

EBOOK BY MARGARET EGGLESTON, PhD, SPRING 2022

Elevating Accountability, Dignity, and Equity in the Federal Government

Strategies for Improving Process,
Policy, and Perception



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Background

Traditionally, being hired by the U.S. federal government has been an excruciating process. In years past, that legacy entailed completing a lengthy, multifold paper application. You mailed it or submitted it in some manner, and then waited, and waited, and waited — sometimes for years. It was quite possible that you would never even be notified that your application had been received. The process itself deterred many potential employees from applying because they felt it was a waste of time.

Let's fast forward to the present. Because the federal government has been on a journey of continuous improvement, applying for a job using the current online process is much easier than before. Moreover, there's information within individual vacancy announcements that provide specifics on the entire hiring process for each position and to which levels you may apply. There's also dignity and respect inherent in the process because your application is acknowledged upon receipt and you are informed of the whereabouts of your application throughout the process. This much-improved process alleviates angst and uncertainty and demonstrates dignity and respect for each applicant.

Perhaps you've noticed that within numerous job vacancy announcements advertised for the federal government, there are options to apply for different grade levels. This results in equity — the process of hiring and placement takes into account that you may not have all the knowledge, skills, and abilities to be, say, a human resource specialist; however, you may have everything it takes to apply for a position as a human resource generalist. Through the use of job placement levels, the process affords job seekers the opportunity to become civil servants by meeting them where their bench strength lies. That's just one example of equity at work in the federal government.

You may be wondering why focus is being placed on accountability, dignity, and equity. The federal government is still on an endless journey of continuous improvement, and that's where you come in. As a federal employee, you are one of the government's valued partners on its journey.



Commitment to Accountability, Dignity, and Equity

One might think the concepts of accountability, dignity, and equity are mutually exclusive, given how each is generally defined. However, the three concepts work best in tandem, which is an essential point for those choosing a career in the federal government. Whether you are just starting out or one of the government's most tenured employees, you are among a group of civil servants who occupy a position of public trust, are committed to upholding government principles, and willingly serve this country. These are just a few of the commonalities shared by federal employees for which the concepts of accountability, dignity, and equity are inherent. These concepts stand alone, are interrelated, and are visible within the federal government.

Accountability

The federal government has accountability for decisions and laws affecting its citizens, and individuals working for the government are accountable for their actions and behaviors.

Recall, if you will, the oath of office, which is a key item within the Appointment Affidavit, Form: SF61. Perhaps on the first day of your employment, you signed it as part of your swearing-in or affirming acceptance of a position within the government. The oath is administered to all federal employees. If an appointee objects to the form of the oath on religious grounds, certain modifications may be permitted. For federal civil service employees, the oath states:

I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter. So help me, God.¹



In essence, and through that process, you agreed to hold yourself accountable as a civil servant and be held accountable by others. This is only the beginning of your accountability and pledge to the American people. While you are accountable for self-management related to the oath, an organization's leaders, managers, and supervisors are accountable for ensuring employees adhere to the oath.

As a federal employee, your timely arrival, presence during the workday, and working on assigned tasks while in the workplace demonstrate your ability to hold yourself accountable. Yet, you are probably aware of one or two employees who made poor decisions regarding their attendance accountability. Such instances likely required supervisor or manager intervention to correct their unacceptable conduct. Addressing attendance abuse was enough of a challenge for managers and supervisors in the workplace in the past. Given that the pandemic greatly expanded telework opportunities, there is an increased need for employees to hold themselves accountable for discharging the duties of their position in accordance with the oath.

¹ 5 U.S.C. § 3331

Advice for Supervisors

It may be beneficial for those in leadership roles that involve supervising or managing employees to review the oath with them every year or two. It may have been quite a number of years for some employees since they read the Appointment Affidavit containing the oath and signed their acknowledgment. Don't assume that the oath has been embedded in everyone's memory. Consider taking the opportunity to have the oath read and signed again during a staff or team meeting.

There is an additional item to mention that may be applicable to your organization. It states:

Employees shall adhere to all laws and regulations that provide equal opportunity for all Americans regardless of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, or handicap.²



Periodically share this statement with your workgroup as well. It can serve as a reminder of federal employees' commitment to accountability, dignity, and equity.

Dignity

Dignity is not the same as respect. Dignity is our inherent value and worth as human beings; everyone is born with it. Respect, on the other hand, is earned through one's actions. We all have a deep, human desire to be treated as something of value.³



We begin our exploration of dignity by discussing the common workplace tactic of offloading — a behavior that impedes dignity. Offloading is assigning or volunteering a person for a task or project based on a generational label. What might that look like? Picture the following scenario.

Unconscious Bias

During a staff meeting, your manager begins to share information about a critical project for which a new software program will be used. After bringing the team up to speed, the manager looks at each member of your workgroup and waits for someone to volunteer or express interest in the project. You have already decided not to work on it. As a matter of fact, the very thought of having more work added to your overflowing plate strikes fear in your heart. You avert your eyes because you are likely to hyperventilate at using a new software program. As the seconds tick by, you decide to suggest one of your coworkers. You attempt to justify your actions by reminding everyone how at-ease this person is with all things related to computers.

Let's pause to consider a couple of things from this scenario. First, you may have put someone on the spot, and your rationale for volunteering that coworker could have stemmed from an unconscious bias related to a specific generation. Whether intentional or unintentional, you have just offloaded onto a coworker. It's great that you think highly of your coworker's skills and ability. However, you must seek to avoid offloading because it robs a person of the dignity and respect they are due. An alternate way of working through this scenario would be to volunteer yourself for the project and then seek support from this coworker.

² 5 U.S.C. § 2635.101(b)(13)

³ Hicks 2013

I would caution a leader from looking at someone and assuming their generation is who they are as a person...It can be a good starting point, but you don't want to hinge your thoughts of an employee on assumptions that may or may not be true of them.

—Aaron Raby, leadership development and professional coach, adjunct professor at the University of Massachusetts Global⁴

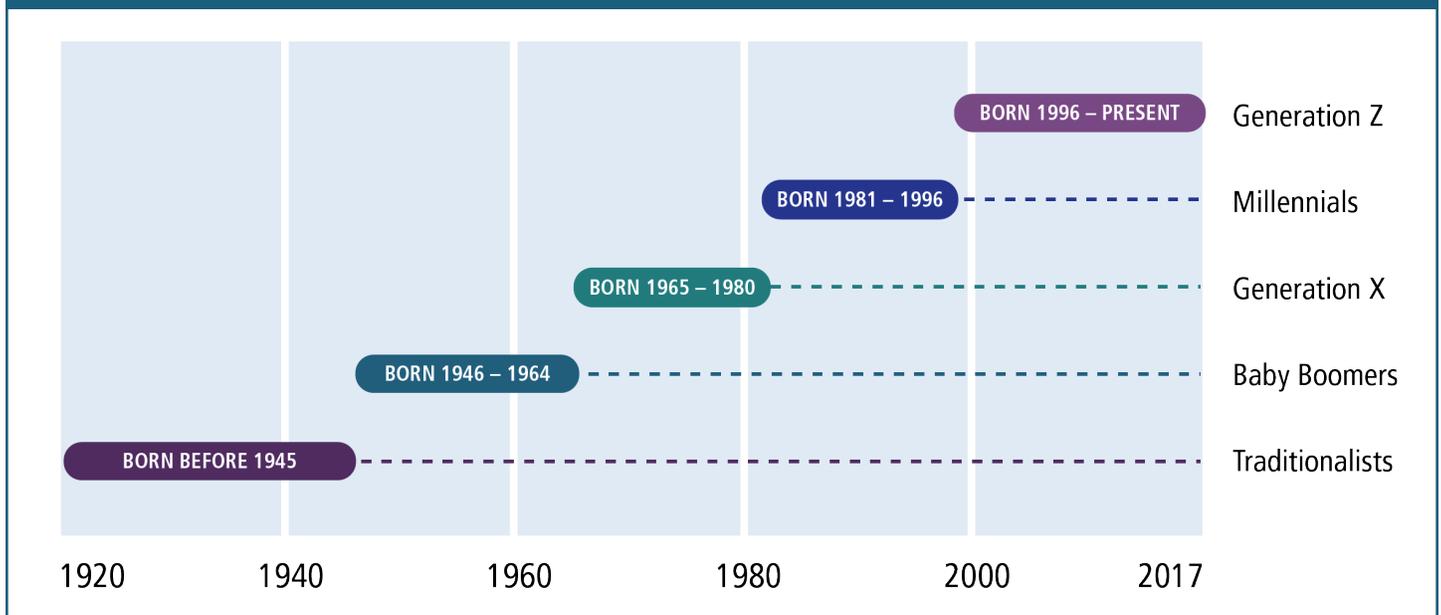


Strategic Pairing

Managers may likewise be prone to offloading. Often, it's a matter of delegating to the employee most likely to succeed in a timely, dependable, and judicious manner. But is that really *always* case? It could be an opportunity to partner up with a couple of coworkers who can learn from each other and increase their knowledge, skills, and abilities. By not stating the intent, managers can avoid the appearance of employees from one generation being more talented or well-versed in a particular area than those from a different generation and preserve their dignity.

Take time to familiarize yourself with the five different generations in the workplace today to understand the possible myths aligned with the labels given to each group. Increasing your awareness makes you less likely to let an unintended bias creep into your thought process. It's easy to do. Know yourself and know that no matter the generation, all employees are expected to work toward the same purpose — fulfilling the organization's mission and striving to help achieve its vision.

FIGURE 1. MODERN ERA GENERATIONS



Source: Managing Beyond Generational Differences module of the Professional Government Supervisor Program (PGSP)

Regardless of which generations an employee may identify with, all employees are entitled to dignity in the workplace. There is a role, a time, and a space for each employee to contribute to the federal government's success. Remember that we need keepers of the past, guardians of the present, and visionaries for the future. Each of these three traits reside in each generation and adds significant value.

⁴ University of Massachusetts Global

Equity

“Equity” refers to fairness and justice and is distinguished from equality: Whereas equality means providing the same to all, equity means recognizing that we do not all start from the same place and must acknowledge and make adjustments to imbalances. The process is ongoing, requiring us to identify and overcome intentional and unintentional barriers arising from bias or systemic structures.⁵



Leaders at every level within the federal government can promote equity, especially as it pertains to generational disparities. For example, you can take it upon yourself to facilitate more equitable work opportunities. If you are assigned to or volunteer for a special project, consider partnering with a less-tenured employee. Not only will you openly serve as a role model for that person’s growth and development, but you will also be able to contribute as a coach. In these instances, you will be bound to gain a new skill, technique, or insight while working with employees from other generations. Think strategically — you may be contributing to your organization’s longevity and success in achieving its future vision.

You may notice a coworker being given an opportunity to have the spotlight shine on them. One way that might happen is for a supervisor to hand-pick that particular employee to participate in a project team. When that project’s success is recognized nationally, that employee may later receive special assignments. They become known to leaders of various departments, functional areas, and even the executive agency leadership. You may be wondering to what extent your colleague will benefit from this exposure when you learn of their promotion.

By now, the perception of inequity has entered your mind. It may have been hard for you to celebrate such achievements by your former coworker when you had aspirations of moving up the ladder. It is not uncommon to perceive inequity based on the hand-picking selection process in situations like this. As you stare at the promotion announcement, two questions arise: “Why was my coworker selected rather than me?” and “What exactly was the supervisor’s decision-making process?” It’s time to acknowledge that you are more likely to rise to greatness by proactively preparing yourself with readily available tools and techniques.



As an employer, the federal government is responsible for promoting equity, especially regarding disparities in practice. One such perceived practice was the example of selection for promotion. It did not appear that opportunities for promotion or selection to an executive-level position were open to all employees in the past. Postings or vacancy announcements were rarely publicized for those aspiring to executive positions, such as the Senior Executive Service (SES). When they were, internal aspirants could be overlooked for any reason, including the inability to backfill their position. In the past, becoming an executive in government did not seem fair at all. Fortunately, while maybe not perfect, the processes and policies have changed, and equity is being delivered today through various means, such as:

- Workshops and training opportunities help those aspiring to executive ranks to learn more about the process and executive core qualifications (ECQs)
- Aspirants can be nominated by a supervisor/manager or self-nominate for an in-house developmental leadership program
- Development opportunities via the SES Candidate Development Program
- Openly published vacancy announcements are posted on the usajobs.gov website



Detailed information on each ECQ, the underlying and fundamental competencies, sample narratives, and a tips sheet for writing effective ECQs are available in the “Guide To Senior Executive Service Qualifications” at: <http://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/senior-executive-service/executive-core-qualifications/>.

⁵ National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) 2022

Blinding Candidate Assessments

The following example may seem to apply only to supervisors and managers; however, it can be insightful for all leaders. Consider that Candidate A arrives for an interview, articulates well in response to questions, gives appropriate eye contact when responding, and appears well poised. Candidate B is professionally dressed but may seem more tense, answers questions abruptly, and fidgets with their hands throughout the interview. Visual presence may skew perceptions of which candidate is most viable for the vacant position. Try leveling the playing field through appropriate assessment tools rather than relying on surface impressions of potential candidates. Also, seek guidance from your organization's human resource professionals and review the Office of Personnel Management (OPM)'s "Talent Surge: Playbook for Rebuilding the Federal Workforce."

Perceptions of inequity in the hiring process may dissuade internal applicants from applying for vacant positions and promotional opportunities once posted. Perhaps an employee was temporarily assigned to the vacant position, and it may be perceived that they have an inside track to obtaining the position. After all, depending on the length of time working in the position, they may perform well, contribute to the group's success, and be recognized as a true team member. Not only may the assigned employee perceive that they are a shoo-in for the vacant position, but others around them may perceive so as well. As a result, applicants for the position may not be as plentiful. Although such perceptions may be unavoidable, there are ways to ensure the interview and selection process is above board. For example, establish an interview panel consisting of members beyond the immediate workgroup. Remove all personal identifiers — name, address, job title, etc. — from the applications, and label each with an alpha-numeric code before providing copies to the panel for review. While this does not eliminate the assigned employee's statements about their performance in the role, a blinded process demonstrates intentional equity in the foremost part of the interview and selection process.⁶



U.S. Office of Personnel Management: Services for Agencies Assessment & Evaluation

OPM provides Federal agencies with assessment solutions and assistance to maximize return on investment in the selection and development of leaders and staff. Assessments, which are systematic approaches for evaluating individuals' talents and capabilities, can be used to make a wide variety of decisions about applicants and employees. In OPM's recent Hiring Reform efforts, the implementation of higher quality assessments was identified as one of the single most critical steps an agency can take to improve the quality of hires.

Among the assessment products and services that can be purchased off-the-shelf or tailored to meet an agency's assessment needs include:

- Candidate Development Program
- Accomplishment Record
- Leadership Assessment Center
- Structured Interview
- Leadership Profiler
- Leadership Potential Assessment
- Customized Assessments
- Competency Gap Analysis
- USA HireSM: Online Assessment Products and Services
- Validation Research & Technical Consulting⁷

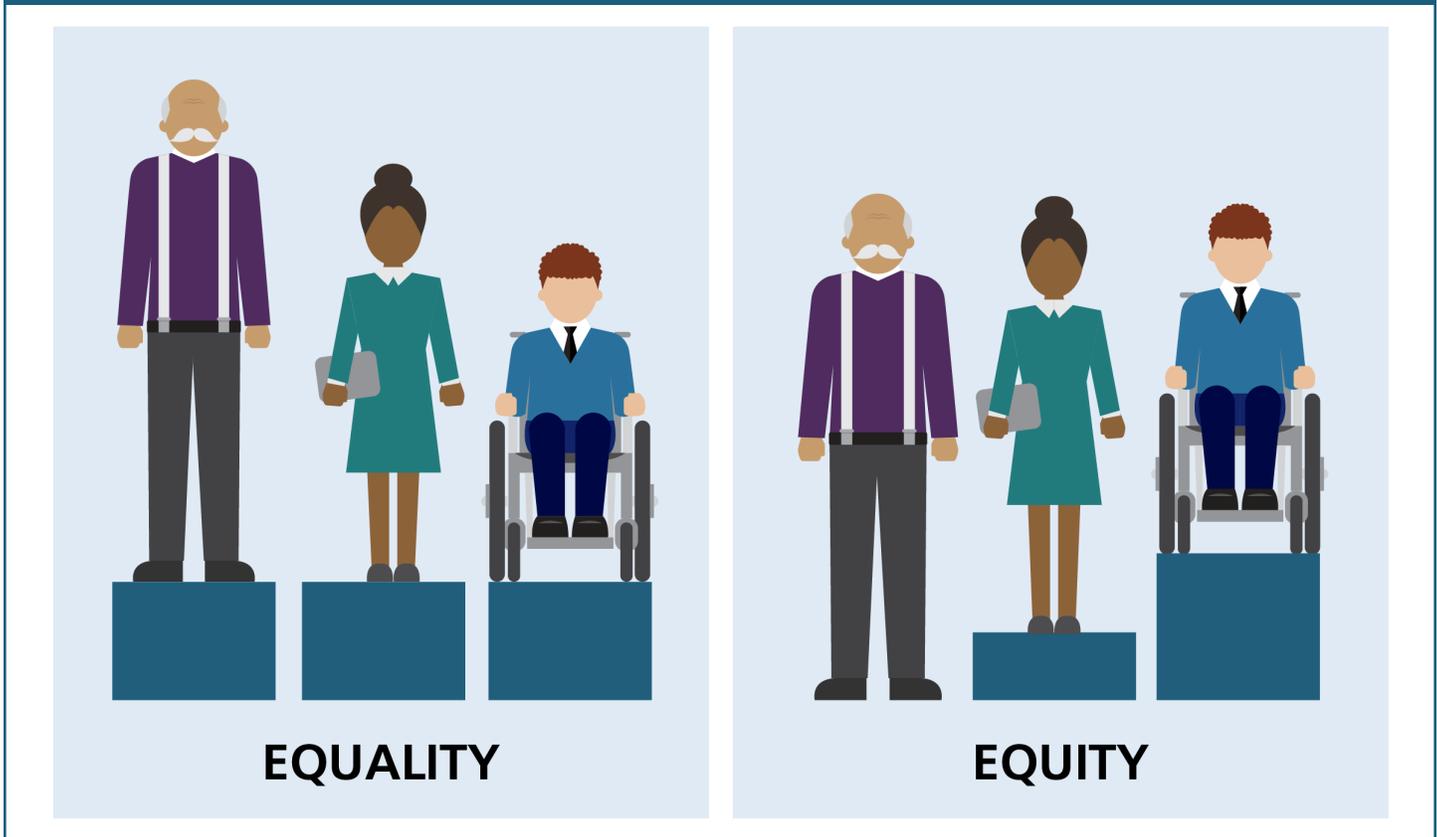
⁶ Johnson and Kirk

⁷ Services for Agencies: Assessment & Evaluation, U.S. Office of Personnel Management

The Interrelationship Between Accountability, Equity, and Dignity

As our nation's largest employer, the federal government is primarily accountable for promoting dignity and equity in the workplace, regardless of size, location, or number. Such responsibility is enormous, and being successful involves all manners of change, including the culture. While the government does inform policies, laws, rules, and regulations relative to accountability, equity, and dignity, ultimately, federal employees bring about change from within the culture and follow it through to fruition.

FIGURE 2. ILLUSTRATING EQUALITY VS EQUITY



There are various ways that you can contribute to equity and dignity in the federal workforce. When reflecting on how the boxes were used in Figure 2 to bring about equity, you can also surmise that the individuals pictured received fair and equal treatment. How can you apply that logic in your role? Perhaps you can serve as a coach, a mentor, a role model, or the go-to person to help your coworkers? Your effort may create momentum that increases equity in your workplace. Consider proposing that people who benefit from coaching and mentoring share what they learned as part of an ongoing process of continuous improvement. Although the progress may seem incremental, it can lead to a culture shift, which always takes time. Be accountable — get the ball rolling.

State of Accountability, Dignity, and Equity in the Current Federal Workforce

Since 2002, OPM has surveyed employees of federal departments and agencies to assess how they jointly experience the policies, practices, and procedures characteristic of their work, agency, and leadership. The annual results of the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) provide federal agency leadership with actionable insights about the workplace conditions in federal agencies and information essential to successful organizational change and development initiatives — such as the Human Capital Framework; Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility programs; Veterans' programs; and Work-Life programs.⁸

⁸ Office of Personnel Management Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey 2021

Reflecting on the 2020 FEVS Results

Leaders at every level are on a path to continuous improvement in the federal government. However, just because the 11 items listed in the table, “Highest Level of Agreement — OPM 2020 FEVS,” are the highest percentage level of agreement does not mean any of them are good enough or cannot be even better. Leaders hold themselves accountable for finding opportunities to push the envelope. You have an integral role in almost every statement in Table 1, indicated by “I” and “my.” What have you done to find out if you don’t know how your work relates to the agency’s goals? That’s an example of holding yourself, not someone else, accountable. One of the best ways to self-educate how the work you do contributes to the agency’s goals is by viewing your agency’s strategic plan.

As a second example, if your supervisor does not treat you with respect, you might ask yourself what respect looks like. Do both of you agree? Not everyone interprets the term *respect* in the same way. Consider that respect begets respect. Are you treating your supervisor with respect? Have you given any thought to how to level up the respect you give? Might that enhance the respect you receive?

TABLE 1. HIGHEST LEVEL OF AGREEMENT – OPM 2020 FEVS

RESPONDENTS IN AGREEMENT	QUESTION	QUESTION NO.
87%	I know how my work relates to the agency’s goals.	7
87%	My supervisor treats me with respect.	23
85%	My supervisor supports my need to balance work and other life issues.	19
84%	The people I work with cooperate to get the job done.	9
83%	I know what is expected of me on the job.	4
83%	My supervisor listens to what I have to say.	22
82%	My work unit has the job-relevant knowledge and skills necessary to accomplish organizational goals.	13
81%	My agency is successful at accomplishing its mission.	16
79%	My supervisor is committed to being a workforce representative of all segments of society.	20
78%	Supervisors in my work unit support employee development.	21
78%	Overall, how good a job do you feel is being done by your immediate supervisor?	25

Supporting Employee Development

Lastly, consider the following example as a way that you can support your supervisor and boost the score for the statement, “Supervisors in my work unit support employee development,” as listed in the table, “Lowest Level of Agreement — OPM 2020 FEVS.” Even though funding may not be available for all members of a workgroup to participate in training or similar events, you can help by advancing and facilitating equity in professional development. Take it upon yourself to intentionally share takeaways from conferences and training you attend. Use that intention as part of your rationale for attending. Supervisors, team leaders, and other organizational leaders can utilize this strategy to leverage an attendee’s knowledge by filtering it back into the organization. Rather than one or two employees being the sole recipients of new knowledge, have them lay out and commit to a sharing plan. An additional suggestion is to empty your bag of “swag” goodies onto the top of the conference table to allow your coworkers to help themselves after sharing information and highlights from the conference or other such events. After all, there are only so many pencils, pens, notepads, and trinkets you can use yourself!



TABLE 2. LOWEST LEVEL OF AGREEMENT – OPM 2020 FEVS

RESPONDENTS IN AGREEMENT	QUESTION	QUESTION NO.
42%	In my work unit, steps are taken to deal with a poor performer who cannot or will not improve.	10
43%	I believe the results of this survey will be used to make my agency a better place to work.	18
51%	In my work unit, differences in performance are recognized in a meaningful way.	12
51%	In my organization, senior leaders generate high levels of motivation and commitment in the workforce.	26
58%	How satisfied are you with your involvement in decisions that affect your work?	33
58%	How satisfied are you with the information you receive from management on what’s going on in your organization?	34
59%	How satisfied are you with the recognition you receive for doing a good job?	35
60%	Managers promote communication among different work units (for example, about projects, goals, needed resources).	29
61%	My organization’s senior leaders maintain high standards of honesty and integrity.	27
62%	I have a high level of respect for my organization’s senior leaders.	31

Perceived Inaction

Focusing on the lowest-scored statement in Table 2, “In my work unit, steps are taken to deal with a poor performer who cannot or will not improve.” It should be known that supervisors may not apply corrective measures in an obvious manner. For example, other employees may perceive that a supervisor is not addressing poor performance, but in reality, the issue is conduct-related. For instance, absences and tardiness may appear excessive or abusive, but the supervisor knows their employees and may be aware of the circumstances surrounding absences or tardiness. When an employee reveals a personal issue, the supervisor is held accountable for keeping the information confidential. Indeed, a medical condition or certain treatment regimens may contribute to an employee’s poor or spotty attendance and may also lead to the employee’s inability to perform certain tasks. Perceptions that a supervisor is failing to take steps to deal with “poor performers” may not reflect the reality of the situation. Therefore, lower positivity levels for this survey question may not accurately represent supervisor inaction.

Track and Share Successes

Although a supervisor may find it challenging to positively impact the score for some survey items (such as “How satisfied are you with the recognition you receive for doing a good job?” from Table 2), perhaps more can be done to recognize differences in performance in a meaningful way? This may mean that supervisors initiate periodic one-on-one feedback conversations. Employees can find ways to ensure their supervisors know about their accomplishments. A few proven methods include:

- Preparing for feedback sessions by maintaining a current list of your successes.
- Keeping a folder of completed product samples.
- Collecting expressions of appreciation that you receive from stakeholders.
- Creating a tracking sheet for your successes and updating it weekly.

Your supervisor may not remember what an awesome job you did on a high-level project, and you might even forget as time passes. By being accountable for tracking and sharing your successes, you may contribute to your supervisor’s ability to recognize your performance in a meaningful way. Never underestimate the power of regular and ongoing feedback conversations!

Pay It Forward

Make your star shine brighter to call attention to your successes. For example, opportunities exist to mentor an outstanding graduate student, student intern, or recent graduate. This is yet another way you help yourself and facilitate equity in the federal government’s hiring process. Consider recommending participation in OPM’s Pathways if your agency hasn’t already. Keep in mind that if, through the program, you find an awesome grad or intern that you’d like to hire, act quickly before they are hired by another agency when the program ends.

Lastly, consider volunteering to join a FEVS improvement committee. There’s nothing innocent about being a bystander — be an active, engaging leader instead. Through accountability, dignity, and equity, you can help make the federal government one of the most desirable workplaces in the United States.

Management Concepts Offerings

Whether your agency needs to improve hiring practices; create a mentoring program; support performance management; or address Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) needs; Management Concepts has you covered. We hope this eBook helps you better understand the importance of accountability, dignity, and equity and how they directly impact the federal workforce.

For more information on our courses in **Human Capital & Human Resources**, **Leadership and Management**, please visit our website at www.ManagementConcepts.com. For assistance designing or implementing related learning and organizational development initiatives, please review the services offered by our **Human Capital Advisory Services** staff or call us at 888.545.8571.



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She holds a Doctorate in Human Development from Virginia Tech, a Master of Science degree in Business Administration from Madonna University, and a Bachelor of Science degree in Criminal Justice from Wayne State University.



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