

Getting Better All the Time:

Cultivating a Positive Workplace in the Public Sector

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This study recommends the cultivation of a positive workplace environment by focusing on Deputy Ministers as heads of their departments. We aim to incentivize these top civil servants by tying a percentage of DM performance pay to the results from the Public Service Employees Survey (PSES) in his/her department. This scheme will have two phases. The remedial phase will aim to achieve a departmental improvement rating of 1-2%. Afterwards, departments will enter a maintenance phase to ensure the sustainability of the process. We advocate this programme on the grounds that it is an effective yet cost-efficient solution.

The Canadian federal public service is a workforce of 257,034 participants, representing a significant investment in human capital.¹ Civil servants' intellectual, technical, and interpersonal competencies make up the vast reservoir of expertise that gives the bureaucracy its *raison d'être*. Statistics nevertheless show declining levels of worker satisfaction and well-being. According to the 2014 Public Service Employee Survey, only 74% found their jobs satisfying, a drop of two percentage points from 2011. A mere 57% acknowledged receiving "meaningful recognition for work well done," down from 59%. Only 62% believed that they had some measure of "input" over their daily tasks, which is a significant decline of six percentage points.² Meanwhile excessive stress at the executive level is compromising physical and mental health in the senior ranks.³

This essay argues that the cultivation of a positive, collaborative workplace environment will help decrease stress, improve motivation, and promote well-being across all levels of the public service. Despite best intentions, initiatives to improve workplace culture will likely prove

¹ *Population of the Federal Public Service*. Catalogue number 95F0487XCB2001004, Statistics Canada, November

² *2014 Public Service Employee Survey - Summary Report*. Catalogue number BT1-34/2014E, Statistics Canada (Ottawa, Ottawa: Government of Canada, 2015), <http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/psmfpm/modernizingmodernisation/psessaff/dr-rd-eng.asp>, accessed December 2 2015 [hereafter PSES 2014].

³ *2012 Executive Work and Health Survey Synopsis* (Ottawa, Ontario: Association of Professional Executives of the Public Service of Canada, 2013), <http://www.apex.gc.ca/uploads/key%20priorities/health/2012%20health%20survey%20results%20-%20eng.pdf>, accessed December 3 2015.

haphazard without a strong framework of accountability. We recommend reforming Deputy Ministers' existing performance pay so that a portion of their reimbursement depends on their ability to foster a congenial work environment within their respective departments. The Public Service Employee Survey will be used to measure their success or failure in this regard. Our proposed solution uses financial incentive to encourage innovative action at the highest executive level. At the same time, it adapts existing infrastructures in order to keep costs low. This essay will begin with a detailed plan for implementation. It will then discuss some of the benefits of the recommended approach, as well as some challenges that may arise.

Background

The new Liberal Government has vowed to repair the political executive's relationship with the federal public service following the deterioration of that partnership during the previous Conservative regime.⁴ The Liberals inherit a workplace where levels of stress, job dissatisfaction, lack of engagement, and mental illnesses have reached worrying heights.⁵ The new government must work with senior management to instill a positive workplace culture in order to remain a competitive and efficient employer. Supportive work environments are not only an ethical matter: there are concrete benefits to be gained.⁶ Contentment and empowerment

⁴ Kathryn May, "Scott Brison at Treasury Board Must Grapple with Public Service Problems," *Ottawa Citizen*, November 4 2015, <http://ottawacitizen.com/news/national/scott-brison-at-treasury-board-must-grapple-with-public-service-problems>, accessed December 2 2015; "Canadians Voted for Change, PSAC Calls on New Parliament to Restore Public Services and Repair Relations with Federal Public Service Employees," October 19 2015, <http://psacunion.ca/canadians-voted-change-psac-calls-newparliament>, accessed December 2 2015.

⁵ See PSES 2014 and note the downward trend particularly in the areas of worker engagement (p.6), empowerment (p.11) and work-life balance (p.11). See also Craig Dowden, "Maximizing Employee Engagement within the Federal Public Service: An Evidence-Based Perspective," Association of Professional Executive of the Public Service of Canada (APEX) White Paper, (Ottawa, Ontario: Government of Canada, 2015), pp. 4-5.

⁶ For instance, it is estimated that workplace mental illness alone costs the Canadian economy \$33 billion per year. See "Mental Health in the Workplace," Mood Disorders Society of Canada, 2015, <http://www.mooddorderscanada.ca/page/no-1-health-and-wellness-in-the-workplace>, accessed December 3 2015.

lead to higher performance levels.⁷ Reduced stress will contribute to better health, resulting in lower absenteeism and fewer demands on employer-funded benefit plans.⁸ Lower worker turnover will reduce the resources needed to adjudicate applicants and train new employees. Finally, a positive work environment will help the government attract new recruits, a timely factor given its aging employee demographic.⁹

We recognize that it is not possible to eliminate entirely factors such as stress, mental illness, lack of engagement and job dissatisfaction from the workplace. We do, however, believe that a positive work environment will help curb these tendencies so that they are no longer excessive. Entry-level workers can suffer from a lack of autonomy, under-utilization of skills, and repetitive tasks. Job insecurity and low pay can also cause dissatisfaction. Conversely, senior ranks suffer from high workloads, tight deadlines, and uncertainty regarding their roles and responsibilities as supervisors. Employees at all levels may face low levels of professional recognition as well as low interpersonal support from colleagues.¹⁰ *A positive work environment* may therefore be defined as one characterized by civility, respect, and professionalism at all levels.¹¹ Employees will be given clear instructions and constructive feedback yet they will be trusted to use their own initiative.¹² Input will flow from the bottom-up as well as top-

⁷ For the relationship between incivility and reduced workplace performance see Craig Dowden, “Civility Matters! An Evidence Based Review on How to Cultivate a Respectful Federal Public Service,” Association of Professional Executive of the Public Service of Canada (APEX) White Paper (Ottawa, Ontario: Government of Canada, 2015), pp. 7-11, <http://www.apex.gc.ca/uploads/key%20priorities/white%20papers/civility%20report%20-%20eng.pdf>.

⁸ Linda Duxbury, “Dealing with Work-Life Issues in the Workplace: Standing Still is Not an Option,” Don Wood Lecture in Industrial Relations (Kingston, Ontario: Queen’s University, 2004), pp. 13-17; *Making the Case for Investing in Mental Health in Canada* (Ottawa, Ontario: Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2013), <http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/document/5210/makingcase-investing-mental-health-canada-background-key-facts>, accessed December 2 2015.

⁹ Willow S. Jacobson, “Creating a Motivated Workforce: How Organizations Can Enhance and Develop Public Service Motivation (PSM),” *Public Personnel Management* 40 (3): 217-218.

¹⁰ Melanie Bickford, “Stress in the Workplace: A General Overview of the Causes, the Effects and the Solutions,” (Canadian Mental Health Association Newfoundland and Labrador Division 2005), <http://www.cmhanl.ca/pdf/Work-Place-Stress.pdf>, accessed December 5, 2015.

¹¹ For the importance of civility see Dowden, “Civility Matters!”

¹² Dowden, “Maximizing Employee Engagement,” pp. 8-9, 20-22.

down. Employees will receive recognition for work well done. Finally, a positive workplace will be one in which management supports employee well-being by promoting work-life balance and minimizing workplace-related stress.

Plan and Implementation

Step 1: Adopt the Public Service Employee Survey as a tool of measurement

Our plan employs the Public Service Employee Survey (PSES) in order to measure and evaluate Deputy Ministers (DMs)' success at instituting a positive workplace culture. The questionnaire is distributed every three years and enjoys a high response rate (71.4% in 2014).¹³ The PSES is administered by Statistics Canada in “extensive consultation with departments and agencies, central agencies, bargaining agents, Human Resources policy groups, functional communities, and employment equity group committees.”¹⁴ Confidentiality of individual responses is assured, yet results are helpfully organized according to department or agency.¹⁵ Adapting the existing survey infrastructure is a cost-effective solution. Public servants already trust the system and are accustomed to completing the survey at regular intervals. Moreover, the questionnaire already addresses aspects of workplace culture, including:

- Q9. I have support at work to balance my work and personal life.
- Q12. I receive meaningful recognition for work well done.
- Q22. I have positive working relationships with my co-workers.
- Q39. Senior managers in my department or agency lead by example in ethical behaviour.¹⁶

¹³ PSES 2014.

¹⁴ *2014 Public Service Employee Survey*, Record number 4438, Statistics Canada, 2015, <http://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p2SV.pl?Function=getSurvey&SDDS=4438&lag=en&db=imdb&adm=8&dis=2>, accessed December 2 2015.

¹⁵ *Frequently Asked Questions: Public Service Employee Survey 2014*, Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, <http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/psmfpm/modernizing-modernisation/ps-es-saff/faq-eng.asp>, accessed December 2 2015.

¹⁶ *2014 Public Service Employee Survey Results by Question for the Public Service* Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, <http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/ps-es-saff/2014/results-resultats/bqqq/00/org-eng.aspx>, accessed December 2 2015.

The PSES is comprehensive, but it misses some crucial questions about stress and health. We recommend the inclusion of some additional questions such as:

- Stress of workplace demands on the average day
- Employee physical health
- Sleep deprivation
- Mental health, particularly the rates of anxiety and depression
- Use of counselling services to cope with workplace-related stress or mental illness

These inquiries appear in a 2012 survey by the Association of Professional Executives of the Public Service of Canada (APEX) aimed at the executive ranks, but there are no comparable statistics for the public service at large.¹⁷ Some of these topics are, admittedly, highly personal and the stigma surrounding mental illness in particular may discourage some individuals from self-identifying. Even so, the PSES already contains personal questions regarding harassment, discrimination, and the like. It would not be much of a stretch to integrate these other criteria. We nevertheless recommend a “prefer not to answer” response option for the more sensitive topics. Stats Can already has a rigorous process of input, deliberation and target group testing for any modifications to the PSES. The agency will therefore be able to handle any proposed changes for 2017.¹⁸

¹⁷ *2012 Executive Work and Health Survey Synopsis* (Ottawa, Ontario: Association of Professional Executives of the Public Service of Canada, 2013), <http://www.apex.gc.ca/uploads/key%20priorities/health/2012%20health%20survey%20results%20-%20eng.pdf>, accessed December 3 2015.

¹⁸ *2014 Public Service Employee Survey, Record number 4438*, Statistics Canada, 2015, <http://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p2SV.pl?Function=getSurvey&SDDS=4438&lag=en&db=imdb&adm=8&dis=2>, accessed December 2 2015. In saying thus, we acknowledge that the PSES is not infallible and that its results may be skewed depending on factors such as: the representativeness of the sample population, date/time of survey completion, individual mood at time of completion, varying understandings of the survey questions, etc. Though imperfect, it nevertheless remains a trusted, confidential, and quantifiable source of data over the public service at large.

Step #2: Tie a portion of Deputy Ministers' performance pay to the cultivation of a positive workplace environment

As the top bureaucrats within their respective organizations, we propose giving DMs incentives to ensure their active participation in the effort to improve workplace culture. Deputy Ministers already have a structure of performance pay in place that rates their ability to achieve individual and departmental objectives within a given year.¹⁹ We recommend reallocating the existing rewards in order to balance individual/departmental goals with a positive workplace culture. The latter will be assessed using departmental results from the Public Service Employee Survey (*step #3*). PSES results appear every three years, yet DMs tend to rotate between various departments every fifteen months or so. The bonus for a particular department will be split among the relevant DMs in proportion to the length of time they served. This means that DMs will be holding each other accountable as well as encouraging their peers' efforts. Furthermore, the rotation of DMs means a variety of leadership ideas and techniques, thereby reinvigorating a department's efforts over the three-year period.

A *collaborative*, rather than competitive, performance pay plan ensures the sharing of best leadership practices and collective support for individual DM initiatives. In this system, everyone wins: Deputy Ministers are more likely to be rewarded and line departments benefit from the innovations. To help DMs transition into their new leadership roles, we suggest that the Clerk of the Privy Council create small groups of three to five members. The groups will meet once every two months in order to discuss their reform efforts. DMs will learn from initiatives

¹⁹ "Performance Management Program for Deputy Ministers, Associate Deputy Ministers, and Individuals Paid in the GX Range," Privy Council Office 2014, <http://www.pco-bcp.gc.ca/index.asp?lang=eng&page=secretariats&sub=spsp-psps&doc=pmp-pgr/dm-sm/performance-rendement-eng.htm>, accessed December 2 2015.

being pursued in other departments. These groups will also serve as a forum for DMs to bounce ideas off each other, so that they may fine-tune a new solution before implementing it.

Step 3: Evaluating workplace culture in order to determine performance pay

The final part of our strategy involves the use of the PSES results to determine the reimbursement given to the DMs. Statistics Canada personnel will select the survey questions they consider most relevant to workplace culture and employee well-being as well as the weighting assigned to each question. Results will be calculated for each department and then compared with the department's previous survey results. Performance pay will reflect *relative* improvement since each department will all be starting from a different base level. PSES results appear once every three years, so the bonus will similarly be determined once every three years and then divided into annual installments. A Deputy Minister achieving successful results on the 2017 survey would therefore be guaranteed that portion of at-risk pay for 2017, 2018, and 2019. Retiring DMs would receive a single lump-sum payment.

During the initial *remedial phase*, bonuses would be given to DMs who manage to secure a 1-2% improvement in workplace culture. This phase will continue until a department's results start to stabilize around a specific benchmark level. Statistics Canada will calculate a number that is a) high enough to demonstrate that a department has done as much as it can to improve the factors within its control and b) achievable in the long-term given the law of diminishing marginal returns. The length of time each department needs to reach this goal will differ depending on its starting point (as determined by the 2014 survey) and the internal challenges it faces. On average, departments should pass through the remedial phase in one or two decades. Once a department achieves the benchmark goal, it will pass into the *maintenance phase*. At this

point performance pay will be awarded to DMs who either maintain the high levels or manage some slight improvement. A decline by more than 1-2% will lead to no bonus.

Rationale for Implementation

One of the strengths of this proposal is that it frames workplace culture as a management issue rather than blaming the workers themselves. Public service employees work long hours with tight deadlines and even tighter resources. Responsible leadership recognizes that workplaces contribute to the stress levels of the individuals employed there. Our plan sends a powerful message to employees that management is responsive to their needs. Second, the proposal is cost-effective because it adapts existing infrastructures and because it is self-regulating. It requires no central authority enforcing regulations. It simply gives Deputy Ministers the incentive to be innovative.

Third, our scheme offers Deputy Ministers plenty of flexibility. They have the freedom to reform their department as they see fit, thereby avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach to improving the public service. We stress that DMs are in no way expected to become walk-in therapists for disgruntled staff. Instead, they are expected to lead by example, set the reform agenda, and delegate responsibilities where appropriate. With measures like job design, flexible work arrangements, and training programmes, Deputy Ministers will be able to effect meaningful change. Fourth, our plan focuses on leadership at the highest level. The September 2015 joint task force report on mental health in the federal public sector affirms the need for “sustained leadership commitment” as a key element for workplace reforms.²⁰ Personnel management is

²⁰ Technical Committee, *Report to the Steering Committee on Mental Health in the Workplace :Implementing the 2015 Memorandum of Understanding between the Treasury Board of Canada and the Public Service Alliance of Canada with Respect to Mental Health in the Workplace*, (Ottawa, Ontario, Government of Canada, 2015), <http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/psm-fpfm/healthy-sain/wwb-memt/mhw-mmmt->

moreover one of Deputy Ministers' core duties as articulated by the Treasury Board Secretariat.²¹ Our performance pay scheme recognizes the importance of these senior executive responsibilities in tangible form. The Public Service Employee Survey has furthermore shown that while rank-and-file employees have strong relationships with their immediate supervisors, they feel alienated from senior management.²² Department heads may have good intentions but they have achieved little positive action on the pressing problem of workplace culture. Our modest financial initiative should ensure a prompt and sustained response.

Finally, the triennial timeline of this initiative provides time for changes to come into effect. We considered increasing the PSES frequency to a yearly basis in order to facilitate reimbursement calculations, but we reasoned that annual surveys would increase the programme's operating costs. Workplace transformations are moreover gradual processes. Maintaining the current three-year system also prevents a loss of enthusiasm from survey organizers as well as respondents.

Risks and Considerations

Our plan is not without some challenges. The new pay system may involve some short-term costs. Although we are reallocating existing DM performance pay funding, we have designed this programme to ensure that the goal is an achievable one. The number of bonuses may be higher than was the case under the old at-risk pay system. After a while, savings from increased productivity, lower absenteeism, and reduced turnover will more than offset the

eng.asp?utm_source=referral&utm_medium=news&utm_term=canada&utm_content=2015-12-02&utm_campaign=mhw, accessed December 3 2015.

²¹ *A Leadership Development Framework for the Public Service of Canada*, (Ottawa, Ontario: Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2010), <http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/psm-fpfm/learning-apprentissage/ptm-grt/ldf-cpl-eng.asp#Toc234980000>, accessed January 12 2016.

²² PSES 2014, pp. 1, 7.

costs. We also note that the DM pay incentive is intended as a supplement to, not a replacement for, other workplace efforts such as peer support networks, mental health campaigns, etc. We further acknowledge that the Public Service Employee Survey cannot capture all the shifting nuances of workplace interactions. Still, it remains a reliable and quantifiable way of evaluating overall departmental culture at a moment in time.

One particular challenge of the co-operative system is the possibility of free riding among Deputy Ministers, as incoming departmental heads profit from the work of their predecessors. The free rider problem is not insignificant: some DMs may try to ‘play’ the system, which in turn may create resentment amongst their peers. Nevertheless, we believe that the collective benefits departments receive from the sharing of ideas and initiatives far outweighs the risks. Another alternative would be to match Deputy Ministers’ rotation periods to the PSES; however, such a shift would prove both cumbersome and costly.

We also acknowledge that it will be important to secure the support of the political executive, particularly Ministers, to ensure the success of any scheme. Finally, we will need to provide DMs with resources to help them achieve their goals. They will require training sessions and/or reading materials about employee motivation, human relations management, workplace health, and other matters. Human resources staff will be useful allies in the effort to ensure that DMs are properly equipped.⁷

Conclusion

We have argued in favour of reallocating Deputy Ministers’ performance pay in order to reward their ability to improve workplace culture within their own departments. The Public Service Employee Survey provides a low-cost, effective way of measuring workplace

environment and employee welfare. This scheme is not merely designed as a framework for short-term action. It is intended to influence workplace dynamics across the public sector, and over time bring about a workforce that is proud, agile, and high-performing. Our plan consequently offers a starting point for a mutually beneficial long-term commitment between the federal government and its employees.

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