

# GOVERNMENT LEADER

MANAGING FOR RESULTS

## Missions of the civil service

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The challenge of federal civil service reform is not simply to design a good, business-oriented human resource system. The challenge is to understand and capture what the American public expects of the federal civil service. Those expectations have changed in the last 20 years, and legislation such as the Working for America Act is essential to updating the civil service so it better reflects those expectations.

At the same time, the public has not completely lost sight of the older, traditional civil service missions. To be successful, any new legislation must account for all the public's expectations, both old and new. Let us review the key missions the public expects of the civil service system and see how the Working for America Act stacks up.

At the top of the list of the older, traditional missions is what I would characterize as the fairness mission. The public expects the government to be fair to its employees, whether that contributes directly to an agency's business success or not. For example, whether it helps the National Institutes of Health develop a cure for cancer or not, the public expects NIH to be "fair" to its employees. Fairness is reflected in the fundamental civil service concept of merit, the concept of equal pay for equal work and the emphasis on employee rights.

The public also expects the civil service to accomplish certain national social missions. At the top of the social agenda is the insistence on veterans' preference. For example, the public expects the Federal Aviation Administration to give preferential treatment to the hiring of veterans, whether that practice makes aviation any safer or not. Likewise, agencies are expected to promote the employment of racial and ethnic minorities, the disabled, students—irrespective of the business sense such practices may or may not make.

Another key civil service mission, although less well articulated, is what I would refer to as the uniformity mission. The public expects government to be consistent, from agency to agency, in the way it treats its employees. Hence, the apparent insistence on one national pay scale for the civil service; common HR policies, standards and practices across all agencies; and centralized HR management and oversight. Maybe it's the residue of "government by laws, not people," but the public clearly values and expects a high degree of HR sameness across its government.

A final, even more obscure, civil service mission is what I would characterize as the role model mission. The public expects the federal government to have an HR system that serves as a model for how employees in all spheres throughout the nation's economy should be treated. In short, the federal civil service should lead the way in establishing national HR norms and values. It should serve as a model for good labor management relations, employee benefit programs and other programs.

Remember, none of these civil service missions, as yet, has had anything to do with helping a particular agency achieve its specialized agency mission or business goals, although clearly that, too, is a public expectation. If I were to succinctly describe what the public expects of the civil service system, it would be as follows:

- Treat the workforce fairly
- Support certain social goals

- Be uniform
- Be a national role model and (despite the above)
- Provide for a workforce that effectively and efficiently achieves the particular missions of each individual agency.

The Working for America Act puts increased emphasis on that last mission—agency performance—while doing nothing to seriously weaken the other four traditional missions. The uniformity mission is the only one of those missions that is seriously challenged. A key premise of the act is that each agency can go its own way with the specifics of its HR system as long as it adheres to certain fundamental rules and principles established by the act. While this may lead to a little less uniformity, it should in no way run afoul of public expectations.

The major change represented in the act, and the only one of much significance, is pay for performance. The act's emphasis on performance is completely in line with the public's expectations. The act would provide managers with greater pay flexibility and link individual employee pay to performance. America is a meritocracy, and the notion that people should be paid based on how well they perform is apple pie to the American public.

The act's reaffirmation of the old civil service missions is one of its strengths, but the act disappoints by failing to challenge the traditional bureaucratic strategy used to achieve those missions. This is most apparent in the hiring and staffing area, where a number of the civil service missions intersect. For example, the public expects employees to be hired based on merit, in a way that gives preference to veterans, and in a way that ensures the agency gets the talent it needs to accomplish its specific mission. The act keeps those missions, as it should, but does nothing to challenge the complex, rule-bound processes used to accomplish them. Candidates must still be screened, rated, ranked and certified according to a complex set of procedures that contribute little to any of the three missions they are intended to accomplish.

The Working for America Act is a constructive, if small, step in the right direction. In that regard, it is like the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978. It will not solve the major problems of the civil service. But it introduces some valuable principles, such as the emphasis on performance and increased decision-making authority for managers, which should begin to make bigger and bigger dents in the armor of the old bureaucratic civil service culture. These principles are far more valuable than the specific rule changes, which only scratch the surface of the current bureaucracy. The act is very much in line with public expectations, although too cautious in challenging old ways of meeting those expectations. We can only hope subsequent administrations and sessions of Congress introduce additional legislation that continue progress toward a modern civil service—one that retains old public sensibilities about the nature of public employment while energetically supporting each agency's mandate to perform.

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