Book Improving the Performance of Government Employees

A Manager's Guide

Stewart Liff
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Recommendation

Citizens are more likely to see government agencies as lumbering, inefficient bureaucracies than as organizations that produce outstanding customer service, achieve high-quality performance and demand accountability. It doesn't have to be that way. Veterans Administration human resources expert Stewart Liff outlines methods and tools government managers can use to make their staff members more effective and client-oriented, and to guide them to focus on doing a great job. Liff is a government HR pro, but you don't have to be an expert to benefit from his book. If you're looking to inject some enthusiasm and accountability into the government operation you manage, *BooksInShort* recommends this handy guide.

Take-Aways

- The US Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 requires federal departments and agencies to improve operations and accountability.
- "Organizational System Design" helps government managers rework their agencies.
- This strategy covers six systems: "organizational, technical, structural, decision making and informational, people," and "rewards and recognition and renewal."
- Your office's organizational system can help or hinder performance.
- Simplifying your technical systems (IT, physical plant) greatly aids improvement.
- A straightforward, understandable structure supports efficient, effective work.
- To gain the data to make good decisions, measure "customer satisfaction, quality, timeliness, productivity" and "employee satisfaction."
- Having a people system that helps you find and hire quality employees directly connects to your ability to improve performance.
- Recognizing achievement and fostering creativity contribute to organizational renewal.
- Steps taken in "claims processing, vocational rehabilitation, home loan guaranties" and "human resources management" offices offer examples of performance improvement.

Summary

When Government Works – and When It Doesn't

The 1993 US Government Performance and Results Act aimed to improve how units function throughout the federal government. The law made departments and agencies create far-reaching operating blueprints listing specific aims and explaining how these government offices would reach those goals. Objectives included instituting accountability, streamlining processes, improving client service and boosting management techniques. These goals may sound basic to private sector workers, but good management can be more difficult in a government setting, due to these limitations:

- Budgeted funds can take years to filter down to departments or divisions.
- Personnel processes protecting against discrimination can slow operations.
- Government units often must set up shop in high-cost areas such as Washington, DC.
- Managers often settle for fair or poor performance instead of enforcing improvements.
- Politically warped legislation can create unforeseen operational difficulties.
- Government offices work in the open, subject to the opinions of the General Accounting Office, the Office of Management and Budget, the press, and labor unions – as well as to internal scrutiny from their own employees.
- Incompatible technologies, unpleasant work surroundings, strict pay-grade systems and lack of training opportunities can inhibit high-quality performance.

> "It is difficult to manage performance in government [because] there are a wide variety of factors and variables at play, a number of which are extremely difficult to manage and control."

Even with these daunting challenges, you can encourage and enforce better government functions and services. As a manager, you probably must work within your agency's existing government structures. Try to improve its performance in the six major support systems: "organizational, technical, structural, decision making and informational, people," and "rewards and recognition and renewal."

1. Organizational Systems

Usually, you will find yourself coordinating and upgrading the six systems rather than trying to change them. Use the "Organizational Systems Design" performance model to outline your work-related choices and systems. This model tracks the ways your internal culture and "external influencing factors" (such as the media or other government branches) affect how your staff converts its work (inputs) into results (outputs). Your definition of your unit's purpose, beliefs, tactics and goals helps you shape its achievements.

> "Knowledge is power, and the more you know about your operation, the better you will be able to manage it."

Understanding how the six systems furnish the structure of your organization and coordinating them strategically requires having a long view of your operations. Focus on that distant horizon to avoid letting short-term issues sidetrack you. Be very aware of your operating environment. Know what your agency is supposed to accomplish and how you can measure its success or failure. Understand your workplace culture – that is, its "behaviors, feelings and attributes."

> "Top-notch supervisors...will still need to skillfully manage their employees; but they will do best if they manage them within the framework of an integrated set of management systems."

Your "mission, core values, strategies" and "goals" shape your performance, so they are critical to your organizational design. Government entities on the ladder above yours may determine your agency's overall mission, so your goal is to achieve it. Craft a mission statement that explains how your team will proceed. Succinctly state the values that explain the agency's nature. Outline the strategies you'll use to accomplish your goals, and establish those goals as milestones or markers to show your progress. For example, set a goal of improving project completion times or work accuracy, and then set strategies to achieve those objectives.

> "If your systems are properly aligned, your employees will all focus on what is important to the organization."

Even in government, where higher-ups determine many of your work parameters, you can affect the design of your systems, craft your objectives, decide on metrics, create hiring processes, determine the look of your physical workplace and manage your staff; so be active, not reactive.

2. Technical Systems

To improve your technical systems, use "business process reengineering." First categorize and rank your processes so you know which ones are crucial. Then perform these analyses:

- **"Environmental scan"** – Are your customers happy with your service? What are other agencies doing to provide better service?
- **"Process mapping and analysis"** – Are your processes achieving results effectively?
- **"Value analysis and work categorization"** – What should you be doing that you're not? Which processes are necessary, and which are superfluous?
- **"Constraint and variance analyses"** – What's broken? What's impeding your work?
- **"Process ownership and key decisions"** – Who's in charge of what? Are roles clear?
- **"Cultural analysis"** – How well do you communicate with your employees?

> "Spend a considerable amount of time speaking to your customers. You will be amazed by how much you will learn by...taking the time to speak with and listen to the people you serve."

Using the information from these analyses and working within the system design model, draft a blueprint of how would you recreate your organization optimally from bottom to top. To conduct a form of process reengineering without redesigning your agency "from scratch," ask your employees how they would improve its workflow. Codify their work processes by using visual representations like charts and posters. Make sure they have the skills and equipment to perform their duties. Add training sessions if necessary.

> "You do not have to simply be a pawn in the bigger game of government. You can be a player and make a difference."

Other technical systems that affect performance include the physical workspace, lighting and color scheme. If your workplace fits the stereotype of unimaginative, drab government offices, it will discourage performance and deflate staffers' pride in their work. Make a deliberate effort (using "visual management") to lighten and brighten your space. Even if higher-up agencies select your technological systems, you can improve your IT performance by ensuring that your staff receives the right training, updates data in a timely way, and tracks their work and results.

3. Structural Systems

Your organization's structure affects your employees' performance. A straightforward, understandable system supports decision making, boosts fast results, and helps people react deftly to new assignments or challenges. Engineer a structure that supports learning and good internal communication. Your organizational chart tells only half the story. It does not represent your "internal power structure," the flow that evolves according to how people relate to each other.

> "Ensure that all of your organizational energy is focused in a laser-like manner to achieve your organization's performance goals."

Though government work often is complex, you can make your unit's structure efficient and productive. Be aware of how related higher-up agencies are organized, even if you don't need to replicate their approach. Ensure that your organization works congruently and without redundancies. Streamline your positions. Set up internal work groups to provide clients with "one-stop shopping." Contracting work out can increase your efficiency, but as you assign it, ascertain that affected staffers understand their responsibilities and don't feel discouraged or assume you believe they are underperforming. Monitor contractors' work as you would that of any full-time staffer. Be mindful of "workflow" (the number of employees you need to complete a process), "grade creep" (new well paid employees can mean less money for other people), and the productivity of employees (staffers should achieve results and not just do busy work).

4. Decision Making and Informational Systems

Metrics play a crucial role in measuring government performance. The trick is not to measure too much or too little; instead, seek a balance. Measure five important areas:

- **"Customer satisfaction"** – Consider hiring a survey firm to poll clients periodically.
- **"Quality"** – On a regular, if impromptu, basis, check how well the work is being done.
- **"Timeliness"** – How quickly do your workers turn raw material into products?
- **"Productivity/unit cost"** – What resources (usually, full-time employees) does this work require?
- **"Employee satisfaction/development"** – Are your workers engaged and inspired?

> "Recruitment and selection should be an important part of an organization's people plan and should be done strategically."

To gather the information and interpret it, you may use a "performance dashboard" or a "balanced scorecard." The dashboard lines up all your indicators next to one another to provide a general view of your operation. The scorecard shows how your indicators relate to all the participants in your project, including people with differing perspectives: employee "learning and growth," business processes, client satisfaction and your organization's finances. "SMART" activities ("specific, measurable, attainable, relevant" and "time-bound") should flag "lagging indicators" (impediments to your progress) and "leading indicators" (for instance, faster work, increased employee skills and higher customer satisfaction). Whichever approach you use, communicate the results to your employees. Tailor the format you employ to each audience (for instance, managers, frontline workers, and so forth).

5. The People System

Carefully plan your people system; that is, outline the methods you'll use to recruit, retain and develop employees. Plan systematically; don't just replace people who leave. Determine which talent you'd like to recruit and which performance slots might be available. Follow government internal hiring procedures. Enlist your human resources staff to develop job parameters and rank applicants. Make your physical workplace appealing. Check candidates' accomplishments.

> "Most government supervisors spend relatively little time and energy talking with employees about their performance."

Provide new employees with a memorable, pleasant orientation session. Make learning opportunities continually available. Use a "competency grid" to compare the skills you want against the skills of your employees. Set up an "individual development" plan and provide training for each worker. In all cases, make sure you provide regular feedback.

> "If people see that management will not tolerate poor performance, the vast majority of employees will silently applaud you."

To ensure accountability, create and implement a "performance appraisal system," including an "employee performance plan" that covers five features: 1) tasks the employee must perform, 2) individual goals, 3) a "performance rating" that compares accomplishments to expectations, 4) "performance standards" that outline the agreed-upon bottom-line achievements, and 5) a "progress review" to give employees a report on their ongoing results. Provide your staffers with clear, comprehensible performance standards. Pinpoint their energies toward their goals. Grade their output, speed, precision and how well they serve their clients.

6. Rewards and Recognition and Renewal Systems

Successfully managing employees requires recognizing and rewarding them. Meet with them frequently, not just biannually, to offer criticism and praise. On-the-spot feedback and personal handwritten notes work well. Gather with your teams weekly, and share information equally. Consider posting performance scores publicly (using symbols or codes instead of names). This will discourage underperforming. If staffers don't perform well, address their issues. Document all the details. Ensure that your supervisors do not contribute to any problems. Treat supervisors and their subordinates the same.

> "To ensure that your organization renews itself...promote innovation and creativity. That sounds simple enough, but it is a lot more complicated than you might think."

Do not reward people randomly; plan a bonus system that supports your organization's goals. Develop and explain your "awards criteria" clearly ahead of time. Consider bonuses, vacations, parking privileges, an "employee wall of fame" and even a simple expression of thanks. A well-thought-out reward system contributes to renewal by fostering ongoing opportunities to learn and grow. Make your office a place where people feel comfortable being creative.

"Examples of Improving Performance"

When you improve your government agency's performance, everyone knows. Consider these four model examples: New leaders of a claims processing office weeded out underperformers and helped usher in better labor relations and a more representative board. A vocational rehabilitation office became more efficient by firing "deadwood" workers and making changes that encouraged employee responsibility. A home loan guarantee operation changed its substandard reputation by reorganizing its data and instituting clear procedures for tracking information; more stringent performance requirements helped employees to grow. And an HR office set up a client-centric, performance-tracking tool to improve the speed and accuracy of its service delivery.

About the Author

Human resources professional **Stewart Liff** has spent more than three decades in government, most notably at the Veterans Administration.