From Results to Action: Using the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey to Improve Agencies

In “Assessing the Past and Promise of the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey for Public Management Research: A Research Synthesis,” Sergio Fernandez, Tima Moldogaziev, Zachary Oberfield, and William G. Resh provide a comprehensive review of the strengths and weaknesses of the federal employee survey administered by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM). The survey is used by my organization, the Partnership for Public Service, as the basis for our Best Places to Work in the Federal Government rankings. As a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that works to strengthen the civil service and improve government effectiveness and efficiency, our analysis provides an independent perspective on the federal workforce in a variety of categories.

Fernandez and his co-authors acknowledge that the primary purpose of the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS), the successor to OPM’s Federal Human Capital Survey, is as a management tool for federal leaders. From our perspective, it is the most powerful measurement tool federal leaders and managers have available to them. Ten years ago, few in government were talking about what federal employees thought or how the survey information could be used to improve employee satisfaction and commitment, and the performance of federal agencies. This is important because the views of employees are related to many critical organizational outcomes, as we know from the academic literature and assessments by practitioners.

The article raises an important question: how might the FEVS be improved to yield more rigorous research?

According to the authors’ analysis of more than 40 peer-reviewed journal articles, diversity management and empowerment are two areas where researchers have advanced understanding using the FEVS. Empowerment, in particular, is a concept that we have found important to agency improvement. We also see great value in the topics of appreciation, communication, and trust, as well as perceptions of performance at all levels (individual, work unit, and organization).

We agree with the authors that it would be helpful to understand the validity of the survey items in greater detail and to expand on themes identified in the literature. As they note, the survey was originally designed to assess human capital management in agencies, and so it does not include the full range of questions needed to undertake thorough assessments of certain topics important to academic researchers. The issue of adding new questions, however, is problematic because the survey already has more than 80. Changing the wording of questions to improve measurement or to create alignment with other research would mean losing the ability to identify trends over time. In spite of some weaknesses with the survey design, we believe the trends and comparisons offered by analyzing the results of the employee survey provide helpful direction to agencies.

The strength of the survey lies in many factors. First, agencies can understand how they are performing relative to others. Without the ability to compare, any data point loses its relevance. Second, the data are rich, with many organizational and demographic breakouts, and can tell us if one set of workers has a dramatically different perspective from another set of workers. For example, the Department of Commerce had subcomponents with the highest employee satisfaction in government and the lowest in 2013, prompting leaders to ask what was going on and to take action. The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO) was the number one agency of 300 subcomponents regarding employee satisfaction and commitment, while the Economic Development Administration (EDA), also in Commerce, ranked last. EDA officials said they began consulting with the USPTO and other organizations to gather best practices and work on improving employee satisfaction. In 2014, EDA was the most improved subcomponent, raising its satisfaction score by...
11.8 points. Despite the increase, EDA was still ranked near the bottom at 312 of 315 organizations. This example shows the value of considering both the rankings and the trends.

Another reason the data are so powerful is because we have collected 10 years of information, allowing us to examine trends and to make comparisons with the private sector. For example, between 2003 and 2010, employee satisfaction and commitment was on the rise in government. In 2003, the Best Places to Work employee satisfaction score was 60.5 out of 100. It climbed to 65 by 2010, but has plummeted since then to a score of just 56.9 in 2014. The downfall coincided with sequestration, employee pay freezes, ad hoc hiring freezes and a government shutdown that furloughed hundreds of thousands of employees. The 2014 data also show a 15.1-point gap between the federal government and the private sector when it comes to employee opinions on their jobs and workplaces, and this gap has nearly tripled since 2010, when there was only a 5.6-point difference.

I highlight these examples to illustrate the enormous practical value of the FEVS in its current state. Fernandez and his co-authors provided some thoughtful recommendations to improve the FEVS. However, any changes to the survey must be weighed cautiously against what could be lost in terms of trends and the useful application for agencies. The authors’ suggestion to add topical modules may offer an ideal solution for both scholars and practitioners. Upon completing the core FEVS questions, a subset of respondents could be invited to answer an additional set of questions on topics that would expand the range and depth of subjects covered while not over-burdening the majority of survey respondents. Furthermore, if subsets of respondents could be tracked over time with a longitudinal survey, researchers could test causal relationships, which could increase our understanding of the management practices that work best.

The discussion of how the FEVS might be improved for academic research raises a larger matter of how scholars can help meet government management challenges. We wholeheartedly support the authors’ idea to create a group of volunteer scholars to advise OPM on FEVS issues. At the same time, we challenge researchers to look beyond the technical aspects of the FEVS to the problems it surfaces and what can be done to solve them.

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