

Building the Case for Talent Development

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Introduction

The federal government must invest in its workforce if it is to address modern challenges. As agency missions evolve, public servants will need to grow and develop to adapt to new ways of serving the American public. Strategic talent development will help agencies retain productive, engaged employees and ensure the effective delivery of mission-critical services.

In 2019, the Partnership for Public Service and Cornerstone OnDemand conducted focus groups and a workshop to explore how federal HR leaders make the business case to start new talent development initiatives. With competing priorities for limited agency resources, it is critical to gain buy-in from key stakeholders to ensure the success and sustainability of new and existing programs.

The following tips can help you prepare a case that works for your agency and illustrates to leadership the benefits of talent development.

Five Tips to Build Your Case

1

Link talent development to the organization's goals and mission.

Support for talent development is greater when clearly linked to mission achievement. For example, an agency that provides public-facing services could invest in developing more highly skilled employees so they can shorten wait times or speed claims processing—both improvements in customer service outcomes. The key is to be specific and concrete when talking about how your initiative will impact your organization's goals and mission.

2

Use data to tell the story.

Data is a valuable tool for quantifying the impact of new programs that enhance the skills of your workforce. However, relying on numbers alone is less effective than creating a compelling, evidence-based narrative that engages your leadership. For example, you could use data on the cost of employee turnover at your agency to construct a narrative that shows both the financial impact of losing valuable employees, as well as the less evident costs of separation (such as time spent hiring a replacement) that are equally important to your mission.

Evaluating agency programs is another way to spur leadership to create more opportunities for professional development or ensure that current efforts are used and communicated widely across your organization.

“We always talked about our business case in the military as supporting the mission and/or operational risk: We need these tools, these weapons systems, these IT systems to provide military forces needed to deter war and defend our nation. Should deterrence fail, to win. What I've learned is we have to also address developmental risk. If we don't develop our people, you're going to have a fantastic radar, a fantastic F-35 advanced jet, but you're not going to have the maintainers or the pilots to fly it.”

Russ Frasz

Director, force development and deputy chief of staff for manpower, personnel and services, U.S. Air Force

3

Focus on employee engagement.

According to the 2019 Best Places to Work in the Federal Government® rankings, agencies that scored well on employee engagement tended to emphasize training and development at their agencies.¹ Sustained professional development over the course of an employee's career can improve engagement, and that typically leads to more productive employees. Employees are also more likely to stay if they feel their agency invests in them.

¹ Analysis of 2019 Best Places to Work in the Federal Government data available at <https://bit.ly/2sNz1A0>.

4

Strengthen institutional knowledge.

Talent development programs prepare employees for workforce changes, such as attrition or retirement, which can pose a risk due to the loss of institutional knowledge. Share how you will reduce risks by preparing employees for future leadership and technical roles. Specifics about impacts are critical for making a compelling business case. Training more employees in mission-critical areas can help ensure continuity in your organization.

5

Think big but start small.

Government changes incrementally. When shaping new talent development initiatives, create short-term efforts to provide quick wins that can help you gain support and credibility from agency stakeholders. For example, launch a pilot program to test new approaches and gather data from your results that demonstrate best practices. Use the lessons you learn from these early activities to refine your strategy and tackle larger challenges.

“Focus on one thing at a time. If you have to go from A to Z, don’t try to skip to Y. Start at the beginning and build your business case to secure buy-in and identify the partners that you can work with. Soon you’ll be able to engage other leaders and employees in your organization and move the needle.”

John Salamone
Chief human resources officer, U.S. House of Representatives

Conclusion

Federal leadership development and employee education and training should not be discrete, isolated events. They should be part of a continual process for enhancing the skills of our public servants so our government can perform at its best.

The Partnership for Public Service recently released its [Public Service Leadership Model](#), which emphasizes continual employee development for employees ranging from aspiring supervisors up to members of the Senior Executive Service. This model requires a deliberate and strategic investment in leaders at all levels. Top agency leaders need to consider the long-term development of their employees to strengthen engagement, build skills and prepare for new, challenging roles. With these tips in mind, you can develop a strong foundation to build that business case to senior leaders and achieve the goals that will maximize your agency's performance.

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