Employee Engagement in Human Services

(Part 2): The Flip Side of Challenge Is Opportunity

By Bob Lavigna and Phil Basso

"The workforce sits at the core of how human services agencies deliver on their missions. Absent a talented, well-equipped workforce, it's nearly impossible to drive the outcomes we desire for communities."

This quote, from the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) article, "The Health and Human Services Workforce: Igniting the Potential, Part 1", highlights the critical role the human services workforce plays in delivering essential services to their communities. In the first of this two-part series (see *Policy & Practice,* June 2020), we described how a highly engaged workforce can enable human services organizations to successfully deliver these services.

Engaged employees have a strong and deep connection to their work, their organization, their colleagues, and the people they serve. Decades of research, including in the public sector, have shown that employee engagement drives retention, organizational performance, and improved client outcomes.

The COVID-19 crisis has only heightened the need to foster a healthy work environment through strong and intentional strategies to improve engagement.

Engagement Is Low

Unfortunately, employee engagement is low across the entire U.S. workforce, including in the public sector. Bob's Institute for Public Sector Employee Engagement has conducted a series of national surveys to assess the level of employee engagement in the public and private sectors. The most recent results are shown below ("Government Overall" combines the results for employees in federal, state, and local government).

As Chart 1 shows, engagement is low across the board but is lower in government than in the private sector, including higher percentages of not-engaged employees in the public sector. By level of government, local government employees have a lower percentage of fully engaged employees, and a higher percentage of those not engaged.

We see these government results as a bad-news, good-news story. While the bad news is that employee engagement in government is low, there is tremendous potential for government to improve performance by improving engagement.
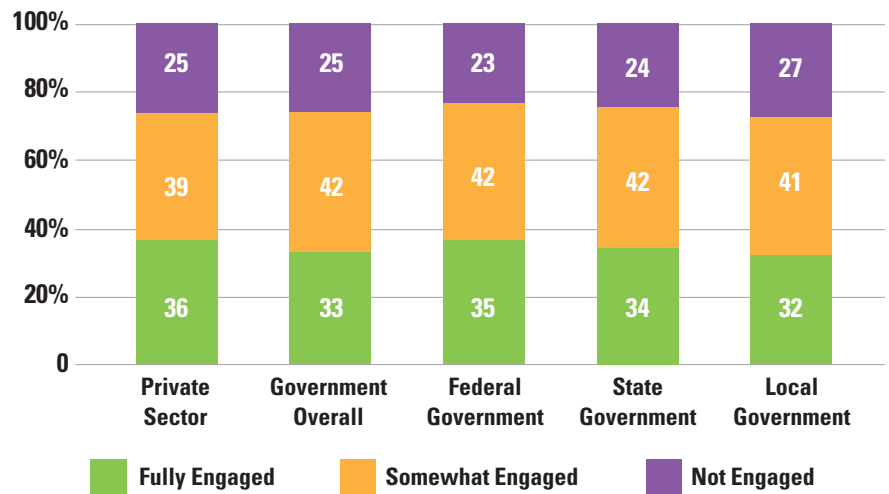
Drivers of Engagement

The Institute's research has also explored the factors with the biggest impact on employee engagement statistically— the "key drivers" of engagement.

The top workplace factor influencing engagement in government is "leadership and managing change." That is, engagement is high when employees feel good about their leaders; and these leaders are visible, exemplify the organization's values, manage change effectively, and put in place changes that employees perceive as positive.

Other key engagement drivers are training and development, employee

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Chart 1: How Engaged Is the U.S. Workforce?

	Private Sector	Government Overall	Federal Government	State Government	Local Government
Not Engaged	25	25	23	24	27
Somewhat Engaged	39	42	42	42	41
Fully Engaged	36	33	35	34	32

Legend: ■ Fully Engaged ■ Somewhat Engaged ■ Not Engaged

recognition, the work itself, and (in local government only) supervision. In other words, public-sector employees who are engaged have opportunities to develop their competencies, are challenged, believe they are making a difference, have good supervisors, and feel they are valued. The Institute's research and framing on engagement drivers are consistent with APHSA's 35 identified drivers of employee retention, which include employee recognition, supervisor quality, an empowering and teaming culture, senior team reputation, and quality employee development.

Unfortunately, Institute research also reveals that government scores are lower than the private sector on key engagement drivers such as leadership and employee recognition. In fact, leadership and managing change is the lowest scoring dimension in government. Only 50 percent of public-sector employees surveyed responded positively to survey questions about their leaders. Moreover, only 63 percent of government employees believe they are valued.

Finding Out What Matters to Your Employees

The Institute's employee engagement survey results reveal the powerful impact of factors such as leadership and employee recognition on engagement. However, there is not a single one-size-fits-all solution to improving engagement. By one count, there are more than 90,000 government jurisdictions across the United States. Each has its own mission, politics, culture,

and budget. No single action, or set of actions, can drive engagement across all of these organizations.

Instead, as we discussed in Part 1 of this series, each organization should measure the level of engagement in its own workforce to establish an empirical baseline and identify actions it should take to improve engagement.

Also as we described in Part 1, regular employee engagement surveys are the most effective way to measure engagement. Surveys create the engagement baseline and identify what influences employees' engagement. Over time, regular surveys provide the data to determine if the needle of engagement is moving in the right direction.

Chart 2 shows the five-step model the Institute uses to help public-sector organizations survey their employees, analyze the level and drivers of engagement, take action, and then sustain engagement over the long term. Unlike a one-size-fits-all approach, this model allows individual organizations to tailor their approach to their mission, values, strategy, culture, capabilities, and budget.

It is important to note that surveying employees is only one step in the process. In particular, steps four and five—taking action and sustaining engagement—are critical. Unfortunately, some organizations, including in government, survey their employees but do not take action on the results. This is a fatal mistake. Surveying employees and then failing to take action is likely to lead to lower engagement.

Chart 2: Employee Engagement Process Model

| 1. Plan & Set Goals | → | 2. Survey Employees | → | 3. Analyze & Share Results | → | 4. Take Action | → | 5. Evaluate Actions & Sustain Engagement |

Adapted from Engaging Government Employees (American Management Association) by Bob Lavigna

This is also why APHSA developed "define, assess, plan, implement and monitor" (DAPIM) to build performance and capacity. DAPIM connects defined drivers of employee engagement to the assessment of those drivers through surveys and other means. This assessment is the basis for planning and implementation that leads to effective monitoring, testing, and refinement—and adjusting improvement actions. The result is an ongoing learning cycle.

Maintaining Engagement During a Pandemic

COVID-19 has created a dramatically new workplace environment, and many employers and employees were unprepared for the large-scale workforce changes caused by the pandemic, especially the large-scale transition to working remotely. According to the "Head of Remote" for Gitlab, billed as the company with the world's largest all-remote workforce, the transition to working remotely is "… a process, not a binary switch to be flipped."

However, COVID-19 has forced organizations, including in government, to flip the switch to a remote workforce, sometimes literally overnight. In addition to the obvious technology challenges, this sudden transition created concerns about employees' psychological well-being, performance, and productivity.

In the Institute's recent survey of the impacts of COVID-19, which generated 19,550 responses from government employees across the nation, most respondents said they feel "tired," "anxious," "worried," "nervous" and "stressed." The survey further revealed that 85 percent of employees now working remotely for the first time want to continue working remotely permanently, at least part time. As one large-city human resources director

said, "We need to prepare for working remotely as a permanent evolution in how and where we perform work."

One key to managing a remote workforce effectively is keeping employees engaged when they are not physically at their work sites. This is important not just because more employees are now working from home, but also because engagement is already low, as shown above.

Consistent with years of Institute research on what drives engagement, as well as APHSA's observations from providing technical support to our member agencies, maintaining engagement during a pandemic or other crisis requires:
- Providing strong and visible leadership
- Communicating effectively
- Continuing to focus on training and development
- Emphasizing the mission and the work
- Recognizing and appreciating employee contributions
- Asking for employee feedback

Leadership. With larger numbers of employees working from home, leaders must continue to be visible, even if not in person. Employees need to see and believe that their leaders are actively managing the organization despite the pandemic, and that leaders care about employees.

Leaders also need to set clear expectations about the new workplace environment. According to one government leader, "We've had to drastically change. People who have kids need to take an hour off to put someone down for a nap or to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich." The response to this challenge is to manage goals, results, and outcomes, not just time, attendance, and activities.

Leadership during a pandemic also means giving employees the tools

they need. One state government is spending millions to buy laptops for employees working remotely. Leaders also need to ensure that employees who continue to report to their work sites have the equipment they need to keep them safe. According to the Institute's national COVID-19 survey, 30 percent of "essential" employees reported they did not have the protective equipment they need.

Communication. The "State of Remote Work" report (published before COVID-19), identified communication and collaboration as the biggest challenges in managing a remote workforce. In our new world of work, this is truly a case where it is nearly impossible to overcommunicate.

Therefore, leaders should reach out through multiple means (i.e., not just email or messaging), using telephone, web sites, blogs, intranet, Twitter, and Facebook. Face-to-face communication platforms like Zoom, Teams, WebEx, and Skype allow more personal two-way or full group discussions and dialogue.

Training and development. It might be easy to ignore employee development since most employers and employees are scrambling just to adapt to the new workplace and get their work done. But this would be a mistake.

Managers, supervisors, and employees should continue to focus on development, using options that do not require in-person interaction, including by taking advantage of the explosion in online training. While in-person conferences are being postponed or even canceled, some are substituting online, virtual events, including webinars.

Another proven strategy is mentoring, which does not require in-person contact but can be highly effective—and

also highly cost efficient. For example, in one APHSA management development effort in the Texas child welfare system, mentoring proved to be the key to unlocking a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable agency climate.

The mission and the work. Research has revealed that public servants often have a higher level of connection and commitment to their organization's mission than their private-sector counterparts. Many government employees were attracted to their agencies by the mission and the work itself. Nowhere is this truer than in human services, where mission and client contact are now more important than ever. That is why "serving a cause" is another key retention driver in the APHSA model.

Appreciation and recognition. The Institute's national survey has consistently found that the most important cultural driver of engagement in government is ensuring that employees feel valued. This can be tough without physical proximity—it is no longer possible to just walk down the hall to thank or praise an employee.

But it is still important to recognize the contributions and accomplishments of all employees, including those working remotely as well as those who continue to report to their work sites. Public-sector leaders, managers, and supervisors often say that they cannot reward superior performance financially. While this is indisputable—for both budgetary and political reasons—it is not always about money.

A critical aspect of employee recognition is helping employees understand that their work matters and that they should be proud of what they do. Recognition can also mean simply telling the people we work with that we appreciate them and their contributions. The book *1501 Ways to Reward Employees* includes more than 500 pages of "low- and no-cost" ways to acknowledge good performance.

Bob was recently on a teleconference where a manager praised the work of one of the folks on the call. He could almost "hear" the smile in the employee's voice when she said thanks. And

Phil now begins his virtual meetings by sharing and celebrating examples of how participants have achieved personal and professional successes despite our challenging environment.

Agencies should also create, publicize, and use online recognition tools, including allowing employees to nominate each other for recognition, and use offline approaches such as telephone calls, thank-you cards, handwritten notes, and even birthday and anniversary cards. These small gestures can mean a lot—often more than a monetary award.

Ask for feedback. Communication is a two-way street, and organizations need to stay connected to employees. A recent poll found that 86 percent of employees believe it is "appropriate" or "completely appropriate" for employers to survey them now. Moreover, employees whose organizations ask for feedback during uncertain times are more engaged than employees in organizations that do not ask.

Organizations unsure whether to conduct these surveys now should consider moving forward despite COVID-19. This can send the message that the organization is doing everything it can to understand how the new work environment is affecting the engagement of employees—and wants to continue business as usual, as much as possible.

An alternative is a more targeted survey on how employees feel about the current working arrangement, like the Institute's COVID-19 survey. This approach can include asking both remote and essential employees how they feel about their leaders and supervisors, communication, tools and resources, and their own safety and well-being.

Creating a Culture of Engagement

As the above Institute model shows, the long-term goal of any engagement strategy is to create a culture of engagement. In other words, make engagement part of the organization's

DNA—how we treat each other and how we treat the people we serve. The nonprofit Conference Board has conducted research to define what a culture of engagement is, and to identify the characteristics of an engagement culture. The Board report, "The DNA of Engagement," defines a culture of engagement as, "A set of accepted organizational values, behaviors, and practices that promotes increasing levels of engagement as a cultural norm."

The Board's research identified the primary characteristics of this engagement culture:

- The engagement business case is broadly understood across the organization, with engagement explicitly linked to achieving the mission and key organizational outcomes;
- Engagement is measured regularly—and results are acted on;
- Leaders and managers work together to improve engagement;
- Engagement efforts are visible across the organization;
- Human resources systems are linked to engagement (i.e., the organization hires, evaluates, rewards, advances, and trains with the goal of maintaining engagement); and
- Communication, particularly from senior leaders, is frequent and robust.

As one executive interviewed described her organization's commitment, "We talk about employee engagement all the time. It's not something we do when our other work is done or is at the end of a meeting agenda and if we don't get to it, that's OK." In other words, engagement is part of this organization's DNA.

It may be a cheesy cliché that the flip side of challenge is opportunity. However, human services organizations that view today's working environment as an opportunity to show employees the organization cares about them, especially during the toughest of times, will be a lasting win for government, the human services workforce and, most important, the people the workforce serves.