**MEMORANDUM**

**Submitted to:** Office of Management and Budget (OMB)

Executive Office of the President

**Submitted by:** Fred Mills

Independent Consultant and Author

**Subject:** Response to Request for Information, SPE-RFI-18-0001

Establishing a Government Effectiveness Advanced Research (GEAR) Center

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to OMB on this important initiative. Per guidance offered during the August 23rd GEAR Center virtual conference I’ve elected to respond primarily to question #7, as Federal workforce issues are my principal area of expertise. My response begins with a few thoughts on question #1, below, which serve as a preface to the balance of my comments pertaining to question #7, which follow.

**Informing the GEAR Center**

**Question 1:** *Given the mission of the GEAR Center, what should be –*

* *Its strategic approach and operating objectives?*
* *Specific areas of innovation and practice to prioritize? For example, we anticipate an early focus on reskilling the Federal workforce and growing the economy through appropriate commercialization of Federal data.*
* *The process to identify and prioritize additional new areas on an ongoing basis?*

**Response:** The Center’s proposed approach of facilitating private sector engagement in helping to bring the government into the 21st century, and stated objective of addressing the most significant operational and strategic challenges to improved public sector performance and effectiveness, are sound and appropriate. These are readily understandable, inarguable on the merits, and don’t require much in the way of further elaboration. The GEAR Center initiative holds significant promise and represents a welcome departure from typical approaches to addressing the Federal government’s dysfunction, which to date have proved ineffectual.

That said, the RFI reflects an underappreciation of the depth and nature of the fundamental challenges to genuinely effecting change in the Federal context. This is notably reflected in question #7, which implicitly assumes that leading private sector practices for workforce reshaping, etc., can be successfully adapted and applied to Federal employees in the context of current civil service laws and regulations, bargaining unit agreements, and management authorities (de jure and de facto). This is, regrettably, not the case. As such, an early focus on reskilling and upskilling the Federal workforce, while a laudable objective, would likely yield disappointing results. Attempting to run before learning to walk, to borrow the old idiom, will inevitably result in stumbles and falls – and for the GEAR Center, an inauspicious start.

Addressing the fundamental, structural impediments to improved performance – the underlying reasons why the government too often fails to meet its obligations to the taxpayer – should define the GEAR Center’s agenda in its early years. Genuine civil service reform must top any list of such foundational challenges (see question #7 below) along with other, related bureaucratic infrastructure types of problems as noted in the RFI overview: byzantine acquisition and assistance regulations; the sclerotic Federal budget process; antiquated approaches and phenomenal waste in IT modernization; and, underlying it all, the effective absence of a performance culture and meaningful accountability, for either agencies or employees.

The necessary preconditions for the Federal government to move from its current state, to what will be required for effective performance in the 21st century, do not exist today. As such the GEAR Center can best pursue its long-term objectives, and fully realize its significant potential, by focusing first and foremost on these kinds of fundamental issues.

**Anticipated Early Focus Areas**

**Question 7:** *What models, approaches, and opportunities should inform an anticipated early focus on reskilling and upskilling Federal employees? For each question, please cite any available data or research to support your answer –*

* *What are leading practices for effective reskilling, upskilling, and training adult workers, including opportunities for new applications of existing models?*
* *What approaches could be piloted for possible application and scalability across the Federal sector in various learning domains (e.g., cognitive, affective, behavioral) - such as gamification, use of massively open on-line courses (MOOCs), apprenticeship models, and other new approaches?*
* *What are examples of metrics currently used to assess the effectiveness of reskilling and upskilling efforts?*
* *Do any of the suggested approaches have a particular nexus to the Federal workforce and/or to the automation of existing workflows, and transformation of existing skills to in-demand skills expected to comprise the “future of work”? If there are occupations or skill sets that would provide an opportunity-rich environment, please include specifics.*

**Response:** As indicated by the comments above, I would reject the premise that reskilling and upskilling the Federal workforce, under today’s circumstances, is a realistic pursuit. The practical impediments to achieving meaningful results, at a scale sufficient to justify their costs, are manifold: the de facto property right of career employees to their positions, and the bureaucratic wickets that must be run to reclassify or reassign individuals to new jobs or occupations with different qualification and skill requirements; the interest, willingness, and capacity of many Federal workers – particularly long-tenured ones – to learn new skills, take on new roles, or accept the necessity of adapting to meet the needs of the government and the taxpayer; the extent of coverage by collective bargaining agreements governmentwide, and the requirement for impact and implementation (“I and I”) bargaining over changes to working conditions for covered members; and, the constraints on Federal management and executive authority, both legal and practical, which render them far less capable of actually directing their organizations or driving change than their private sector counterparts.

Attempting to reskill and upskill current employees, practical impediments notwithstanding, may seem the best and perhaps only approach to begin reshaping the Federal workforce to meet the government’s emerging and future human capital needs. But I would suggest this notion is too tactical, too incremental, too accepting of the status quo – inconsistent with the stated goal and purpose of the GEAR Center to reimagine possibilities, explore innovative approaches, and define strategic solutions to the government’s most significant challenges. Rather than attempting to retrofit or jury rig the 20th century legacy workforce, tacitly accepting its current static nature and suboptimal capacity, the ambition should instead be to transform this leviathan into one purpose-built for the challenges of the 21st century: a more responsive, flexible, and capable workforce, explicitly designed to deliver results to the American people.

In my 2010 book, ***Civil Disservice: Federal Employment Culture and the Challenge of Genuine Reform***, I offered a detailed prescription for creating such a future Federal workforce. Based on experience gained and lessons learned over more than 25 years as a government employee, management consultant, and lecturer/trainer on human capital management, the book explores the problem of Federal workplace culture, deconstructs past efforts at civil service and management reform, and culminates with a series of specific recommendations for creating a genuinely performance focused Federal workforce for the 21st century. I have attached a .pdf of the manuscript for reference and would be happy to provide complimentary copies of the book to OMB on request. The book is also available in paperback at <https://www.amazon.com/Civil-Disservice-Federal-Employment-Challenge/dp/1450208940>.

These specific recommendations can be found in Part III of the book. While the entirety of this section constitutes the full prescription for reform and renewal of the Federal civil service, the key elements of my future government workforce are defined in chapter 18, “Regenerating the Core;” chapter 19, “Just-in-Time Feds;” and chapter 20, “Mongols in the Mix” (an irreverent reference to the role of contractors). These chapters are preceded by an introduction and overview chapter, entitled “Fundamental Truths,” in which I identify and explain the five critical elements that must characterize any serious effort to create a 21st century Federal workforce:

1. Core Incentive Structures Must Change
2. The Workforce Must be Segmented and Differentiated
3. Responsibility for Workforce Issues Must be Reassigned
4. Implementation Requires a Different Approach
5. Culture Change Must be First and Foremost

Over the nearly nine years since publication of the book, some movement has occurred with respect to a couple of these elements – most notably 3., as evidenced by OMB’s expanding leadership role in workforce management issues and the current restructuring and downsizing of OPM, as previewed in my chapter 21, “OPM Must Die.” This chapter also addresses the challenge to reform potentially posed by Federal employee unions, suggesting a radically different, significantly elevated, and far more productive role for these organizations in the future. This is followed by a relatively lengthy chapter in which I lay out in detail a greatly expanded, central role for OMB in managing the future Federal workforce, supplemented and supported by the Government Accountability Office (GAO).

I acknowledge that my comments here are not directly responsive to question #7 and its sub-questions. I believe, however, that the comprehensive proposal for Federal civil service reform described in my book offers a more strategic approach to addressing the underlying, fundamental problem reflected by this question. Chapter 19 in particular directly addresses issues of workforce flexibility, refreshment/replacement of skills, employment flows, and labor market connectivity. I’d also suggest that digging deeper to identify and treat the underlying illness, rather than seeking a salve for its symptoms, would be more in keeping with the stated purpose and long-term objectives for creating the GEAR Center. Genuine civil service reform and workforce transformation are, unquestionably, daunting challenges to tackle –precisely the kind of challenges perhaps only a GEAR Center could successfully address.

**Respondent Background**

Fred Mills is an executive level consultant and program manager with more than 30 years of diverse experience as an advisor, analyst, manager, instructor and technical specialist for Federal sector, non-profit and professional services organizations. His career has focused on enhancing and extending public institutional capacity and performance through strategic analysis and planning; effective workforce and human capital management; efficient organizational, work, and process design; and systematic investment in both collective and individual human capacities. Specific areas of experience and expertise include:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| * Human Capital Management * Strategic Workforce Planning * Organizational and Process Design * Capacity Building * Institutional Strengthening | * Performance Planning and Monitoring * Results Based Management * Program Evaluation and Assessment * Training and Development * Instructional Design and Delivery |

Currently an independent consultant, Fred has held a number of leadership positions including Senior Vice President of Management Systems International; Vice President and Human Capital practice lead for C2 Technologies; Deputy Director of the Global Health Fellows Program; and Vice President/Principal of FMP Consulting. He also served as a lecturer for Catholic University’s HR master’s degree program. Fred began his Federal sector career as a government employee, with staff positions at the Library of Congress and the Central Intelligence Agency. Fred holds a master’s degree in public administration from the Maxwell School at Syracuse University and a bachelor’s degree in political science from Vanderbilt University. He is also a Certified Compensation Professional (CCP). <https://www.linkedin.com/in/fredmills/>

**Contact Information**

[fvmills@outlook.com](mailto:fvmills@outlook.com)

703.220.4452 c

Attachment – *Civil Disservice: Federal Employment Culture and the Challenge of Genuine Reform* (.pdf)