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There's No 'Easy Button' to Modernize the Civil Service

But the hard work of cultivating effective, accountable federal managers is essential.

James M. Durant III, Elizabeth Barcus, Craig Carter, Chad Hooper and David Lescarini | AUGUST 29, 2022

SCHEDULE F



Federal supervisors work every day to effectively manage their employees to deliver critical services for the American people. Unfortunately, many in Congress have shown no interest in leadership development for the federal workforce. The longstanding inattention to equipping leaders with the tools for success, coupled with bureaucratic inefficiencies that have long been endemic to national government, has prevented even the best leaders from managing most effectively. The results are seen each year in low scores for agencies on the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey.

Proponents of the [Public Service Reform Act](#) and [Schedule F](#) cite an interest in government modernization and accountability. But these proposals are merely “easy button” solutions, and there is no easy button to federal leadership and accountability. Still, there is a consensus among the professional associations of federal managers and executives we represent that Congress must modernize the civil service.

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should be employed to increase accountability in the civil service, but they don't involve stripping the civil service of the basic protections in place to maintain the merit system. Government managers and executives have implored Congress and the president to enact these changes for decades, but political leaders have lacked the will to do so. With little progress, the situation continues to deteriorate, stoking the calls for dire actions like PSRA and Schedule F.



Select and Train the Right Managers

Congress and the president can improve agency performance by ensuring that federal agencies focus on the selection, development and cultivation of managers. This has been a near-constant topic of discussion since the passage of the 1978 Civil Service Reform Act. Successful companies do these things for a reason—to develop a performance-oriented culture.



Government watchdogs like the Merit Systems Protection Board and the National Academy of Public Administration have stressed the importance of first-line supervisor and manager selection and development in various reports for decades:

- [Training and Development for the Senior Executive Service: A Necessary Investment](#) (MSPB, 2015)
- [A Call to Action: Improving First-Level Supervision of Federal Employees](#) (MSPB, 2010)
- [First-Line Supervisors in the Federal Service Their Selection, Development, and Management](#) (NAPA, 2003)
- [Federal First-Line Supervisors: How Good Are They?](#) (MSPB, 1992)

Helping managers do their job only works if the right people rise to management and effective training regimes are already established. As Anita Blair [pointed out recently](#), before she became chief human capital officer at the Defense Department, the agency lacked a framework for manager training to ensure that everyone entrusted with supervising others had the knowledge and resources to help all employees do their best. Most agencies remain in this state.

A single agency's story of effective management-building does not negate the decades of research showing systemic shortfalls across government to provide managers and executives the tools for success. The PSRA places the duty of reinforcing a fair and competitive merit process in the hands of supervisors ill-equipped to meet this task. The only thing currently protecting the system is the merit protections overseen by the MSPB, which provide an independent check on ineffective managers for retaliating, discriminating, or engaging in prohibited personnel practices. The PSRA will weaken these protections and, with no strong supervisory culture in place to maintain the merit system, will result in a civil service responsive only to the political will of administration appointees.

Develop Public Service Leaders

Federal agencies do an inconsistent job, at best, of preparing and supporting supervisory employees to succeed in their roles. These travails, despite the best intentions of the Office of Personnel Management guidance, are well documented by MSPB and the Government Accountability Office. Moreover, agencies allow managers who prove incapable of serving in those roles to continue doing so through ineffective use of the

effectively for new managers, as for all new employees. Both [GAO](#) and [MSPB](#) have reported on this.

Good managers are the key to effective performance management. Few would disagree that performance management in the federal government falls well short of effective practice. OMB Deputy Director for Management Jason Miller testified as much before the House Oversight and Reform Committee during a [hearing on the future of federal work](#) in late July. And the issue has been well-documented by GAO:

- [Opportunities Exist to Strengthen Performance Management Pilot](#) (2013)
- [Opportunities Exist for OPM to Further Innovation in Performance Management](#) (2018)
- [Actions Needed to Ensure Agencies Have Tools to Effectively Address Misconduct](#) (2018)
- [Key Talent Management Strategies for Agencies to Better Meet Their Missions](#) (2019)
- [Additional Analysis and Sharing of Promising Practices Could Improve Employee Engagement and Performance](#) (2015)
- [Improved Supervision and Better Use of Probationary Periods Are Needed to Address Substandard Employee Performance](#) (2015)

Consensus for Change

In 2018, the Government Managers Coalition, made up of five major federal sector professional associations representing managers and executives, who constitute the Government Managers Coalition, [said the selection and development of career leaders](#) are the single most important areas the government must address to improve performance and accountability.

The Government Managers Coalition recommends that civilian federal agencies follow the Defense Department's lead and invest in improving their management cadres. Training and development are always first to be cut—if they are funded at all—in civilian agencies.

Another top recommendation of the coalition is to make the system less complex and cumbersome while still maintaining a balance of employee rights and process. Since the early 1990s, federal managers have pleaded with policymakers to streamline the federal personnel dispute system. We agree.

Federal human capital management has been [atop GAO's high risk List](#) for more than two decades for a reason. Leading people is hard. Change is complex. Leaders of the Government Managers Coalition and across the federal sector know the civil service must evolve to meet the needs of America today. Congress needs to step up and do its job to modernize it. That means more than efforts like PSRA or Schedule F, which throw the baby out with the bathwater by simply making it easy to fire employees. More critically, lawmakers need to remind the president that they created the civil service and will be responsible for their fate.

Creating More Problems


The PSRA is not about reminding people what public service is all about, helping managers do their jobs, and maintaining a proper balance to preserve fairness and secure performance. That may be how certain chief human capital officers would implement the legislation, but nowhere does the bill actually require these initiatives. The PSRA simply purports to create a more accountable federal government by making it easier to remove federal employees.

president political control over the executive branch. However, at lower levels in the federal government, career leaders ensure the laws are carried out in accordance with congressional intent rather than influenced by a president's political motives. The PSRA and Schedule F would weaken the career employee buffer that ensures presidential prerogatives are in line with congressional intent, as outlined in the law.

Not only would this politicize the federal government, but it would erode critical democratic values like consistency and reliability of the law. One of the key reasons Congress decided to abolish the political patronage system was to ensure as the country grew that there was continuity in the application of the law. This requires a professional career workforce.

If employees can be fired without cause (as the PSRA allows) and the buffer between career and appointed leaders is removed (as Schedule F does), there is no check to ensure laws are carried out in a consistent manner. Continuity in the execution of the nation's laws provides stability for businesses engaging with the federal government, industries regulated by the federal government, and ultimately, taxpayers.

The solution to our government's challenges is not the PSRA or Schedule F. It is not doing away with the civil service protections. The answer is doing the necessary work to effectively address systemic management challenges. Accomplishing this will better enable federal civil service leaders to fulfill the public's expectations of the U.S. government.

James M. Durant III is board chair of the Senior Executives Association. Elizabeth Barcus is president of the Federal Aviation Administration Managers Association. Craig Carter is president of the Federal Managers Association. Chad Hooper is executive director of the Professional Managers Association. David Lescarini is president of the National Council of Social Security Management Associations. All are members of the Government Managers Coalition, collectively representing more than 250,000 career executives, supervisors, and managers in the federal government. The comments herein do not represent the interest or opinions of the Department of Energy, where James M. Durant is employed. They are personal to him. 

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Human Nature Can Steer People Away from New Things – and that Can Blind Them to Novel Threats

Those who seek to cause harm are as capable of generating creative ideas as anyone else. Two psychologists and counterterrorism scholars suggest how not to overlook a new danger.

SAM HUNTER and **GINA SCOTT LIGON**, *THE CONVERSATION* | AUGUST 28, 2022

PROMISING PRACTICES LEADERSHIP



There's a military aphorism that generals are always fighting the last war. It's a natural human tendency to focus on the kinds of threats you're used to while playing down the likelihood or importance of some new sort of attack.

Of course novel threats can crop up anytime and anywhere. An assassin killed former Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe with an **improvised firearm** in a country largely **unfamiliar** with gun violence. Dozens of cases of **Havana Syndrome**, a health condition some have speculated is caused by **directed energy** or **microwave weapons**, remain unexplained. Unless you are a science fiction fan or obsess over spy novels, these kinds of attacks aren't top of mind when anticipating what dangers are out there.

As **psychologists and counterterrorism scholars**, we're **interested in malevolent creativity**. Novelty is not solely the purview of the "good guys" – those who **seek to cause harm are as capable** of generating creative ideas as everyone else.

So why do people tend to dismiss these types of novel threats, leaving themselves less protected? What social scientists call "the **originality bias**" provides insight into why it's so easy to forget that adversaries may be developing new tactics in pursuit of their malevolent goals.

What makes a novel threat easy to miss

Although many people report a desire for new things and fresh ideas, studies find most are surprisingly **resistant to novel thinking**.

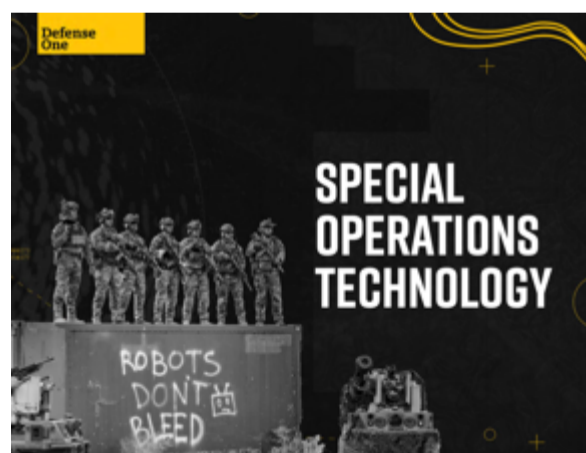
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popularity of entertainment options like the movie *Fast and Furious* movie or the latest Marvel Cinematic Universe offering. Gadgets are often designated by variant numbers – think iPhone 13 – emphasizing they're an iteration of the familiar. And people tend to **make mistakes** when assessing the most novel ideas.

Such biases may have served humans well over the course of evolution, limiting the inclination to grab an unknown berry or trudge off into an ominous, freshly discovered cave. Although neutral or even helpful in many scenarios, this originality bias also has more worrisome implications if it means missing novel threats. Here's how it can happen.



To start, novel ideas by definition are difficult for people to assess based on previous experience. A bullet, for example, causes a wound. But a novel weapon may not leave as **clear an indicator** of harm. The impact of novel ideas can be harder to see and so easier to dismiss.

Evaluating novel ideas is also more cognitively demanding. There's a lot more to figure out around an emerging or even theoretical technology like a microwave weapon compared with a well-known explosive compound.



It can be hard to decipher the danger of something you haven't encountered before. [Klaus Vedfelt/DigitalVision via Getty Images](#)

And because a novel threat is by definition unknown, no one is scanning the horizon for it specifically. Before the terrorist attacks on 9/11, for example, there were fewer **security checkpoints**. Before Abe's assassination, most in his circle were not scanning for makeshift guns, since Japan has few firearms and makeshift guns were often **dismissed** as a viable threat.

There are also **social** or interpersonal reasons for ignoring or missing original ideas. Fresh ideas often threaten the status quo and may put some people at a disadvantage. Consider a security company that sells bulletproof glass. If a novel threat can travel through the glass, that company may be reluctant to tell others that their product is of limited use against it. People may prefer to set aside the **risk** from a novel threat to protect the current way of operating.

Finally, it can be uncomfortable or embarrassing to discuss novel ideas and your views of them. A researcher may be reluctant to write about Havana Syndrome because of a fear of losing credibility if their take on what's going on turns out to be wrong. Being wrong can

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Seeing past the originality bias

For all these reasons, people are often less well defended against novel threats, even though such threats have the potential to do great harm. How can those who work in law enforcement and the broader homeland security enterprise guard against the originality bias while guarding against threats? Work in [organizational psychology](#) and [design thinking](#) offers a few potential avenues to support breaking natural tendencies toward the predictable.

- Support a [climate](#) that seeks creative solutions.
- Promote [leadership](#) that supports and encourages viewing things differently.
- Seek [diversity](#) of expertise and a range of ways to frame problems.
- Conduct [after-action discussions](#) when a novel threat was missed and make changes to address weaknesses.

These ideas are aimed in particular at organizations and people who focus on countering violent extremism. But they provide some guidance for anyone else who also wants to work on the cognitive blind spot created by the originality bias.

And remember, it's important not to equate novelty with danger. New ideas may be boring and rightly dismissed. They can also be first steps toward amazing innovations that should be pursued. In many respects, failure to grapple with the originality bias can come [at significant cost](#).

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