

AN ESSENTIAL BUILDING BLOCK FOR THE PUBLIC WORKFORCE



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With an unprecedented convergence of workforce trends impacting public-sector employment -- from accelerating retirements to hiring that has increased to no more than an uptick due to the lingering effects of the Great Recession -- it's more important than ever for governments to think about better ways to not only attract top performers but also to keep them.

This calls for progressive and practical strategies and tools. One of the most important of those is a robust career management program for public employees.

Career management is not simply about employees accumulating years of service or improving their technical proficiency. The dimension receiving increasing attention is the development of non-technical skills such as communication, delegation, motivation and critical thinking. These are often referred to as "soft" skills, when in fact they are the hardest to acquire. But they are essential to succeeding in supervisory and management positions.

Moreover, the whole concept of a career in government is transitioning from the traditional ladder of upward mobility to more of a lattice in which employees move in different dimensions. Today's employees might move up, sideways or in both dimensions.

In that environment, a forward-looking career management strategy -- one whose message is "Join us and stay with us because we will help you realize your potential" -- is essential to keeping top performers as well as recruiting qualified candidates. Here are some of the most important components of an effective program:

Career counseling: Counseling can help employees determine which skills to develop to prepare for future promotional opportunities. Such a program might include a competency assessment and employee development plan with recommended training. An in-depth career path would outline steps and competencies required for supervisory or management positions.

Learning opportunities: Develop a series of courses that can equip employees with the requisite leadership, management and supervisory skills. Incorporate traditional topics such as managing employee feedback, business writing, communication skills and delegation as well as emerging topics such as leading change, fostering innovation and performance management.

Mentoring: Establish a pool of employees who are willing to share their knowledge with others. A mentoring program is an easy and inexpensive way to effectively transfer accumulated knowledge about agency operations from senior to junior employees as well as to support employees who want to further their knowledge and skills for career advancement.

Development on the job: Target potential leaders with opportunities to position themselves for advancement. Rotating job assignments, "acting" roles and "shadowing" - learning by accompanying and observing somebody who already holds a desired job -- are attractive to top performers who want to stretch themselves.

Implementing a career management program incorporating these components will allow employees to create a career path from any starting point. They can discover qualities about themselves, develop important leadership skills, learn from a mentor and tackle new and challenging assignments.

A strong career management system doesn't pay dividends only to employees. It holds the promise of improving the delivery of public services and preventing the kind of workforce stagnation that produces low performance. Ask yourself, "What if we don't develop our people and they stay?"



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