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## FOUR PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT MISTAKES IMPEDING YOUR TEAM'S SUCCESS (AND WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT THEM)

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**P**ublic sector workplaces are experiencing colossal changes that are challenging traditional ways of working and workforce expectations. The economic realities of ongoing fiscal constraints, reductions in headcount, and increasing public expectations are creating a demanding environment where employees are expected to deliver more with fewer resources. In addition, the working styles of a new generation and new technologies have created a hyper-connected workforce that is engulfed in email, instant messaging, video conferences, phone calls, and social network access. This hyper-connectivity has not necessarily translated into increased employee engagement or better performance. Instead, employees are becoming more and more overwhelmed by this new work context.

## **Engaging Staff**

Although the 2014 Public Service Employee Survey, administered by the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, revealed that effective performance management practices have increased in the public service, only 33% of employees surveyed agreed that unsatisfactory employee performance is managed effectively and less than half of employees indicated that essential information flows effectively from senior management to staff. Despite the overall increase in effective performance management practices in the public service, there continues to be an opportunity to further strengthen these practices to increase employee engagement, instill a strong sense of purpose in employees, and focus efforts.

Deloitte's Human Capital Trends<sup>1</sup> report highlights employee engagement as the most important issue facing leaders today.<sup>1</sup> Leaders have a key role to play to help unengaged, overwhelmed employees succeed in today's workplace. One approach that leaders can take to address these issues is to adapt their current performance management practices in response to the evolving workplace. By adapting performance management practices, leaders in the public sector can help employees identify organizational priorities and focus their efforts, while still emphasizing continuous self-improvement, ultimately helping to increase overall engagement. Effective performance management practices not only help organizations continue to raise the bar, but also engage employees on the efforts and behaviours required for both personal and organizational success, creating a win-win situation. Regardless of the maturity of the organization's performance management practices, leaders that make it a priority to help manage employee performance ultimately build a more engaged, high-performing workforce.

Based on insights from public sector leaders and subject matter experts, this article identifies the key challenges facing leaders who are managing performance in the public sector today, and proposes a number of leading practices to address these challenges. It is important for leaders to interpret these challenges and tactics within the context of their organization, as there is no "one size" fits all approach for performance management.

## **I. PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES FACING LEADERS IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR**

### **Strategies and plans are not always clear**

Many public servants are uninformed of their organization's overall strategy and enabling plan. While typically in the public service there is a common understanding of an overarching mandate (e.g. healthcare staff have an ultimate mandate of improving overall health and wellbeing of patients) many public servants do not receive adequate communication from leaders regarding the organization's strategy and what actions are required of employees to contribute to these goals. This gap in communication contributes to misalignment between the goals of employees and the organization's strategy.

### **Saving feedback for the formal performance review cycle**

Performance review cycles vary across government departments, agencies and even collective agreements. Regardless of the cycle, there is a tendency amongst public sector leaders to 'save' feedback or coaching opportunities for formal performance review cycles. While the performance review processes vary across the public sector, for the most part, employees tend to meet with their performance management supervisors or their manager one to two times per year to obtain formal feedback. With this approach, leaders often struggle to integrate both formal and informal feedback and, as a result, run the risk of bottling up performance feedback instead of evenly distributing it throughout the year and/or delivering it to employees in the moment.

### **Fear of the collective agreement**

Public sector leaders face the challenge of managing in a highly unionized environment. Collective agreements are put in place to protect employers and employees; however, they can be difficult to understand, and the potential for union grievances can often shape and limit how managers provide performance feedback, especially when performance improvements are required. This fear and lack of understanding of the appropriate steps to take (as outlined in an organization's collective agreement) can often cause managers to refrain from sharing constructive feedback or critical ratings with employees.

### **Performance incentives are limited**

Performance incentives are often used by organizations to encourage top performance and desired behaviours. However, the link between incentives and performance management is not as clear in the public sector, which is highly unionized and policy based. From a performance management and compensation perspective, there are not always opportunities to distinguish between top performers and performers who are just meeting expectations. Rewards are generally based on tenure, and promotions are traditionally linked to an employee's ability to effectively meet standardized selection criteria, as opposed to their performance and personal 'fit' for the position.

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## **II. WHAT CAN LEADERS DO?**

### **Make the strategy clear and realistic**

Leaders must establish, reiterate and reinforce the organization's strategy and how their team contributes to meeting the objectives. All public sector leaders can use the leading practice techniques below to help ensure their organization's goals are communicated in a clear and meaningful way:

- *Tell them, tell them, and tell them again* – Identify and use all opportunities to communicate the goals of the organization.
- *Relate to your team* – When communicating, always try to consider your employees' viewpoints and ensure you are making the organization's strategy relatable to your employees.
- *Partner with your team to ensure goal alignment* – Work with employees to ensure employees' development and career goals are aligned with the goals of the organization.
- *Continuously engage* – In addition to the steps outlined above, it's important for managers to continuously engage with their employees through formal and informal opportunities (e.g. meetings, lunches, off-sites) to communicate the goals of the organization and how employees fit into the bigger picture.

### **Create coaching moments**

Leaders have the ability to complement formal performance review cycles with real-time, ongoing coaching and feedback to help employees grow, develop, and become more engaged. Leaders need to stop focusing on the formality of the performance review cycle and shift toward regular, on-the-job, real-time constructive coaching/development opportunities, helping to increase overall employee engagement:

- *Listen* – In order to effectively create coaching moments, and provide employees with the adequate level of advice and guidance, leaders need to effec-

tively listen and understand what matters to their employees, and what they hope to achieve.

- *Encourage two-way conversations* – Leaders need to encourage two-way, ongoing discussions with employees. Frequent coaching touch points allow for opportunities to connect and engage with employees, and provide timely feedback and a ‘no surprises’ performance management experience.
- *Speak up* – If you notice something, either an example of the desired behavior, opportunity for improvement, or an employee demonstrating symptoms of being overwhelmed, say something. By investing time to connect, care, and provide an employee with real-time coaching, leaders can redirect employee actions, reinforce desired behaviors and even help someone reprioritize activities so they are not feeling overwhelmed.
- *Treat coaching as an art* – Not all leaders start off with the right tools to be an effective coach. Giving feedback can be tricky – especially when collective agreements are involved. It is important that leaders are equipped with the tools and training required to provide constructive feedback in a way that is supportive to the recipient.

### **Do not fear the collective agreement**

Collective agreements shouldn’t be used as an excuse to avoid delivering difficult messages to poor performers. Oftentimes, what is most feared by leaders is the unknown. Taking time to understand collective agreements and how to work effectively within them will remove the fear and help leaders develop employees and ensure they truly understand what they can do to help improve employee performance. Leaders can do this by working with other leaders to identify the source of confusion with respect to collective agreements and the grievance processes, and ensure the actions they can take are clear.

### **Meaningful incentives have many forms**

While approaches to raises and promotions can be difficult to influence in the public sector, leading practices suggest that performance recognition is not only about tangible rewards. Leaders should begin to better understand what makes their employees ‘tick’, recognizing that this can be very different on an employee-by-employee basis. With the evolving expectations of a younger workforce for interactive and transparent work environments, potential reward and recognition opportunities include: flextime, indirect benefits, prestige and recognition, career planning sessions, and special programs.

The public sector will always be responding to pressure to become increasingly innovative, effective and efficient, while reducing expenditures and providing exceptional services to Canadians. Although progress has been made implementing modernized performance management programs across public sector organizations, there is a need to continue to improve these processes, meet evolving employee expectations and accommodate shifting priorities. Leaders, often faced with this challenging task, remain in the most influential position to establish a strong performance culture, align employee performance to the achievement of organizational goals and objectives and motivate employees to perform at a high level. Provided with the right tools and equipped with leading practices, leaders have the ability to raise the bar to meet the demands of an evolving workforce and workplace, increase employee engagement and productivity, and achieve the intended outcomes and objectives of today and into the future. Go make a difference.

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