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The challenge of managing a highly educated work force

By PAUL LAWRENCE

One of the most interesting and lesser-known facts about the federal government is that its work force is among the most educated in the country. The era when the federal work force consisted largely of low-graded file clerks is long gone.

The civilian federal work force consists of 2.7 million employees, 41 percent of whom have college degrees. In the general population, only 27 percent hold such degrees. Focusing on just the Senior Executive Service — the 7,000 top civil servants — we find that 62 percent have advanced degrees, as compared with only 8 percent in our general population. Simply stated, our federal team is exactly what author and management expert Peter Drucker was talking about when he first wrote about the “knowledge worker” as one who “gains access to work, job and social position through formal education.”

If this trend continues, which is likely, government executives will need a different management style to oversee knowledge workers than they used to supervise a lower-graded, less-educated work force. Much can be learned about the future of a government work force of knowledge workers by looking at two agencies: the Census Bureau and the National Institutes of Health. In recent conversations, their directors each described his own style for managing knowledge workers.

Charles Kincannon is the director of the Census Bureau. He has spent his career working with government statisticians, economists and demographers measuring our population. On his staff, a master’s degree is common and many have doctorates. He sees the challenge this way: The Census Bureau “is filled with experts, and they all know more about what they are doing than I do.” Because of this expertise, Kincannon pointed out, it’s difficult to say “you shouldn’t be performing your work a certain way.”

Before becoming NIH director, Dr. Elias Zerhouni was chairman of the radiology department at Johns Hopkins University, providing advanced training and degrees to doctors. At NIH, Zerhouni leads one of the most educated work forces in the country. In contrast to the general population, where 1 percent hold doctorates, 13 percent of NIH’s work force have Ph.Ds.

To Zerhouni, such a team poses special challenges, especially in the area of decision-making. According to Zerhouni, “When you have a knowledge-based work force, the only way you can lead is to have an open environment where you share information. They are data-driven — 95 percent of the time, if you bring data, they will converge to an optimal solution.”

I saw immediate similarities in the techniques each director used to get results from their knowledge workers. They focused on three key actions:

- Cultivate a collegial environment. This requires engaging workers and listening carefully to what they have to say. They might not agree with a decision, but if they feel listened to and understood, they are more likely to be supportive. Simply giving orders is the sure path to indifference — or worse, sabotage. Similarly, never try to outclass a knowledge worker in his own area of expertise. More citations, details or even volume will never convert them to your point of view.
- Create a learning organization. Knowledge workers' expertise is deep, but narrow. They have limited understanding of other disciplines. But they are avid learners. Managers can draw on this desire to learn by teaching employees how their work connects to the work of others. Aligning knowledge workers through teaching will decrease conflict and increase collaboration.
- Draw on the manager's unique knowledge. Managers of knowledge workers may no longer be current on the subject matter, but they are quite knowledgeable about the organization in which they work. Because of their broader experiences and higher rank, they better understand the mission, politics and realities of the agency. Managers should use their unique knowledge to help their knowledge-worker subordinates and teammates succeed.

The federal work force consists of highly educated, dedicated professionals. Government leaders need to use new management tools appropriate for knowledge workers. Kincannon and Zerhouni demonstrate how this can be done in government. We can all benefit from their experiences.

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