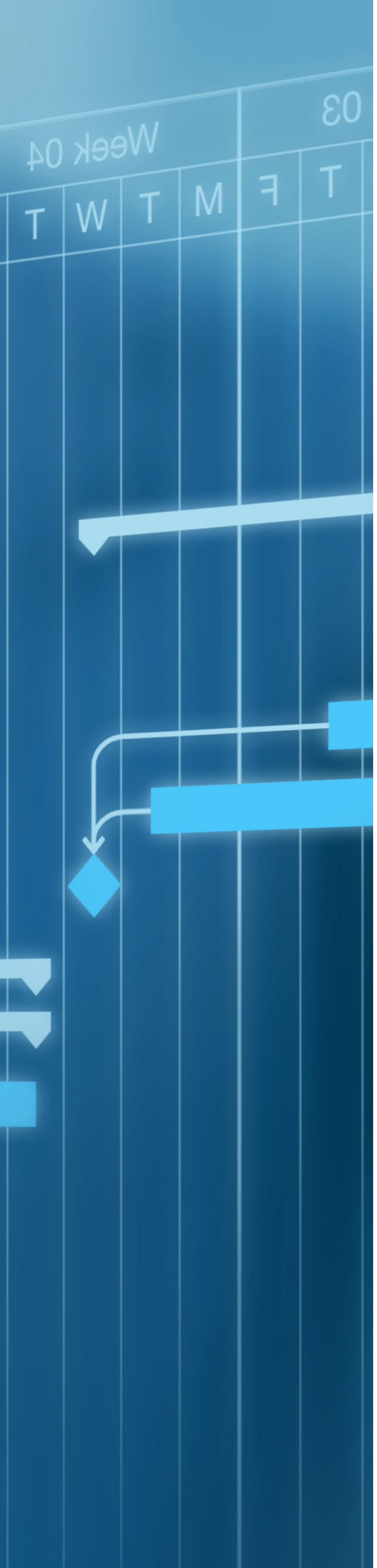
Government Executive

# PREPARING MANAGERS FOR TOMORROW'S GOVERNMENT

Agencies face enormous challenges; addressing them successfully will require a new approach.

DECEMBER 2020

*By Howard Risher and Trish Holliday*



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CHAPTER ONE

# The New Spotlight on Managers

The COVID-19 pandemic is the latest event to impact work management in government. While many workers have experienced new flexibilities and opportunities to work remotely, the pandemic has forced front line workers in a number of occupations to commit to long hours in potentially dangerous situations. Agencies have also had trouble filling vacancies in newer high demand fields like cybersecurity as well as in core occupations like law enforcement and teaching. Additionally, declines in tax revenue and budget deficits have prompted hiring freezes and layoffs.

In the “old” work management paradigm, employees were expected to do what they were told. A recent two-part report from the National Academy of Public Administration, “*No Time to Wait: Building a Public Service for the 21st Century*,” referred to the government's “compliance culture” as a barrier to good government. Prior to the pandemic, many managers relied on close over-the-shoulder supervision. Words like “hovering” and “micromanaging” have been used to describe the supervisory approach.

Now, with the switch to working from home, managers have been forced to delegate more and rely on employees to make work-related decisions. That requires a different approach to supervision and different skills. It's to be expected that some managers will not be able to make the transition. The criteria previously considered for selecting new supervisors have to be reconsidered. Manager training has to be reconsidered and redesigned to help develop the new skills needed for this type of supervision. This retraining and/or new training would be a new approach to government.

In contrast, the private sector worked through a similar transition starting four decades ago when companies experimented with autonomous work teams. In the 1990s companies flattened their organizations, eliminating layers of management, to

cut costs and become more responsive to customers. They empowered frontline workers to address problems. This was the era when the use of personal computers mushroomed and made it easy to communicate easily across continents. It was also the era when knowledge workers and their expertise became important. The role of managers evolved as those changes unfolded.

It was roughly 20 years ago that Gallup reported research showing managers and their effectiveness are key to employee engagement or commitment. Gallup's analyses show empowered employees perform better on a number of common metrics. Since then, other researchers have confirmed the importance of the role of managers. Managers are central to strategies for raising and sustaining performance levels.

Now, public employers are under the gun to recover from the pandemic and find ways to raise performance levels. With the end of the pandemic in sight, public employers need to develop plans to rebuild their workforce, add essential skills by upskilling, and reinvigorate employee commitment. This starts with managers.

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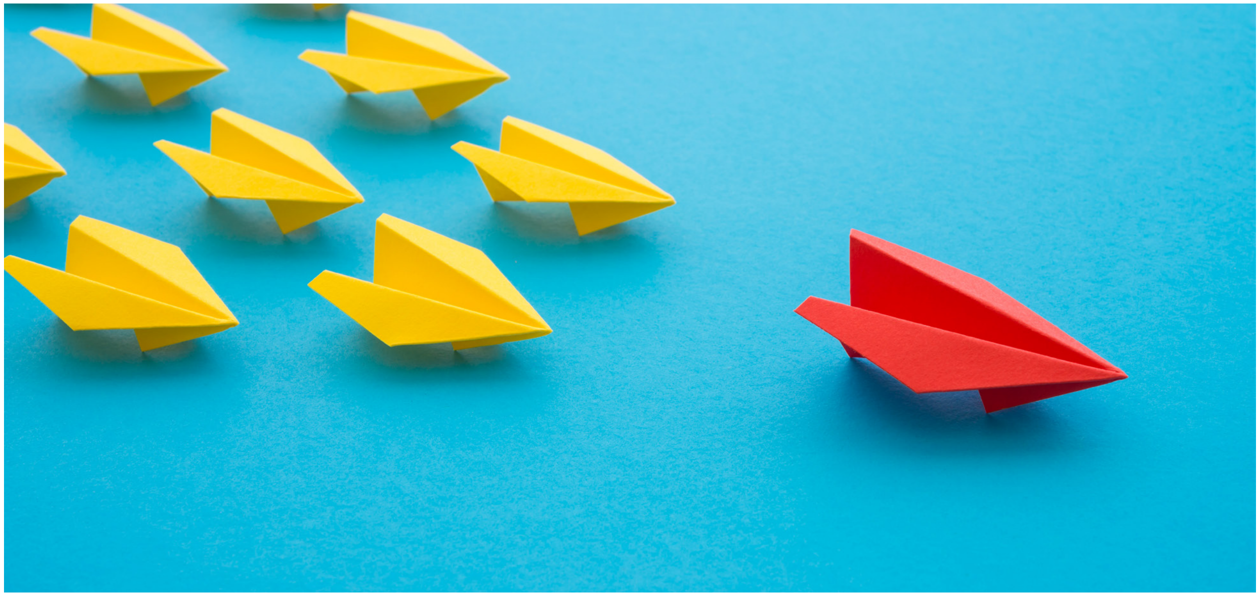
*"Gallup's analyses show empowered employees perform better on a number of common metrics."*

In the years prior to the COVID-19 crisis, government executives were the center of attention following creation of the federal Senior Executive Service but managers have been virtually ignored. Promotions to supervisor have too often been based on seniority and technical skills, not necessarily because an employee had the needed people management skills or the potential to be an effective manager. Most often the focus is on compliance, not results. Civil service rules delimit managers' discretion. Training is focused too often on administering those rules and learning how to adhere to the rules. But if leaders want to raise performance levels and keep them high, managers will be the keys to success.



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CHAPTER TWO

# Focusing on the Value of Effective Managers

One of the prominent changes in management thinking over the past half century is the emerging importance and increased investment in managers and supervisors. Through most of the last century they were not expected to do much more than carry out orders. They were effectively the sergeants of organizational life and hired to keep things running efficiently.

Top management did the thinking and mid-level managers and supervisors carried out the marching orders. They were responsible for making certain that workers knew what was expected of them and confirming they followed the rules. In many work situations they had little contact with workers once expectations were communicated. Managerial training was often limited to understanding legal compliance and the steps for handling problem employees.

When the federal government created the Senior Executive Service in 1978, middle managers were notably not included. The law provided for separate HR policies and systems but nothing for middle managers. There is a distinct "class" divide. A few states adopted a similar strategy (although interest waned).

Business is different; executives are far better paid but the entire management cadre participates in the management incentive plan. The goals of managers are linked through executives to corporate goals. When the company is successful, all executives and managers stand to benefit.

> *"When the federal government created the Senior Executive Service in 1978, middle managers were notably not included."*

There is another important difference triggered by delayering—eliminating management levels—around the time of the 1990 recession. Until that point, a prominent phrase was "span of control," which referred to the number of workers a supervisor managed. That number was typically five or six so the manager could control what an employee did. Today workers in business are "empowered" and expected to take the initiative in tackling problems. There are many corporate employees who rarely meet with a supervisor. The pandemic has triggered a greater degree of worker autonomy but previously it was rare in government.

Starting in the late 1990s Gallup concluded that managers are central to creating high performance work groups. Gallup has now emphasized the importance of managers over more than two decades. The firm's research findings are discussed at several points in this ebook. The key point is that Gallup argues managers are primarily responsible for building and sustaining worker engagement or commitment. Gallup's findings are important to government's efforts to raise performance levels.

Gallup also argues that ineffective managers are the primary reason why employees resign. In government, when an employee "retires on the job" it affects the morale of co-workers. It's costly.

There was a time when managers were virtually ignored. We now know that's a mistake.

Today, looking back over the years of research on organization performance, the single most important development may well be the understanding of how managers and their competence influences employee retention and performance. In fact, it follows from the research that the single best investment an organization can make is investing in developing effective managers. The data suggests it will pay off.

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# CHAPTER THREE

## It Starts with Leaders

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Improved performance starts with leaders. It can be a team leader, a departmental leader, or an elected leader but someone has to decide, "We need to improve performance." That triggers decisions that affect the way work is managed. New technology can play an important role but that also prompts changes in the way work is done. In the absence of change, meaningful gains cannot be realized.

A core issue is empowering employees to use their full capabilities. That's unlikely to happen in a "compliance culture" where employees are expected to do what they are told. Employees need to be trusted to address problems as they emerge. That's particularly important when people work remotely. Trust starts with leaders.

At the federal level, David Walker was successful in transforming the Government Accountability Office over the decade he served as Comptroller General. He had a solid career in business and consulting before assuming his role at GAO. He argues leaders need to "build a burning platform," provide a "call to action," and show "a way forward." At the state level, Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam was successful in reforming state government. He also had a solid career in business before running for public office. Both men took several years to effect change. Both made it a priority.

These success stories highlight an important issue—the individuals who run for elected office typically have little experience leading large employee groups. Many are lawyers, business owners, or hometown community leaders. In contrast, business leaders have spent careers doing what's necessary to achieve goals and run successful businesses. That experience gives them and the managers below them

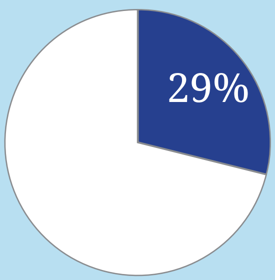
> *"A core issue is empowering employees to use their full capabilities. That's unlikely to happen in a 'compliance culture' where employees are expected to do what they are told."*

a different and now badly needed orientation to building successful organizations.

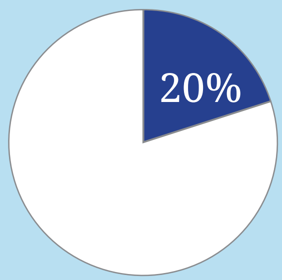
For government to improve performance, managers will need to play the lead role in overseeing and encouraging needed change. Leaders have to encourage managers to play a role in decision making and allow change to happen.

A survey (see below) by a frequent writer on leadership, Mark Murphy, CEO of Leadership IQ, suggests a number of practices that will help make leaders more effective. “Leader” in this survey was undefined but the questions and responses indicate it encompasses anyone who manages employees. The responses highlight issues that no organization can afford to ignore.

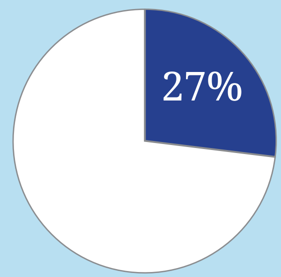
It starts at the highest levels. Elected officials and agency leaders need to guide and provide support for managers in transitioning to the new work environment.



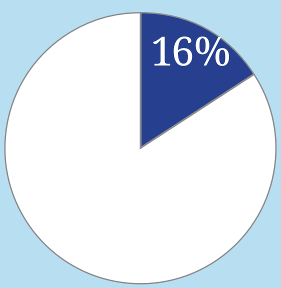

Only 29% of employees say their leader is open to using ideas from outside their organization.



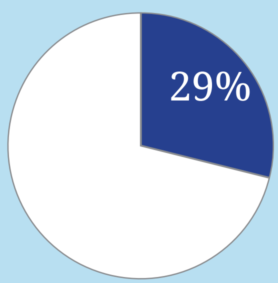

Only 20% say their leader always takes an active role in helping employees to grow and develop their full potential.



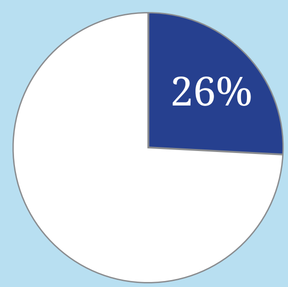

Only 27% say their leader always encourages and recognizes suggestions for improvement.




Only 16% say their leader works to remove roadblocks to their success.




Only 29% say their leader’s vision for the future always seems to be aligned with the organization's.




Only 26% say their leader always responds constructively when employees share their work problems.

# CHAPTER FOUR

# Essential Competencies

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The buzzword "competencies" does not have a solid definition. Competencies are discernible and measurable characteristics that include using knowledge and essential skills, behaviors and abilities that contribute to improved performance. It's the basis for understanding training needs and for coaching an individual's improved performance. Competencies are central to understanding and discussing how the manager's job has changed with the shift to working remotely.

Managers and supervisors in this new work environment have to become leaders. That is to say, they need to trust, guide and inspire their people from a distance. They have to facilitate the collaboration of people working in different locations. They have to empower and support their people in making job-related decisions. They have to support and encourage learning and development from a distance. For many managers, working remotely redefines their role and requires a new approach to supervision and new competencies. The goal is to help them master the new role quickly.

Competencies were first used in HR more than two decades ago. Lists of previously defined competencies for managers are readily available. Interestingly, the lists are all somewhat different. Now the pandemic has forced employers to rethink how managers are to function and the expected behaviors. The competencies that helped managers realize success in the past may no longer be effective.

In a traditional work setting, workers learn the basics of supervision by watching different bosses over time. They learn what's acceptable and effective behavior. They learn what works. They learn what to emulate when they are promoted. But now working remotely requires a new profile of managerial competencies. It's not surprising that everyone was uncomfortable and anxious at the start of the pandemic.

A subtle but important issue is the difference in managerial roles at higher levels in the hierarchy. The competencies important to front line supervisors are not the same as those important to mid-level managers or executives. “Vision” is often mentioned as important to executives but not for supervisors. Furthermore, the competency profile that is ideal for working in a prison is not the same as in a public health facility or in a scientific lab setting. The goal is to define the competencies relevant to a manager’s success in his or her work unit.

The credibility and acceptance of the competencies is important because they are used in performance discussions, in selecting new supervisors and managers through competency and behavioral based interviewing questions, in developing training and development programs, and in recognition and reward decisions. The competency profile is also the basis for deciding when a manager is ineffective and needs to be moved back to a non-supervisory role.

It starts with clearly defining the profile or model of core managerial competencies

*“The pandemic has forced employers to rethink how managers are to function and the expected behaviors. The competencies that helped managers realize success in the past may no longer be effective.”*

and establishing scales—the best to worst behaviors—to assess them. The federal Government Accountability Office adopted the term “role model” to refer to the highest level. The scales also need to define what is unacceptable.

Teams of managers should be tasked with selecting and defining a profile of competencies important to their specific jobs. They know better than any experts what determines a manager’s success. With guidance from a group facilitator, they should be able to complete the task in a few meetings. Their work product is a ‘competency model.’

The most competent managers demonstrate better leadership and overall better team performance. Developing a competency profile can help move an organization from ordinary to extraordinary.

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CHAPTER FIVE

# Selecting Tomorrow's Managers

The expected mass exodus of retirements from government did not occur; instead, it has been a slow stream of retirements. Over the past year there have been layoffs and hiring freezes but with seniority policies that impact recent hires, not managers. As a result, many agencies have de-emphasized succession management and management staffing. It's possible, however, that older managers who this year lived with long hours or are burned out by the problems working through this pandemic will leave soon after the crisis is over. Now, with the end in sight, agencies should shift to preparing their cadre of managers for the new world of work.

A quote from a new book from Gallup, *It's the Manager*, highlights the importance of promoting the right people to managerial roles: "Chances are, for every 10 supervisors you've had throughout your career, you'd probably want to work for only two or three of them again. And that's if you're lucky." Their research shows that "managers account for at least 70% of the variance in team engagement and heavily influence employee wellbeing." Stated differently, having the right managers will result in higher performance.

In addition to satisfactory performance, managers also play a prominent role in developing others and helping them reach their potential. Agencies need managers who nurture employee development and heighten their engagement. Ineffective managers can be very costly.

Research suggests that development is a valuable retention tool. As the economy recovers and job opportunities expand, government's top talent may decide to look for better career opportunities. Well-qualified employees always have other job opportunities. Employees who feel that they are growing and have promising futures are more likely to stay. Those with potential for advancement should be informed.

Government's supervisors and managers are normally promoted from the non-supervisory ranks. For workers in the private sector, the salaries are too low and the prospect of working in a bureaucracy makes the switch unattractive. In the past. the supervisor's role was simple—they made sure employees completed assigned tasks. Promotions were often based on seniority. Performance evaluations have been superficial. Managers and employees are rarely taught how to give and receive feedback. That explains the all too common superficial evaluations provided employees.

That now has to change. Promotions can no longer be based on past performance, technical skills, or seniority. Promotions should be based on evidence an individual is capable of mastering the specific competencies needed to perform satisfactorily at the next level. But the redefined role of managers means HR needs to confirm that recruiting reflects the emerging requirements for future jobs. Well-defined competencies relevant to the job ensure recruiting and staffing, "Get the right people on the bus and the wrong people off the bus," to borrow a phrase from the book, *Good to Great*.

In addition to the competency profile, the selection process should confirm candidates have a positive attitude, are respected by peers, are known for their integrity, and consistently demonstrate the values of the organization.

It's important for leaders periodically to review the way promotions are handled so everyone understands its importance and its rigor.

Within the first 90 days, real-time feedback and coaching should be provided to help managers get off to a good start in their first year. HR should follow up with the new supervisor's direct reports asking for feedback that can be communicated in coaching. If it becomes clear they are unlikely to become effective managers, performance improvement plans help to address concerns early. Early feedback may help to avoid their failure.

One of HR's most important responsibilities is providing for the development of the next generation of leaders.

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> *"One of HR's most important responsibilities is providing for the development of the next generation of leaders."*


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# CHAPTER SIX

## Investing in Manager Effectiveness

The challenges government faces today and in the years to come are myriad and complex, yet with the end of the pandemic in view this is also a time of great opportunity and change. To be able to respond to the public's needs, the government now must focus on developing the leaders—executives and managers—within the agencies ready to drive positive changes and achieve agency goals.

In pre-pandemic times, many jobs in government were routine. Managers could appear to be effective simply by communicating performance expectations and then following up to confirm results. They were in control and relied on maintaining control. That was hardly satisfying to anyone but as long as delays or problems did not occur, all was well. Agencies gave lip service to the importance of employee engagement but it was often not a worksite priority.

All of that has changed. Working remotely makes the old, over-the-shoulder approach to supervision unworkable. It's essential now to focus on the managerial competencies needed to inspire employees who work largely autonomously.

Leaders need to understand the expected payoff from investing in training. They need to learn what can be expected when managers and employees are supported in developing new skills. They need to appreciate the importance of developing tomorrow's leaders. Training is no longer a "nice to have"; it's correctly seen as an investment that should pay off with better results.

When Tennessee initiated civil service reform in the days after Bill Haslam's 2011 inauguration as governor, training was a priority and the investment paid off. It was consistent with his belief that the "team with the best players wins." At the start, the assumption was that the state was responsible for the employee's learning. That changed, making it the employee's responsibility if they want to succeed. In the first five years of his administration, the state's HR department trained almost 2,500 leaders across government. Better management resulted in hundreds of millions in savings. The commitment to employee development also enhanced the state's ability to recruit high-performing employees. Studies show that support for development is a priority for today's job seekers.

The best management development programs include a combination of competencies, behaviors, knowledge, and skills through intense, high impact development and experiential learning known to drive effective job performance.

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Creating a shared leadership language facilitates networking across departments, which has a direct impact on the workforce and contributes to greater opportunities for resource sharing and problem solving. Better-trained managers provide clearer direction and guidance to employees who in turn provide agencies with desired accomplishments and results. They are the keys to employee engagement.

With programs of this type of interaction, managers gain a deeper understanding of what people leadership is all about and how to be most effective in real work situations. Investing in managers produces a pipeline of talent for agencies and expedites the filling of vacancies. As a result, agencies are better equipped to fill leadership voids when current leaders are promoted, move to a different agency, or leave government.

It starts with the training needed to transition successfully from team member to supervisor and to successfully manage people. To support reform and change the way performance was managed, the state invested three years in training and coaching managers, and in securing feedback from managers and employees to fine-tune the outcomes-based management approach.

The state's first Chief Learning Officer (and one of the authors of this ebook) was recognized by *Governing* magazine as being instrumental in the successful transformation of the state workforce. She drove change through continuous improvement, leadership development and employee learning at the macro and micro levels.

The philosophy around investing in manager effectiveness is based on the premise that emerging leaders and current leaders can learn and create solutions that cross agency lines and emphasize resource sharing. It is imperative for public sector organizations to adopt the shared mindset in this fundamental approach to creating leadership bench strength.

BRANISLAV NENIN / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

# CHAPTER SEVEN

# Managing a Manager's Performance

The goal of performance management is the same at every level—to improve an employee's performance both today and into the future. Performance management is best understood as an ongoing responsibility and process carried out by supervisors and managers at every level. It's increasingly acknowledged to be a weakness in both the public and private sectors. That has prompted fresh thinking.

The phrase "performance management" is also used in discussions of an organization's performance. It starts with defining an agency's mission and operational goals. The focus is on performance metrics and the steps to improve results. Many organizations have adopted a balanced scorecard to track and communicate priorities and progress.

At the federal level, the 2010 Government Performance and Results Modernization Act (GPRA) established the framework for holding agencies accountable and for setting performance goals and objectives for each agency. It raised the importance of data and empirical evidence in policy, budget, and management decisions.

In texts on management, a common illustration depicts the use of cascading goals, starting with an organization's goals, followed by the goals of executives and managers at each level. That picture accurately portrays the practice in high performing companies. In this COVID-19 world, it is an important model for all public organizations.

Employee performance management was at one time limited to the annual completion of an appraisal form, based then on checking boxes on a list of generic attributes or dimensions. With managers especially, since each job is in some respect unique, performance criteria should be job specific. The pandemic demands replacing outmoded approaches.

## MANAGING IN A REMOTE WORLD

The job of frontline supervisors used to be simple—tell employees what needs to be done and then maintain oversight as they work. The job was to make certain that employees satisfied expectations.

Now, the new world of work requires practices proven to be productive when that employees and managers may be miles apart. In a remote work environment, employee empowerment is essential. Everyone has to be capable of working independent of direct supervision and accountable for promised deliverables.

Leaders need to understand this is broad scale culture change that requires trust and flexibility. It's been stated often that managers need to become coaches, offering advice as the year unfolds.

In business, goal-based performance management is effectively universal for at least managers and always a consideration in determining salary increases. And yes, the textbook cascading goals is the common model. Best practices call for regular meetings to discuss progress and problems. The meetings allow managers to understand how the year is unfolding and if warranted, redefine goals. Informal coaching is a best practice at any time.

*"In a remote work environment, employee empowerment is essential. Everyone has to be capable of working independent of direct supervision and accountable for promised deliverables."*

## EVALUATING THE PERFORMANCE OF MANAGERS

Managers should be able to state easily what they and their people are expected to accomplish. They also know what would be seen as outstanding performance as well as what would be unacceptable. That's the basis for defining performance goals and the scales to assess how well they perform. In high performing organizations, the culture emphasizes stretch goals.

The acronym SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Timely) provides a consistent approach for managers and employees to define expected performance levels across the organization.

In addition, the pandemic and the importance of coaching highlights the need for new approaches and skills—competencies—to be an effective manager. That is a best practice model for evaluating managers, with goal performance looking back and the competency assessment helping managers going forward.

An added dimension used in business is to ask each manager's direct reports to comment on their effectiveness.

In many companies, the linkage between ratings and rewards is effectively an equation, with goal-based results tied mathematically to pay increases (or incentive awards). When goals are weighted to reflect their importance, it's a straightforward calculation. Throughout the year, as results unfold, managers can estimate what they will earn at year-end. It implicitly reinforces accountability.


CHAPTER EIGHT

# Manager Compensation: Squeezed in the Middle

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It's here that private and public sector differences are the most prominent. Outside of government, the market dictates how executives, managers and supervisors are compensated. Merit salary increase policies are universal. Cash incentives are also universal for executives and managers.

It's not that government should emulate the practices in business; that's not feasible for several reasons. However, there is research evidence confirming a well-managed pay for performance policy—emphasis on "well managed"—contributes to better performance. Reward policies also help to attract high caliber talent. Those practices are important to maintaining a performance culture.

Perhaps the most important difference is the growing gap when the compensation of managers is compared with their counterparts in business. In business, each level of management typically is paid at least 15% to 20% more than the people they manage. Currently, there is no ceiling.

In government, with limited exceptions, the salaries of all levels of management have to be squeezed between the salaries of elected officials and the pay of front line supervisors, dictated by the highest pay of the employees they supervise. That contributes to what in some public organizations is a serious compression problem. It also means promotional increases are limited, making job openings less attractive. The political pressure to hold down salaries continues to be an issue.

Rigid, one-size-fits-all salary systems like the federal General Schedule are problematic for public employers across the country. Writers focus on the high pay of technical specialists but their salaries trigger pressure to raise salaries of the managers above them. That's true in high pay cities and states like New York as well as in states like Maine, where specialists earn less. The differences in pay levels across the country and within states argue for locality pay policies.

## SALARY PLANNING FOR MANAGERS

There are textbook answers for planning salaries for executives to the lowest level non-supervisory jobs. It's based on job matching across a group of employers competing for talent. Over 1,000 salary surveys are conducted annually in every industry and major metropolitan area.

*"Rigid, one-size-fits-all salary systems like the federal General Schedule are problematic for public employers across the country."*

In the typical program model, each level of management needs a salary range. With added layers of management in government organizations, the overlap of the ranges increases, resulting at times in managers being paid more than their boss.

The trends driving up the pay for high demand knowledge jobs like cybersecurity pushed up the pay of supervisors and managers. Based on market pay data, managers in high demand fields should benefit. But that breaches a long standing tradition of treating all managers the same.

## SALARY INCREASES: COST OF LIVING OR MARKET?

The standard practice is to adjust, or at least consider adjusting, salary ranges each year. In the private sector, the budgets are based on market increase trends and planned to remain competitive.

Outside of government, cost-of-living increases were dropped years ago. Market increases for managers and high demand specialists consistently exceed cost of living increases. That has opened a growing gap in income levels over the pay of low skill occupations.

## PAY FOR PERFORMANCE POLICIES

Government's experience with performance pay has been mixed. There are critics as well as union opponents. However, Tennessee's transition to performance pay confirms that with planning and an investment in developing essential managerial capabilities, the policy can be successful and support improved performance.

Making a performance pay policy successful over time requires a commitment to the management of individual performance. Where performance management is limited to checking boxes on an appraisal form and a brief year-end meeting, the policy will fail.

Over time, the salaries of the best performers should increase faster than the average. That sends an important message.

## A NEW, OLD PROGRAM MODEL

There are no obvious answers. The ideas that have emerged in other sectors all break from the traditional salary model in government. Government, however, has a long tradition of separate occupational pay programs (e.g., teachers, police, foreign service). An option would be to create special pay systems for high demand occupations. The importance of the STEMM (science, technology, engineering, math and medicine) job families warrants separate programs. The managers are as important as the specialists.


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# CHAPTER NINE

## Transition Strategy

The shift to working remotely was surprisingly fast and successful. That contradicts the standard argument that large scale organizational change borders on the impossible. Contrary to the track record of previous change initiatives in government, there has been minimal resistance. It confirms that when change is essential, public employees are open to changes needed.

Tennessee's reform strategy is an important model. It started shortly after Governor Haslam's inauguration. He committed to a "top to bottom review" to set priorities and establish measurable goals. One of his announced goals was to build a "winning" workforce. As he commented, "Whether it's in business, government or sports, the team with the best players wins. Unfortunately, in Tennessee state government ... the rules don't allow us to go out and recruit great players." But that changed.

He undertook three initiatives:

1. Each Cabinet member undertook a top to bottom review of his or her agency, asking first if there were services that could be provided more effectively and efficiently by the private sector and second, if the government should be providing the service, is it being provided effectively and efficiently?

2. The deputy governor and human resource commissioner went on an employee listening tour, traveling to major cities in Tennessee to hear how to recruit and retain the best employees.

3. Finally, the commissioner of finance and administration (a former corporate CEO) was surprised to find that citizens were not seen as customers. He created a taskforce of Cabinet members to focus on better serving the government's customers.

The listening tour was similar to a practice

recommended by the Great Places to Work Institute—the use of "Employee Resource Groups" to play a role in defining problems and developing solutions. Their surveys claim ERGs "are found in 90% of Fortune 500 companies." Great Place research has learned that companies that solicit employee ideas "operate with greater agility, realize greater speed in implementation, and have significantly better financial results." Employee teams should play a role in both the planning and the implementation.

The success stories make an important point: This is not an HR problem, it's a management problem. That is a key point in understanding Tennessee's strategy. The state invested three years in training and preparing managers to manage including bringing in coaches.

HR did, however, play a central role. The HR Commissioner, Rebecca Hunter, was a member of the Governor's cabinet. The listening tour defined her image as a leader both within the Cabinet and across state government who was focused on understanding and addressing workforce problems.

HR needs to be seen as acting for top management and working to operationalize the vision of leaders. HR officials can take the lead in keeping employees informed but they are speaking for top management.

*VECTORFUSIONART / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM*

> *"The most important measure of successful change is the support and buy-in of stakeholders; trust is a core issue."*

But the most important measure of successful change is the support and buy-in of stakeholders; trust is a core issue. Gallup's research shows "high trust organizations have an enormous advantage in the speed with which any new initiative will take hold. And even when there are periodic mistakes in decisions or communication, employees will give leaders the benefit of the doubt. But engagement and trust don't happen if they're simply left to chance. Who ultimately fosters trust in all levels of the organization? It's the manager."


# CHAPTER TEN

## Putting it All Together: Moving to High Performance

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One of the most important trends in management over the past two or three decades is the recognition that with a new workforce management philosophy and newer human capital practices, organizations can perform at significantly higher levels. A search on Amazon.com found over 40,000 books on the subject.

It's clearly not a simple problem and the transition will take several years. But to use the title phrase from a NAPA report, there is "no time to wait." Government at all levels has been strained by the COVID crisis, tax revenues are down and budget shortages are on the horizon, students are losing interest in government careers, talent shortages in key occupations are already a problem, and the public's trust in the federal government is hovering at near-record lows.

A report from the Harvard Business School, "[The Impact of Employee Engagement on Performance]" highlights key research findings. In interviews with more than 550 business executives, 71% rank employee engagement as very important to achieving organizational success.

"Business leaders recognize that a highly engaged workforce can increase

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*"The most important measure of successful change is the support and buy-in of stakeholders; trust is a core issue."*

innovation, productivity and bottom-line performance while reducing costs related to hiring and retention in highly competitive talent markets."

They learned the two most impactful drivers of employee engagement are "recognition given for high performers" and "individuals have clear understanding of how their job contributes to strategy." Although the report does not focus on it, it's clear managers are directly accountable for both.

The latter "clear understanding" is a repeat of the first question in Gallup's Q12 survey used to measure engagement: "I know what is expected of me at work." Gallup of course found in its research that managers and their approach to supervision are primarily responsible for employee engagement.

Independent global research led by André de Waal, Director at the Center for Organizational Performance in the Netherlands, found that high performance is attributable to five factors. The first on his list is "management quality." He describes effective managers in an "HPO" (That's a high performance organization) as ones who "maintain trust relationships with employees by valuing their loyalty, treating smart people with respect, creating and maintaining individual relationships with employees, encouraging belief and trust in others, and treating people fairly."

The common thread running through all of this research is the central role of managers. They are primarily responsible for employee engagement—and for high performance. Government surveys reveal problem areas, but there is inadequate followup to improve employees' sense of engagement. The high performance follows when employers actively work to raise engagement scores. Making that a priority will be an effective strategy once the pandemic ends.

Unfortunately, the actions to improve performance require flexible and proactive decisions in the way work and workers are managed. The barrier will be traditional civil service systems that emphasize compliance with rules over effective talent management.

Government is at an inflection point. The pandemic is forcing public employers to learn how best to manage remote employees. Employee empowerment has become the norm. It will take time to gain comfort with this new management model. Preparing managers for their redefined role should be an early priority.

It's not clear how long the pandemic will affect staffing but before the COVID-19 crisis, writers argued the nation's young workers—Millennial and Gen Z job seekers—want to feel a sense of value and meaning in their work. That should be an advantage for public agencies competing for top talent. But it will require the rethinking of long held beliefs and practices. Managers are the key.

# About the Authors

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