

Commentary

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Public Service Motivation: Lessons from NASA's Janitor

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A focused, well-articulated mission. A workforce motivated by purpose, defined goals, and the public good. Taken together, the two can produce positive and lasting results that the public deserves. An often-told story makes the connection in lively and memorable detail: President John F. Kennedy visited NASA after challenging the agency to put a man on the moon and return him safely to Earth by the end of the 1960s. He saw a janitor sweeping the floor of the building lobby, walked over to him, and asked, "What is your job?" The janitor replied, "I am helping to put a man on the moon, sir."

Lectures and articles on leadership, workforce alignment, and communications draw on this anecdote liberally. Yet there is real doubt that the episode actually occurred. Some accounts claim that a reporter, not President Kennedy, spoke with the janitor. Others state that the encounter took place at Cape Canaveral, not NASA headquarters. Still others wonder why a janitor would be sweeping up as the president walked into the building.

Discrepancies aside, it is noteworthy that this story is repeated frequently to drive home the importance

of an engaged workforce motivated by mission and service. It also underscores the value of this article. Robert K. Christensen, Laurie Paarlberg, and James L. Perry have made a meaningful contribution to the literature by tracking and synthesizing the research on public service motivation and—even more important—translating the findings into concrete actions that government can take to identify job seekers with public service motivation and maintain it once they are on the job.

My tenure at the helm of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management and nonprofit organizations has shown me that public service motivation is key to achieving *any* government or nonprofit mission. It is promising that today's supervisors utilize numerous lessons that this article outlines.

I have been most fortunate to work with or observe many public and nonprofit organizations. What I know is that the successful ones devote significant effort to an intentional demonstration and continual reinforcement of the linkage between what an employee does on a daily basis and how those functions impact the citizenry, membership, or individual beneficiary. I am also certain that the

connection is made, and may in fact be easier to demonstrate, for state and local governments, where the gap between the practitioner and citizen is closer and easier to bridge.

I have met and worked with leaders of many types—from the highest-level presidential appointees to state and local elected officials to nonprofit executives to first-level supervisors—who believe in and practice leadership by example. They understand the importance of embodying, exemplifying, and being a champion of public service values, including a commitment to and focus on the public they serve.

At the same time, three areas deserve greater attention among managers and researchers. The first: identifying public service motivation early in the job application process is a very real challenge. At the federal level, most vacancy announcements attract thousands of applications, requiring computer software to “conduct” the initial résumé review. That computer, and the overworked human resources professional who will handle the next level of triage, search for the specific experience and expertise that meet the detailed competencies, knowledge, skills, and abilities articulated in the position description and classification system.

It is easier to identify and assess an applicant’s public service motivation during the interview phase. It becomes evident in responses to such simple questions as “Why do you want to work here?” “What appeals to you about this agency/program/position?” or “Why did you choose to apply for this job over all the other vacancies?”

As I work and live inside the Washington Beltway, however, I know many government attorneys who launched their legal careers in private law firms, felt unfulfilled and frustrated by the incessant focus on the bottom line, and went on to make significant contributions in public service. How can a computer or a harried human being identify public service motivation when a résumé does not show nonprofit or philanthropic experience? What new tools can keep the public sector from passing over such needed talent?

The federal hiring system is broken. The classification system is overly complex, detailed, and outdated. Yet human resources staff and hiring officials must function within the existing system, even with

all its flaws, not a hypothetical one. Scholars and practitioners should collaborate to coproduce strategies and tools that can identify candidates with potential and public service motivation as early as possible in the hiring process, regardless of individual work history.

The second area meriting practitioner/academic attention: developing tactics to establish and maintain a workplace culture that places public service motivation at its core. The authors cite promising strategies and exercises that led to positive results, including a self-persuasion technique in which nurses described how a project would help health care practitioners improve their patients’ lives. Another effort asked grateful citizens to write stories about how police officers had made a positive difference in their communities.

It appears these promising practices have not been tested in larger organizations. They should be, then shared widely to trigger similar ideas at all levels of government and in agencies small and large.

I also urge more study of public service motivation in times of rapid change and crisis. For public employees, change is the only constant, whether it comes with the retirement of a longtime supervisor or a large-scale swing in the political philosophy of elected officials. The 2016 U.S. presidential election is a dramatic example.

A few days after the inauguration, I participated in a panel about the presidential transition. As fate had it, the event took place the day after President Donald Trump signed an order instituting a federal hiring freeze. Students in the audience wondered aloud about their employment prospects with an organization where they could make a difference. Federal employees worried about potential reductions in force and funding for their programs. Managers asked how they could sustain morale, maintain their workflow, and execute against their mission, all at the same time.

There was—and is—a single answer to the audience’s questions: recommit to a public service motivation focus by ensuring that *all* employees understand their role in achieving their agency’s mission and appreciate firsthand the impact of their contributions on those they serve. The NASA janitor shows us how.