

INTRODUCTION

Supervising federal employees really *is* different from supervising employees in the private sector. If you're going to supervise them well, you have to recognize these differences and make them work for you. The four biggest differences are: the system of rules, a need for consistency, employee entitlements, and people's motivation.

THE SYSTEM OF RULES

As a federal supervisor, you work in a system with personnel policies and practices that are carefully regulated and overseen. Unlike working in private industry, where you can hire, promote, pay, harass, fire, and generally treat employees however you want, in the federal service we must operate within rules, laws, regulations, and policies that govern how we treat our people. Hiring and promotion, for example, are carefully circumscribed by rules that define a merit system. Demotion and removal require adherence to standards of cause and proof to prevent arbitrary actions.

Not only do we have rules and regulation, the federal government takes them seriously. All big organizations have rules, but in federal service we've set up enforcement mechanisms that include outside entities that have the authority to overturn our actions when not in compliance with these rules.

This is not necessarily a bad or even a cumbersome system. Once you learn the dynamics, you can make it work for you. I have written many books on supervisory topics like discipline, controlling absenteeism, and handling performance problems. The message I have tried to leave readers with is that they *can* fire people, make them come to work, and perform up to even the highest standards. Virtually all the stories you hear about how you cannot do this or that with a federal employee are urban legends. It's not that you cannot do this or that, it's that you have to meet certain standards—none of which I have found to be onerous.

CONSISTENCY

First, we must apply our rules consistently. Federal government employees have formal and informal mechanisms to challenge management—various avenues of appeals, grievances, and complaints. Among the most important concerns of third parties is consistency in the application of our rules. Selective enforcement is not an option. When federal supervisors are confronted with personnel management decisions, they must always think one step ahead.

AN EXAMPLE OF CONSISTENCY

Your best employee commits a minor violation of a serious rule—gets caught making an unauthorized purchase with an inconsequential amount of money on a government credit card. In private industry, you could get away with simply giving a friendly warning. In federal service, though, I guarantee that if you do not take formal action against that employee, your worst employee will charge services at an escort service on a government credit card. When you fire him, he will point an appeals body back to your best employee who also misused a government credit card and suffered no action.

EMPLOYEE TENURE

The second difference relates to the first: federal employees do not serve at will. In the federal government, most employees achieve tenure after a certain period of time. For most, it's upon completion of the first year of probation after a competitive appointment. Once an employee achieves this tenure, he or she has an entitlement to the job, and that job cannot be taken away unless management follows certain procedures and meets certain standards—whether it's a layoff, removal for cause, or removal for competence problems. Federal employees can be fired, but it has to be for the right reasons and the right procedures must be followed (which are not especially tough or lengthy once you learn them). This creates two problems: the first is the difficulty of dealing with marginal employees—whether performance or conduct.

Marginal Employees

It is not difficult to deal with the incompetent employees or those committing serious acts of misconduct. The problem is dealing with the marginal ones. Take, for example, the marginal employee who is barely doing enough to get by—work product is barely on time, most of the work needs to be re-done, and is hardly acceptable even then. In private industry, employment at will allows management to fire an employee for any reason not prohibited by law, and no law protects marginal employees.

If you're a federal supervisor reading that, you laugh out loud. Forget it. The problem, as you know, is that if your marginal employee is past probation, there's nothing you can do officially as long as the employee is meeting basic minimal expectations. Federal managers must be especially thoughtful in dealing with people *before* they achieve tenure—in the hiring process and during probation or other trial periods, where you do have virtually unfettered authority and almost no legal ramifications or employee challenges. Once an employee achieves permanent civil service status, you'll have to meet

the various legal standards, which simply do not permit action in marginal situations.

During the hiring process you must work harder than your counterpart in private industry to gather information about applicants from every conceivable source. You have to be especially vigilant in evaluating the information and weed out applicants who show risk factors such as sick leave use, obesity, smoking, and lack of motivation. If you do hire a risky employee and the person becomes an absentee problem, demands excessive breaks, or treats the job indifferently, there's not much you'll be able to do and what you can do, will be extraordinarily time-consuming.

Federal Employees Have No Fear

The second problem that tenure creates is that federal employees are simply not afraid of their supervisors. We'll elaborate on this one later, but since the private sector has employment at will, a major factor in how employees work is fear—knowing they can be fired at any minute. Federal employees know that they'll not be removed for a single act of poor performance or a first offense of tardiness. Or, if their agency downsizes, they'll have plenty of handsome options. Except in rare cases, you're not going to be able to motivate a federal employee by making him or her afraid of losing his or her job.

EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION

The last big difference between federal and private sector employment is that you are indeed dealing with a different type of employee. Government employees in general, and federal employees in particular, choose to work where they do for reasons different from those in private industry. I have worked intimately with federal employees, civilian and military, for over forty years in various capacities, and I have reached the inescapable conclusion that federal employees are a different breed. They are motivated by reasons significantly different from those that motivate their contemporaries in the private sector.

The most obvious motivational difference, of course, is financial. While federal employees would like to own a home, drive nice cars, and have a variety of comforts, it is not what drives them. What drives them is that they want to make a difference. They want to measure their lives not in terms of how much money they made, but in what they left behind. They want a career that gives them memories, excitement, prestige, power, challenge, relationships, travel, a legacy, and a variety of other similar treasures.

I recall sitting around a few years ago with a couple of biologists from the Fish and Wildlife Service. They were talking amongst themselves about a project they had been working on in the wilderness involving a wildlife survey that

required them to figure out how to get down to the substructure of a railroad bridge to count nests and eggs. One of them, a former Army ranger, rappelled down from the top and with a variety of improvised materials they rigged up a surface so they could crawl out and find the nests. As they were recounting the story, they laughed about how much they enjoyed what they were doing. One woman said, "I can't believe they pay us to do this."

And there it is: "I can't believe they pay us to do this." What turned these people on was the camaraderie, the challenge, the chance to solve problems, being part of a team, being outdoors in the woods, the sense of achievement in accomplishing something, hanging around attractive people of the opposite sex, doing something for the environment, and sitting around a campfire with friends laughing.

Many of you will scoff, and I'm not a Pollyanna. I realize that there are some awful jobs in federal service. I also realize that there are employees who do not respond to a higher calling and could not care less about excitement, fun, or meaning. These people are the minority.

THE SEVEN MAJOR TASKS OF NEW SUPERVISORS

If you are to attract, motivate, and retain good people, you must spend the majority of your efforts as a supervisor on strengthening the jobs of the people under you—not trying to invent ways to give people more benefits, nicer working conditions, more money, and ways to get away from work.

So there's a lot you're going to have to learn about supervision. You must learn how to hire the best people, how to design the jobs to best help motivate employees, the legalities and practicalities of discipline, and how to manage time. If you have a union, you must acquire some expertise on labor relations, how to handle and settle grievances and complaints, and study all the aspects of managing performance, as well as a variety of other topics.

Some lessons you must learn sooner rather than later. Others you can hold off on learning until you actually have to do it. One of the very few precepts of the late W. Edwards Deming, the great God of Total Quality Management, that I agree with is "just-in-time learning." It's a bad idea, he argued, to teach employees skills that they are not going to use right away. They'll forget them by the time they use them, so you've wasted a lot of time and money. Applying this to learning supervisory skills, you can safely wait for many problems to come up before you learn how to deal with them. Hiring, for example, is something I wouldn't worry about learning until the first time there is a vacancy. Learning the complexities of pay and compensation I would avoid