



When Mission-at-all-costs no longer works: How the Public Sector can Optimize Human Performance

Introduction

Public sector organizations that prioritize both mission delivery and human performance typically outperform those focused solely on mission goals. According to our 2024 survey 76% of respondents believe that an organization's success hinges on improving the well-being of its people, while only 48% feel that their organization supports employees and conducts HR activities tailored to their unique needs and preferences.¹ This deep dive will explore how giving equal priority to human performance and mission delivery enhances workforce efficiency, creativity, and productivity, while also fostering a supportive environment that addresses the professional, physical, mental, and social needs of employees.

Such an environment not only can boost job satisfaction and retention but can also strengthens the organization's capability to attract and retain top talent. Although it might feel counterintuitive to shift resources from mission-focused to workforce-centric programs, substantial evidence suggests that investing in employee support initiatives leads to increased productivity and improved mission outcomes. We will delve into the importance of balancing mission

Human Performance:

The result of organizations prioritizing both mission goals and human sustainability in key decisions, which creates a cycle that benefits everyone—workers, the organization, and society. This approach boosts performance, job satisfaction, and has a positive impact on society.

focus with human performance, effective methods for measuring the success of workforce-centric programs, and the crucial role of trust in optimizing public sector outcomes. This balanced approach fosters a virtuous cycle that enhances both employee satisfaction and mission achievement.

Some public sector organizations have already embarked on this journey and are seeing positive results. U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) initiated their workforce care initiatives years ago and have since implemented several successful programs. When asked about the catalyst of these programs and the key to their success, Andrea Bright, Assistant Commissioner of the Office of Human Resources Management, highlighted the importance of leadership investment and the impact of, "a few key leaders who really championed it."

¹ 2024 Global Human Capital Trends Report.

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Workforce Care: The Key to Mission Success

To enhance human performance in public sector organizations, a fundamental shift in mindset is essential—leaders should actively listen to their employees and invest in supporting their multifaceted needs. This transformation starts with reevaluating how leaders view and interact with their workforce, recognizing the various skills, desires, and experiences that employees contribute.

Leadership in Action: Elevating Workforce Care at CBP

To demonstrate a commitment to workforce care, a senior leader at CBP spent over a year visiting various stations and offices across the country, engaging directly with employees from frontline staff to middle management to understand their needs. This hands-on approach not only reinforced leadership's dedication to employee well-being but also led to the establishment of the Workforce Care Directorate, positioning it as a core component of the organization alongside Human Resources and other key divisions.

Jim Walsh, Comptroller at the Department of State (DOS), highlighted the importance of engaging with the workforce and its link to mission impact. Involving the workforce whenever you can – and acknowledging there are times when you cannot – creates overall buy in and allows workers to feel an ownership over their work towards mission goals. This can lead to further commitment to mission impact from the workforce.

Collecting insights on employee preferences and needs is a vital first step to ensure that programing is tailored to the workforce's needs. Collaborating with employees not only helps public sector organizations gather crucial data, but it also shows employees that their well-being and input are highly valued. This recognition can boost engagement and cultivate a culture of collaboration, where employees are key partners in shaping their work environment.

The result is a more dedicated and satisfied workforce that drives stronger outcomes for both themselves and their organization. To truly meet the needs of their workforce, public sector leaders must also go beyond mindset shifts—decisive action is necessary to allocate the required budget and resources for these critical programs. A potential offset for reallocating budget comes from increased retention resulting from the implementation of programs informed by employee feedback. These programs also help organizations stand out and attract top talent.



By offering a comprehensive suite of support that addresses both professional and personal needs—from mentorship and upskilling opportunities to mental health resources and well-being initiatives—public sector organizations can adopt a holistic approach that enables employees to feel valued for their entire selves. This strategy boosts productivity, enhances job satisfaction, and accelerates progress in mission-critical tasks.

Enhancing Mission Readiness at CBP through Employee Care

CBP's Backup Care Program effectively addressed employee challenges in managing personal emergencies, enhancing presence and effectiveness at work. By providing reliable and affordable emergency care solutions, the program boosted morale and retention. "If folks aren't able to deal with their life outside of work because they can't find care services, they are not present on the front line," said Andrea Bright, Assistant Commissioner of the Office of Human Resources Management. The successful implementation resulted in cost savings through reduced turnover and lower expenses for backfilling positions, reinforcing CBP's reputation as a desirable employer and driving stronger organizational outcomes.

Beyond Productivity: Measuring What Matters

Investing in employee-centric resources and programs in the public sector necessitates a data-driven strategy. Organizations must first leverage data to pinpoint employee needs, enabling them to identify the most impactful programs to enhance morale, retention, and performance. This process extends beyond discussions - it involves comprehensive data collection and analysis data through surveys, feedback sessions, and other methods to gain a detailed understand of employee preferences and requirements. Recent statistics reveal that 75% of leaders and 70% of workers report improved performance outcomes due to the strategic use of newly available data.² These figures underscore the significant advantages of employing a data-driven approach within public sector entities.

² 2024 Global Human Capital Trends Report.

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By prioritizing investments through data-driven decision-making, leaders can enhance workforce skills, increase job satisfaction, and increase productivity. To achieve this, leaders must first clearly define what successful outcomes they envision for their workers and the organization. This clarity is essential for selecting the most impactful programs. Skipping this step will prevent them from effectively using the data they collect to make informed decisions about their workforce.

Once public sector organizations clearly define what successful outcomes entail, they need to

develop a targeted strategy for collecting the right data to evaluate impact. This involves identifying specific metrics that reflect organizational performance, progress against mission goals, employee well-being, and individual achievements using detailed methods to gather both quantitative data and qualitative stories. To develop this strategy and select the appropriate data points, leaders must collaborate across the organization. Such collaboration is key to maintain employee support and trust. After establishing the strategy, it's vital to establish a comprehensive data collection system, which might include regular reviews, real-time feedback tools, and advanced data analytics. By systematically collecting and analyzing this data, organizations can gain valuable insights into the effectiveness of their strategies and make informed decisions to enhance both individual and organizational performance. Advanced analysis and key metrics enable public sector organizations to monitor the effectiveness of their programs in real time and make adjustments to improve outcomes.

Agencies like the Department of State are exploring the best methods to measure the impact of their programs organization-wide. Comptroller Jim Walsh emphasizes that “measuring impact is a team sport,” highlighting that this effort involves all workers at every level in determining the appropriate investment into these programs. For projects or work that is less tangible, leaders at the Department of State have successfully set common team goals and celebrated achievements at key milestones. By using targeted data collection and analysis, organizations can drive effective decision-making while enhancing human sustainability across the workforce.

Humanizing HR: CBP's Employee-Centric Data Collection

According to Melissa Stefko, Deputy Executive Director of Planning, Program Analysis, & Evaluation (PPAE) in Human Resources Management, CBP is “putting the human back into HR.” By leveraging data from surveys and focus groups, CBP extends its analysis beyond traditional metrics to encompass employee behavior and workplace issues. This enriched data collection strategy has empowered CBP leaders to enact significant enhancements to their programs, which have improved both the professional and personal lives of employees and sharpened their focus on mission delivery.





To effectively assess and optimize their impact, public sector agencies are increasingly focusing on innovative performance metrics. Leaders should consider non-traditional measurements, as standard productivity metrics, such as hours worked, often fail to capture the impact or outcomes of their efforts. Public sector organizations benefit substantially from developing and implementing comprehensive data collection strategies that involve collaboration across all levels, enabling effective measurement and enhancement of both individual and organizational performance.

Breaking Down the Black Box of Data

A lack of understanding or trust regarding the organization's actions and intentions can significantly undermine any efforts to support public sector employees. When workers are confident in their organization's responsible handling of transparent data, their trust increases by 35%.³ Therefore, it is essential for public organizations to find the optimal level of transparency to ensure that employees are fully informed about what actions are being taken and why. Regular updates on new initiatives, their purposes, and the expected benefits for both the individual and the organization are a key step to creating this trust. By finding the right level of transparency, leaders can build trust and demonstrate a genuine investment in their employees' best interests.

While transparency is crucial, Deloitte Specialist Executive Rosemary Williams cautions, "There is a limit to the thinking that, 'the more transparency, the better.'" She highlights the importance of sharing the right information at the right time on the right platform to build trust effectively with the various cohorts that make up a public sector organization, large or small. Additionally, creating open channels where employees can voice concerns and provide feedback is essential to strengthening trust and engagement. By building and maintaining an appropriate level of transparency that enables regular and open communication, organizations can improve trust and confidence while cultivating a positive and inclusive workplace culture with staying power.

As public sector organizations introduce new data-driven programs, they face heightened risks to employee privacy and security, both real and perceived. To address these concerns and preserve workforce trust, leaders must implement strong safeguards that include comprehensive cybersecurity measures to prevent unauthorized data access, well-defined privacy policies, and stringent access controls. Maintaining transparency with employees about the nature of these protective measures and the purpose of data collection both secures sensitive information and reinforces the organization's commitment to privacy and trust.

³ 2024 Global Human Capital Trends Report.



For example, certain military organizations have established privacy offices specifically to protect the privacy of personnel seeking mental health services. These offices ensure that data is used responsibly in support of critical initiatives like suicide prevention, while respecting employees' personal boundaries. This level of transparency builds trust by reassuring employees that their personal information is handled securely. Moreover, providing avenues for employees to anonymously report concerns can further enhance trust and promote a culture of openness and accountability.

Transparency and Privacy at CBP

At CBP, data management is handled with strict adherence to privacy and diversity protocols. Every data request, irrespective of the requester's organizational level, must be processed through the dedicated privacy and diversity office, following multiple approval steps. This rigorous process ensures the confidentiality of worker data and the protection of their privacy, demonstrating CBP's commitment to a transparent and secure handling of information, which is crucial for building trust within the organization.



By implementing these measures, public sector organizations can protect their employees' data while fostering a supportive and secure workplace, thereby improving the effectiveness of their employee programs. By implementing robust data privacy measures and maintaining open communication about these safeguards, public sector organizations can effectively protect employee privacy while cultivating trust and transparency. This enhances the security and effectiveness of their data-driven programs. Building trust involves more than just protecting employee data; it requires showing employees that their inputs are both safeguarded and actively used to customize and enhance available programs and resources.

Transparently demonstrating how employee feedback and data influences the development and refinement of workplace initiatives can increase employee engagement and willingness to share information. This approach creates a collaborative environment where employees feel genuinely valued and see a direct connection between their contributions and organizational improvements. Such a dynamic not only boosts morale but also strengthens the trust and partnership between employees and leadership, further enhancing workplace benefits.



Bringing It All Together

The design and implementation of workplace programs, data gathering, impact measurement, and trust-building, are deeply interconnected activities that collectively aim to maximize human performance. Trust is foundational to this framework; without it, employees might be reluctant to provide the necessary feedback that informs the creation of effective, tailored resources and programs. This hesitation can severely limit the success of valuable human sustainability initiatives.

Furthermore, the successful execution of these programs hinges on a detailed measurement strategy. Such a strategy enables leaders to understand and effectively communicate the value of these programs and their alignment with organizational mission outcomes. Importantly, this measurement must be conducted in a manner that bolsters trust within the workforce, rather than eroding it.

When public sector organizations place equal emphasis on their people and their mission, they lay the groundwork for sustained success. Human capital is one of the most valuable assets in the public sector; by prioritizing human sustainability, leaders can unlock the full potential of a skilled and motivated workforce, thereby enhancing the organization's ability to attract and retain top talent.

This strategic emphasis on a comprehensive approach to employee well-being and engagement initiates a virtuous cycle: a satisfied and committed workforce leads to improved mission outcomes, which in turn can attract more dedicated staff, further strengthening the organization. Utilizing data to continuously refine these programs, tailoring offerings to meet the evolving needs of the workforce, and clearly communicating these benefits are key strategies that help build trust. This trust is essential, as it feeds back into the cycle, fostering a resilient workforce capable of adapting to future challenges and driving mission success for years to come.



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