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Date: 12/15/2016 12:00:55 PM

Subject: Federal Insider: Report ranks best and worst agencies for federal employees

Report ranks best and worst agencies for federal employees

By Joe Davidson

The Homeland Security Department headquarters in Northwest Washington. Its employee-engagement ranking has improved, but it remains at the bottom of its category. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh)

Just in time for the holidays comes the “Best Places to Work in the Federal Government” report, filled with good tidings and bad news for federal agencies.

The annual report is awaited each year by top officials who want to look good and avoid embarrassment. That makes sense, because the ratings are a reflection on their leadership. But more than simply showing who is up and who is down, the Best Places report slices and dices data to show why employees are engaged in their work or not. Engagement pays off in productivity and service to the public. Used properly, the report is a workforce road map, providing signs on how to improve employee morale.

Best Places is published by the Partnership for Public Service and the Deloitte consulting firm, using data from the Office of Personnel Management’s **Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey** (FEVS). Among the key findings:

- The government-wide employee engagement index score rose by 1.3 points to 59.4 this year. The Obama administration can feel proud of this second-consecutive-year increase, but this is still well behind the high of 65 in 2010.
- Things are getting better. More than 72 percent of all agencies increased their scores in 2016, compared with 70 percent last year. These two years represent vast improvement over the 43 percent that increased in

- 2014 and the lowly 24 percent in 2013.
- “The 2016 government-wide data show improvement in employees’ views of all 10 workplace categories for the second straight year. The biggest increase came in effective leadership, which still ranks 9th out of the 10 workplace categories.”
- The federal government lags behind employee engagement in the private sector, which is rated at 77. “However, 12 federal agencies scored above the private sector average.”

The Best Place index score is based on 100 points and is determined by three survey questions on recommending an agency as a good place to work, job satisfaction and satisfaction with the employee’s organization. The Partnership said one of the reasons it developed the ratings was “to hold agency leaders accountable for the health of their organizations.”

The ratings indicate that the best places to work are NASA, among large agencies; the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp., among midsize agencies; the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), among small agencies; and the Office of the Inspector General at the Tennessee Valley Authority, among subcomponent agencies.

The worst places to work in the same categories are the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Broadcasting Board of Governors, the Federal Election Commission and the Secret Service.

Communication is an important factor in the ratings.

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“I believe that the key to our rating increase this year has to do with including our entire staff in determining our organizational values and in celebrating our agencies accomplishments,” said Jane Chu, chairman of NEA. It jumped from number 11 last year. “It is very important to have open and transparent channels of communication, as well as a safe space for new and independent thinking. The ratings tell us that we are on the right track in providing this type of environment for our staff to do its best work.”

The report points to a highly mission-focused workforce suffering from poor leadership. “This is troubling because effective leadership remains the key motivating force for employees,” said a Partnership statement.

Many of the rankings were no surprise.

NASA has been No. 1 in its category for five straight years.

That’s not because of space, said Max Stier, the Partnership’s president and chief executive. “It’s because Charlie Bolden [NASA’s administrator] is a great leader.”

That’s not to say all agencies with low ratings have bad management. DHS, for example, has resided at the bottom of its category for five straight years, but it scored the group’s second largest improvement. When the [department’s improved FEVS results](#) were released in September, Secretary Jeh Johnson and Alejandro Mayorkas, then the deputy secretary, participated in a conference call with reporters that demonstrated their pride in the progress.

Yet, the Secret Service, a DHS component, dropped for the fifth straight year and is last among 305 government agency subcomponents. In another worrisome sign, the Social Security Administration registered the largest fall in employee engagement, dropping 2.9 points. “No other large agency saw its score fall by more than 0.7 points in 2016,” the Partnership reported.

“Best in class private-sector organizations understand that improved employee engagement leads to better performance and improved outcomes,” Stier said. “People are our government’s greatest asset, and the new administration should commit itself to strengthening the federal workforce and improving workforce culture.”

So far, no such commitment is evident from President-elect Donald Trump’s team.

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