

Low Employee Engagement in Government: A Bad News—Good News Story

By Robert Lavigna, IPMA-SCP

Government organizations across the country are under enormous pressure, facing harsh criticism while still being expected to maintain and improve performance despite budget and personnel cuts. Public sector human resources leaders and professionals are in the eye of the storm kicked up by this trifecta, working hard to enable their organizations to attract, develop and retain talent despite the tough environment.

When I speak to groups of public sector leaders and professionals, I often cite a friend of mine who writes about government. As he puts it, in government, they ask us to do more with less, then even more with even less. Ultimately, they want us to do everything with nothing.

A joke? Sure, but every joke contains some truth. And research on the impacts of this do-more-with-less challenge is out there. The July/August 2017 issue of *Public Administration Review* includes “The Effects of Doing More With Less in the Public Sector: Evidence From a Large-Scale Survey.”

As you may suspect, the effects are not good. Results from the “six hierarchical linear regression models” run by Marc Esteve, Christian Schuster, Adria Albareda and Carlos Losada include the finding that reduced budgets and longer working hours have “dampened” motivation among public servants in Europe. As the authors conclude, “There are no free austerity lunches.” No reason exists to think the situation is any different here in the United States.

So how can public sector organizations succeed—and even thrive—in this difficult environment? One proven response is to improve the level of engagement among employees. The primary resource we have in government is talent. If our people are engaged and, therefore, perform well, government will also perform well.

The U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board defines employee engagement as “a heightened connection between employees and their work, their organization or the people they work for or with.” The board continues in its 2008 report on the power of engagement to the president and Congress that “engaged employees find

personal meaning in their work, take pride in what they do and where they do it, and believe that their organization values them.”

Decades of research have shown that improving employee engagement can be a key to improving organizational performance in all settings, including government. Additionally, engaged employees are more likely to go above the minimum and expend discretionary effort to deliver performance.

As I wrote in *Engaging Government Employees*, greater engagement leads to greater achievement of strategic goals, more responsive customer service, increased innovation, enhanced retention of good employees, decreased absenteeism and even better workplaces safe. The engagement value chain included with this article illustrates why engagement matters in government. Engagement drives desirable outcomes and moves the needle of public opinion about government. And don’t we need to move that needle?

Employee Engagement Value Chain



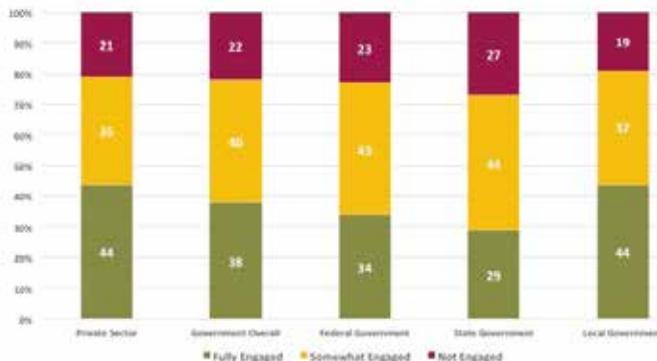
Engagement Is Low

A poll conducted by my organization, the Institute for Public Sector Employee Engagement at CPS HR Consulting, revealed that 44

percent of private-sector employees are fully engaged. This compares with 38 percent of public sector employees. The gap, illustrated in the accompanying bar graph, is statistically significant.

We also broke the results down by level of government. Those results, also shown in the graph, indicate that engagement is higher among local government employees than among workers at the federal or state levels. However, we still found that fewer than half of local government employees are fully engaged.

Engagement Levels



Drivers of Engagement

In addition to understanding overall engagement levels, we designed our survey to reveal the factors that have the biggest impacts on employee engagement—in other words, the key drivers of engagement—because employees considered them the most important. We analyzed potential drivers such as leadership, supervision, training and development, the work itself, appreciation and inclusion, and organizational culture. Across both the public and private sectors, we found that the top drivers are:

- Leadership and managing change,
- Training and development,
- The work itself, and
- Employee recognition and value.

We also identified the drivers by level of government and found some differences among federal, state and local government employees. While leadership and managing change was the top driver at all levels, “my supervisor” was the second-highest driver in local government. That factor was not among the top drivers for federal and state government employees.

We also did a deeper dive into the actual scores for each engagement driver. For the top driver, leadership and managing change, the score for government is significantly lower than it is for engagement in the private sector. In business, 65 percent of employees reported feeling positive about leadership and change management in their companies, compared to only 55 percent in government.

For training and development, the government score (62 percent positive) is also lower than the private sector score (65 percent). The same is true for “I feel valued” (67 percent positive in government versus 72 percent positive in the private sector). Only

for “my work” are the government scores (slightly) higher than the private sector scores (an 80 percent to 78 percent, respectively). The detailed poll results are contained in “Driving Employee Engagement: Results from a National Survey”, which was just released by the institute.

Taking Action

What can we conclude, and what is actionable, from our research? To summarize:

- Engagement in the public sector is lower than in the private sector.
- Local government employees have a higher level of engagement than employees in federal and state government.
- The overall priority areas of focus in government are
- Leadership and managing change,
- The work itself.
- Training and development,
- Appreciation and recognition, and
- Supervision (in local government).

While our poll results are revealing, there is no a one-size-fits-all solution to improving engagement in government, especially since there are roughly 90,000 government jurisdictions just in the United States. Still, as we often hear, you can’t manage what you don’t measure. This applies to employee engagement.

Organizations need to survey their employees to create an engagement baseline. Doing this will allow leaders to understand what employees feel is working and what they believe needs to be improved. The organization must then take action on the survey results to build a culture of engagement.

Now to explain why I subtitled this article “a bad news—good news story.”

The bad news is that engagement is low in government, as are the scores for the key drivers of engagement. The good news is that the low scores suggest that there is tremendous potential to improve engagement in government—and, thereby, improve the performance of government.

To help accomplish this goal, the Institute for Public Sector Employee Engagement and IPMA-HR have forged a new partnership through which the institute provides employee engagement survey and related services to association members. Please contact me for more information and/or a copy of the report on our poll results.

Bob Lavigna is director of the Institute for Public Sector Employee Engagement with CPS HR Consulting. He has more than 30 years of experience leading public sector HR organizations and programs, and is a past IPMA-HR president. He can be reached at rlavigna@cpshr.us.

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