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Information
Technology

Management
Issues

Homeland
Security

Procurement

Postal News

Business Report

Career Info

Personal Finance

Spotlight

Commentary

Weekly Poll

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Interventions Give Employees Input in Performance Culture

By HERB SELESNICK

The past decade has seen a growing number of congressional and presidential mandates for results-based management. This top-level guidance toward what is increasingly being referred to as a performance culture has significant consequences for federal agencies.

A performance culture is oriented toward results. It depends upon agreed-upon goals, and it closely measures and analyzes performance in relation to whether those goals are attained. The natural strength of a performance culture is that it sets high standards and enables individuals to stand out.

When taken to excess, however, a performance culture can allow managers to lose sight of the human element in the workplace, take employees for granted, make employees feel insecure by continuously pressuring them to exceed established productivity goals, and routinely pass up legitimate opportunities for team efforts and rewards in favor of individual competition and recognition.

Well-meaning but overly enthusiastic implementation of a performance culture may put an agency's human capital at serious risk and actually block performance improvement. Employees in an agency's front-line work force may be constantly insecure because they feel that they are overworked and undervalued, that leadership is never satisfied, that they are always underperforming, and that they work in a cold and insensitive place where their personal concerns are regarded as annoyances.

A performance culture can only achieve its intended outcomes in agency environments where the emphasis on achieving the best possible results is balanced with a focus on working with employees' varying motivations, talents, circumstances and needs.

As an agency transitions toward more results-based management, managers can identify and remove the potential imbalances of a performance culture with interventions — a set of structured activities designed to help employees accomplish their work more effectively and with greater satisfaction.

Interventions typically provide participants with a systematic framework they can use to determine where they are overdoing some things or underemphasizing others, and exactly what elements need to be adjusted in their workplace for better balance and greater effectiveness. An example of an intervention is a facilitated meeting in which front-line employees provide senior managers with feedback on wasteful work practices and propose ways to improve efficiency.

Interventions are an opportunity for candid conversations about the causes behind workplace problems. Because these discussions and debates are typically grounded in hard numbers and carefully documented examples, participating managers and employees take the feedback seriously. It acts as a clear barometer of workplace conditions that are, for the most part, within their capacity to change.

The dialogue makes it acceptable for participants to discuss issues and problems that perhaps had not been explored openly before. As they agree upon the steps necessary to make their work more valuable and their job more satisfying, participants become energized by the feeling that they can create a positive difference in their workplace culture.

Workplace interventions bring to the surface a level of detail that is often visible to front-line employees and managers, but often not to higher levels of management. Across an agency's work force, positive change at a detailed level can increase efficiency and become a stimulus for organizational performance improvement at least as important as the agencywide human-capital initiatives undertaken by top management.

Private-sector organizations have used workplace interventions to boost front-line engagement and have subsequently measured significant improvements in organizational performance. These effects are centered on work groups, but they can be repeated across an entire agency — enabling it to maintain well-balanced workplace environments that develop and sustain a results-oriented culture and a high-performing work force.

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