

Public Service Talent Management

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Forty years ago the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 was signed into law ushering in sweeping changes to a federal personnel policy system that had been in place for nearly a century. Considered well past due, the revisions promptly garnered bipartisan support from Congress. Perhaps most remarkably, the CSRA was passed and signed into law a little more than a year after the new President proposed the initiative. Stalwarts on Capitol Hill from both sides of the aisle worked through competing legislative initiatives to meld a comprehensive package and forged a modern federal personnel management system superimposed over the framework of the legacy public service foundation laid in the 19th century. Decades later, today it is again the target of multiple proposals for “reform.”

The current clarion call for change to the federal personnel system is a drum beat from very divergent points of view. The concept of a merit based personnel system is under siege from those who view the process as protecting underperformers rather than rewarding qualified professionals. The compensation system, long considered talent market competitive at entry and mid-level ranks, is losing ground after a decade of compression and freezes. And the bipartisan common ground has shifted such that most elected leaders from both political parties have found it popular to relentlessly attack the professionalism of the career public service. To some this may appear to be observations that could have been made at any time and any era in the past with equal applicability. Indeed, public service has never been an easy road for the idealist or suitable to the faint of heart. But there are two significant factors in the present condition which are substantively different than in the past – the confidence of the nation’s citizens in our public institutions has declined, and the nature of work to be performed on behalf of the public has markedly changed.

First, public opinion has sunk to new lows as citizens feel more and more disconnected from the delivery of public services. Substantially better than half of all federal public services are now considered mandatory costs for our nation’s citizens entitled to a variety of benefits. Yet regardless of how much more widely dependent fellow citizens are on services like Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, low income energy assistance, or food stamps, the common public perception is that these essential services are poorly administered by a coterie of incompetent civil servants. Applying for services provided by our national government are generally considered the equivalent of a trip to the state Department of Motor Vehicles for a new license or car registration.

While several initiatives have been launched by successive Administrations and multiple agencies to improve the citizen experience to make the endeavor more akin to “customer friendly” commercial practices, there is little evidence to suggest that this has changed the general public perception. Contracting out, public employee training and varying marketing campaigns have failed to significantly move the needle from the depth of public disdain that persists. Federal and state government agencies can ill afford to give up on service delivery improvement initiatives, but it’s increasingly evident that these efforts alone are insufficient to alter public opinion.

In large measure this is attributable to public leaders campaigning with equal enthusiasm on both sides of the political aisle against bureaucracy and “red tape.” With a few notable exceptions, Presidents and Congress have “run against Washington” or the state government on the premise that career public service quality is the root cause of the prevailing public mood. Altering that view will require focused public leadership and a concerted effort to highlight

performance improvements. To facilitate the effort, research efforts from the academic community on service delivery initiatives will surely enhance the quality of implementation going forward. This would be a valuable contribution to the goal of aligning academic research with current practitioner service delivery challenges and accrue great benefit to the field of public administration.

The second substantial difference between today's call for public service reform and factors which prompted action decades ago is the dramatic change in the nature of the work to be performed in the public sector. Over the last three decades, the federal workforce has experienced successive hiring freezes, an increasingly more cumbersome federal hiring process, long delays in background checks and an occasional jihad by elected leaders to reduce federal direct hire public servants. In each case, successful or not, morale of public servants is in the dumpster.

Given this combative backdrop, program managers and agency leaders have come to the view contracting for services as an expeditious avenue to acquire talent to fill the expertise void. The public debate has been dominated by those who believe that contracting out non-governmental functions is an easier pathway, less costly in the long term and can be temporary in lieu of the arduous task of Reduction-In-Force standards for public servants displaced by workload and program changes. A practice once applied to government industrial activities has now become common practice in most federal agencies and departments for managing programs and delivering public services. But a legacy impact of this practice is that the experience base of the career force has eroded as public servants have come to be more frequently assigned as the reviewers of the work performed by contracted personnel performing the work. With a diminishing knowledge base of those who have actually delivered the public services, the current career force is less informed by hands-on experience to know what constitutes efficiency, effectiveness and innovation to deliver services. And that chasm is widening with each generation of public servants.

Beyond the evolving shift between the public and private sector on where the work is performed, technology developments have yielded a transformative impact on how the work is performed. The working theory of contracting out efficiency is that private sector best practices and bottom line profitability pressure would drive adoption of contemporary practices to accomplish tasks. Instead, many private companies doing business with the government have come to exhibit the culture and practices of their public customers with a focus on controlling head count and minimal capital investment as measures of merit. In effect, many private firms are focused on input controls with less regard for outcomes.

Meanwhile, technology has yielded accelerated applications of automation, process step reductions, fewer maintenance and operations functions, and in some cases, a complete elimination of human interfaces to complete transactions. During this rapidly evolving "second machine age", most federal processes, practices and procedures have slowly changed, if at all. As one stark example, a recent Deloitte Center for Government Insight study of the more than 200,000 sections of the Code of Federal Regulations found that most have not been edited in two decades and two thirds of all sections haven't changed since they were first created. To translate, the data generally suggest that of all the products and services governed by public safety standards, product specifications and quality assurance – to name but a few critical areas -- the widely expanding access of technology developments is not adequately considered in the enforcement of public standards and requirements. By extension, that means the work of

federal public servants who oversee these public standards are engaged in tasks that either don't need to be accomplished the same way or, in some case, not at all.

This argument may seem to suggest to some that this is argument advocating a reach back to the pre-Waldo standards of public administration as a scientific discipline to inform economy and efficiency of public policy and program delivery. To the contrary, the view seeks to highlight the reality that even if policy objectives are unchanged, the requisite for public servants and the work that must be performed by them has changed dramatically since the last federal personnel system revisions were enacted.

Several panels and research project teams are busy assembling recommendations for the next federal civil service reform initiative. To be relevant, the thinking is generally fashioned in consideration of these two factors, among others, in framing recommended actions. To inform these efforts, the considerable body of academic research around these issues will require close collaboration with public leadership promoting policy reform, and practitioners charged with implementation. But the imperative is clear. Consensus on the need for federal personnel policy reform doesn't happen very often. While the events may not drive an imperative to act, it has been building for four decades and will reach critical mass at some point. What hangs in the balance is the very foundation of what defines public service as a professional calling.