



Preserving the Integrity of the Federal Merit Systems: Understanding and Addressing Perceptions of Favoritism

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The eighth merit system principle at 5 U.S.C. § 2301 (b)(8) requires that Federal agencies protect employees against personal favoritism. To comply with that principle, Federal supervisors must base personnel decisions on organizational needs and objective criteria, such as assessments of ability or performance, rather than personal preferences or relationships. Avoiding favoritism is also important to agency productivity: employees who perceive workplace favoritism are *less* likely to be engaged—to go the “extra mile” at work—and *more* likely to consider leaving than those who do not.

Work remains to be done. In a survey conducted for this study, 28 percent of Federal employees indicated that their supervisor engages in favoritism, and more than half said saying that other supervisors in their organization demonstrate favoritism. Likely contributors to these responses include:

- 1) Intentional favoritism, such as deliberately basing a decision on personal connections;
- 2) Unintentional favoritism, such as making a decision that is unconsciously influenced by bias or personal factors; and
- 3) Employee misperception of a merit-based decision, which might result from a lack of transparency or a misinterpretation of the role and influence of existing personal relationships.

Notably, many employees believe that advancement depends on factors that they consider problematic. As shown in the table, many employees believe that managers overvalue personal and professional relationships and undervalue factors such as experience, competence, and dedication.

Consistent with this pattern, Federal employees were more likely to attribute occurrences of favoritism to conscious intent (supervisors valuing friendship over competence, 59%) than to a lack of understanding of merit system requirements and rules (38%) or a lack of adequate tools for making merit-based personnel decisions (32%).

Federal Employee Views on Factors Considered in Promotion Decisions		
Factor	Should Be Considered	Is Actually Considered
Quality of experience/ Technical competence	98%	58%
Recognized potential	93%	51%
Professional relationship with selecting official	14%	47%
Personal relationship with selecting official	2%	40%
Source: U.S. MSPB, 2011 Federal Merit Systems Survey		

The report addresses all three contributors to perceptions of favoritism, outlining actions for those who make or guide personnel decisions (e.g., supervisors and HR professionals) and for those affected by them. For example, we recommend that:

- *Agency leaders* hold supervisors accountable for proper use of their authority, which includes making merit-based decisions and refraining from favoritism;
- *Supervisors* ask employees about their career goals and interests, so they can make more fully-informed and equitable decisions in areas such as work assignment and training;
- *Human resources staff* advise supervisors on how they can effectively and properly use HR authorities and flexibilities—while recognizing their responsibility to oppose an illegal or improper action; and
- *Employees* seek information on how personnel decisions are made, and request developmental feedback to help them prepare and compete for opportunities for advancement and recognition.

*For the full report, including detailed survey results and recommendations,
please visit www.mspb.gov/studies.*