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MEMORANDUM FOR HEADS OF EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENTS AND AGENCIES

FROM: SHAWN DONOVAN  
DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF MANAGEMENT AND BUDGET

BETH COBERT  
DEPUTY DIRECTOR FOR MANAGEMENT, OFFICE OF MANAGEMENT  
AND BUDGET

KATHERINE ARCHULETA  
DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT

MEG McLAUGHLIN  
DEPUTY DIRECTOR, WHITE HOUSE PRESIDENTIAL PERSONNEL  
OFFICE

SUBJECT: Strengthening Employee Engagement and Organizational Performance

This memorandum provides guidance to support agencies' efforts to strengthen an organizational culture of employee engagement and mission performance in accordance with priorities established in the President's Management Agenda (PMA) Cross Agency Priority (CAP) goal on People and Culture.<sup>1</sup> Employee engagement is the employees' sense of purpose that is evident in their display of dedication, persistence, and effort in their work and overall attachment to their organization and its mission. Engaging employees and removing the burdensome barriers that make it difficult for them to accomplish their vast and complex tasks will directly have a positive impact on citizens and help rebuild trust in our Federal Government.

A growing body of evidence in the public and private sector has shown a strong relationship between high levels of employee engagement and improved organizational results. As the President said in his recent remarks to the SES, "*One of the things that we know in the private sector about continuous improvement is you've got to have the folks right there on the front lines able to make suggestions and know that they're heard, and to not simply be rewarded for doing an outstanding job, but to see their ideas implemented in ways that really make a difference.*"

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.performance.gov/content/people-and-culture#overview>

OPM has worked with agencies to significantly improve the utility of the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (EVS) to increase the ability of leaders, managers, and supervisors to use employee feedback to improve their organization. For example, OPM now conducts the survey annually, has worked with agencies to increase the level of detailed reports made available to agencies from a few hundred to more than 21,000, and provides interactive visualizations of the data through the newly released UnlockTalent.gov Dashboard. Since the beginning of this Administration, agencies have been developing improvement action plans with several notable successes in improving factors/conditions related to engagement, as measured by the Employee Engagement Index (the 15 EVS questions related to leadership, supervisors and intrinsic work experience; See Appendix 4). For example, since 2010, the Department of Education has improved scores in this Index from 62.6% to 66.6%. During the same time, the Department of Transportation has improved from 60.8% to 63.7%. Individual Department components such as the Bureau of Engraving and Printing went from 61% in 2011 to 66% in 2014. In five years, the Federal Labor Relations Authority improved from the lowest rated agency to 82%.

To further institutionalize a focus on improving employee engagement and mission performance, the guidance in this memo is integrated with existing human capital performance review requirements under 5 CFR Part 250, the Government Performance and Results Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRA), the President's Management Agenda benchmarking initiative, as well as OPM's HRStat initiative. Included is a set of actions, some of which require immediate attention. This memorandum does not include new reporting requirements, but does clarify roles and responsibilities, as well as puts forth a series of management practices and routines that are important to fostering an organizational culture of employee engagement and performance.

### **Objectives**

A key objective of the People and Culture CAP Goal of the PMA is to drive more effective and efficient performance of agency and government missions by unlocking the full potential of the Federal workforce in place today and building the workforce we need for the future." The Federal workforce is the crucial driver of mission success. We believe that employee engagement is a leading indicator of performance and should be a focus for all levels of an agency – from the front line employee to the agency head. Employee engagement is not only a Human Resources function, but a cross-cutting leadership effort that is directly tied to mission success. Engagement occurs in every unit between employees and their supervisors. The top-line goal for Federal agencies is to improve from 2014's 63% Engagement Index score to 67% on the 2016 survey. This ambitious goal can only be met if we use the feedback from employees to inform actions by each leader, manager and supervisor, and empower supervisors at unit levels to foster a culture of employee engagement locally.

### **Strategies**

Currently, agency results in the Employee Engagement Index vary widely across and within agencies, including among organizations that perform similar functions. The Administration is committed to improving employee morale, but there are no single solutions to improvement. Rather, it will take actions at all levels of the organization to achieve our improvement targets. These may range from the simple fixes like celebrating our successes and increasing partnership conversations with local labor organizations to more challenging solutions such as more regular

and meaningful performance discussions with supervisors and managers. Agencies that have successfully changed their culture report that it takes about three years of consistent focus before sustained results are typically achieved.

The Employee Engagement Index score goal in the EVS reflects the importance of employee engagement to improving overall mission success, and the goal is not to just reach a threshold and stop. For example, question 41 (asking whether employees believe the results of the survey will lead to change) is a strong indicator of whether employees trust the leadership so setting perpetually high reach goals will help ensure employees remain engaged. Specifically, this guidance describes the management routines and the tools to strengthen Federal workforce engagement that agencies should adopt. Appendix 1 provides agencies more clarity on the timeline for EVS administration. Appendix 2 describes a continual improvement process that seeks to build an organizational culture with engaged employees using the following steps:

- *planning* by reviewing and analyzing data to identify areas/organizations of strength and weakness, gathering input from employees, and using the new tools to set targets and identify improvement actions;
- *implementing* agreed-upon actions; and
- *reviewing* progress to determine what works and to inform future actions.

As part of a collaborative and continuous improvement effort, labor representatives and local Labor Management Forums (LMF) can also provide valuable insights throughout the process and assist in gaining employee commitment and input. Other useful indices include the New Inclusion Quotient (New IQ) that consists of 20 EVS questions with the highest correlation to inclusive environments, the EVS Global Satisfaction Index, Leaders/Supervisor Lead Indices and the Intrinsic Work Experience Index, as well as agency-created examples such as NASA's Innovation Index. Agencies can also use pulse surveys, town halls, and focus groups to gain more frequent, timely, and focused feedback. See Appendix 3 for a list of resources available, Appendix 4 for a list of the EVS questions in the Employee Engagement Index and Appendix 5 for current PMC Agency levels on each of the three Index areas.

Finally, we are requesting each Agency to identify one senior accountable official to be responsible for improving employee engagement and be a point of contact for OPM, PPO, and OMB to coordinate the Agency's involvement in Government-wide engagement communication. This individual may be placed where the Agency deems most appropriate (e.g. Performance Officer, Chief Operating Officer, Chief of Staff, Chief Human Capital Officer, etc.). If the individual is a political appointee, a career appointee should serve as a back-up to ensure consistency through transition.

#### **Next Steps:**

- By January 23, 2015: Each agency will identify the Senior Accountable Official (SAO), and career deputy, if applicable, responsible for ensuring the agency's commitment to improving employee engagement.
- By January 31, 2015: Each Deputy Secretary or equivalent will have reviewed progress on employee engagement and other agency-specific areas of focus with components or

offices that directly report to the Deputy or Agency Head. Agencies should take a more formal approach with the components already identified as requiring improvement.

- During January 2015: CHCOs will use the HRStat quarterly review mechanism to identify and baseline employee engagement metrics and targets to be tracked on a quarterly basis.
- By February 27, 2015: Each component head will conduct a comparable review of their EVS data with their senior subcomponent leadership teams (including field offices), focusing in particular on engagement and other agency-specific areas of focus. Such reviews should include a determination of areas of focus, proven strategies for improving employee engagement, and policies and practices for disseminating the data each year throughout the organization, including to each manager with breakout results. As OPM has striven to release results within two months of the survey's completion, each agency can build consistency to its annual schedule.
- By February 27, 2015: PIOs, in collaboration with the SAOs, will ensure baselines and organizational targets for strengthening employee engagement are included within GPRA Annual Performance Plans, with a focus on a percent change and not simply an absolute level (as appropriate). PIOs will ensure that applicable baselines, organizational targets and/or measures for improvements in employee engagement and results are included in future performance planning and reporting activities. This includes incorporating such targets and/or measures in the FY16/17 Annual Performance Plans and resulting Annual Performance Reports.
- On-going: Deputy Secretaries will ensure SES Performance Plans include some measurable component related to action planning and/or results to improve employee engagement or based on employee feedback. The measurable item should be related to the Leading People Executive Core Qualification and should reflect an active feedback loop. Full implementation is expected in 2016.
- On-going: CHCOs use HRStat to conduct quarterly reviews to measure progress and identify actions to enhance organizational culture and employee engagement. The CHCO and LMC work groups will meet throughout the year to exchange lessons learned and develop engagement tools and best practices to be shared on UnlockTalent.gov and via other appropriate means. In fall 2015, the SAOs and OPM will convene a larger forum.

## **Appendices**

1: Annual Cycle

2: Strategies

3: Resources

4: Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey Employee Engagement Index

5: Engagement Index Trend Report

**Annual Cycle for Administration and Use of EVS Results**

In order to establish a predictable cycle for using EVS data to inform and strengthen organizational performance, below is a suggested timeline that incorporates some of the defined EVS dates:

- January: Agencies send OPM final list of organizational breakouts.
- April-June: OPM staggers the administration of the EVS while agencies encourage employees to participate.
- July: All EVS results collected and OPM compiles the data.
- August-September: OPM disseminates results to agencies.
- September -October: Agencies disseminate EVS reports to managers, supervisors, and unions; facilitate data-driven reviews of engagement and performance.
- Before the beginning of performance appraisal cycle: Agencies identify appropriate strengthening employee engagement performance metrics to be incorporated into SES and manager performance plans (noting that identified activities and metrics should cascade from executives to mid-level managers and supervisors).
- November: Agencies and unions develop EVS action plans via labor management forums.
- February: Annual Performance Plans and Reports include goals related to employee engagement and other EVS related improvements.
- On-going: Agencies use the HRStat quarterly review to identify and baseline metrics and targets for driving, measuring, tracking and taking steps to strengthen engagement.
- On-going: Agencies use continuous feedback mechanisms such as focus groups, pulse surveys, etc. to learn what local actions are making a difference in employee morale and engagement.
- On-going: Agencies should work with local labor management forums to discuss progress on improvement actions.
- Quarterly: Agencies conduct HRStat reviews to monitor progress on engagement actions, which may include related measures such as attrition.
- Every six months: Component heads review progress on engagement efforts.
- Annually: OMB, OPM, and agency leadership review progress with agencies.

## Strategies

While strategies to strengthen an organizational culture of engagement within each agency will vary, there are several key actions that agencies should undertake, as described below.

### 1. Planning

Many of the key elements of an effective planning process are specified in the People and Culture CAP goal; those required actions are noted with an asterisk (\*) below:

- ***Leaders set clear goals\**** – Engagement starts from the top. If the secretary, director, commissioner, administrator, etc. is the role model of the right behaviors and is engaged and engaging, the culture will permeate throughout the agency. As part of regular organizational and individual performance planning, agency heads, component heads, senior executives, managers, and supervisors will set goals each year to strengthen their organization's culture of employee engagement and other workforce issues. Strengthening an organizational culture of engagement should be included in human capital and local labor management forum goals, and where possible, in the performance objectives established by agency and component level strategic plans.
- ***SES members and managers will be held accountable for fostering engagement through the performance management process\**** – SES members and senior managers are the key to an engaged workforce and developing an inclusive culture. SES and managers also need to receive training investment to continue growing as leaders. As they do, they will engage staff and help them learn, grow and develop. Fostering employee engagement and creating inclusive work environments are specific parts of annual performance plans and appraisals for SES members and managers, cascading to mid-level managers and supervisors. Considering SES mobility may make it difficult to map individual actions to results; agencies are given wide flexibility in how to define these requirements, which may include the use of specific EVS question(s) or indices as possible indicators or markers of engagement.
- ***Agencies will take steps to underscore the importance of designing, aligning, and communicating workforce development and management programs that support individual development*** – Being engaged starts with the individual employee feeling empowered to contribute to organizational priorities in such a way that leads to mission accomplishment and employee satisfaction. Performance management plans, individual development plans, rotational assignments, innovation projects, and effective communications are just some of the ways that employees can actively contribute to workforce programs.
- ***Agencies will partner with their labor unions at the national and local level on engagement topics*** – Front-line employees are in the best position to report what will improve their morale and increase engagement. Large-scale efforts require broad buy-in sustained for several years before they become the cultural norm and embedded in how

the agency accomplishes its mission. Labor representatives can provide insight and assist with gaining employee commitment and are expected to be partners in developing plans that achieve results.

- ***Agencies' components and offices will develop local strategies and approaches*** – While building an organizational culture of employee engagement and performance is grounded in leadership support and organizational values/mission, implementation is an inherently local function that often requires changes in practices at the manager and supervisor level. Components and offices should develop strategies to address specific concerns revealed by the review of EVS and HRStat data, as well as pertinent data derived from other sources such as sick leave usage, new hire turnover rates, focus groups, interviews, and pulse surveys. Using the available tools, agencies may identify the organizational units that require the most assistance and then adopt action plans for these units based on their analysis of results.
- ***Agencies will ensure data results are disseminated to the lowest level possible\**** – OPM has already issued more than 21,000 EVS reports at the agency, component, and office levels. Agency CHCOs and other senior officials should facilitate and ensure distribution of these reports to all executives, supervisors/managers, and employees at the component and office level, where the data are actionable, within three months of the survey completion date. Local labor management forums are encouraged to use this information as they identify areas for improvement as well. At a minimum, local labor management forums should have access to the Agency Management Reports (AMRs) that summarize the EVS results.
- ***Leaders will ensure agency-wide collaboration and accountability in building a culture of engagement*** – While each component is responsible for determining which EVS items to address, the agency leadership needs to regularly monitor progress, ensure all components are actively incorporating engagement activities and spot trends across the components that may require a more global effort. Union leadership can partner with management by encouraging employee participation in engagement efforts, including taking the EVS and sharing examples of best practices.
- ***Leaders will link employee engagement to agencies' Strategic Planning*** – One of the most critical inputs in the effective execution of organizational strategy is whether you have the people engaged in the ways you need them to be to meet mission objectives. For example, if an organization's strategy is to build a more collaborative, empowered work environment at all levels, organizations should assess empowerment and collaboration metrics to assess risks and to derive action plans. Each agency can include these metrics as a measure of success in the ways that are most relevant to specific mission strategies.

## **2. Implementing Engagement Actions**

- ***Identifying areas in need of attention*** – The EVS data can also identify organizations where leadership, manager, or supervisor issues need to be addressed. While EVS results

are never the final answer, they offer an important place to begin the conversation with managers and employees in trying to identify root-cause issues that may impact morale and organizational performance. Members of the SES and managers should analyze the annual EVS scores for their respective organizations and plan and implement actions they deem appropriate to improve their organizations as reflected among their designated indicators. The planned and implemented actions should be contained within an action plan that is revisited annually based on the subsequent year's EVS results. Although the goal is to improve each organization's EVS and employee engagement scores, it is recognized that variables outside the control of agency leaders can greatly affect an agency's scores.

- ***Identifying successful practices*** – The expansion of EVS breakouts provides most organizations with an ability to identify organizations and even work units that are employing successful practices that lead to a more engaged workforce, many of which can be adapted to other similar organizations. Often these items have no cost and are already being performed by managers within the agency, but have not risen to the agency's attention. These successful practices should be shared and the managers recognized to help spread the good ideas. SES members can go through a basic training on engagement developed internally or from OPM or private vendors. These courses can become part of new supervisor training and a part of the SES performance plans to ensure they are trained on best practices in engaging employees and how to create effective action plans.
- ***Implementing key actions*** – Agencies should look at and implement engagement actions that address component and office-level concerns in addition to actions that cut across the agency. Education needs to occur at all levels of the agency to increase agility and capability, maximizing the potential to create a positive impact that is measurable. The Community of Practice section in [UnlockTalent.gov](http://UnlockTalent.gov) contains research and guidance on successful practices; OPM will update this section based on input from agencies, unions and other contributors.
- ***Sustaining successful approaches*** – Employee engagement is not a one-time project, but an ongoing effort effecting organizational change that results in better organizational performance. As soon as practicable, agencies should develop human capital policies that support their engagement strategies and establish strong outcome metrics for agency mission performance that are driven by engagement and other organizational performance indicators.

### **3. Reviewing Progress and Feedback**

- ***Analyzing EVS and other data*** – Agencies will review EVS results and other human capital data through a variety of management reviews (e.g., Deputy Secretary quarterly reviews, HRStat, SES/manager performance reviews) while labor unions may work with their membership in an effort to understand where the organization's culture of engagement and performance are lagging and why that might be the case.



- ***Communicating and sharing best practice*** – Agency leaders should make every effort to communicate what is working within their agencies and work with OPM to share the results across government when OPM convenes community of practice meetings.
- ***Collecting return on investment data*** – The linkage between investing in employee engagement and mission results will help agencies measure success. Reviewing and making connections between the investment and subsequent results will demonstrate the value of changing the culture. For example, as engagement improves, do customer service measures indicate more satisfied employees or are agencies seeing a decrease in error rates and injuries? These types of measures can be quantified and translated into savings and other mission-related metrics.

## Resources

Many agencies have developed their own capabilities to analyze human resources data, develop action plans, and disseminate best practice. In addition to expertise within agencies, there are a number of cross-agency resources, including:

- ***UnlockTalent.gov*** – On July 3, 2014, OPM released the UnlockTalent.gov Dashboard in support of the PMA People and Culture pillar. This comprehensive data visualization tool provides views of agencies' EVS data combined with other data sources such as the Enterprise Human Resource Integration (EHRI) database OPM maintains with Federal employee demographic information to support agencies' identification of subcomponents needing immediate action to improve engagement, as well as resources agencies can apply to their action planning. With more than 21,000 organizations and trend data for three years, agencies can review how they are doing in comparison to other agencies and the federal government as a whole. Questions and feedback for the dashboard can be sent to [unlocktalent@opm.gov](mailto:unlocktalent@opm.gov).
- ***EVS online tool*** – Agencies are able to access reports and review data by accessing the EVS online tool at <https://www.dataexplorer.com/fevs>. This password protected tool, to which OPM provides access to assigned agency EVS personnel, allows agencies to view item-by-item results, response rates, and other data at various component levels, and to produce customized datasets that may be useful for analysis and action planning. Questions and feedback for the EVS online tool can be sent to [EVS@opm.gov](mailto:EVS@opm.gov).
- ***HRStat*** – Through their HRStat processes, agencies will define success in terms of specific human capital metrics that demonstrate linkages between engagement, organizational health, and agency performance. Once agencies have designed a measurement strategy, launched actions to strengthen engagement, and integrated engagement fully into their human capital strategies and operating plans, they will use their HRStat quarterly reviews to closely monitor performance and drive continuous improvement.
- ***CHCO/LMC Working Group*** – The CHCO Council and the National Council on Federal Labor-Management Relations have undertaken a joint initiative to identify and catalog effective employee engagement practices. Their findings will be made available at Council meetings, via UnlockTalent.gov, and through other appropriate avenues.

### **Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey Employee Engagement Index**

The Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (EVS) Employee Engagement Index is a measure of the engagement potential of an agency's work environment – the conditions that lead to engagement. OPM defines employee engagement as “the employees' sense of purpose that is evident in their display of dedication, persistence, and effort in their work or overall attachment to their organization and its mission.” This index includes three subfactors:

- **Leaders Lead:** Reflects the employees' perceptions of the integrity of leadership, as well as leadership behaviors such as communication and workforce motivation.
- **Supervisors:** Reflects the interpersonal relationship between worker and supervisor, including trust, respect, and support.
- **Intrinsic Work Experiences:** Reflects the employees' feelings of motivation and competency relating to their role in the workplace.

Each of the subfactors reflects a different aspect of the engaged environment.

#### **Employee Engagement Index Items:**

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##### **LEADERS LEAD:**

53. In my organization, senior leaders generate high levels of motivation and commitment in the workforce.
54. My organization's senior leaders maintain high standards of honesty and integrity.
56. Managers communicate the goals and priorities of the organization.
60. Overall, how good a job do you feel is being done by the manager directly above your immediate supervisor?
61. I have a high level of respect for my organization's senior leaders.

##### **SUPERVISORS:**

47. Supervisors in my work unit support employee development.
48. My supervisor listens to what I have to say.
49. My supervisor treats me with respect.
51. I have trust and confidence in my supervisor.
52. Overall, how good a job do you feel is being done by your immediate supervisor?

##### **INTRINSIC WORK EXPERIENCE:**

3. I feel encouraged to come up with new and better ways of doing things.
4. My work gives me a feeling of personal accomplishment.
6. I know what is expected of me on the job.
11. My talents are used well in the workplace.
12. I know how my work relates to the agency's goals and priorities.

## 2014 Employee Engagement Index Scores

Agency	Employee Engagement Index, 2014	EEI - Leaders Lead, 2014	EEI - Supervisors, 2014	EEI - Intrinsic Work Experience, 2014
Government-wide	63	50	71	68
Broadcasting Board of Governors	56	39	63	64
Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency	63	50	71	69
Department of Agriculture	63	46	73	69
Department of Commerce	70	58	78	74
Department of Defense Combined	64	52	71	69
Department of Education	67	55	75	69
Department of Energy	61	46	71	66
Department of Health and Human Services	66	55	71	72
Department of Homeland Security	54	39	64	58
Department of Housing and Urban Development	57	43	66	61
Department of Justice	66	55	72	71
Department of Labor	64	53	71	67
Department of State	70	59	77	74
Department of the Interior	61	45	70	69
Department of the Treasury	66	53	76	69
Department of Transportation	64	49	74	68
Department of Veterans Affairs	61	47	66	69
Environmental Protection Agency	63	47	74	68
Equal Employment Opportunity Commission	65	53	70	71

Federal Communications Commission	70	61	77	72
Federal Energy Regulatory Commission	74	67	81	73
Federal Trade Commission	76	73	79	76
General Services Administration	68	56	77	70
National Aeronautics and Space Administration	77	68	84	80
National Archives and Records Administration	59	43	69	65
National Credit Union Administration	72	63	79	74
National Labor Relations Board	64	53	72	67
National Science Foundation	69	57	76	74
Nuclear Regulatory Commission	75	66	82	76
Office of Management and Budget	73	63	83	73
Office of Personnel Management	72	61	81	74
Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation	65	51	72	73
Railroad Retirement Board	68	59	72	73
Securities and Exchange Commission	66	55	74	69
Small Business Administration	62	48	69	69
Social Security Administration	66	57	71	71
U.S. Agency for International Development	64	51	73	67