Driving Successful Employee Engagement: A Major Opportunity to Keep Public Sector Employees Connected and Committed

The recent recession has made an indelible mark on the public sector, but government agencies and employees are adapting by embracing innovation, eliminating waste and increasing efficiencies to save money and improve citizen services. Governments didn’t get stuck in the recession’s mud — they got down to business and moved forward with the important work of the people.

Yet employees are reeling from pay freezes, shrinking budgets, layoffs, hiring freezes, furloughs and other short-term fixes to address the impacts that the recession caused. Many employees are looking for jobs outside of the public sector, and a recent survey of new college graduates showed that just 6 percent plan to work in government.1

Research also shows that employee engagement is lackluster across all regions and industries — it’s not limited to the government sector.2,3 But because engagement is key to retention, it’s more important than ever for the public sector to keep employees connected, committed and loyal to their jobs, agencies, agency leadership and agency mission and goals.

For these reasons, employee engagement is top of mind for public sector leaders, particularly those in human resources. Additionally, the competition for skilled workers is greater than ever. This issue brief will review the results of a recent survey on public sector employee engagement by GOVERNING Research, including the state of employee morale, the factors that shape it and how agencies measure employee engagement. Further, we will suggest strategies for assessing and improving public sector employee engagement, featuring case studies of government organizations that have adopted and enacted programs that are putting them on the right track.

A Sharp Decline in Engagement

Recently, GOVERNING Research hosted an online discussion and survey among state and local government leaders to determine how they were quantifying and measuring employee engagement in their organizations. The survey and discussions were hosted from March 29 through April 13, 2012, on GOVERNING Exchange, a proprietary research platform for state and local government leaders. Two hundred and fifty-four senior decision-makers and managers participated.

The survey yielded critical insights into the state of government employee engagement; they illustrate a familiar cycle of budget cuts, workforce reductions and increased workload that most government employees recognize. Nearly all survey respondents indicate that employee morale and engagement has sharply declined in the last few years. According to respondents, the two most important challenges to employee engagement are budget cuts and increased workloads.

WHAT IS EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT?

An engaged employee is enthusiastically and proudly involved in his or her organization and day-to-day job responsibilities, and engagement keeps employees committed to their work. Here are two formal definitions:

• “A heightened emotional connection that an employee feels for his or her organization, that influences him or her to exert greater discretionary effort to his or her work.”4
  — The Conference Board, a nonprofit business membership and research organization

• “A measurable degree of employees’ positive or negative emotional attachment to their job, colleagues and organization which profoundly influences their willingness to learn and perform at work.”5
  — Scarlett Surveys, an employee engagement survey company
Measuring and Addressing Concerns

The GOVERNING survey revealed a surprising statistic: In spite of the importance of employee retention to agency success, more than two-thirds of those surveyed do not have a formal process, such as employee opinion surveys or other research tools, for assessing employee engagement. Starting a program for measuring employee engagement is perhaps the biggest — and easiest — opportunity to improve employee engagement in the government workplace.

The survey asked participants to provide ideas for measuring employee engagement. Most of the respondents say that anonymous employee morale and satisfaction surveys should be conducted every one or two years. This was followed by formal or informal face-to-face employee interviews by third-party firms. Other suggestions include evaluating and comparing rates of employee absenteeism and retention/turnover, and conducting exit interviews with departing employees.

Those that do have measurement systems say that agency executives do not provide feedback on results or plans for addressing employee concerns. This aligns with research suggesting that engagement surveys without visible follow-up action may actually decrease engagement levels, and presents HR and agency decision-makers with a key action item: If they plan to measure employee engagement, they must be prepared to communicate and act on the results to maintain credibility.

To be successful, the engagement survey must lead to a strategy for improvement that is clearly aligned with the agency’s vision, guidance, programs and services. Scores can be negative; respondents, employees and leaders will want guidance on how to make improvements instead of focusing on negative conditions.

Participants suggest that agencies hold employee roundtables or workgroups to address major areas of concern that arise in engagement surveys; the groups can be departmental or agency-wide, depending on the nature of the problem. Group recommendations should be evaluated by HR and agency administration and implemented to the extent that they are feasible. If not possible, HR should communicate the decision and the reasoning to employees.

Perhaps as a result of perceived neglect of employee concerns, only half of those surveyed say they are satisfied with their department or agency’s ability to address employee engagement.

Strategies for Improving Engagement

In the online discussions, survey participants provide suggestions for improving engagement that fall into four broad categories:

- **Improve communication.** Administrators should regularly communicate with all levels of employees and actively involve them in planning and decision-making — particularly in matters that pertain to their own jobs or departments. Don’t just talk — listen. Solicit employee feedback and work to implement suggestions where possible.
• **Show appreciation.** In the absence of pay increases, showing appreciation for employees, especially by providing positive feedback for a job well done, goes a long way. As a reward, consider providing cards, achievement certificates or time off. A public pat on the back (free!) is viewed as one of the most valuable rewards. Flexible work options, casual dress days, wellness programs and off-site training are also valued.

• **Provide a personalized long-term career plan.** Identify employee strengths and values and create opportunities for them to work in those areas. Develop clear objectives linked to the agency mission and strategic goals. Measure employee performance against these goals, and develop and follow guidelines for rewarding achievement and penalizing underperformance.

• **Support management.** Ensure that managers have the tools they need to lead their employees effectively. Stress the importance of capable managers who can connect employees to the mission of the organization and provide enough autonomy to vest employees in departmental success.

Many of these suggestions can be formalized as part of a talent management strategy — ideally one that is organization-wide. Talent management helps manage the employee lifecycle, from hire to retire. When it is tightly integrated with the day-to-day activities of employees and managers, it brings more visibility to the evolution of the organization’s talent pool. Components include talent acquisition, compensation management, performance management, succession planning and learning management.

Talent management processes can help government organizations uncover the value in their workforce. For example, government organizations can identify and foster top performers and future leaders and ensure they’re being developed and fairly compensated. Managers and HR staff can align individual employee goals and jobs with departmental initiatives and the broader agency mission, and determine an appropriate training program. Government agencies can also prepare for the future, through succession planning, which enables them to respond to workforce demographic changes, such as the retirement of older workers and the arrival of younger ones. This includes charting employee career and succession paths.

After effectively building a strategy, certain tools and technologies can aid government agencies in implementing talent management processes. Eliminating operational inefficiencies allows governments to lower the impact of budget cuts on employees, since personnel reductions may be avoided. And these types of workflow improvements can increase employee engagement by making their jobs more rewarding.

For example, by upgrading legacy technology, consolidating disparate systems or outsourcing administrative functions, agencies trade manual processes for automated ones. This frees employees from routine administrative processes, allowing them to focus on high-value, mission-critical tasks. The more integrated these solutions are with the talent management strategy during the hire-to-retire spectrum, the more engaged employees are and the more benefit government gains.

**Employee Engagement Strategies in Action**

Oregon Metro and the City and Borough of Juneau, Alaska, take employee engagement very seriously and have developed a number of programs for addressing key concerns.

**Oregon Metro**

The regional government for the Portland metropolitan area, Oregon Metro conducts an employee satisfaction survey every other year. On the off years, they conduct a “cultural compass” survey that measures employee satisfaction and concerns regarding diversity within the organization.

HR Director Mary Rowe, IPMA-CP says the jurisdiction is working hard to improve communication between employees and administration. Oregon Metro conducts twice yearly all-staff meetings, quarterly all-manager meetings and twice-monthly department director meetings. In addition, Metro’s chief operating officer sends all employees a weekly message. “I think we have had our best success if we over-communicate [when rolling out a new initiative] and are clear with each level of management what we want them to convey and what type of follow-up information to look for,” says Rowe.

Metro uses performance management throughout the year to coach employees and help them develop professionally and prepare for higher-level positions. “Employees want to see hiring from within and to know they have opportunities for advancement within the agency,” Rowe says.
In terms of employee appreciation, Metro’s peer-to-peer recognition program enlists colleagues to give their peers a note of thanks when observed in an act that upholds the organization’s values.

Juneau, Alaska

The City and Borough of Juneau (CBJ) is in the process of conducting its sixth employee engagement survey since 2002. HR Director Mila Cosgrove, IPMA-CP says that the overall city-wide results are provided to all employees and posted on the city Web page. Work-area specific results are reported to department directors and high-level managers. Leaders share results with their employees, and work with them to identify areas to address during the upcoming year.

CBJ uses a talent management process that includes talent acquisition and selection methodologies; a standardized onboarding process that lasts an entire year and includes required goals, skills and competencies; and an annual training plan. Cosgrove says that CBJ emphasizes internal promotions and is working on a leadership development program.

To ensure that managers are capable, new supervisors must attend mandatory five-day supervisor training workshops geared toward effective interpersonal skills, giving and receiving feedback, and conflict resolution skills, as well as a two-day coaching workshop. “We try to train our managers to listen more than they talk, and to coach before directing, if possible,” says Cosgrove.

Communication between administrators and employees is heavily encouraged. “We are attempting to create a culture of direct and honest feedback to employees,” Cosgrove says. “We believe a critical way of achieving this is for high-level managers to get out in the trenches with the employees. ‘Management by walking around’ keeps management accessible and in touch with what is happening in the workplace.”

Conclusion

The single most important thing learned from GOVERNING’s survey of public sector HR leaders is that in spite of the low engagement numbers, there is a major opportunity for improving engagement for agencies willing to undertake an ongoing effort to measure, communicate and act on the results.

In addition, as survey responses and our examples show, a number of options exist for engaging employees, many of which can be integrated into a comprehensive talent management strategy that helps agencies effectively acquire talent; manage compensation, performance and training; and plan employee succession.

Juneau’s Mila Cosgrove has the last word of advice. “There has to be a leadership-driven culture of valuing employees and what they have to offer,” she says. “If that is not genuinely in place, it doesn’t matter how much lip service you give to employee involvement.”

Endnotes