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Article

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Public Administration Review

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Perry, Mesch, and Paarlberg

Motivating Employees in a New Governance Era: The Performance Paradigm Revisited

Professors Perry, Mesch, and Paarlberg's "review of reviews" compiles the findings of research conducted to date to assess the impact of motivational programs on "reliable role behaviors" and "innovative and spontaneous activity." Presumably measuring these "behavioral outcomes" gives us reliable indicators of performance changes in both private and public sector organizations. In their article, the authors tell us what has worked and what has not worked, and identify areas for future research. In my view, their work is invaluable as a roadmap for organizations thinking about designing and implementing motivational programs, and for future research as well.

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I would contend, however, that the insights afforded by the authors' review of existing literature on motivational theory and its links to performance need to be supplemented by a broader focus than that which apparently has been used by researchers in the past. In particular, the success of agencies in motivating performance in the federal government (where my experience lies) is to a great extent dependent on the perceptions of careerists regarding the seriousness and commitment of the President, his appointees, and the Congress to improving agency performance.

How serious have presidents, their political appointees, and various congresses been about

using the most rudimentary knowledge—let alone theories—of motivation to enhance the performance of public agencies? Focusing exclusively on the federal government, I would argue that three sets of interrelated questions have to be answered affirmatively before we can take seriously the commitment to performance motivation of any Congress or White House. As such, I would pose three sets of questions directly to these elected officials and their appointees:

(1) Have you afforded agencies a sufficient mix of tools and discretion to link motivational theory to performance?

(2) Does increasing organizational performance matter to you, and if it does, how will you measure it? If increasing organizational performance does matter, are you willing to take time away from creating public policy to spend more time leading the implementation of motivation-performance policies?

(3) Do you feel confident that you have the discipline and skill to lead the transformational organizational change effort necessary to implement a motivational program—given the fact that successful transformational efforts take seven to ten years, resistance will be predictably large, and your tenure as a political appointee is limited? More specifically, do you have the discipline and skill to improve the necessary mediating variables identified by the authors of this article to implement a motivational program that improves individual and organizational performance for 1.9 million federal employees?

I would argue that little evidence exists to suggest that positive answers presently exist to these three questions. I come to this conclusion after evaluating how both the White House and the Congress have created and

made use of these motivational tools, illustrating their limited focus on pay-for-performance tools and the gap between their promise and performance. I conclude by offering a brief research agenda, the results of which I view as critical for the consideration of any President or Congress serious about linking motivation to performance in federal agencies. It is also a research agenda that is essential to advancing both practice and theory building through empirical examination of what works and what does not work in federal agencies as the latest wave of reforms proceeds apace.

Toward a Broad-Based Serious Commitment to Motivating Performance?

In the federal sector, what might be termed an "organizational commitment" to linking motivational theory to performance cannot be evaluated without looking at the role Congress and the President play in performance management. In effect, we need to explore the organizational commitment of the Congress, which serves in effect as the executive branch's board of directors, and the organizational commitment of the President—the chief executive officer (CEO) of the executive branch—together with his political appointees. A key way to assess this organizational commitment is to examine the sets of tools that they historically have provided for themselves for doing so. Overwhelmingly, such a review will demonstrate that these tools have been limited to pay-for-performance and linked inelegantly to the theories of motivation underlying it.

The post-World War II Classification Act of 1949 created a single hierarchy of white-collar positions in the federal government. As most readers know, the levels developed under the act were used to create the General Schedule, which consists of 15 pay levels, each with ten steps. An employee advances from one step to the next—receives a so-

called within-grade pay increase—after serving minimum time in a step and being evaluated satisfactorily (James 2002). As most also know, the General Schedule pay system often is criticized for failing to link effectively federal employee pay to individual or agency performance.

To address this problem, President Jimmy E. Carter convinced Congress to enact the Civil Service Reform Act (CSRA) of 1978.¹ The CSRA mandated agencies to create goals and translate those goals into individual employee goals. Critical elements of every federal job were to be defined and individual performance standards created. The goal was to link within-grade pay increases to individual performance.² Yet, although agencies spent a great deal of time and effort defining critical elements of jobs, the effort ultimately failed. Agencies were unable and/or unwilling to set individualized performance standards and managers were reluctant to link within-grade increases to performance.

With evidence of perhaps a bit more success, the CSRA also allowed the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to create financial incentive (pay-for-performance) demonstration projects, each of which could cover up to 5,000 employees for five years.³ Twelve projects covering approximately 85,000 employees ultimately were approved (OPM 2005). OPM has noted that "employees in the demonstration projects reported a much stronger link between pay and performance than under the General Schedule system," and after four years, the Air Force Research Laboratory reported that "[p]erformance accounted for 25 percent of differences in pay, compared to 0 percent under the General Schedule system" (OPM 2005, 3).

Recognizing past failures, however, Congress enacted the Government Performance

and Results Act (GPRA) in 1993.⁴ In doing so, it directed every federal agency to submit a five-year strategic plan containing a mission statement; "general goals and objectives, including outcome-related goals and objectives"; and a description of how the goals are to be achieved, "including a description of the operational processes, skills and technology, and the human capital, information, and other resources required to meet those goals and objectives."⁵ Section 4 of the act requires each agency to submit an annual report of results to Congress.

Congress also moved beyond goal setting in GPRA to grant the authority to create pay-for-performance systems⁶ to the Federal Aviation Administration in 1996 and to the Internal Revenue Service⁷ in 1998. However, Congress's legislative attempts did not have quick results. In 2001, Comptroller General David Walker put strategic human capital on the General Accounting Office's (GAO) high-risk list: "Inattentiveness to strategic human capital management has created a government-wide risk—one that is fundamental to the federal government's ability to effectively service the American people" (GAO 2001, 72). Importantly, Walker focused on the critical need to create "results-oriented organizational cultures" (GAO 2001, 71).

Then, in 2002, OPM Director Kay Coles James published *A Fresh Start for Federal Pay: The Case for Modernization* (James 2002). She urged Congress to give the executive branch more flexibility in classifying positions and creating pay-for-performance systems. The report pointed out that the Classification Act of 1949 created a centralized, inflexible system for a workforce that was then 70 percent clerical as opposed to today's 70 percent "knowledge worker" workforce. Change was needed to reflect these developments.

In 2003, Congress next granted OPM the authority to approve a new system for career Senior Executive Service pay⁸ in agencies that had created and implemented a pay-for-performance system. The new system was to be "based on individual performance, contribution to the agency's performance, or both...."⁹ The goal was to create a system with "meaningful distinctions based on relative performance."¹⁰ Congress has given the two largest grants of authority to create pay-for-performance systems to the Secretary of Homeland Security in 2002¹¹ and to the Secretary of Defense in 2004.¹² Each secretary was also empowered to waive existing laws in the process of creating their department's pay-for-performance system.

The pay-for-performance motivational program train in the federal government is clearly moving. This may not be bad. For example, research conducted by Booz Allen Hamilton at the Department of Commerce partially mirrors the conclusions offered by the authors in this article (BAH 2003). BAH's study used individual performance and compensation data (e.g., performance-based pay increases, performance bonuses, more flexible pay increases upon promotion, and supervisory performance pay), and applied the data to a Demonstration Group of 2,641 employees and a Control Group of 1,821 employees (BAH 2003, 17).

Booz Allen Hamilton concluded that "a positive relationship [exists] between financial rewards and performance" (BAH 2003, 9). The question, however, is whether the train has a destination, and if so, will it ever arrive? Will it improve individual and organizational performance, or will it stall or crash along the way as have past efforts? An exploration of the answers to the questions I posed to the President and Congress may give us a clue.

Does Congress Really Care About Increasing Executive Branch Performance?

Does increasing the organizational performance of the executive branch matter to the legislative branch of the federal government, and if so, how much? Legislation concerning goal setting does not guarantee that Congress will use the information to improve agency performance. Nor does granting authority to create pay-for-performance systems guarantee that discretion will be exercised to increase performance. I would argue that Congress has delegated authority to executive branch agencies, but has not effectively managed that delegation to ensure that goals of increased performance are achieved.

For example, it was assumed that the passage of GPRA would lead Congress to shift its historic focus solely from public policy creation to include the effective implementation of public policy. That assumption has not been borne out. Despite the congressional rhetoric about the need to improve performance and occasional congressional hearings concerning public policy implementation breakdowns (e.g., the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and Columbia; the Federal Emergency Management Agency and Katrina), neither appropriations nor authorization committees have engaged agencies on a regular, ongoing basis concerning agency programmatic results. Similarly, Congress has not linked budget resources to the levels of agency performance achieved.

Showing frustration over these results, Comptroller General Walker, in a 1999 high-risk management report, urged Congress to redress this situation, a request that has been routinely renewed ever since:

We [the GAO] have long advocated that congressional committees of jurisdiction

hold augmented oversight hearings on each of the major agencies at least once each Congress and preferably on an annual basis. Information on the linkages among plans, programs, budgets, and program results—which should become available as agencies' implementation of performance based management moves forward—could provide a consistent starting point for each of these hearings" (Walker 1999, 27).

Some members of Congress have recognized its failure to engage agencies in public policy implementation. For example, Senator Tom Coburn (R-OK), at a recent Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information, and International Security hearing, chided his colleagues for not using Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) scores to make budget decisions (Mandel 2006).¹³ Likewise, Representative John Tanner (D-TN) recently introduced legislation (H Res. 841) that would require congressional hearings whenever:

- (1) an agency's inspector general identifies waste, fraud, or abuse in excess of \$1,000,000;
- (2) the Government Accountability Office (GAO) identifies an agency as high risk for mismanagement; or
- (3) agency auditors issue disclaimers to an agency's audit.

The legislation also would require two hearings a year on Office of Management and Budget (OMB) programmatic performance reviews using the President's PART. Even if enacted to create more congressional oversight, these legislative proposals still do not

address congressional failure to base funding allocations on agency performance.

I would add that the traditional role of an enterprise's board of directors is to give direction to the CEO and employees. Specifically, a board defines goals and results measurement, giving the CEO clear direction for the organization and a yardstick to evaluate achievement. However, Congress has not performed like a traditional board of directors. Although Congress tells the executive branch what it wants by creating public policy, it has not set performance goals to measure implementation of that policy. When significant programmatic failures occur, Congress tells the executive branch what it does not want. However, it routinely fails to define success. Nor is there any alignment between the congressional and executive branches concerning what constitutes performance or performance improvement.

Why Congress fails to perform this role is beyond the scope of this commentary. It is not difficult, however, to speculate on why this happens and why this failure leads to the creation of executive branch motivational programs that fail to increase organizational performance appreciably (if at all). For example, without a commonly accepted definition of performance, the executive branch must proceed unilaterally to define organizational goals; to then align those goals with individual jobs; to link the jobs back to organizational performance; and, finally, to link the jobs to the market so pay can be set. Then, after all this calculation, agencies and departments often face congressional disagreement with the performance goals, or fail to fund the system to meet even those agreed-upon goals. Since proceeding under these circumstances has a high risk of failure, career civil servants responsible for cre-

ating and implementing pay-for-performance systems in the federal government may resist short-term political appointees' efforts to do so.

Has Performance Really Mattered to Presidents Historically?

Is increasing organizational performance important to most presidents and their political appointees? If importance is evidenced by *rhetoric*, organizational performance matters greatly. Almost all recent presidents have complained about "Washington," the "bureaucracy," and the lack of federal employee efficiency and effectiveness, and have vowed to improve the system. If concern is measured by *action* taken to improve organizational performance, however, Presidents William J. Clinton and George W. Bush have cared the most. President Clinton made "reinventing government" a centerpiece of his administration. A government-wide initiative was undertaken to improve organizational performance by changing and improving work processes. President Bush, however, has taken perhaps the most dramatic steps to improve government performance in issuing his President's Management Agenda (PMA) in the summer of 2001. The PMA is described on the OMB website as an "an aggressive strategy for improving the management of the Federal government."¹⁴

Although a public scorecard was created by the OMB and the OPM to evaluate progress¹⁵ on meeting the administration's six management goals, the scorecard only measures "improving management." But such a measure does not necessarily guarantee improved organizational performance. For example, successfully linking budget to performance—one of the PMA initiatives—provides information about costs and results. However, it does not guarantee that the information will be used to improve results.

Recognizing this problem, OMB began in 2002 to evaluate approximately 800 federal government programs using PART. This tool asks 25 questions about factors affecting and reflecting program performance, including program purpose and design; performance measurement, evaluations, and strategic planning; program management; and program results. OMB stated, "Because the PART includes a consistent series of analytical questions, it allows programs to show improvements over time, and allows comparisons between similar programs."¹⁶ Its results are publicly reported at the website, *expectmore.gov*.

For the first time in history, there is now an attempt to create a common definition of performance across the federal government. If successful—and there are significant impediments to success, particularly in obtaining program evaluation information (GAO 2005)—Congress, stakeholders, the press, the public, and federal managers and employees may be able to measure performance for every federal government program using the same yardstick.

Do This President and His Department-Level Appointees Really Care About Improving Performance?

The Bush administration's effort to implement a commonly accepted performance measurement system reflects significant concern for increasing the performance of government agencies. However, the question remains as to how much performance really matters to the Bush administration. I would argue that the best way to measure commitment to a program is to add up the amount of time spent on it. President Bush and his appointees, like all presidents and political appointees in the past, are almost entirely focused on creating public policy. They are engaged in the traditional activities of marshalling support for new legislation, issuing

new regulations that distinguish their ideas from those of their opponents, and resisting the legislative thrusts of opponents.

Thus, although President Bush created the PART process, he and his department secretaries spend little time discussing how to improve PART scores. For example, there are no cabinet meetings called to discuss best practices for increasing programmatic results. The President does not have discussions with departmental secretaries about such issues as how to solve strategic management problems, new strategies to increase organizational performance, or how to use technology to improve results. Nor is there any evidence that the President and/or his department secretaries will change their current focus in the near future. Therefore, it is extremely unlikely that the CEO of the executive branch and the cabinet will allocate the time necessary to lead the creation and implementation of motivational programs like pay-for-performance. As a result, the risk of implementation failure is substantially increased for even the most theoretically grounded effort.

In contrast, the GAO, a legislative branch agency given the authority to implement a pay-for-performance system, is headed by Comptroller General Walker. As a former partner and global managing director of the human capital services practice of Arthur Anderson LLP (1989-1998), he has the skills, passion, and the "political time" given his appointment tenure to create the transformational effort necessary to implement a successful pay-for-performance system. In a recent presentation, he acknowledged that GAO is a relatively small, 5,000-person, homogenous workforce made up primarily of analysts and attorneys. He stated that he "spends 40 percent of his time on human capital issues," and unlike his counterparts in the executive branch, his 15-year term

gives him the opportunity to initiate and complete "the transformational effort associated with implementing a pay-for-performance system that usually takes seven to 10 years" (Tobias 2006).

Do Sub-Cabinet Level Appointees Have the Knowledge, Skill, and Persistence Necessary to Implement Successful Motivational Programs?

Comptroller Walker's situation certainly contrasts greatly with the situation in most departments and agencies. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS)¹⁷ and the Department of Defense (DOD),¹⁸ for example, are on a congressionally mandated fast track to implement all four motivational programs reviewed by Professors Perry, Mesch, and Paarlberg. More precisely, the DHS's MAX HR¹⁹ and the DOD's National Security Personnel System²⁰ are called upon to implement financial incentives, job design, goal setting, and employee participation with sequential groups of employees.

Including all four motivational programs constitutes the largest organizational change effort we have seen in Washington. Thus, as Perry, Mesch, and Paarlberg's review of reviews finds, success will depend on political appointees below the secretaries of Defense and Homeland Security collaborating with career civil service leaders to acquire the requisite skills. They also must be willing to do the following:

- lead the creation and acceptance of a performance management system that defines individual performance in terms of organizational performance;
- change their own behavior—and lead efforts to change the behavior of every employee—with respect to defining performance expectations, conducting performance reviews, preparing performance evaluations, and successfully differentiating

among employees' performances so as to create acceptance for the performance pay awarded;

- link successful performance achievement to performance rewards;
- manage any resistance by employees and managers; and
- deal with congressional skepticism.

As many *PAR* readers appreciate, and as the authors' distillation of motivational research suggests, changing individual behavior is difficult. Even more so is stimulating behavioral change in approximately 850,000 federal employees in DOD and DHS. Indeed, it is the ultimate challenge. At this stage, there is little evidence that either political appointees below the secretary level or career senior executives have the skills—and, more importantly, the interest—to implement such an agenda. Conventional wisdom, plus the observations of my fellow commentators with experience in federal agencies, dictates that without support and interest from the secretaries, those below will be reluctant to take the risk of implementing a program that employees and their unions already are resisting vigorously.

Nonetheless, in July 2005, OMB Deputy Director for Management Clay Johnson released a draft of an administration-sponsored bill entitled the Working for America Act (WAA). The major goal of the act is to replace the General Schedule pay structure with a pay-for-performance system and phase it in by 2010 in all civilian agencies outside of DHS and DOD. If the WAA is enacted, agencies would have the authority to design and implement a pay-for-performance system unique to their agency. Unlike the DOD and DHS, however, the WAA does not allow other executive branch agencies to implement a pay-for-performance system until OPM certifies them as capable of creating and implement-

ing such a system (Rutzick 2005). When the Bush administration was unable to obtain sponsors for its legislation, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) announced it was requiring all agencies to create small tests of programs that include goal setting and bonuses linked to goal achievement. The goal, according to OPM, is to prove to Congress that federal agencies are capable of implementing financial incentive motivational programs (Rutzick 2006).

Conclusion: The Need for Quality Research is Imperative

It is clear that the targets for motivational program research in the federal government are vast and extremely important. Large sums of dollars and organizational energy will be spent on creating these pay-for-performance programs and attempting to implement them. Whether they have positive, negative, or no impact on the way federal programs are run is important to the public, the Congress, the President, and the employees who are supposed to be motivated by the interventions. Will the programs be declared a success in the time-honored fashion many federal employees have experienced in the past? Typically, no "pilot" programs supported by political appointees ever fail. Only good research conducted over time on the Bush administration's initiatives can help avoid this outcome in the future. That research should build on and extend the insights afforded by Professors Perry, Mesch, and Paarlberg in their review of reviews of the motivation-performance literature.

What might such a research agenda look like? I offer several modest proposals in the hope that they will stimulate future research. First, I would suggest collecting data to compare the impact of differences in leader knowledge, skills, and interest as reflected in the passion and personal time spent by offi-

cials involved at DOD, DHS, and the GAO as they implement the motivational programs envisioned. This research could shed light on why programs fail, how risks may be mitigated, and what factors ultimately lead to program goal achievement.

Relatedly, I would encourage researchers to collect and analyze data measuring the impact of several key contextual factors on the success or failure of the Bush administration's motivational initiatives. Most important in this regard, I suspect, would be factors such as political and career leader commitment to the initiatives. Also important would be gauging the attitudes of rank-and-file federal employees toward these efforts and, most significantly, their perceptions of the seriousness of the President and his appointees toward improving performance. Also relevant would be gauging how variations in program design and funding of the initiatives affected their success. Again, comparing DOD, DHS, and the GAO on these dimensions could be revealing.

A third avenue for future research lies in linking federal sector financial incentive interventions (using the data supplied to Booz Allen Hamilton) to programmatic evaluations now being conducted by the OMB. In regard to the latter, use might be made of the PART's evaluations of programmatic performance results. Using these two data sources, researchers might be able to begin answering the question of whether individual success reported by Booz Allen Hamilton translates into organizational success as reported by PART. Similarly, and directly linked to the Perry, Mesch, and Paarlberg findings, researchers might use regular employee surveys conducted by the OPM to determine the impact of mediating variables on behavioral outcomes of the motivational programs.²¹ With the introduction of motivational programs across the federal govern-

ment, there are many research opportunities being created.

Finally, research also might be directed at the impact of the "organizational commitment" to performance improvement of elected officials (the President, his political appointees, and the Congress) as a "mediating variable" or causal link among a motivational program, behavioral outcomes, and program results. As I noted earlier, while private sector leaders focus largely on improving organizational productivity to improve the bottom line, public sector political leaders tend to be much more interested in creating new public policy. Lost in the process can be any hope of improving the implementation of motivational programs. Given the fact that we now have an opportunity to examine the impact of federal sector—both political and career executive—leadership on the effectiveness of the design and implementation of motivational programs, we should seize the moment.

In sum, Professors Perry, Mesch, and Paarlberg have neatly alerted us to what we think we know about motivation and its link to performance. From their efforts, *PAR* readers will benefit greatly as they think about, analyze, and evaluate this latest round of presidential and congressional efforts to link pay-for-performance to results in the federal government.

Notes

1. Public Law 95-454, *Civil Service Reform Act of 1978*, October 13, 1978.
2. 5 USC 4302.
3. 5 USC 4703.
4. Public Law 103-62, *Government Performance and Results Act*, Section 2(b)(3), January 3, 1993.
5. 5 USC Section 5306(a)(1)-(6).
6. Public Law 104-50, *Department of Transportation and Related Agencies Appropriations Act*, November 15, 1995.
7. Public Law 105-206, *Internal Revenue Service Restructuring and Reform Act*, July 22, 1998.

8. Public Law 108-136, *Senior Executive Service Reform Act of 2003* (contained in *Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2004*), November 24, 2003.
9. 5 USC 5382(a).
10. 5 USC 5382(b).
11. Public Law 107-296, *Homeland Security Act of 2002*, November 25, 2002.
12. Public Law 108-136, *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2004*, November 24, 2003.
13. A full explanation of the Program Assessment and Rating Tool is provided by the OMB at www.whitehouse.gov/omb/part/index.html. Program ratings conducted by OMB may be found at expectmore.gov.
14. www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budintegration/pma_index.html.
15. www.whitehouse.gov/results/agenda/scorecard.html.
16. www.whitehouse.gov/omb/part/index.html.
17. Public Law 107-296, *Homeland Security Act of 2002*, November 25, 2002.
18. Public Law 108-136, *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2004*, November 24, 2003.
19. 5 CFR, Subpart B, Classification, Section 9701.201 et. seq.; 5 CFR, Subpart C, Pay and Pay Administration, Section 9701.301 et. seq.; 5 CFR, Subpart D, Performance Management, Section 9701.401 et. seq.
20. DOD 1400.25-M, SC 140 Chapter 1940. www.cpms.osd.mil/nsps/docs/1940PerformanceManagement.pdf. See also www.cpms.osd.mil/nsps/performance_management.html for a full description of the National Security Personnel System.
21. The results of the 2002 Federal Human Capital Survey may be found at www.fhcs2002.opm.gov, and the results of the 2004 Federal Human Capital Survey may be found at www.fhcs2004.opm.gov. An analysis of the Federal Human Capital Survey that rates and ranks federal agencies based on the survey results may be found at bestplacestowork.org.

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