emphasis on five areas. Three percent of federal employees talked about recruiting young people to government, 2 percent talked about senior leadership, 8 percent talked about the hiring process, and 13 percent addressed the need for better trained managers and executives.

These employees clearly worried about renewing the public service. “We really need to take a long look at the personnel that are currently in place,” said one. “We need to start refreshing the organization, to bring in young, fresh minds. We have too many people who have been here too long.” “We need a lot more new employees,” said another, “and need to fire half the people that are presently here.”

These employees shared a general disquiet about the overall quality of the career service. “Better quality people, raise the standards,” said one. “We need more competent people and more direction,” said another. “We need to have top managers retire,” said yet another.

They also worried about the hiring process itself, echoing the earlier complaints about the need for speed, simplicity, and fairness. “Ensure that we can hire the right people to do the right jobs at the right time,” said one employee. “Laws just don’t give us the flexibility we need [to do our jobs], and salaries are unrealistic.” “The hiring process needs to be speeded up somehow,” said another. “I’ve been here thirty-one years and it hasn’t gotten a whole lot better since I was hired.”

Many of the complaints focused on the need for flexibility, calling into question the Bush administration’s assertion that managers already have all the flexibility they need. “The hiring and process is long and drawn out,” said one employee. “The promotional and disciplinary process is long and drawn out.” Another argued that “we need to make hiring and firing more flexible, and need to make advancement based more on performance.”

If federal managers have all the flexibility they need, the question is why they are not using it. One answer is that additional flexibility costs money that is simply not in the budget. These respondents also looked to the leaders of their organizations for improvement. “First of all, we need some competent people with vision leading the organization, not just political hacks,” said one respondent. “Then we need to set forth clear goals and objectives for middle-level workers and managers to make sure the goals and objectives are clear all the way around.”

Another focused on the middle-level: “We need supervisor retraining....If you don’t have a [college] degree, you can’t get the job, but you have to train the supervisors.”

Resources and Tools

The employees who focused on resources and tools as targets for reform were most concerned about structure, staffing, and organizational culture. Twenty-seven percent of federal employees targeted the problems in the layering and politicization of the hierarchy as a starting point for change, 8 percent focused on tools and technology, 11 percent emphasized the need for more innovation, discipline, and a commitment to high performance, and 15 percent talked about the budget and training.

The comments on structure were nothing if not direct: “You have to go through too many people to do your job.” “There are too many upper layers in the bureaucracy.” “Organization needs to be

restructured so one or two presidential appointees do not hold up the work of the entire agency.” As one employee said of his own agency, “it is the most inefficient organization on the earth. It is a colossal waste of taxpayer money, and the more streamlined it can be, the better. The civil service does not hold people accountable. It’s all very political, and the cream rarely rises to the top.”

The comments on technology were brief. “Better data.” “Better equipment.” “Need to be able to acquire new technology without the red tape.”

The concerns about organizational culture were more complicated, reflecting a mix of worries. Some respondents pinpointed the lack of discipline within the workforce. “Disciplining problem employees,” said one. “Very little responsibility for actions,” said another. “Need for a better work ethic from middle-level employees,” said still another.

Others focused on the damage caused by past reforms. “They need to leave us alone,” said one employee. “They’ve reformed our processes to the point that nothing works,” said another. “We ought to either reverse the reforms, or reform the reforms so they actually work.” As one respondent concluded, “we have to realize that the new ways are not always the best ways.”

Still others focused on simple stagnation. “People get so secure that they won’t move from their job,” one employee said. “New blood would help.” Another focused on the large number of baby boomers in the organization. “I’m fifty-three,” this respondent said, “and most of the people I work with are about the same age. Change is difficult for all of us. Everyone has been here about twenty years.” Still another emphasized the lifetime tenure that comes with many civil service jobs: “We have people who have been here thirty years or so. If they don’t want to innovate, they are just fine the way they are.”

Respondents were especially tough on the lack of training. “The organization as a whole needs more training,” said one respondent. “We need to reduce the training gap and make the environment more collaborative.” “We need to come up with a way to train staff to do mid-upper management work,” said another. “We have expanded so much so fast that many have ended up in management without qualifications.”

Rewards and Discipline

The respondents who focused on rewards and discipline as targets of reform divided their concerns between compensation and staffing, performance-based retention, and getting rid of deadwood. Five percent of federal employees focused on the need for higher pay, primarily at the top of their organizations, 5 percent emphasized the need to recognize performance, and 6 percent underscored the problem of deadweight. Many respondents emphasized the role of pay in recruiting talented employees. As one said, “we need better pay, better incentives.” Another argued that “pay needs to go up, hours down. Administrative junk needs to be streamlined and made more understandable.”

The harshest comments in this category involved poor performers. “Learn how to discipline those who don’t work and reward those who do work,” said one respondent in a typical answer. “They could fire a lot of lazy people,” said another.

The comments on deadwood were surprisingly similar: “Get rid of people who do not perform.” “Get rid of the people who can’t do their job.” “We need to get rid of a lot of managers,” another respondent argued. “We should put them back on the front lines where people are actually doing some work.”

This category also included respondents who talked about the overall quality of work life. “We need better communication, strategic planning, positive feedback to employees, and breaks and time away from the computer,” said one respondent. “We need to reduce the stress in the office, and increase fairness.” Another argued that “we should be fairer to women. Women are still discriminated against.” Still another recommended that the government “do more for recognizing the talent that gets the job done and advancing them....Too few people [are] doing a job that was done by a great number in the past.”

Confidence and Respect

The small number of respondents who focused on confidence and respect stressed the undue emphasis on politics. “Unrealistic demands by Congress,” said one respondent. “Reduce some of the political influences,” said another.

Differences Among Respondents

There were relatively few differences in the open-ended answers based on the respondent’s position, race, age, or gender. Managers were significantly more likely than nonmanagers to say that their organizations needed to work on talent issues, while nonmanagers were significantly more likely than members of the Senior Executive Service to say government should improve the quality of managers and provide greater access to training. In addition, employees with less than nine years in government were significantly more likely than employees with ten to nineteen years to say government should focus on talent and hiring. Otherwise, the 756 respondents were in agreement on the targets of reform.

Conclusion

These are not the recommendations of a selfish, indulgent, job security-conscious workforce. Although some federal employees did emphasize the need for better pay, the vast majority asked for the basic tools to do their jobs well and to be recognized for doing so. They were not saying “Show me the money,” but rather, “Let me do my job.” To the extent that means getting rid of poor performers, instilling discipline in the work force, or eliminating whole layers of management, these employees appear to be in favor of action along those lines.

If Congress and the president want to redeem themselves, they could do no better than to actually engage federal employees in a dialogue about reform.

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At the same time, these employees recognize that the public service must improve if it is to meet public expectations. Federal employees rightly wonder, however, whether Congress and the president do more harm than good when they turn to reform. Given the unenviable track record of the past few decades, it is no surprise that 60 percent of federal employees said that Congress generally acts in ways that worsen the management of their organizations, while 41 percent said the same of the president.

If Congress and the president want to redeem themselves, they could do no better than to actually engage federal employees in a dialogue about reform. Federal employees know where the problems are in their agencies, and which employees are not pulling their weight. They also know a good deal about which reforms have worked in the past and which have failed. In this regard, federal employees may be the single greatest asset Congress and the president have if and when they decide to take another run at reform. The question is whether they will listen to what the federal work force is telling them.

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