insights & analyses for Federal human capital management

ISSUES OF MERIT

April 2010

a publication of
the U.S. Merit Systems
Protection Board,
Office of Policy
and Evaluation

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Supervisory Job Announcements: Truth in Advertising

Do supervisory job announcements provide the information applicants need?

Much has been said about the need to make Federal job announcements more inviting and readable. An upcoming Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) report, *A Call to Action: Improving First-Level Supervision of Federal Employees*, indicates that when it comes to supervisory announcements, much could also be done to make them more informative.

In our report, *As Supervisors Retire: An Opportunity to Reshape Organizations*, we highlighted the need for agencies to plan for the inevitable, if deferred, retirement of increasing numbers of supervisors and managers. In *A Call to Action*, we document the importance of evaluating supervisory competencies when making selections. Those duties may only take up to 25 percent of a supervisor's time, but supervisors identify them as their most important tasks. With that in mind, MSPB reviewed a sample of 100 job announcements for supervisory positions posted on USAJOBS during July 2009 to gain insight into what Federal agencies are seeking in their next generation of supervisors.

The results were not reassuring. Nearly half of the job announcements—44 percent—provided no substantive information about the nature of the position's supervisory responsibilities. In more than a few announcements, the only indication that the job involved supervision was the word "Supervisor" or "Supervisory" in the job title. Similarly, 42 percent of job announcements either did not list the competencies necessary to do the job or only listed the technical competencies needed.

A job announcement should serve as a preview of the job so that the applicant can determine if he or she is qualified and/or interested in the job. We realize that agencies are trying to eliminate unnecessary verbiage from job announcements, as we have recommended in previous reports. We also recognize that the absence of a competency from a job announcement does not necessarily imply its absence from the assessment process. But neither applicants nor agencies are well served when job announcements do not clearly describe the agency's required and desired skills set.

First, it is not particularly applicant-friendly to force an applicant to go through the application process in order to find out what, exactly, the agency is looking for. Second, applicants may apply

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The MSPB Office of Policy and Evaluation conducts studies to assess the health of Federal merit systems and to ensure they are free from prohibited personnel practices.

Issues of Merit
We offer insights and analyses on topics related to Federal human capital management, particularly findings and recommendations from our independent research.

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DIRECTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

Improving the Performance of Federal Supervisors

MSPB takes a fresh look at how to improve efforts to select, develop, and manage Federal supervisors.

As you can see from the themes in this edition of *Issues of Merit*, the MSPB has focused much of our research attention the past two years on helping agencies ensure they have the supervisory workforce necessary to carry out their missions. And with good reason. Federal supervisors are the nexus between policy and action. They are responsible for achieving the organizational goals assigned to their work unit, and do so by providing their employees the necessary tools to succeed in their jobs. Because they have direct and regular contact with employees, first-level supervisors can have a stronger impact on employee performance and productivity than anyone else in the management chain.

MSPB's recent research supports the importance of first-level supervisors in several ways. Our 2008 study, *The Power of Federal Employee Engagement*, reported a positive relationship between agency outcomes and employee engagement. It went on to note that good management practices appear related to engagement. Engaged employees (87 percent) are much more likely to report that their supervisor has good management skills than unengaged employees (14 percent).

In addition, our 2009 study, *Managing for Engagement – Communication, Connection, and Courage*, demonstrated that supervisors in highly engaged agencies are more likely to practice good performance management techniques (e.g., providing regular, usable feedback) than those in low engagement agencies.

Additional data from our 2007 Merit Principles Survey show that non-supervisory employees who rated their supervisors' performance as good were much more likely to recommend their agency as a place to work and to believe their talents are used well in the workplace compared to employees who had less positive perceptions of their supervisors. Ultimately, the research shows that supervisory proficiency is critical to individual and organizational performance as well as employee motivation, engagement, and retention. That is why the selection, development, and management of Federal supervisors are so critical.

Unfortunately, the Government has not historically done a good job of cultivating its supervisors. Our upcoming report, *A Call to Action: Improving First-Level Supervision of Federal Employees*, examines almost 30 years worth of research on the management of Federal supervisors. We found that this research has consistently identified problems with the effectiveness of the Federal supervisory workforce; yet few solutions have been implemented.

Why do these problems continue to exist year after year? We've identified four key areas as barriers to improving supervisory performance. First, current selection processes do not adequately identify supervisory candidates with the underlying abilities, interests, or values required for supervisory jobs. For instance, selection often over emphasizes technical expertise as opposed

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Supervisors

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to leadership abilities, perhaps because they are easier to measure. While technical expertise is important to ensuring the ability to make informed work unit decisions, leadership skills are often more difficult to develop. Second, survey data consistently show that supervisors often do not receive the development they need to build good management skills. Third, many supervisors do not receive the guidance and support they need from upper management to drive organizational results and improve their individual performance as supervisors. Finally, many supervisors are not held accountable for managing their employees.

These problems are not easy to fix, which is probably why they continue to linger. We believe that agencies can substantially improve the quality of first-level supervision if they improve how they select, develop, and guide and support supervisors, as well as hold them accountable for the performance of their work units. Some of the steps that can help agencies do this include:

- As discussed later in this newsletter, provide clear information about the supervisory role in job announcements. Provide information on the specific supervisory duties, the workforce to be supervised, and the core competencies required for the job so applicants can ensure they are interested in the job.
- Use selection tools that are strong predictors of supervisory success, not just technical competence.
- Allow adequate time for supervisory duties because when implemented properly, supervisory responsibilities are time-consuming.
- Provide a comprehensive training and development program for supervisors. Create an integrated plan for preparing first-level supervisors for their roles through a combination of formal training, on the job learning, and other development opportunities such as job rotations, job shadowing, and mentoring.
- Communicate expectations that make it clear supervisors will be evaluated on both work group outcomes and how well they manage their staff.

We do not claim that improving supervisory performance will be easy—or it would have been solved long ago. However, the role of the supervisor is critical to agencies' mission accomplishment. Therefore, it is an area that should result in a high return on investment for agencies. ❖

John Crum
Director, Policy and Evaluation

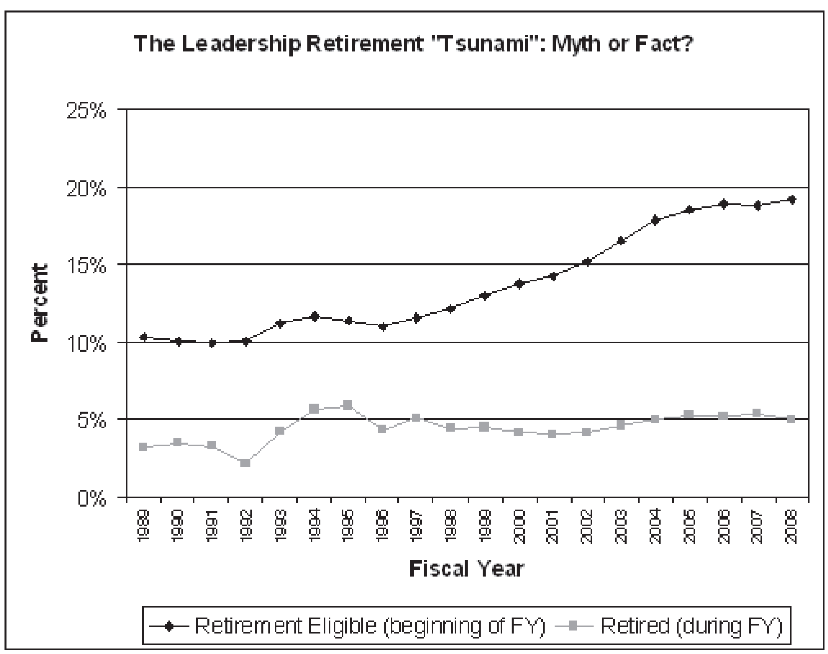
Focus on the Facts

Is the leadership retirement "tsunami" myth or fact?

The answer is "yes."

"Myth" because the tsunami has not yet occurred and may not occur in the huge numbers once expected. As shown in the chart above, the retirement rate among Federal supervisors has been fairly stable, averaging about 5 percent since the late 1990s.

"Fact" because the percentage of Federal supervisors who are eligible to retire has risen steadily and now stands at over 19 percent. At some point, those supervisors will begin retiring and the Government needs to be prepared.



Giving Managers the Time to Manage

Agencies may need to examine their employee to supervisor ratios to ensure supervisors have the time they need to strategically manage a knowledge-based workforce.

As described in MSPB's recent report, *As Supervisors Retire: An Opportunity for Organizational Change,* the Federal workplace is changing quickly. Supervisors are now managing in a complex, knowledge-based work environment where analyzing and synthesizing information are often more important than production and processing paperwork. The modern Federal supervisor, therefore, spends increasing amounts of time communicating and interacting with diverse, multi-sector knowledge workers.

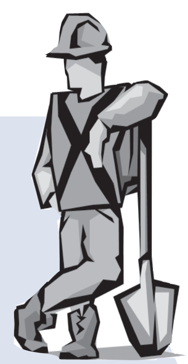
As the demands of complex work and work environments mount, supervisors must focus on different functions to more strategically manage their human resources. Strategically managing the workforce can require more time and a different supervisory skill set to implement effectively. For instance, while their technical expertise is important, they also may need to be better versed in strategic planning, performance management, training and development, and recruitment and selection than they were in the past. Unfortunately, MSPB research has shown that many Federal supervisors have not received sufficient training to carry out these responsibilities. Therefore, as agencies consider the changing nature of their supervisory workforce, they need to evaluate how to ensure supervisors have the skills necessary to carry out these responsibilities.

Strategically managing the workforce may also require more supervisors. Based on the 2007 Merit Principles Survey data, supervisors and managers who oversee more employees (higher supervisor ratios) tend to report having less time to engage in strategic personnel hiring, development, management, and retention. Instead, supervisors who have a greater span of control—that is, more employees to supervise—tend to spend more time on day-to-day operational concerns and less time on strategic issues and workforce development. In essence, the amount of time available for supervisors to spend on strategic human resources management is constrained by the number of employees that they must supervise.

The 2007 Merit Principles Survey item from which this conclusion was drawn read, "What percentage of your time is devoted to the following activity: Creating a work unit or organization equipped to successfully meet the challenges of today and tomorrow through strategic hiring, development, management, and retention?" Data show that as the supervisor ratio decreases (fewer employees to supervise), the amount of time the average supervisor has to strategically manage human resources increases. This inverse relationship has implications for supervisory workload and the allocation of supervisory time. Not surprisingly, the more employees there are per supervisor, the less time a supervisor tends to feel he or she has to invest in strategic hiring, development, management, and retention efforts.

Because of the importance of strategically managing the workforce, agencies should bear in mind the hidden cost of assigning more employees to a supervisor than can be effectively managed. The "right" number of employees per supervisor will vary based on the work and the workforce. Agencies are in the best position to determine the "right" balance based on an analysis of what is needed, and not on an assumption that all workforces need the same supervisory ratio. The MSPB recommends that agencies examine the work demands placed on supervisors and the ratio of employees to supervisors in order to ensure that supervisors have the competencies, management support, and the time to devote to the job of supervising. ❖

Renovation In Progress: MSPB Website



MSPB is currently working to improve its website to make it easier for you to find the information you need. Please take a look at the MSPB web page at www.mspb.gov and the studies page at www.mspb.gov/studies. You can email any comments you have to opengovernment@mspb.gov.

OPM Issues Final Training and Development Regulations

OPM's issuance of final regulations comes at a good time to for a new cadre of supervisors.

On December 10, 2009, the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) issued regulations on training (5 CFR Part 410) and supervisory, management, and executive development (5 CFR Part 412). These regulations were based on training components of the Federal Workforce Flexibility Act of 2004 and impact both the form and content of training that Federal leaders will receive. They became effective immediately upon issuance. Under the new regulations, each Federal agency is required to:

- Align training with agency strategic goals;
- Evaluate training programs regularly;
- Train new supervisors within one year of appointment;
- Train supervisors in mentoring employees, performance management, and conducting performance appraisals;
- Retrain supervisors at least every three years;
- Develop an agency leadership succession program;
- Establish development programs for Senior Executives; and
- Obtain OPM approval of SES candidate development programs.

These regulations are designed to improve the effectiveness of the supervision and leadership within Federal agencies. A recent MSPB report, *As Supervisors Retire*, has determined that a large number of Federal managers and supervisors are likely to leave the workforce in the near future. When these long-anticipated retirements begin to occur, new supervisors will be selected to fill these vacated positions. With OPM's training regulations in place, these new supervisors hopefully will receive improved training early in their careers and continuing development in the future. OPM's introduction of these changes is therefore well-timed.

The new regulations specify training content in key areas, including mentoring employees, managing performance, and evaluating employee performance. However, agencies retain the flexibility to determine additional content for supervisory training. In addition to supporting OPM's focus on the areas listed above, MSPB research highlights some areas that agencies may want to include in their customized training. As discussed in our forthcoming report, *A Call to Action—Improving First-Level Supervision of Federal Employees*, Federal supervisors believe that their training has been inadequate in many aspects of organizational and employee performance management, such as developing performance goals and standards, assigning work, providing constructive feedback, and managing poor performers. Agencies should consider these potential areas for improvement as they customize training for their supervisors.

An increased focus on supervisor training and development will be beneficial to the Federal workforce as a whole. Agency decision makers are encouraged to read OPM's new regulations at www.opm.gov/fedregis. MSPB reports are available at www.mspb.gov/studies. ❖

Merit Principles Survey: A Chance To Be Heard in 2010

MSPB conducts a Merit Principles Survey (MPS) every few years to elicit employee views on the soundness of Federal merit systems and reports progress to the President, Congress, and other Federal decision-makers. Through this survey, Federal employees enjoy an opportunity to inform workforce management policy and practice by voicing their opinions and concerns.

Soon, the MSPB will administer the 2010 Merit Principles Survey to full-time, permanent employees and managers Governmentwide. Major unions are being informed of the survey and are encouraged to support their members' participation. This survey effort will focus largely on employee perceptions of the 12 prohibited personnel practices (5 USC § 2302(b)), including reprisal for whistleblowing. The survey will also contain questions concerning other workplace issues that impact employees' abilities to carry out the missions of their agencies.

Participation is voluntary and individual responses will be kept confidential. A summary report of the Governmentwide survey results will be posted on the MSPB website (www.mspb.gov/studies). We hope that all employees who receive the invitation to participate will share their candid thoughts with us so that we can help agencies improve their workforce management practices.

A Road Map for Improving Agency Performance Through Fair and Equitable Treatment of Employees

Steps agencies can take to foster a fair environment that supports agency outcomes.

As highlighted in the recent report, *Fair and Equitable Treatment: Progress Made and Challenges Remaining*, many practical reasons exist for maintaining a diverse and representative workforce. Beyond meeting the legal requirements, Federal agencies need to tap into all segments of the available workforce as a matter of a business necessity to be able to better serve the American public.

Yet, these steps only represent part of the not-so-secret formula for achieving optimal agency performance. The true key to any organization's success involves the full commitment of its employees to achieving the mission, a concept popularly known as "employee engagement." Using a fairness index comprised of select items from MSPB's Merit Principles Survey, we were able to demonstrate a strong link between perceptions of fair treatment and employee engagement. Given the correlation between employee engagement and agency outcomes demonstrated in our report *The Power of Federal Employee Engagement*, it follows that perceptions of fair treatment would have a similar positive affect on agency performance. So, what actions can agencies take to foster a fair environment in which employees can and want to do their best work? Here's a brief overview of some of the necessary steps.

1. Conduct a thorough workforce analysis. This analysis should identify workforce requirements, including identifying where representation lags behind the available workforce and possible barriers to a fully representative workforce.

2. Ensure that human resources policies and practices do not create barriers to merit-based selection, recognition, advancement, and retention. For example, agencies should use a balanced set of recruitment strategies and hiring authorities. Selection criteria should be clearly job-related, with assessment strategies that are well-designed and carefully implemented. Additionally, the diversity and depth of the resulting candidate pool should be examined at each stage of the process to identify any unintentional impacts.

3. Select supervisors with care and assure that they exercise their authority in a fair and transparent manner. Agencies must recognize that the supervisor-employee interface represents one of the most critical points at which employees can experience fair—or unfair—treatment. Therefore, supervisory selection and accountability are critical. Supervisors may also need training, as well as the time, to fairly and effectively manage their employees.

4. Earn the confidence of employees through daily decisions and routine interactions. It isn't sufficient for supervisors to feel that they are treating employees fairly. They must earn employee confidence through their actions—whether giving assignments, constructive feedback, training opportunities, performance ratings, awards, and pay raises. All workforce decisions should be based on merit factors—matching individual abilities and performance to organizational requirements. Relying upon less rigorous assessments that can't hold up to external scrutiny has the potential to seriously undermine employee engagement and subsequently, organizational performance.

5. Ensure employees have knowledge of and access to effectual redress procedures, such as grievance and EEO complaint processes. Although these procedures serve as a safety net to guard against misuse of authority or mistreatment of employees, agencies should work to avoid getting to this stage by maintaining high standards as discussed in the points above.

More details can be found in the report, *Fair and Equitable Treatment: Progress Made and Challenges Remaining*, which is located at www.mspb.gov/studies. ❖

Partnership Forums and Employee Engagement

Last December, President Obama signed Executive Order 13522, *Creating Labor Management Forums to Improve Delivery of Government Services*. The Executive Order states that management should discuss workplace challenges and problems with labor and endeavor to develop solutions jointly, rather than advise union representatives of predetermined solutions to problems and then engage in bargaining over the impact and implementation of those solutions. To facilitate these discussions, the Executive Order directs all agencies to establish labor management forums to help identify problems and propose solutions to better serve the public and complete agency missions. It also establishes The National Council on Federal Labor-Management Relations to (among other things) develop suggested metrics to evaluate the effectiveness of the agency forums and to develop recommendations to improve delivery of products and services while cutting costs and advancing employee interests.

In our report *The Power of Federal Employee Engagement*, we demonstrated a strong relationship between greater levels of employee engagement and improved Federal agency outcomes. We noted that roughly 35 percent of Federal employees are fully engaged in their work. Based on that survey data, we found that only 26 percent of employees who identified themselves as dues paying members of a union were fully engaged. Many factors could explain this difference. For instance, supervisory responsibilities influence engagement—79 percent of the union members were non-supervisors versus 61 percent of non-union members.

An important aspect of fully engaging employees is to demonstrate to them that their opinions count in the workplace. However, more than half of the respondents to the Merit Principles Survey 2007 did not feel free to express their opinions to management. Our report, *Managing for Engagement: Communication, Connection, and Courage*, offered several strategies managers could follow to further engage their workforce. One of those strategies was to treat employees as business partners—to empower employees to participate in the organization as partners with management. Executive Order 13522 appears to offer employee representatives just such a partnership opportunity, as well as a formal avenue to have their opinions heard. If both agency management and labor use this opportunity in the spirit envisioned by the executive order, the engagement level of union employees just may improve, helping to realize the Executive Order goal of improved agency products and services. ❖

Want to learn more about labor partnerships? Try these resources.

President Bill Clinton's 1993 Executive Order 12871 formalizing Labor-Management Partnerships within the Executive Branch of the Federal Government:
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=61564

U.S. Office of Personnel Management report on Labor-Management Partnerships issued in December 2000:
www.opm.gov/lmr/report/index.htm

President George Bush's Executive Order 12871 dissolving the Labor-Management Partnership Council established in 1993:
www.govexec.com/dailyfed/0201/021901m1.htm

President Barack Obama's 2009 Executive Order 13522, Creating Labor-Management Forums to Improve Delivery of Government Services:
www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/executive-order-creating-labor-management-forums-improve-delivery-government-servic

Six Steps to an Effective Labor Management Partnership:
www.law.com/jsp/cc/PubArticleCC.jsp?id=1202433126509

Kaiser Permanente's Labor Management Partnership Facebook Page:
www.facebook.com/kp.labor.management.partnership

Supervisory Job Announcements

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under the understandable, if mistaken, assumption that the agency seeks a super-technician rather than a supervisor. If that happens, agencies may find the applicants' presentation of their supervisory abilities and accomplishments–or the abilities and accomplishments themselves—to be disappointing.

In our 2007 Merit Principles Survey, MSPB asked first-level supervisors to identify their most important and rewarding tasks. Supervising employees, as opposed to technical work, topped both lists. Given these findings, Federal agencies that seek supervisors who are leaders, coaches, and makers of difficult decisions—and not merely timekeepers and spell-checkers—may want to review their supervisory job announcements. Although it can pay to advertise, "want ads" that do not describe what is actually wanted are unlikely to deliver. ❖

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ISSUES OF MERIT

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