Ensuring Excellence: A Guide for Cultivating Healthy High-Performing Agencies

NATIONAL ACADEMY OF
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Ensuring Excellence: A Guide for Cultivating Healthy High-Performing Agencies

EXPERT ADVISORY GROUP OF ACADEMY FELLOWS

Lisa Coleman

Nicholas Hart

Peter Hutchinson

Kathryn Newcomer

Sean O'Keefe

ABOUT THE ACADEMY

The National Academy of Public Administration is an independent, nonprofit, and non-partisan organization established in 1967 and chartered by Congress in 1984. It provides expert advice to government leaders in building more effective, efficient, accountable, and transparent organizations. To carry out this mission, the Academy draws on the knowledge and experience of its over 1,000 Fellows—including former cabinet officers, Members of Congress, governors, mayors, and state legislators, as well as prominent scholars, career public administrators, and nonprofit and business executives. The Academy helps public institutions address their most critical governance and management challenges through in-depth studies and analyses, advisory services and technical assistance, congressional testimony, forums and conferences, and online stakeholder engagement. Learn more about the Academy and its work at NAPAWash.org.

FOREWORD

In the fall of 2019, the National Academy of Public Administration (the Academy) announced 12 Grand Challenges for the field of public administration. These are the most significant issues facing the government from a public administration standpoint over the long term.

One of the Grand Challenges is to Modernize and Reinvigorate the Public Service. As governments are increasingly called upon to address complex and interconnected problems, they need leaders, managers, technical experts, and front-line workers in the right jobs with the right skills at the right time. Yet many public agencies have long struggled to build a workforce that can deliver critical public services given laborious and time-consuming hiring practices, limited salary flexibilities, and promotion rules that value longevity over expertise and performance. Effective recruitment and retention are especially critical with the current wave of public service retirements.

Against this backdrop, the Office of Management and Budget and the General Services Administration asked that the Academy identify effective strategies for strengthening organizational health and performance in the current world of work. To build and reinvigorate the public service, this report contends that agencies must develop a strong internal culture with a focus on high performance to ensure that the public gets the services that it wants, needs, and deserves. This report is intended to serve as a playbook, or how-to guide, for leaders and managers. It highlights concrete strategies, and evidence-based practices along with resource links and case examples that can be used to continually assess and respond to evolving work environments in ways that will improve organizational health and performance.

As a congressionally chartered, independent, and nonprofit organization with over 1,000 distinguished Fellows, the Academy has a unique ability to bring nationally recognized experts together to help government agencies address challenges. I appreciate the great work both of the Study Team that led this work and of our Fellows who offered such important advice in the development of this report. I also want to thank the many federal and nonfederal leaders who participated in the three symposia hosted by our team—these leaders provided incredible insights that greatly increased the usability and specificity of the final document. Moving forward, I hope that leaders and managers at all levels will find this report to be a useful desktop resource for building healthier and higher-performing organizations.

Teresa W. Gerton
President and Chief Executive Officer
National Academy of Public Administration

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ACRONYMS

Academy	National Academy of Public Administration
BRIDGE	Bridge to Jobs Program
ECQ	Executive Core Qualifications
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
Evidence Act	Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018
FEVS	Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey
GAO	Government Accountability Office
GSA	General Services Administration
HR	Human Resources
IT	Information Technology
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
OPM	Office of Personnel Management
SMART	Strategic, Measurable, Action-Oriented, Reasonable, and Timely
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VA	Department of Veterans Affairs

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the fall of 2023, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the General Services Administration (GSA) requested that the National Academy of Public Administration (the Academy) undertake a study to:

- Update the Academy's organizational health framework from January 2018.

- Identify effective strategies for strengthening organizational health and performance in the current world of work.

- Host three symposiums to gain insights into how leading global organizations have adapted their operations during the global pandemic.

- Examine federal implementation of OMB directive M-23-15 and related policies.

To perform this task, a Study Team conducted research on organizational health and performance by reviewing relevant literature, interviewing federal and non-federal individuals, hosting three symposia with federal and non-federal participants, and working with the Expert Advisory Group to review the results of this research to identify strategies and actions.

This report is intended to be a playbook for leaders and managers at all levels on how to build healthier, higher-performing organizations. It includes:

- Concrete strategies and evidence-based practices that advance organizational health for the new world of work.

- Methods to continually assess and respond to evolving work environments.

- Guidance to agency leaders on using the framework for decision making.

- Case examples of the connection between organizational health, performance frameworks, and outcomes.

Figure 1 summarizes the strategies and actions agency leaders and operational unit managers should take to strengthen their agency's organizational health. This report provides specific examples and practical resources.

Figure 1. Checklist of Strategies and Actions that Agency Leaders and Operational Unit Managers Can Take to Strengthen Organizational Health

Strategy	Actions
Strengthening Organizational Health Requires a Bold Vision that is Tied to the Mission and Promoted Throughout the Organization	**Agency Leaders should:** ✓ Develop a bold vision to strengthen organizational health tied to achieving results and meeting its mission. ✓ Use agile government principles to generate employee buy-in for their overall vision for strengthening organizational health and achieving results. ✓ Select key organizational health and performance indicators that align with the agency's mission and establish routines to drive progress. ✓ Institutionalize discussions about organizational health into existing agency practices. ✓ Work across organizational divisions to increase cooperation and collaboration to achieve better results. **Operational Unit Managers should:** ✓ Align employee roles and responsibilities with the agency's organizational health and performance goals to achieve results.
Strengthening Organizational Health Requires a Supportive Environment Focused on Psychological Safety and Inclusive Leadership to Achieve Results	**Agency Leaders should:** ✓ Adopt inclusive leadership practices within their organization focused on developing people to promote psychological safety and achieve results. ✓ Prioritize training for the operational unit managers on inclusive leadership practices and creating a safe work environment for everyone. **Operational Unit Managers should:** ✓ Create a healthy feedback culture by actively soliciting feedback from employees and providing useful feedback to employees in support of their development. ✓ Engage employees in setting priorities, making trade-offs, and overcoming barriers to achieving results.
Strengthening Organizational Health Requires Effective Communication and Engagement with Employees	**Agency Leaders should:** ✓ Ensure that their strategy for strengthening organizational health and performance is effectively communicated to all levels of the organization. ✓ Take steps to ensure they receive meaningful feedback from employees through surveys and other sources.

	✓ Develop and implement action plans to address issues identified from surveys and other sources of feedback.
	Operational Unit Managers should:
	✓ Adapt communication approaches to effectively provide information to all workforce categories (in-person, hybrid, and remote).
	✓ Develop individualized unit action plans and implement them to address issues identified from surveys and other sources of feedback.
Strengthening Organizational Health Requires an Institutionalized Culture of Continuous Learning	**Agency Leaders should:** ✓ Expand access to collected data for operational unit managers and teams to increase transparency and accessibility. ✓ Dedicate resources to employee development, by providing career pathing, mentoring, and training programs. **Operational Unit Managers should:** ✓ Ensure data collected are used effectively for decision making within their organizations and teams. ✓ Encourage employees to explore opportunities to test, grow, and learn.
Strengthening Organizational Health Requires Modernizing Federal Agency Recruitment, Retention, and Development Efforts	**Agency Leaders should:** ✓ Adopt practices to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their recruitment efforts. ✓ Identify and adopt practices that improve and streamline the hiring process. ✓ Implement practices that improve employee retention. **Operational Unit Managers should:** ✓ Adopt practices to improve and streamline the hiring and onboarding process.

Figure 2 summarizes the actions that OMB, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), and GSA, as the central management agencies, should take to support agencies as they work to strengthen organizational health and performance in their individual agencies.

Figure 2. Checklist of Strategies and Actions that the Central Management Agencies Can Do to Support Organizational Health

Strategy	Actions
Strengthening Organizational Health Requires Modernizing Federal Agency Recruitment, Retention, and Development Efforts	**Central Management Agencies should:** ✓ Engage with federal agencies to conduct more efficient and effective enterprise-wide workforce planning and adopt talent management strategies. ✓ Search for and share effective recruitment, retention, and development practices across the government. ✓ Continue supporting departments and agencies in making decisions about and tracking the effectiveness of workplace requirements.
Strengthening Organizational Health Requires the Support of the Central Management Agencies	**Central Management Agencies should:** ✓ Provide leadership in supporting and assisting agencies to adopt strategies and practices that foster organizational health and performance. ✓ Search for and offer ideas for how federal departments and agencies can strengthen their organizational health and performance. ✓ Identify indicators to better understand the impact of remote, hybrid, and in-person work on productivity, employee satisfaction and engagement, and performance.

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2023, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the General Services Administration (GSA) requested that the National Academy of Public Administration (the Academy) undertake a study to:

- Update the Academy's organizational health framework from January 2018.

- Identify effective strategies for strengthening organizational health and performance in the current world of work.

In this report, the Study Team formed to conduct this work reaffirms the findings and recommendations of the 2018 Academy report and offers additional specificity on practices that can be implemented to improve organizational health for a new world of work. This current report will serve as a playbook and how-to guide for agency leaders, and operational unit managers who wish to improve their organization's health and performance. It also includes specific actions that the central management agencies can take to help support and facilitate federal agencies.

> **What is Organizational Health?**
>
> An organization's ability to drive performance results collectively in support of its mission, deliver programs and services, and meet stakeholder needs and priorities on an ongoing basis. An organization's health may include considerations such as resilience, capability, and capacity.
>
> Source: OMB Directive M-23-15

There's a deep connection between organizational health and high performance; they are, in essence, two sides of the same coin. For example, McKinsey's Organizational Health Index has found that organizational health is the best predictor of long-term future performance. Healthy organizations have strong internal cultures. They offer positive work experiences to their employees like interesting and impactful work, effective leadership, healthy culture, inclusivity, and psychological safety. Their employees feel empowered and do not let constraints hinder high performance. They are resilient in the face of changing conditions and significant challenges. Federal agencies can harness such healthy internal characteristics to produce meaningful results for the American people.

In healthy agencies, people know the purpose of their organization—what difference it is intended to make for those that it serves and what results it is intended to deliver. They also know specifically how their work contributes to achieving that purpose. They have the tools and information they need to succeed, along with the authority to use them, and are accountable for doing so effectively. They operate in a culture that is rich in feedback, directly from those they serve as well as from colleagues—one that recognizes what works so they can build on it and alerts them to what does not so they can continuously learn, grow, and improve.

In short, healthy organizations know what they're trying to accomplish, and they energize their employees to collaborate internally and with external stakeholders to make progress on their core objectives.

Unfortunately, it is easier to talk about organizational health than it is to achieve it. For example, Gallup found that 44 percent of employees worldwide report high levels of work-related stress—a record high tied with its 2021 findings. Gallup's research shows that engaged employees are less likely than their less engaged coworkers to report feeling stress and that leaders and organizations can reduce stress levels by focusing on engagement and building healthy internal cultures.

Healthy organizations are hard to build and easy to wreck. That hard work falls to agency leaders and operational unit managers who must create the conditions in which the people in organizations can succeed and achieve results. This is a difficult task—departments and agencies rely on support from the central management agencies (OMB, GSA, and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM)). Those agencies have traditionally relied on their control of resources—people, money, information, and authority—to provide direction to agency leaders. Creating highly effective federal agencies requires a focus on encouraging agency and unit leaders rather than controlling them.

We recognize that the world of work has changed in important ways since the Academy's first organizational health report in January 2018:

- Over the last several years, the federal government has continued to function in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, which had dramatic impacts on the workplace and the workforce. Federal agencies faced a global shock to the system during the pandemic, to which they responded in an agile way.

- The pandemic exacerbated many existing trends, as many organizations, including federal agencies, pivoted from a mostly in-person posture to a remote and hybrid work posture. This trend has continued, and we have seen a dramatic increase in the number of organizations using remote work or hybrid work as a standard way of doing business.

- There has been an increased focus on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging. For example, the President's Management Agenda has incorporated equity as a central pillar of its three core priorities: workforce, customer experience, and the business of government. The President has also issued an Executive Order to advance racial equity and support for underserved communities throughout the nation.

- There has been increased budgetary uncertainty (resulting in threats of government shutdowns), along with personnel proposals such as Executive Order 13957, Creating Schedule F in the Excepted Service, that hinder healthy organizational dynamics and expectations.

Federal agencies must address complex and interconnected "wicked problems" in the wake of a global pandemic, financial crises, natural disasters, global instability, and polarization at home. Distrust in government has increased while public expectations have grown. The best antidote to distrust and winning the competition for public support is sustained high levels of performance that meet and exceed the expectations of those being served. While there are many elements required to achieve high levels of performance, only organizations that are fundamentally healthy can both achieve and sustain the levels of performance necessary to win the public's trust. The

American people deserve a high-performing, effective government that is agile and responsive amidst more frequent shocks, and we offer this report as one way to help build the government we need.

Methodology

To perform this task, the Academy formed a Study Team of experienced Academy staff with support from an Expert Advisory Group of Fellows. The Study Team conducted both primary and secondary research:

- Reviewed academic literature and other reports about organizational health, including those from leading consulting firms that work with agencies in this area.

- Hosted three symposia with federal and non-federal entities to gain insights into issues such as the conceptualization of organizational health, the connection between organizational health and performance, and leading practices that can be implemented.

- Conducted individual interviews with federal and non-federal experts to learn more deeply about case examples that could be implemented elsewhere.

- Worked with the Expert Advisory Group to review the results of this research, identify key issues and themes, and develop recommendations for action.

Roadmap to the Report

The purpose of this report is to identify effective and usable practices to build healthier and higher-performing organizations.   The strategies and actions are tailored to different organizational levels and participants:

- Federal agencies—includes departments and agencies that deliver many of the federal government's services (such as the Social Security Administration, the National Institutes of Health, the Department of Defense, the Department of the Interior, the Department of Homeland Security, and so on).

- Department/Agency Leaders—these are individuals in the senior-most cadre (both political and career) in the organization, and they set the organization's overall strategy and tone.

- Operational Unit Managers—these are the people leading individual programs and teams, and they have great influence on the internal culture and resulting performance of the agency.

- Central Management Agencies—these are the "Center of Government" agencies including OMB, OPM, and GSA.

Based on the research, high-performing organizations can implement the following strategies to strengthen organizational health and improve performance:

- Develop a bold vision that is tied to the mission and promoted throughout the organization.
- Foster a supportive environment focused on psychological safety and inclusive leadership to achieve results.
- Ensure effective communication and engagement with employees.
- Institutionalize a culture of continuous learning.
- Modernize recruitment, retention, and development efforts.

Within each strategy, there are specific actions and examples of what individual agencies can do to advance organizational health and improve their performance at the leadership and operational unit manager levels.

There are strategies and actions that central management agencies should take to support the strengthening of organizational health and performance across the federal government.

Strategy 1: Strengthening Organizational Health Requires a Bold Vision that is Tied to the Mission and Promoted Throughout the Organization

Strengthening an agency's organizational health is critical to delivering meaningful, measurable results to the people it serves. It requires that each agency create a bold and integrated vision of organizational health and performance tailored to meet its specific mission and take steps to ensure its consistent implementation across all levels. Agency leaders and operational unit managers should view improving organizational health and performance as an ongoing effort that requires continued attention to be sustained over the long term with a holistic approach. Each agency should identify the outcomes to be achieved by their specific organizational health and performance efforts and develop a corresponding roadmap or implementation strategy (i.e., a theory of change) to achieve these goals and mitigate risk.

What Agency Leaders Should Do

The following provides more detail on key actions that agency leaders should implement to maximize the health and performance of their organizations.

Action: Agency leaders should develop a bold vision to strengthen organizational health tied to achieving results and meeting its mission.

There are various organizational health and performance frameworks that agencies can use as a basis for developing a bold vision, such as McKinsey's organizational health index and others outlined in our January 2018 report on Strengthening Organizational Health and Performance in Government. McKinsey has also identified four power practices that agency leaders can adopt as pillars for organizational health and performance.

These power practices are:

- **Strategic clarity.** Healthy organizations effectively translate vision and strategy into actionable and measurable objectives that are clearly articulated and shared with employees at all levels.

- **Role clarity.** Healthy organizations tend to have structures, processes, and working norms that speed up decision making, remove layers of bureaucracy, and make it easy for employees to get things done—even when situations are new or ambiguous.

- **Personal ownership.** Healthy organizations hire and develop managers who have a deep sense of personal ownership for their work and who foster that same sense of ownership in their teams and employees.

- **Competitive insights.** Healthy organizations tend to have a clear view of where and how they fit into the broader landscape and of their value propositions; they use these insights to set strategic priorities and make decisions.

Agency leaders should use frameworks like McKinsey's four power practices to establish a foundation for prioritizing and measuring their agencies' organizational health and performance.

Action: Agency leaders should use agile government principles to generate employee buy-in for their overall vision for strengthening organizational health and achieving results.

Agency leaders seeking to create a bold vision of organizational health to achieve results should adopt Agile government principles to generate employee buy-in and ensure their efforts are institutionalized over time. Resistance to change can undermine any new initiative. Intentionally managing change can ease all parties away from the status quo.

Using Agile government principles can help agency leaders smooth the transition and orient the organization to improve desired outcomes related to organizational health. The National Academy of Public Administration and IBM Center for the Business of Government's Agile Government Center have adopted the following key principles of Agile government:

- **Mission** is at the heart of Agile government. It should be crystal clear, laser-focused, and easy to communicate and understand.

- **Metrics** should reflect the mission and be outcome-focused, widely agreed upon, evidence-based, and easily tracked. Stakeholders should be intimately involved in program design and redesign. Their journey should be ingrained in the culture of the organization.

- **Speed** should be encouraged and enabled by establishing clear deadlines that create a sense of urgency.

- Team members should be **experts** in their roles **and diverse in their thinking**. They should engage in continual communication and make evidence-informed decisions that address the immediate challenge and advance the project.

> **Veterans Affairs Financial and Acquisition Management Modernization and Change Management**
>
> As part of its Vision for Digital Transformation, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) created the Financial Management Business Transformation Program to integrate and modernize financial and acquisition management by combining many stand-alone legacy systems into a combined cloud-hosted system. The VA delivered this product using change management strategies including leadership sponsorship, defining success, an integrated schedule, an appointed change manager, and adoption of an enterprise-wide change management instructor program. Through the usage of this tool, the VA expects to increase productivity and operational efficiency to facilitate payments to vendors and Veterans with transparency, accuracy, timeliness, and reliability.

- Developing and sustaining **networks** is integral to leveraging stakeholder support for the organization's mission.
- **Repeated experimentation, evaluation, and improvement** are needed to promote learning and support the achievement of successful outcomes.
- **Innovation** should be rewarded. Preference for new approaches that test rules, regulations, and past practices will deliver better results and higher levels of stakeholder satisfaction.
- **Solid evidence** should form the basis for designing and implementing organizational health strategies.
- Organizational leaders should **eliminate roadblocks**, **aggregate and assume risks**, **empower teams** to make decisions, **hold them accountable** and **reward** them.

Action: Agency leaders should select key organizational health and performance indicators that align with the agency's mission and establish routines to drive progress.

Agency leaders should identify key organizational health and performance indicators that align with their organization's specific mission, vision, and goals. OMB directive M-23-15 may be used as a starting point for this process, but it is important to remain flexible by identifying which indicators are most important to understanding each individual agency's organizational health and performance. Indicators should be aligned with the road map or implementation strategy highlighted on page 9. Specifically, agency leaders should:

- Consider a variety of organizational health metrics proposed by different sources.
- Select indicators that are strategic, measurable, action-oriented, reasonable, and timely (SMART).
- Prioritize indicators that are the most useful for their organization and avoid selecting too many indicators.
- Develop a tailored set of indicators and other data based on how their agency achieves results while considering important factors such as (but not limited to):
  - Organizational performance measures
  - Mission accomplishment and outcomes
  - Customer experience

Government-wide Mission Support Customer Satisfaction Survey

Providing effective mission-support services is essential in enabling agencies to achieve their missions and strengthen their organizational health. Mission-support services, including human resources, information technology, financial management, procurement, and facilities, provide the tools that agencies need to achieve results.

OMB and GSA have been collecting and reporting data from the 24 Chief Financial Officers Act Agencies on satisfaction with acquisition, financial management, human capital, and information technology service delivery since 2015 on behalf of the President's Management Council. This data can be used to identify effective agency practices that can be adopted by other agencies and help agencies prioritize areas of improvement based on customer satisfaction data.

- o Outputs
- o Efficiency
- o Internal functioning metrics
- o Views of employees on leadership behaviors, alignment, communications, capabilities, and work environment
- o Employee engagement
- o Employee welfare
- o Employee turnover
- o Employee satisfaction with mission-support services, such as acquisition, financial management, human capital, and information technology
- o Trust

- Break down agency missions into specific, quantifiable objectives and identify key areas of focus for improvement.

- Establish routines to observe progress, such as designing real-time dashboards and reporting tools that are adaptable, shareable, and easy to use. For an example of a federal agency dashboard related to organizational health indicators, see Figure 3.

- Promote innovation by creating safe environments for experimentation, with associated indicators to assess its effectiveness, as part of continuous process improvement.

- Cascade organizational health expectations and practices throughout the organization by establishing them as performance expectations for leaders, managers, and individual performers to collect, analyze, and use data and communicate the findings in ways that inform where to focus and what to do to improve results

Figure 3. Example of an Organizational Health Index Dashboard from USAID
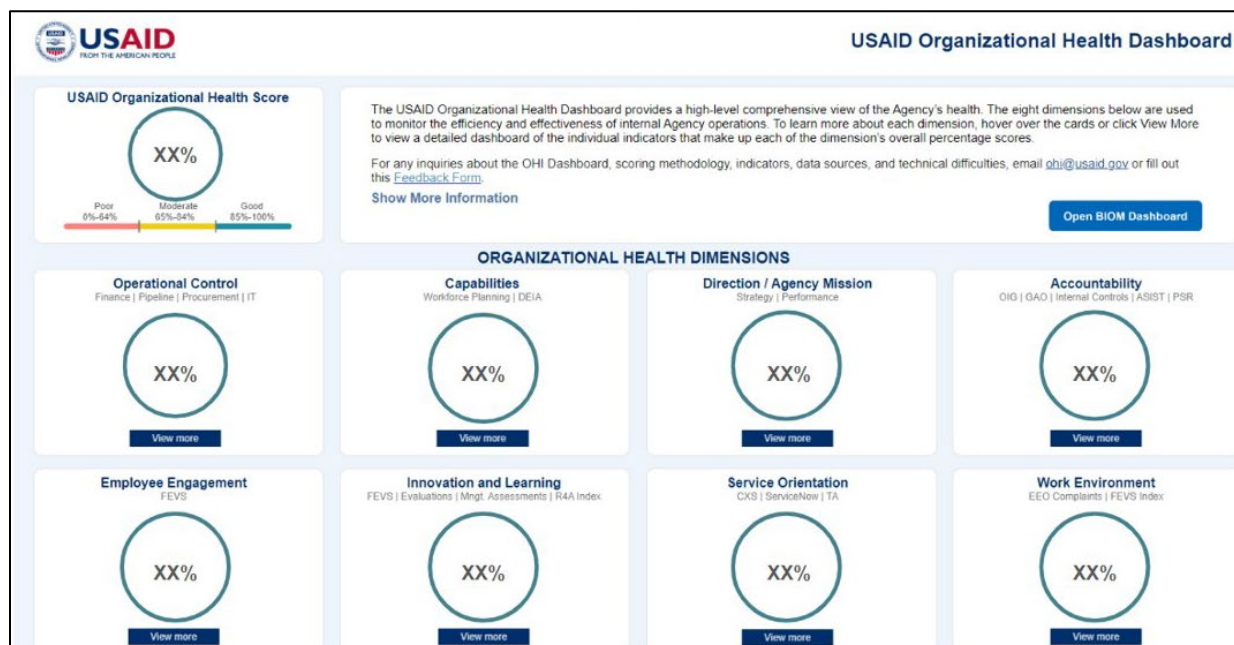
Action: Agency leaders should institutionalize discussions about organizational health into existing agency practices.

To foster high-performing agencies, agency leaders can leverage existing activities, such as performance and programmatic reviews, to institutionalize discussions about organizational health. Using performance reviews can draw attention to their importance and ensure constructive actions are taken. The Federal Performance Framework creates a cycle of performance management routines that govern agencies' organizational planning and goal-setting activities and establishes data-driven reviews of progress against identified goals on a four-year, annual, and quarterly cycle. These meetings can be used effectively within agencies to review performance and organizational health data, encourage evidence-based problem-solving, and avoid compliance-centric discussions.[1]

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[1] In 2021, GAO found that about half of federal managers surveyed from 24 federal agencies reported they used performance information for management decision making. U.S. Government Accountability Office (2021). *Evidence-Based Policymaking: Survey Results Suggest Increased Use of Performance Information across the Federal Government.* GAO-22-103910. https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-103910

Agency leaders can:

- Take and provide training to other leaders and participants in quarterly performance reviews to ensure effective and productive discussions instead of a "check the box" exercise.

- Focus on rewarding and highlighting effective programs, using incentives when appropriate in ways that encourage high performance without discouraging other programs.

- Utilize peer assessments of quarterly performance reviews, strategic and annual performance plans, annual performance reports, and other forms of performance and evidence communication.

- Draw upon lessons from the private sector and other industries on conducting "structured, confidential, and non-punitive" peer reviews.[2]

> **Veterans Benefits Administration's Public Quarterly Performance Reviews**
>
> The former Veterans Benefits Administration leader, Paul Lawrence, held public quarterly performance broadcasts inspired by public quarterly performance calls for private sector companies featuring managers discussing what was being learned from their data and how they planned to apply those insights to improve efforts. Veterans' organizations were invited to speak and ask questions. Lawrence estimates that 10,000 to 20,000 viewers attended the sessions with as many as 50,000 watching replays.
>
> Source: Lawrence, P. (2021) *Transforming Service to Veterans.* Lawrence.

Action: Agency leaders should work across organizational divisions to increase cooperation and collaboration to achieve better results.

In high-performing organizations, supporting organizational health and performance is not solely the function of the agency's human capital office. Agency leaders need to cultivate an enabling environment for innovation and collaboration that transcends the agency's divisions.

Agency leaders should:

- Create multi-disciplinary implementation teams that include leaders from all levels of the organization. Such teams may include membership from mission support offices, such as human capital, facilities, and information technology, as well as program leaders and employee resource groups.

- Identify champions across the agency to implement their organizational health and performance vision beyond the traditional human capital and strategy offices.

- Assign individuals specific roles and responsibilities for implementing organizational health and performance visions with measurable goals.

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[2] Known as the "peer-to-peer assessment technique," based on a common practice from the nuclear power industry where a delegation from one hospital visits another and completes a "structured, confidential, and non-punitive review" of safety and quality efforts. Paul, Annie Murphy (2021) *The Extended Mind*. Mariner Books. Pg. 175.

- Institutionalize updates about their agency's efforts to improve organizational health and performance during staff meetings, town halls, and other forums on a routine basis.

For additional information about the actions described in this section, check out the resources and examples highlighted below in Table 1.

Table 1. Resource for Agency Leaders

Resources for Agency Leaders	
Source/Link	**Description**
National Association of Counties: 5 Performance Priorities	Created a list of 5 performance priorities, which includes embodying certain values and expanding the skills and engagement of their staff.
GAO: Evidence-Based Policymaking	Highlights practices promoting the use of performance information for management decision making.
Paul, Annie Murphy, *The Extended Mind*	Describes the peer-to-peer assessment technique to complete a "structured, confidential, and non-punitive review."
GAO: Performance Accountability Reports	GAO tracks "people metrics" and publicly reports on them in its performance accountability reports (section "Focus on People. ") Those metrics are new hire rate, retention rate (with and without retirements), staff development, staff utilization, effective leadership by supervisors, and organizational climate. This framework can be useful for other federal agencies when designing their own organizational health strategy.
Harvard University Executive Session on Public Sector Performance, Get Results Through Performance Management: An Open Memorandum	Calls for agency leaders to embrace performance management and provides tools for doing so.

What Operational Unit Managers Should Do

Agency leaders must partner with operational unit managers to institutionalize effective practices and implement initiatives that strengthen organizational health to achieve results. While agency leaders focus on the broader organizational goals, operational unit managers should ensure those goals can be achieved at the unit level.

Action: Operational unit managers should align employee roles and responsibilities with the agency's organizational health and performance goals to achieve results.

Operational unit managers in high-performing organizations connect an individual's performance to the organization's overall success. GAO found that high-performing organizations transform themselves by fundamentally changing their cultures to become more results-oriented, customer-focused, and collaborative.

GAO identified key practices for public sector organizations, including:

- Aligning individual performance expectations with organizational goals.

- Providing and routinely using performance information to track organizational priorities.

- Requiring follow-up actions to address organizational priorities.

- Making meaningful distinctions in performance by providing candid and constructive feedback that is documented to reward top performers and deal with poor performers.

For example, managers can align their agency's specific strategic goals with critical job responsibilities for their employees and provide specific examples of supporting behavior.

For additional information about the actions described in this section, check out the resources and practices highlighted below in Table 2.

Table 2. Resources for Operational Unit Managers

Resources for Operational Unit Managers	
Source/Link	**Description**
OPM's Supervisor's Checklist for Preparing for Employee Performance Reviews	Provides resources on how to effectively prepare for employee performance reviews.
Results-Oriented Cultures: Creating a Clear Linkage between Individual Performance and Organizational Success	Identifies practices that federal agencies can use as they develop modern, effective, and credible performance management systems.

Strategy 2: Strengthening Organizational Health Requires a Supportive Environment Focused on Psychological Safety and Inclusive Leadership to Achieve Results

Highly effective organizations implementing successful organizational change need to foster a supportive environment that provides psychological safety for employees and establishes inclusive leadership, which are critical elements for their transformation. Team psychological safety can be defined as "a shared belief held by members of the team that it is okay to take risks, to express their ideas and concerns, to speak up with questions, and to admit mistakes – all without fear of negative consequences.[3]" Psychological safety is important in organizations, as it leads to employees who are more engaged and motivated because they feel their contributions matter. It also can lead to better decision making, by soliciting a more diverse range of perspectives for consideration. Agency leaders seeking to implement a bold vision for improving their agency's organizational health to achieve results (strategy 1) should see this strategy as foundational to achieving success. Fostering a supportive environment contributes to a culture of continuous learning and improvement (strategy 4), where employees can learn from prior mistakes.

> **Government Accountability Office's Core Values**
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> In 2018, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) expanded their agency's core values from focusing on its mission (accountability, reliability, and integrity) to also including "people values" of being valued, respected and treated fairly. Agency leaders engaged with the organization to develop the values, then took steps to institutionalize inclusive leadership through training for operational unit managers and employees throughout the organization. Further, the agency institutionalized people values in its strategic plan and performance budget.
>
> In 2024, GAO was recognized by the Partnership for Public Service for the fourth consecutive year as first among mid-size agencies as a "best place to work."

What Agency Leaders Should Do

Highly effective organizations seeking to attain positive benefits from improved team performance, innovation, creativity, resilience, and learning have leaders who create a work environment focused on psychological safety and inclusivity. [4] Inclusive leaders strive for authenticity, redefine the rules, embrace active learning and consistent implementation, ensure equal opportunity and equitable outcomes, and view fostering an inclusive environment as a core value. Agency leaders are the key to creating and sustaining a supportive environment. Leveraging inclusive leadership practices that promote psychological

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[3] Edmondson, Amy, "The Fearless Organization."

[4] Edmondson, Amy, "Right Kind of Wrong: The Science of Failing Well."

safety is a key practice to attracting talent, retaining employees, and motivating them to achieve results.

Action: Agency leaders should adopt inclusive leadership practices within their organization focused on developing people to promote psychological safety and achieve results.

Agency leaders should develop and adapt relevant philosophies on inclusive leadership to promote psychological safety and achieve meaningful, measurable results.[5] For example, leaders should demonstrate the following attributes to promote psychological safety within their organizations:

1. Visible commitment
2. Humility
3. Awareness of bias
4. Curiosity about others
5. Cultural intelligence
6. Effective collaboration

As part of this focus, agency leaders should use available surveys to assess team psychological safety, such as the Fearless Organization Scan, which provides a seven-question survey and evaluates safety across four domains: willingness to help, inclusion and diversity, attitude toward risk and failure, and open conversation. Agency leaders may adapt this survey for their own purposes and send it to teams across their organization through pulse surveys or using other methods.

Action: Agency leaders should prioritize training for the operational unit managers on inclusive leadership practices and creating a safe work environment for everyone.

Agency leaders should focus on developing their operational unit managers by providing training on inclusive leadership and creating psychological safety in their teams. Operational unit managers are essential to creating a highly effective organization that achieves results for the American people. Some federal agencies have chosen to make this type of training mandatory for their senior leaders and operational unit managers. Federal agencies can also explore the use of

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[5] A systematic review of literature on psychological safety found that "psychological safety is important given it is a key cognitive state that allows learning processes to occur and contributes to improved work outcomes at different levels of analysis." Newman, Donohue, Eva (2017).

emotional intelligence assessments to help operational unit managers and employees understand their own approach to relationships and self-motivation and provide tactics for managing feelings and stress.

For additional information about the actions described in this section, check out the resources and examples highlighted below in Table 3.

Table 3. Resources for Agency Leaders

Resources for Agency Leaders	
Source/Link	**Description**
Harvard Business Review: The Key to Inclusive Leadership and **Why Inclusive Leaders Are Good for Organizations, and How to Become One**	Highlights evidence-based practices for leaders to successfully engage in inclusive leadership within their organizations.
OPM: Promising Practices for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility	Identifies 12 promising practices for fostering diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility within existing federal agency processes. This can be used by agencies to implement Executive Order 14035 on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce.
Great Places to Work: The Power of Purpose	Highlights practices for leaders that seek to keep high-valued employees engaged at organizations.
National Institutes of Health: UNITE Program	Provides an example of a federal agency that has integrated promoting equity into its mission and research.
The Fearless Organization Scan for individuals and teams	Uses the work from Amy Edmondson to help organizations measure psychological safety in their teams and to make improvements.
The Fearless Organization Scan Certification and Training	Provides four modules of training on psychological safety scanning and identifies a list of training providers.

What Operational Unit Managers Should Do

High-performing organizations are enabled by their operational unit managers when they develop and adopt relevant philosophies on inclusive leadership and demonstrate the same attributes related to psychological safety listed above for agency leaders. It is often even more critical to strengthening organizational health and achieving results for operational unit managers to ensure they are fostering a supportive environment since they work more closely with most of the workforce. The actions below are specific ways that operational unit managers can leverage a supportive environment to achieve results.

Action: Operational unit managers should create a healthy feedback culture by actively soliciting feedback from employees and providing useful feedback to employees in support of their development.

Operational unit managers seeking to create a psychologically safe environment should provide authentic and timely feedback to employees to support their professional development and growth over time.

- Create a culture of [feedback and authenticity](#)—where timely, continuous, honest, and constructive feedback is given and received. For example, operational unit managers can use [360 Leadership Assessments](#) to ensure their teams can provide feedback to leaders and managers.

- Empower employees by [delegating decisions](#) to the lowest possible level of the organization, and focus on eliminating obstacles.

- Foster a culture that celebrates individual employees' strengths and actively supports their welfare.

Action: Operational unit managers should engage employees in setting priorities, making trade-offs, and overcoming barriers to achieving results.

Agencies routinely are asked to "do more with less," which creates a challenging organizational culture and [can lead to employee burnout](#). When the mental health of employees suffers, it has a negative impact on workplace productivity, creativity, and retention. According to Gallup, employees who strongly agree they feel supported by their managers are about 70 percent less likely to experience burnout. Operational unit managers can help employees through these challenges when a psychologically safe environment has been enabled so that managers can:

- Collaborate with employees in prioritizing their work tasks and communicate information regarding any trade-offs among areas of focus and barriers to agency leadership.

- Foster opportunities to manage projects and programs using Agile principles including establishing small teams with clear tasks and timeframes to accomplish work in shorter periods that can be iterated over time.

- Establish regular, meaningful, one-on-one check-ins with members of their team.

For additional information about the actions described in this section, check out the resources and tools highlighted below in Table 4.

Table 4. Resources for Operational Unit Managers

Resources for Operational Unit Managers	
Source/Link	Description
Building an Agile Federal Government	Identifies practices that operational unit managers can use to help develop Agile teams.
Harvard Business Review: The Key to Inclusive Leadership and **Why Inclusive Leaders Are Good for Organizations, and How to Become One**	Highlights evidence-based practices for leaders to successfully engage in inclusive leadership within their organizations.
The Fearless Organization Scan for individuals and teams	Uses the work from Amy Edmondson to help organizations measure psychological safety in their teams and to make improvements.

Strategy 3: Strengthening Organizational Health Requires Effective Communication and Engagement with Employees

Highly effective organizations communicate and engage effectively with their employees on a routine basis, especially during periods of uncertainty or transformation. Federal agencies need to examine how information is communicated with their employees and offer different mechanisms of internal communication based on the new world of work, including strategies that are effective for a workforce that is spread across in-person, remote, and hybrid work modalities.

What Agency Leaders Should Do

Effective communication starts at the organizational leadership level. Federal agencies routinely communicate priorities through their mission and vision statements, strategic plans with goals and objectives, agency performance reviews, and budget justifications, among other things. Those documents dictate the nature of communication with external stakeholders and the internal workforce.

Action: Agency leaders should ensure that their strategy for strengthening organizational health and performance is effectively communicated to all levels of the organization.

Agency leaders should focus on communicating their strategy for strengthening organizational health and performance by:

- Effectively communicating the vision to lower-level leaders so that they understand and have buy-in. This can include developing a communication strategy.

- Ensuring that lower-level leaders are fostering the agency's vision in their teams and given time to create that environment rather than viewing it as "other duties as assigned."

- Developing consistent dashboards and visualizations to use with operational unit managers and their teams relating to organizational health and performance indicators.

American Red Cross's Cascading Communication

The American Red Cross initiated an effort to centralize their information technology, human resources, and marketing across the United States, so their field-level operations can focus on community-level work. As part of the effort to implement this structural change, the Red Cross focused efforts on simple messages that are communicated from leaders and cascaded to their managers and teams. The communications strategy included metrics, and information on how they are being achieved; the goal is to be transparent about process.

- Hosting regularly scheduled meetings with their operational unit managers and employees to present organizational health and performance findings and provide strategies for effective communication with employees.

- Supplying training to operational unit managers to help them interpret the results and communicate with their individual operational units.

- Assigning responsibility for information sharing to particular employees throughout their agency.

- Providing more direct communication regarding organizational health and performance to employees to ensure the message is reaching the audience.

Action: Agency leaders should take steps to ensure they receive meaningful feedback from employees through surveys and other sources.

Highly effective organizations use their employee feedback survey results as a starting point and then implement other tactics to explore trends in the survey data.[6] Employee feedback may be captured on existing agency practices or be used as a tool for generating innovative ideas.

Agency leaders may explore using the following practices to more fully understand their agency's federal employee viewpoint survey (FEVS) results:

- Quarterly town halls with employee forums.

- Workshops.

- Pulse surveys.

- Feedback apps.

- Focus groups.

- Idea crowdsourcing.

Environmental Protection Agency's Lean into Change GreenSpark Challenge

In 2014, Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Office of Internal Communications collaborated with the Office of Strategic Environmental Management to launch the staff-generated GreenSpark challenge, a program that encourages employees to offer fresh perspectives and innovative ideas. Between 2014 and 2016, the EPA initiated five agency-wide and 12 office-level challenges generating over 1,000 ideas. Agency leaders used these ideas to improve onboarding, management communication, data analytics, and risk assessment.

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[6] OPM's FEVS is an annual climate survey covering a wide array of topics to gain insight into successful workplace conditions present in federal agencies. The FEVS provides agencies with a wealth of insights across operational units and bureaus. It is also a snapshot in time that captures the thoughts, feelings, and insights on the day employees fill it out so more must be done throughout the year.

In some cases, federal agencies may want to examine their individual response rates and take steps to encourage additional participation. Such steps include:

- Utilizing OPM's communication guide strategies to increase FEVS participation.   This includes sharing results as soon as possible, highlighting planned actions to be taken in response to the survey, and addressing employee privacy concerns.[7]

- Hosting friendly organizational competitions between units.

- Designating a date and time when employees should complete the FEVS.

- Allowing for the use of administrative leave for employees to complete the survey.

- Ensuring that the results of prior surveys are used to drive needed changes inside the organization.

Agency leaders may explore capturing feedback from other sources and partners that meet their agency's needs. Agencies that heavily utilize contractors should consider ways to solicit feedback from them, such as applying for Paperwork Reduction Act exemptions. Agency leaders may also consider methods of obtaining feedback from close partners, including state and local officials and nonprofit stakeholders.

Action: Agency leaders should develop and implement action plans to address issues identified from surveys and other sources of feedback.

Agency leaders should use the information gathered from their FEVS results and other feedback sources to develop action plans for addressing those issues. It is critical that agency leaders take the time to develop effective action plans and implement them through the actions listed below.

Specifically, agency leaders should:

- Develop effective action plans, identify individuals assigned to work on specific tasks, establish timelines for activities, and include metrics to assess progress.

- Host listening sessions and use pulse surveys and other methods to explore the challenge areas identified in the survey.

- Routinely discuss the results of the FEVS survey and other feedback collected and highlight actions taken to address issues.

- Report on the changes made in response to employee input.

For additional information about the actions described in this section, check out the resources and examples highlighted below in Table 5.

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[7] Federal agencies can obtain this information from OPM.

Table 5. Resources for Agency Leaders

Resources for Agency Leaders	
Source/Link	Description
Energizer: Employee Engagement Efforts	Energizer hosts quarterly town halls and leadership forums and sends out an annual engagement survey.
OPM: FEVS Dashboard	This dashboard is designed to provide the OPM FEVS results and indices across the federal government, by agency size, and by agency for constructive comparison.
Paperwork Reduction Act Fast Track Process and Case Studies	Describes the fast-track Paperwork Reduction Act process and how agencies can work with OMB to obtain feedback from other customers and stakeholders.

What Operational Unit Managers Should Do

Agency leaders set the priorities at the top of the organization and need to ensure that communication is effectively cascaded throughout. Operational unit managers play an important role in ensuring that their units and teams receive information from leadership that is tailored to their individual goals.

Action: Operational unit managers should adapt communication approaches to effectively provide information to all workforce categories (in-person, hybrid, and remote).

Operational unit managers should adapt their communication style to effectively provide information to their team members, especially when they are comprised of a mix of in-person, hybrid, and remote employees. For example, technology can enable effective communication, but it also creates challenges. Specifically, agency offices may not have been updated during the pandemic with modern video conferencing equipment, or teams may struggle to decide whether to meet in person if some part of the team is remote. Other challenges include how to coordinate across teams that are in-person and remote, how to develop social connections and networks, how to foster team culture, and how to promote creativity.

Operational unit managers should take steps to address these challenges, including:

- Assess their existing approach to communication.

- Analyze which area(s) require the most improvement, using employee feedback mechanisms.
- Develop a plan for addressing the area that needs the most improvement with action steps.
- Implement the plan and establish key metrics for tracking progress.
- Iterate on the plan based on feedback and expand to address other communication challenges identified.

Operational unit managers should collaborate with their teams as they go through this exercise.

Action: Operational Unit Managers should develop individualized unit action plans and implement them to address issues identified from surveys and other sources of feedback.

Operational unit managers should use the information gathered from the FEVS results and other feedback sources to develop individual action plans for their own operational units.

Specifically, operational unit managers should:

- Develop impactful action plans, identify individuals assigned to work on specific tasks, establish timelines for activities, and include metrics to assess progress.
- Host listening sessions and use pulse surveys and other methods to explore the challenge areas identified in the survey.
- Routinely discuss the results of the FEVS survey and other feedback collected and highlight actions taken to address issues.

For additional information about the actions described in this section, check out the resources and examples highlighted below in Table 6.

Table 6. Resources for Operational Unit Managers

Resources for Operational Unit Managers	
Source/Link	Description
OPM: FEVS Dashboard	This dashboard provides the OPM FEVS results and indices across the federal government by agency size and by agency.
OPM: Hybrid Work Environment Toolkit	Providing a toolkit to support agencies and employees continuing to work in a hybrid environment.

Strategy 4: Strengthening Organizational Health Requires an Institutionalized Culture of Continuous Learning

Highly successful organizations have institutionalized a culture of continuous learning at the institutional and individual levels. Federal agencies can foster this culture by adopting an Agile leadership approach that focuses on iteration, learning, and responding based on evidence and data. Effective organizations embrace a culture of continuous improvement rather than utilizing data or performance evaluations as a "one-and-done" exercise. This strategy is in alignment with agency efforts to implement the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (the Evidence Act), including their learning agendas, and previous recommendations we made in our January 2018 report on *Strengthening Organizational Health and Performance in Government*.

What Agency Leaders Should Do

Agency leaders seeking to improve organizational health and performance can implement practices to cultivate and institutionalize a culture of continuous learning for their agencies.

Action: Agency leaders should expand access to collected data to operational unit managers and teams to increase transparency and accessibility.

Highly effective organizations utilize data and evidence to improve results. Useful data may include those collected for assessing organizational health and data for measuring program effectiveness. Agency leaders can support access to collected data for operational unit managers by:

- Examining which individuals within an organization should be granted access to data and who can benefit.

- Developing methods for delivering data and leveraging technology by creating automatic dashboards for indicators relevant to particular operational units.

- Ensuring operational unit managers and teams are trained to use and interpret the data collected on organizational health and performance.

- Creating recognition and incentive programs to reward operational unit managers for using indicators to improve their units' organizational health and performance.

These actions may be taken as part of agency efforts to implement the Evidence Act.

Action: Agency leaders should dedicate resources to employee development by providing career pathing, mentoring, and training programs.

Agency leaders should prioritize resources for all aspects of professional development by providing career pathing, mentoring, and training programs to operational unit managers and employees. This can make a significant contribution to organizational health and performance. Effective private sector companies spoke about the need to take care of your "people resources."

Specifically, agency leaders should:

- Develop career paths at their specific agencies for different occupational series, such as acquisition talent programs, continuous journey programs, mid-career path programs, and supervisory developmental opportunities.

- Invest in developing a coaching and mentoring culture and provide meaningful opportunities for employees to pursue training and development programs. This can include training employees to mentor and coach others in the agency.

- Develop skills marketplaces within the agency to encourage cross-agency staffing to break down siloes, promote collaboration, and enhance employee professional development.

> **Environmental Protection Agency's Skills Marketplace**
>
> EPA created a skills marketplace for employees to work up to 20 percent of their time with another part of the agency to overcome organizational silos and promote continuous learning. Skills marketplaces benefit employees because they get to experience other parts of the agency and build skills, while the agency benefits from increased collaboration and knowledge transfer. This program reported high satisfaction from participants and supervisors and provides a low resource level option to offer professional development opportunities for employees.
>
> Source: GOVLAB Smarter State Case Studies

- Focus on providing leadership training earlier in employees' careers (before advancement to the GS-14 and GS-15 levels).

- Use individual development plans effectively as a retention tool and to identify training needs.

- Foster an environment where agency leaders and operational unit managers meet to discuss their employees' performance and identify career development opportunities.

- Maintain training and development even during resource-constrained environments. For example, agencies may adopt 70-20-10 models (70 percent on-the-job, 20 percent mentoring, and 10 percent academic).

- Examine the use of indicators to assess employee development, such as individual development plan approval rates, average number of training hours, number of internal promotions, retention rates of high performers, and average dollars invested in training.

For additional information about the actions described in this section, check out the resources and examples highlighted below in Table 7.

Table 7. Resources for Agency Leaders

Resources for Agency Leaders	
Source/Link	**Description**
National Institutes of Health: Mentoring Circle	Provides an example of an agency promoting its mentoring program as a way to foster continued learning through knowledge sharing and long-term career development.
OPM: Career Paths for Federal Program and Project Management Guide	Provides a career path guide for federal program and project managers to use across multiple occupational series.
Department of Defense: Career Development and Growth	Provides a tool to assist individuals seeking to navigate career growth and opportunity across the entire Department of Defense.
Federal Executive Institute: Senior Executive Service Leading EDGE	OPM's Federal Executive Institute offers courses on the five executive core qualifications (ECQs) including ECQ 1: Leading Change.

What Operational Unit Managers Should Do

Operational unit managers seeking to improve organizational health and performance can implement practices to cultivate and institutionalize a culture of continuous learning for their agencies.

Action: Operational unit managers should ensure data collected are used effectively for decision making within their organizations and teams.

Operational unit managers have a critical role in ensuring that organizational health and performance data are available to their employees, communicating with employees about the importance and usefulness of the data available, and integrating the use of data into their operational unit decision making.

Operational unit managers should:

- Share information about indicators with their operational unit team using dashboards and tools.

- Communicate and contextualize information on indicators to their operational unit teams for decision making purposes.
- Promote training to operational unit teams and employees to improve understanding of the data and use it for decision making.
- Encourage operational unit teams and employees to provide feedback on the data, including any errors and opportunities for improvement.

Action: Operational unit managers should encourage employees to explore opportunities to test, grow, and learn.

Operational unit managers are closer to their teams and employees and can offer opportunities for their teams to test, grow, and learn. They can:

- Prioritize professional development for employees, including leadership, knowledge, skills, and abilities.
- Support and provide opportunities for employees to test, grow, and learn through skills marketplaces or details to other operational units.
- Collaborate with operational unit managers across the agency to identify employee growth opportunities.

For additional information about the actions described in this section, check out the resource highlighted below in Table 8.

Table 8. Resources for Operational Unit Managers

Resources for Operational Unit Managers	
Source/Link	Description
OPM: Training and Development Policy Wiki	Provides resources to help align employee training and development efforts with its mission, goals, and objectives.

Strategy 5: Strengthening Organizational Health Requires Modernizing Federal Agency Recruitment, Retention, and Development Efforts

Strengthening federal agencies' organizational health requires modernizing federal processes related to recruitment, retention, and development to address broader federal workforce challenges. The federal sector has long struggled to recruit and retain needed talent. Over 20 years ago, GAO added strategic human capital management to its high-risk list, where it has remained to this day. The length of the hiring process and a lack of a positive user experience with federal job applications can deter candidates from applying or continuing with the process. This makes it more difficult to fill positions, adds administrative burdens to current employees who are forced to take on the extra workload, and can result in increased burnout, leading many federal employees to leave the government. The private sector recruiting processes are timelier, and private companies offer competitive salaries and provide other benefits.[8]

As was noted in No Time to Wait: Building a Public Service for the 21st Century, "the challenges caused by the mismatch between the government's workforce and its mission are growing rapidly into a major crisis. To govern effectively, government must have the capacity to govern. The bedrock of that capacity is its workforce. Therefore, if the government is to rise to the challenges of twenty-first-century government—if it is to serve its citizens and rebuild their trust in their government—action must begin immediately and accelerate rapidly."

The central management agencies have taken steps to improve the federal hiring experience and promote practices and resources that agencies can adopt. This section addresses how the central management agencies, including OMB, OPM, and GSA, as well as department and agency leaders can continue to improve recruitment, retention, and development in the federal government.

What the Central Management Agencies Should Do

Improving the recruitment, retention, and development of the federal workforce is critical to optimizing organizational health and performance in the public sector. The central management agencies have the unique ability to assist agencies and highlight existing Human Resources (HR) flexibilities.

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[8] Time to hire refers to the number of calendar days between a hiring manager's request to hire and a candidate's start date, according to the OPM Time to Hire Dashboard.

Action: OMB, OPM, and GSA should engage with federal agencies to conduct more efficient and effective enterprise-wide workforce planning and adopt talent management strategies.

The central management agencies have many tools available to aid agencies in developing workforce plans and talent management strategies, summarized in a recent memo on [Improving the Federal Hiring Experience](). OMB, OPM, and GSA should continue to promote their use and engage with agencies to ensure they are adopted and successfully implemented. These include:

- [Conduct enterprise-wide strategic workforce planning]() and support agencies and departments in developing their human capital plans.

- Recommend that agencies align their strategic planning cycle with their workforce planning.

- Facilitate, and promote the use of cross-agency scalable hiring practices such as pooled or shared certificates and information sharing regarding interns.

- Organize more government-wide hiring events and assist individual agencies with their hiring events.

- Encourage the use of the [Intergovernmental Personnel Act Mobility program,]() which provides for the temporary assignment of personnel between the federal government and state and local governments, colleges and universities, Indian tribal governments, federally funded research and development centers, and other eligible organizations.

- Foster the use of temporary assignments ("details") across different federal departments and agencies to promote information sharing, cross-agency collaboration, and career development.

> **General Services Administration Office of Evaluation Services Use of Intergovernmental Personnel Act Mobility Program**
>
> The General Services Administration (GSA) has worked with over 80 institutions, as of 2022, to provide for the temporary assignment of personnel external to the Federal Government to strengthen management capabilities, assist with the transfer of new technologies and approaches to solving problems, facilitate an effective means of involving state and local officials in developing policy and programs, and to provide program and developmental experience for participants.
>
> Source: [GSA Intergovernmental Personnel Act Toolkit]()

Action: OMB, OPM, and GSA should search for and share effective recruitment, retention, and development practices across the government.

The central management agencies should search for and share effective recruitment, retention, and development practices across the government.

- Identify and share effective practices to support agencies in developing their respective recruitment, retention, and development approaches.

- Highlight agencies that have successfully developed career paths, mentoring programs, and talent development practices.

- Use data and create shared dashboards and trendlines to help agencies identify which are particularly successful at implementing a respective practice and then help highlight those best practices for other agencies.
- Continue to assess current hiring approaches and transition to skills-based hiring or adopt similar innovations.[9]

Action: OMB, OPM, and GSA should continue supporting departments and agencies in making decisions about and tracking the effectiveness of workplace requirements.

The central management agencies should encourage agencies to provide flexibility on in-person work requirements where possible:

- Remind departments and agencies that they can design their own in-office requirements based on their work imperatives and evidence of what works from an organizational performance and health standpoint.
- Be open to revising the "return to the office" requirements based on the evidence of their impact on organizational health and performance across the government."return to the office" Consolidate and analyze public service recruitment and retention data to determine the effectiveness of varying organizational health and performance practices. Ensure the findings are easily accessible to agency leaders and their operational unit managers.
- Continue to collect and share the latest data on the effectiveness of flexible work arrangements with agencies.
- Ensure that the guidance, such as OPM's Guiding Factors for Designing Remote Work Policies and Programs, is clearly communicated to departmental and agency leaders. Consider using easily digestible formats such as FAQs when providing guidance.
- Continue to work closely with the Chief Human Capital Officer Council and other cross-agency groups when developing guidance to ensure the language is clear, the recommendations are accessible and concrete, and important issues and concerns are addressed.[10]

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[9] For example, OPM is transitioning the hiring process for the IT management job series to a fully skills-based approach in 2025.

[10] One example of a concrete recommendation is from Guiding Factors for Designing Remote Work Policies and Programs: "Agencies should decide for themselves how far from a worksite constitutes a "reasonable commuting distance." One frame of reference is the 50-mile radius rule that applies under GSA's travel regulations. But agencies may decide on shorter distances based on the commuter characteristics of their worksites, including, for example, availability of public transportation and other factors that affect commuting times."

What Agency Leaders Should Do

Agency leaders should coordinate with their Chief Human Capital Officers at a strategic level to improve talent management practices and recruitment efforts, including implementing the joint OMB and OPM [Hiring Experience Memorandum](). They should also use the tools the central management agencies provides, such as the [Workforce of the Future Playbook]() and its accompanying webinars, to guide their work.

Action: Agency leaders should adopt practices to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their recruitment efforts.

To improve recruitment and hiring practices, agency leaders should work with their Chief Human Capital Officers to increase outreach by making positions easier to access and more attractive to applicants.

Agency leaders can use practices highlighted by the central management agencies, including:

- Partnering with the [Federal Executive Boards]() to [expand recruitment efforts]() in underserved areas.

- Using modern technology tools like [Talent Surge Playbook]() and the [Hiring Process Analysis Tool]() to reach the next generation of public service leaders.

- Leveraging the [Agency Talent Portal]() on USAJobs to proactively identify potential applicants and invite them to apply.

- Creating [social media campaigns]() to promote hiring and reach larger audiences.

- Assessing whether providing hybrid or remote work options would increase the applicant pool. Use OPM's [Guiding Factors for Designing Remote Work Policies and Programs]() as a guide.

- Replacing current detailed job specifications with a [skills-based talent management model]().

- [Implementing a pooled hiring strategy]() to allow for the comparison of competencies across all applicants. This may include increasing the use of cross-agency scalable hiring practices such as pooled or shared certificates.

- Using talent managers and building talent teams that can model hiring experience practices and keep up with the latest trends in recruiting and hiring from the industry.

- [Increasing the number of paid internships]() and early career program opportunities to advance equity and inclusion in the federal workforce and reestablish a hiring pipeline.[11]

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[11] OPM and OMB's joint memo, [Guidance on Promoting Internships and other Student and Early Career Programs in the Federal Government](), states that agencies should increase the number of interns, fellows, apprentices, and early career hires across the federal government, with an emphasis on increasing paid internship opportunities and decreasing reliance on unpaid internships.

- [Tailoring recruitment efforts and awareness campaigns](#) to geographic and sectoral trends.

- Partnering with universities to recruit individuals from degree programs that have a desired skillset and/or are more reflective of the communities served by the agency.

- Exploring the appointment of a "chief talent management officer" as a leader focused on implementing practices to improve recruitment and retention.

Action: Agency leaders should identify and adopt practices that improve and streamline the hiring and onboarding process.

Agency leaders should work with their Chief Human Capital Officer to improve and streamline the hiring process by:

- [Analyzing historical data to identify difficult-to-fill positions](#) and develop recruitment strategies for those positions.

- [Encouraging programs](#) and hiring managers to work together throughout the hiring process, including scheduling, phone screenings, and preparing interview panels and questions.

- Sharing applications with other divisions and programs.

- Incorporating feedback loops and adopting more user-centric approaches to capture pain points and suggest improvements in the process.

For additional information about the actions described in this section, check out the resources and examples highlighted below in Table 9.

Table 9. Resources for Agency Leaders

Resources for Agency Leaders	
Source/Link	**Description**
Career Training and Advancement System in West Plains, Missouri	The city administrator of West Plains, Missouri created the Career Progression Program, a nine-step training and advancement system for employees that provides a clear guide for upward mobility and encourages continuous learning.
OPM's Workforce of the Future webpage	Provides resources and guidance that agency leaders can use when modernizing their agency's recruitment, retention, and development.
OMB and OPM: Improving the Federal Hiring Experience Memorandum	Directs agencies toward tools, resources, and strategies that will strengthen workforce planning, improve the

	application experience, and make things easier for hiring and human resource managers.
GSA: [Mission-Support Customer Satisfaction Survey](#)	Asks federal employees to rate satisfaction with an agency's [mission-support functions and services](#). Agencies can compare customer service indicators on human capital, information technology, and other mission-support areas to help identify areas for improvement and agencies with effective practices.
OPM: Updates to the [Pathways Program](#)	The Pathways Program helps agencies hire students and recent graduates seeking federal employees.

Action: Agency leaders should implement practices that improve employee retention.

While streamlining the hiring process will help federal employees avoid burnout, providing staff with incentives to stay is even more important. Many of the actions provided below come directly from governments that had higher retention and recruitment rates after implementing similar initiatives.

Agency leaders can retain top talent by:

- Using a comprehensive model for talent management with a line-of-work-focused emphasis on learning and development.

- Using existing incentives, such as [sign-on bonuses](#), [larger merit increases](#), or [other pay opportunities](#) allowed for certain positions.

- Assessing the possibility of providing hybrid or remote work options using guidance from OPM and OMB, such as OPM's [Guiding Factors for Designing Remote Work Policies and Programs](#).

- [Offering educational advancement opportunities](#) or ways to relieve debt from educational opportunities such as [student loan repayment programs](#). Set up [agency-specific student loan repayment programs](#) to attract or retain highly qualified employees.

- Providing employee assistance programs and resources for all employees, and especially for those who experience personal or professional challenges.

- Exploring the option of appointing a "chief talent management officer" as a leader focused on implementing practices to improve recruitment and retention agency-wide.

What Operational Unit Managers Should Do

Operational unit managers should work closely with their Human Resource Specialists to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the hiring process for their operational unit. Not only do these practices increase the number of applications a job posting will likely receive, but they also increase diversity within the applicant pool. We recommend that operational unit managers work with their HR staff to write job opportunity announcements in plain language so they are easy to comprehend and more appealing to potential applicants. In addition, operational unit managers should consult with their HR staff to ensure that position descriptions and job opportunity announcements match the skills required for the role.

Action: Operational unit managers should adopt practices to improve and streamline the hiring and onboarding process.

- Provide the interview dates in the application to give interviewees time to plan their interview if chosen and avoid misunderstandings.

- Coordinate with any partnering divisions to hear their opinions on the hiring process and cultivate new ideas for improvements across divisions.

- Remove preferred qualifications wherever possible for hard-to-fill positions, as these may lead otherwise qualified candidates to opt out of applying.

- Shift from passive to proactive recruitment strategies and take steps to tailor your approach depending on the position and geographic location.

- Work with HR to simplify the language used for job titles and descriptions.[12]

- Customize position descriptions to ensure they are specific, dynamic, and concise.

- Lower barriers to entry by providing training to employees after hiring.

For additional information about the actions described in this section, check out the resources and examples highlighted below in Table 10.

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[12] According to OPM's Hiring Excellence MythBusters presentation from 2018, hiring managers should ensure that the job opportunity announcement accurately describes the duties of the job and the competencies and experience required in an easy-to-understand and appealing manner.

Table 10. Resources for Operational Unit Managers

Resources for Operational Unit Managers	
Source/Link	**Description**
Practices that Expanded the Hiring Pool **in Los Angeles, California** **Bridge to Jobs Program** **Targeted Local Hire Program**	In Los Angeles, the Bridge to Jobs (BRIDGE) program expanded targeted hiring audiences to include semi-skilled classifications (as opposed to fully skilled). In addition, HR replaced some hiring exams with on-the-job performance evaluations, so jobs could be filled more quickly. This program, along with the Targeted Local Hire program provides individuals to be randomly selected for referral to city departments to be considered for entry-level positions. All three of these initiatives reduced hiring time significantly and can be a useful resource for operational unit managers.
Practices that Streamlined Hiring **in Pierce County, Washington** **Track the County's Progress**	In Pierce County, Washington, the hiring team started conducting screenings with anyone who met the minimum qualifications while the position application was still open to quickly verify the applicants' skills before offering them an official interview. The hiring team also provided the interview dates in the application.
OPM: Federal Hiring Experience Learning Series	Provides resources for all federal hiring managers and HR practitioners to help support agencies' efforts to improve the federal hiring experience.

Strategy 6: Strengthening Organizational Health Requires the Support of the Central Management Agencies

The central management agencies (OMB, OPM, and GSA) critical role in fostering organizational health and performance should focus on supporting agencies in building capacity and adopting successful practices. Theyshould not develop rigid and particular requirements for how agencies achieve these objectives but rather provide overall strategic guidance and empirical information that facilitates internal agency processes and promotes flexibility.

What the Central Management Agencies Should Do

OMB, OPM, and GSA have each made progress with their existing efforts to support agencies in adopting strategies and practices that foster organizational health and performance. Initiatives such as the OPM's Workforce of the Future Initiative, which aims to promote a federal government workforce that is inclusive, agile, and engaged with the right skills to enable mission delivery, can help agencies improve their organizational health and performance.

Additional actions can be taken to support federal agencies in their efforts to strengthen their organizational health and performance.

Action: OMB, OPM, and GSA should provide leadership in supporting and assisting agencies to adopt strategies and practices that foster organizational health and performance.

Opportunities for the central management agencies to support federal agencies in adopting strategies and practices include:

- Clarifying each agency's roles and responsibilities relating to organizational health and performance.

- Ensuring that guidance to agencies is both clear and helpful to agency leaders to operationalize organizational health and performance.

- Highlighting examples of effective practices for using agency-wide performance reviews to strengthen organizational health and improve performance. For example, building on the existing Government Performance Framework established by the Government Performance and Results Act, they should share leading practices with agencies for conducting effective strategic reviews.

- Creating a broader culture in which organizational health does not become a "check-the-box compliance exercise" inside departments and agencies.

Action: OMB, OPM, and GSA should search for and offer ideas for how federal departments and agencies can strengthen their organizational health and performance.

Opportunities for the central management agencies to support federal agencies in adopting strategies and practices to assess organizational health and performance include:

- Leveraging empirical insights on what works to improve organizational health and performance.
- Highlighting specific examples of actions that federal agencies and organizations have taken to strengthen their organizational health and performance.
- Identifying indicators that agencies might find useful and that they could tailor to their specific organization and mission to allow for flexibility. Highlight indicators that are context-specific, research-based, relevant, useful, and prioritized.
- Continuing to foster communities of practice to help agencies learn from each other's efforts to strengthen organizational health and performance.

Action: OMB, OPM, and GSA should identify indicators to better understand the impact of remote, hybrid, and in-person work on productivity, employee satisfaction and engagement, and performance.

The federal government has not collected sufficient evidence to determine the effects of remote, hybrid, and in-person work on organizational health and performance. Further, federal agencies vary substantially by their missions, tasks, and telework policies. Establishing a one-size-fits-all approach for the entire federal government may reduce agency health and performance while compromising recruitment and retention efforts. The Congressional Budget Office report comparing federal and private sector telework found that at the end of 2022, fewer federal employees worked from home (22 percent) compared to the private sector (25 percent).

- Identify indicators that allow federal agencies to assess their use of telework and hybrid work that relies on evidence. Indicators may include:
    - Telework utilization
    - Attrition
    - Absenteeism
    - Employee engagement
    - Quantity and quality of hiring pool comparing remote and in-person positions

- o Workspace utilization
- Ensure that agencies have the flexibility to determine the optimal balance of in-person and remote work based on the best available evidence of what is working in their organizational units.

CONCLUSION

This report presents six strategies and associated actions that federal leaders and managers at all levels can utilize to improve their organization's health and performance. This task is vital now given the need to address increasingly complex and interconnected "wicked problems" in the wake of a global pandemic, financial crises, natural disasters, global instability, and polarization at home. The American people deserve a high-performing, effective government that's agile and responsive amidst more frequent shocks. The strategies and actions described by this report can help build the government that the American public relies on and deserves.

Appendix A: AUTHOR INFORMATION & BIOGRAPHIES

EXPERT ADVISORY GROUP

Lisa Coleman: Lisa Coleman's career is a testament to her dedication to diversity, inclusion, and innovation in academia. Her journey began at Tufts University in 2000, where she specialized in Africana studies and institutional diversity. Over a decade, she directed the Africana program and became the university's first senior diversity officer, reporting directly to the president. In 2010, Dr. Coleman moved to Harvard University, where she made history as the institution's first Chief Diversity Officer and Special Assistant to the President. During her tenure, she developed groundbreaking initiatives that focused on technology and disability, setting new standards for diversity and inclusion at one of the world's most prestigious universities. Her next significant role came in 2017 when she joined New York University as the Senior Vice President for Global Inclusion and Strategic Innovation. At NYU, she led efforts to promote inclusive leadership and foster innovation across the university's global network. Her work there further solidified her reputation as a leader in diversity and inclusion. In May 2024, Dr. Coleman was appointed as the President-Elect of Adler University, marking another historic milestone as she became the first female and first Black president of the institution. Her presidency, starting in September 2024, is expected to bring a new era of collaboration, multi-sector partnerships, and systemic equity to Adler University. Throughout her career, Lisa Coleman has been a trailblazer, consistently driving initiatives that intersect innovation, diversity, and social impact. Her leadership has not only transformed the institutions she has been a part of but also set a powerful example for future leaders in academia and beyond.

Nicholas "Nick" Hart: Nick Hart's career reflects a dynamic engagement with evidence-informed policy making and data advocacy. Mr. Hart is currently President & CEO of the Data Foundation, championing data-driven approaches to governance and the use of data. Previously, Mr. Hart directed the Evidence Project at the Bipartisan Policy Center from 2017 to 2019, where he remains a Fellow. As Policy and Research Director of the U.S. Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking from 2016 to 2017, he helped formulate unanimous recommendations that became the basis of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act (Evidence Act). His service in government included roles as a Senior Program Examiner within the White House Office of Management and Budget, focusing on education, income maintenance, and labor programs from 2012 to 2017, as a Special Assistant from 2011 to 2012, and as a Program Examiner for natural resources programs from 2009 to 2011. Mr. Hart is an Adjunct Professor at George Washington University's Trachtenberg School of Public Policy and Public Administration in program evaluation.

Peter Hutchinson: Mr. Hutchinson is a talented leader and problem solver, with a track record of transforming organizations and their strategies, processes, and systems to deliver greater results. He is a skilled facilitator with experience engaging leadership at the highest levels of government, non-profits, and education. Mr. Hutchinson is a former Commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Finance, Superintendent of the Minneapolis Public Schools, a deputy mayor, a corporate vice president at the Dayton Hudson Corporation (now Target), and president of the Bush Foundation, one of Minnesota's largest independent foundations. Most recently he served as the strategy lead for Accenture's Public Service Practice. Peter is also co-author with David Osborne of The Price of Government: Getting the Results We Need in an Age of Permanent Fiscal Crisis. He has written and spoken extensively on all dimensions of public

sector performance including as the keynote speaker at the National Governors Association Annual Meeting on "Delivering Results."

Kathryn Newcomer: Kathryn Newcomer is a professor in the Trachtenberg School of Public Policy and Public Administration at the George Washington University. She serves on the Comptroller General's Educators' Advisory Panel, and served as president of the American Evaluation Association in 2017 and president of the Network of the Association of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) for 2006-2007. Dr. Newcomer has published over ten books, including Research Handbook on Program Evaluation (2024), Evidence-building and Evaluation in Government (2022), Inclusive Engagement for Equitable Outcomes: A Practitioner's Playbook (2022), U.S. Inspectors General: Truth Tellers in Turbulent Times (2020), and The Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation (4th edition 2015), many research reports, and over 70 articles in journals.

Sean O'Keefe: Sean O'Keefe has had a distinguished and multifaceted career. He currently holds the Howard G. and S. Louise Phanstiel Chair in Strategic Management and Leadership at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University. Additionally, he serves as a Distinguished Senior Advisor (Non-Resident) at the Center for Strategic & International Studies. Mr. O'Keefe's career includes significant leadership roles in both the public and private sectors. He was the Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of EADS North America and a Vice President at General Electric Company. In academia, he served as Chancellor of Louisiana State University. In government, Mr. O'Keefe held several high-profile positions. He was the Administrator of NASA, Deputy Director of the U.S. Office of Management and Budget, and Secretary of the Navy. He also served as the Comptroller and Chief Financial Officer of the U.S. Department of Defense and was the Staff Director for the Senate Defense Appropriations Subcommittee. Mr. O'Keefe's academic contributions are notable as well. He held the Louis A. Bantle Chair in Business and Government Policy at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University. He also worked at Pennsylvania State University as the Special Assistant to the Senior Vice President for Research, Dean of the Graduate School, and Professor of Business Administration.

STUDY TEAM

Joseph P. Mitchell, III, *Director of Strategic Initiatives & International Programs; Program Area Director.* Dr. Mitchell leads the Academy's thought leadership activities. He runs the Grand Challenges in Public Administration campaign and the Agile Government Center, facilitates high impact strategic planning sessions with public agencies, manages externally sponsored events, and oversees the Center for Intergovernmental Partnerships. Previously, at the General Services Administration (GSA), he worked with other leaders in the Office of Government-wide Policy to stand up the Office of Shared Solutions and Performance Improvement, led a team responsible for cross-agency efforts in support of the President's Management Agenda, and oversaw the White House Leadership Development Program. Before serving at GSA, he led the Academy's

organizational studies program, managed projects requested by the US Congress and agencies, and served as a senior analyst on reviews of a wide array of agencies across the federal government. He received a Fed 100 Award in 2022 for his contributions to increasing the agility of the federal government and moderated a joint series with the Pandemic Response Accountability Committee that received the Public/Private Partnership Award from the Council of Inspectors General (CIGIE). He served two terms on the National Science Foundation's Business and Operations Advisory Committee. He holds a Ph.D. from the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, a Master of International Public Policy from the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, a Master of Public Administration from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and a BA in History from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. He recently earned an Executive Certificate in Public Leadership at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

Amanda K. Mullan, *Project Director*. Ms. Mullan is a Project Director for Strategic Initiatives working on the Grand Challenges in Public Administration campaign. Prior to rejoining the Academy, Amanda spent a decade in the federal government, most recently as a Program Analyst in the Office of Policy and Program Analysis at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) overseeing a diverse portfolio of programs and making recommendations to leadership on the agency's budget priorities and tradeoffs. Prior to her work at FEMA, Amanda served as a Senior Analyst at the U.S. Government Accountability Office conducting performance reviews of programs at the National Nuclear Security Administration, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Weather Service. Additionally, she played a crucial role in several crosscutting assessments aimed at enhancing the federal approach to disaster recovery and improving federal guidance on testing for lead in drinking water in K-12 schools. Amanda started her career as a Research Associate at the Academy working on organizational studies for the Social Security Administration, FEMA, and the National Weather Service. Amanda holds a Master of Public Administration from Cornell University and a BA in Political Science from the State University of New York at Cortland.

Jillian McGuffey, *Research Analyst*. Ms. McGuffey currently serves as a Research Analyst for the Strategic Initiatives Team. In this role, she conducts research for the Grand Challenges in Public Administration campaign, organizes and facilitates partnership events, and researches and produces studies required by Congressional statute or independently contracted with a public agency or private organization. Ms. McGuffey began working at the Academy in December 2020 after she completed an internship there where she contributed to studies for the Office of Space Commerce and the National Park Service. Ms. McGuffey's focus areas include organizational management, agile management, housing policy, and social equity. Prior to working at the Academy, she interned at the United States Census Bureau's Criminal Justice Branch and USCIS's Emergency Management Division. Ms. McGuffey graduated from the University of Maryland with a Master of Public Policy degree after earning a Bachelor of Arts in Government and Politics and a Minor in Creative Writing.

Brad Riley, *Senior Research Associate*. Mr. Riley is a Senior Research Associate with the Center for Intergovernmental Partnerships. He offers over 20 years of servant leadership in the public and nonprofit sectors, focusing on housing policy, social epidemiology, and advocacy for historically excluded populations. Brad is also known as Councilor Riley, serving as City Councilor At-Large for the City of Easthampton, Massachusetts. He serves as the Public Safety clerk and chairs the Appointment Committee overseeing 200 citizen public administrators across 30 community boards and commissions. He also serves as a local government advisor to the

Governor of Massachusetts and is on the board of directors for the Massachusetts Municipal Association and Tapestry Health Systems. Brad graduated from the University of Illinois with a Master's in Education Policy degree and the University of Massachusetts with a Master's degree in Public Policy and Administration. He also has a Bachelor's degree in Workplace Diversity and Inclusion from the University of Massachusetts Amherst's University Without Walls and professional certifications in applied positive psychology, epidemiology, and diversity and equity.

Appendix B: INTERVIEW AND SYMPOSIA PARTICIPANTS

INTERVIEWEES

Alberts, Adrienne, Chief Diversity Officer, American Red Cross

Bader, Shea, Assistant Director, Government Accountability Office

Boin, Arjen, Professor of Public Institutions and Governance, Leiden University

Gaber, Noah, Organizational Health Expert

Garcia, Carmen, Chief Human Capital Officer, Office of Personnel Management

Havniear, Anne, Sr. Change Strategist, Department of Veterans Affairs

Hoover, Camille, Executive Officer, National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases

Hurst, Melissa, Chief Human Resources Officer, American Red Cross

Hwang, Shirley, Assistant Director, Government Accountability Office

Kann, Aaron, Head of Global Ethics and Compliance, Energizer Holdings

Licht, Ben, Assistant Director, Government Accountability Office

Locke, Dawn, Director of Strategic Issues, Government Accountability Office

Malague, Katie, Chief Management Officer, Office of Personnel Management

Sager, Michelle, Managing Director of Strategic Issues, Government Accountability Office

Schmidt, Aliceanne, Sr. Organizational Development Strategist, Dell

Schmidt, Conrad, Chief Research Officer, Heidrick and Struggles

Sexton, Thomas, Professor in Department of Technology and Society, Stony Brook University

Soileau, Jonathan, Deputy Performance Improvement Officer, Office of Personnel Management

Stiles, Lenora, Deputy Performance Improvement Officer, Department of the Treasury

Van Riper, Kris, Vice President, Gartner

Veale, Sarah, Assistant Director of Strategic Issues, Government Accountability Office

Weber, Karen, Director of Enterprise Strategy, Department of the Treasury

Wells, Kimberly, Managing Research Psychologist, Office of Personnel Management

Wiseman, Jane, Chief Executive Officer, Institute for Excellence in Government

SYMPOSIA PARTICIPANTS

Ackerman, Jennifer, Deputy Chief Human Capital Officer, Department of the Interior

Adrignola, Samantha, Program Manager, Office of Personnel Management

Amin, Faisal, Chief Financial Officer, Environmental Protection Agency

Armstrong, Melody, Deputy Chief Human Capital Officer and Director, Human Resources for the Justice Management Division, Department of Justice

Athanasakopoulos, Giorgios, Associate Partner, McKinsey & Company

Audent, Anne, Director, Departmental Office of Human Resource Management, Department of Transportation

Ayers, Rebecca, Deputy Associate Director, Center for Leadership Development, Office of Personnel Management

Banks, Gerome, Organization Design and Development Strategic Consulting Manager, Office of Personnel Management

Barnes, Bethanne, Director, Division of Data and Improvement, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Department of Health & Human Services

Barth, Sara, Personnel Psychologist, Small Business Administration

Beatty, Theresa, Performance Analyst, National Science Foundation

Benjamin, Lisa, Chief Operating Officer, City of Atlanta, Georgia

Bertha, Alexander, Program Specialist, Office of Personnel Management

Black, Emily, Department of Veterans Affairs

Blauer, Beth, Associate Vice Provost for Public Sector Innovation, Johns Hopkins University

Bovaird, Erica, Executive and Leadership Development, National Aeronautics and Space Administration

Briley, Tanisha, City Manager, City of Gaithersburg, Maryland

Brill, Julie, Deputy Chief Human Capital Officer, Small Business Administration

Brockelman, Stephen, Acting Chief Customer Officer, General Services Administration

Buchmann, Christian, Division Director, Department of Treasury

Buckley, Ruth, Deputy Assistant Administrator, United States Agency for International Development

Cabell, Stephanie, Senior Program Analyst, Department of State

Caldwell, Jocelyn, Vice President, People and Belonging, Walmart

Cazeau, Shannon, Foreign Service Officer, Department of State

Chase, Matthew, Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director, National Association of Counties

Chiang, Anne, Chief Evaluation Officer, Department of the Treasury

Christopher-Davis, Consondra, Acting Director, Planning and Accountability Directorate, Department of Defense

Clark, Charles, Correctional Officer, Department of Corrections

Clark, Patrina, Deputy Director, Office of Agency Services, Farm Credit Administration

Clay, Jacqueline, Deputy Chief Human Capital Officer, Department of Education

Connor-Lopez, Lynda, Director, Center for Strategy and Leadership Development, Social Security Administration

Crump, Julianna, Performance Manager, Office of Management and Budget

Cutler, Samantha, Director, Workforce Relations Division, Department of Education

Dols, Michael, Staff Training & Customer Education Coordinator, Department of Energy

Drew, Denise, Director, Talent Recruitment & Hiring, Department of Education

Earley, Michelle, Deputy (Strategic Operations) Federal Staffing Center, Office of Personnel Management

Evans, Melissa, Director, Performance Reporting and Evaluation Division, Department of Homeland Security

Funston, Robin, Director, Strategic Planning & Performance, Department of Justice

Gaber, Noha, Organizational Health Expert

Giorgis, John, Director, Office of Strategic Planning and Analysis, Federal Transit Administration, Department of Transportation

Green, Mark, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Human Capital and Diversity and Chief Human Capital Officer, Department of the Interior

Hall, John, Deputy Director, Office of Planning Analysis and Accountability, Environmental Protection Agency

Halpern, Bradley, Organizational Effectiveness Expert, Public and Social Sectors, McKinsey & Company

Havniear, Anne, Senior Change Strategist, Department of Veterans Affairs

Heller-Stein, Colleen, Executive Director, Chief Human Capital Officers Council Office of Personnel Management

Helm, Aaron, Chief Human Capital Officer, General Services Administration

Hester, Daniel, Federal Senior Executive, Deputy Director, Civilian Personnel Advisory Service, Department of Defense

Hoadley, Travis, Deputy Director, Human Capital Strategy, Department of Commerce

Hochhalter, Bonnie, Deputy Chief Human Capital Officer, Department of Education

Houghton, Lucy, Chief Wellbeing Officer, Department of Veterans Affairs

Hurley, Sydney, Performance Improvement Directorate, Office of the Director of Administration and Management, Department of Defense

Jabarri, Cyrus, Chief Data Officer to the Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering, Department of Defense

Jacobson, Michael, Deputy Director - Performance and Strategy, King County Office of Performance, Strategy and Budget, King County, Washington

Jarrin, Joseph, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Finance and Budget, Office of the Secretary, Department of Transportation

Jones-Haskins, Joy, Planning, and Accountability Directorate, Office of the Director of Administration and Management, Department of Defense

Kabel-Ballard, Tanya, Director of Performance and Evaluation, Department of State

Kamen, Mara, Director, Office of Human Resources in the Office of Mission Support and Deputy Chief Human Capital Officer, Environmental Protection Agency

Knight, Harry, Director, Office of Performance Excellence, Department of Commerce

Krause, Merrick, Deputy Chief Human Capital Officer, General Services Administration

Kraynik, Sharon, Human Resources and Risk Management Director, City of Sanford, Florida

Laiketsion, Meron, Management Analyst, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Office of the Director of Administration and Management, Department of Defense

Lam-Vieira, Hoang, Agency Deputy Performance Improvement Officer, United States Agency for International Development

Lamary, Mary, Chief Human Capital Officer, Nuclear Regulatory Commission

Landres, Lisa, Deputy Director, Performance Management Center, Department of Labor

Liliedahl, Erika, Evidence Team, White House, Office of Management and Budget

Lipton, Adam, Office of Performance and Personnel Management, Office of Management and Budget

Long, Michelle, Deputy Chief Human Capital Officer, Office of Human Resources Management, U.S. Department of Agriculture

Martella, Margaret, Supervisory Human Resource Specialist, Department of Veterans Affairs

Martin, Jody, Acting Associate Director for Operations, Nuclear Regulatory Commission

Medley-Proctor, Kristen, Assistant Deputy Commissioner, Human Resources, Social Security Administration

Merritt, Zina, Chief Diversity Management Officer, Government Accountability Office

Merritts, Stewart, Director of Office of Occupational Safety and Health, Department of Commerce

Metzenbaum, Shelley, Consultant, The BETTER Project

Micone, Vince, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Operations, Department of Labor

Mullaney-Loss, Patricia, Social Science Analyst, National Endowment of the Arts

Myers, Joyce, Department of Commerce

Nassar, Joe, Director, Office of Facilities and Administrative Services, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Nelson, Christopher, State Cultural Resources Specialist, Department of Agriculture

Norris, Trevor, Acting Assistant Secretary for Management, Department of the Treasury

O'Connor, Mary, Office of Policy and Programs Human Resources Specialist, Department of Commerce

Pickart, Jason, Chief Information Officer, Department of Defense

Rappaport, James, Expert, McKinsey & Company

Ray, Deborah, Senior Strategic Advisor, Defense Civilian Personnel Advisory Service, Department of Defense

Reddy, Kavitha, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

R'id, Amatullah, Senior Advisor to the Deputy Administrator (Chief Operating Officer), United States Agency for International Development

Riddle, Carissa, Chief Risk Advisor, Office of Community Planning and Development, Department of Housing and Urban Development

Roberts-Lewis, Kristie, Executive Director, Center for Middle Georgia Studies, Middle Georgia State University

Rubenstein, Melissa, Director of Strategic Planning and Accountability, Department of Defense

Scannelli, Carol, Chief of Staff, Office of Human Resources, Department of Education

Sherwood, Lisa, Chief Human Capital Officer Chief of Staff/Strategy/Integration, National Aeronautics and Space Administration

Skidmore, Ben, Acting Branch Chief, Office of Management and Budget

Smith, Taiwanna, Human Resources Division Chief, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Department of Defense

Somuah-Gyamfi, Susie, Human Resources Manager, Department of Education

Spangenberg, Joel, Director, Selective Service System

Steide, Kimberly, Deputy Chief Human Capital Officer, Department of Treasury

Stein, Nicole, Chief, Agency Assistance Branch, United States Office of Government Ethics

Stiles, Lenora, Deputy Performance & Program Management Improvement Officer and Chief Risk Officer, Department of the Treasury

Storey, Tim, Executive Director, National Conference of State Legislatures

Sull, Donald, Professor, School of Management, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Sullivan, Kathryn, Senior Fellow, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies

Therit, Tracey, Chief Human Capital Officer, Department of Veterans Affairs

Thompson, Valerie, Composite Technician, Department of Defense

Tumulty, Mandy, Director of Analytics and Strategy, Office of Human Resources Management, General Services Administration

Vares-Lum, Suzanne, President, East-West Center

Webb, Andrew, Office of Planning & Performance Management, Department of the Interior

Weber, Karen, Deputy Chief Revenue Officer and Director, Enterprise Strategy, Performance, and Risk, Department of the Treasury

Wooden-Aguilar, Helena, Deputy Assistant Administrator, Environmental Protection Agency

Wright, Sheila, Deputy Chief Human Capital Officer, United States Agency for International Development