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# ISSUES OF MERIT

## DIRECTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

### **A Look Back to Look Forward**

*Departing Office of Policy and Evaluation Director John Crum offers a perspective from his thirty-four years of Government service.*

I have worked in the world of Federal human resources management for over 34 years and the time has come for me to discover what the future holds beyond Federal employment. During my years in the Federal Government many things have changed—some for the better, some for the worse—yet much seems to have remained the same. In my final Director's Column, I will outline some lessons that I believe can be learned from this history.

*People, not programs, are the key to managing and improving performance.* When I entered Federal service, efforts were being made to tie employee pay to job performance through an initiative called merit pay. The Federal Government spent millions to train supervisors and employees in the use of objective performance standards. Nevertheless, the initiative was widely disliked and ultimately discontinued. More recently, the Department of Defense included pay-for-performance elements in its National Security Personnel System, with the goal of increasing employee accountability and performance. For a variety of reasons, NSPS was also discontinued.

These initiatives struggled not because the concept was bad, but because implementation is so difficult. The underlying concerns, such as motivating Federal employees, making judicious and credible use of salary and award monies, and improving organizational performance, are both important and difficult. In particular, the appropriate level and form of compensation for Federal employees—a matter of great debate when I began working for the Government—is a complex issue and not easily resolved. Still, I hope we have learned that people are the key to problems of employee motivation and organizational performance. The solutions begin with performance management practices and fostering conditions that support employee engagement. I hope

we have learned that effective performance management depends more on improvement in communication between supervisors and employees than on the development of quantified, perfectly “objective” performance standards (a task likely to prove both frustrating and futile).

*Messages matter.* During my initial years in Federal service, a common campaign theme was that Federal employees were underworked and overpaid. The rhetoric today is quite similar. Clearly, “bureaucrat bashing” has not gone out of style. Of course, Federal employees should be subject to, and prepared to withstand, public scrutiny. However, stakeholders should recognize that reflexive and relentless criticism of Federal employees may injure rather than improve Federal Government efficiency. That risk is heightened by changes in the Federal workforce. Thirty years ago, the Federal Government employed a substantial percentage of its workforce in clerical, process-centered occupations. Today’s Federal workforce is a knowledge workforce, with a majority of employees in professional and administrative occupations, such as attorney and information technology specialist.

For now, the Federal Government is well-positioned to compete for talent. However, that may well change as economic conditions improve. Moreover, inevitable (if deferred) retirements mean that Federal agencies will soon need to fill many positions that are, by their very nature, not easy to fill. If bureaucrat bashing and changes to other terms of Federal employment (such as pay and benefits) make such employment unattractive, the Federal Government will be hard-pressed to recruit the competent, committed employees needed to deliver critical services to the American public.

*Money is not everything.* On a positive note, we have gained a better understanding of how to differentiate the Federal Government from other employers. Research has shown that most people do not become Federal employees for the money. Instead, they chose Government service because they believe in their agency’s mission and want to make a difference. Federal agencies can do more to market these aspects of Federal employment. We also have additional ammunition that can help the Federal Government in the war for talent. For example, alternative work schedules and telework can help attract new employees by affording them the flexibility to balance the demands of their everyday lives.

In closing, some concerns and challenges have proved more lasting and intractable than I hoped many years ago. Nevertheless, I leave Federal service with a sense of accomplishment and optimism. Over my career, we have indeed made significant progress and laid the groundwork for continued improvement in the Federal service.



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