

AGENCY GUIDE

Best Places to Work in the Federal Government® Staff/Manager Alignment Scores

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PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE



IBM Center for
The Business of Government

The Partnership for Public Service is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that works to revitalize the federal government by inspiring a new generation to serve and by transforming the way government works.

The IBM Center for The Business of Government connects public management research with practice. Since 1998, we have helped public sector executives improve the effectiveness of government with practical ideas and original thinking. We sponsor independent research by top minds in academe and the non-profit sector, and we create opportunities for dialogue on a broad range of public management topics.

IMPROVING PERFORMANCE? MIND THE GAPS!

As agencies use the Partnership for Public Service's *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government*[®] rankings to improve employee satisfaction, the ability to achieve results becomes more critical than ever. But improving agency performance requires more than a good action plan. Even the most well-intentioned plans could fall flat if managers and staff fundamentally disagree on the core problems.

Managers play an important role in an organization; they implement policies from senior leadership and also carry concerns up the chain from staff to decision-makers. If managers and staff don't see eye-to-eye on the key issues, then managers may be unable or unwilling to properly acknowledge and share staff concerns to leadership. Executives may be left unaware of what's happening on the front lines, issuing policies that risk failure because they aren't fully informed. Executives may also miss opportunities to improve the workplace, if they aren't aware of challenges facing their staff.

As important as it is for staff and managers to be aligned, it's not unusual to find that managers and staff report different levels of satisfaction. Managers tend to report higher levels of satisfaction, because they typically have more status, earn more money and exercise more autonomy in their daily roles. But if staff and manager opinions at a particular agency are more divergent than what is normal across government, it may signal trouble ahead for future mission goals and desired reforms.

In 2010, Partnership for Public Service launched a new measure, the **Staff/Manager Alignment Score**, to help agency leaders determine whether their efforts to improve agency performance are at risk, and where to focus efforts to reduce this risk. The score capitalizes on a unique advantage of the federal government over the private sector: readily available benchmarks for comparison across the federal government. Better still, the analysis uses public data hiding in plain sight to supplement agency action planning. An agency's score¹ can be found at the bottom of its score profile page at bestplacestowork.org

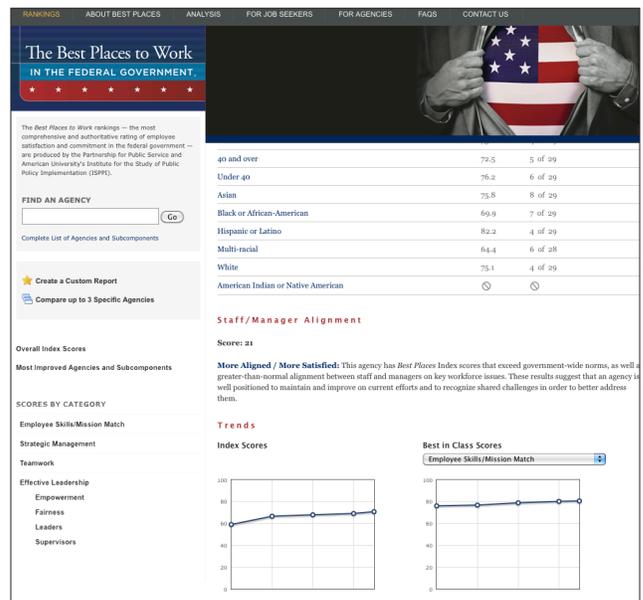
¹ Like the *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government*[®] rankings, the Staff/Manager Alignment Score is calculated using data from the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS), administered annually by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM).

This guide offers ideas on how agencies can start closing the gaps between managers and staff, as well as tips on how to use the Staff/Manager Alignment Score to supplement and refine efforts to improve the workplace.

WHAT IS THE STAFF/MANAGER ALIGNMENT SCORE?

The Staff/Manager Alignment Score helps decision-makers and action planners at a particular agency to determine whether staff and manager views wildly diverge compared to other agencies across government, or whether the workforce agrees on the agency's strengths and challenges. A closer examination of the gaps between staff and manager views on each of the questions that comprise the score can help decision-makers and action planners to identify and address potential hot-button issues for the workforce.

To begin, visit bestplacestowork.org to find your agency's ranking. Then scroll to find the Staff/Manager Alignment Scores on agency and subcomponent profile pages.



HOW WE CALCULATE THE SCORE

The Staff/Manager alignment score is a composite measure of alignment between staff and managers for an agency or subcomponent on the 50 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey questions used in the *Best Places to Work* analysis. For each question, we quantify the perception gap between managers and staff by calculating the absolute value of the difference between positive responses from managers and positive responses from staff.

Then, we set boundaries at the 25th and 75th percentiles, and use these boundaries to add or subtract points from the agency's score:

- Gaps that fall **between the 25th and 75th percentiles** are considered normal or average for government, and we **add 0 points** to the agency's score each time this happens.
- Gaps **below the 25th percentile** are positive because they suggest that managers and staff are more aligned than normal on that question, and we **add 1 point** to the agency's score each time this happens.
- Perception gaps **above the 75th percentile** are negative because they suggest that managers and staff do not see eye to eye on that question, and we **subtract 1 point** from the agency's score each time this happens.

The Staff/Manager Alignment Score ranges from -50 to 50. See the Appendix at the end of this guide for a step-by-step tutorial on calculating the score.

USE THE STAFF/MANAGER ALIGNMENT SCORE TO GUIDE IMPROVEMENT

STEP 1

ASSESS THE AGENCY'S POSITION FOR CHANGE, AND ANTICIPATE NEEDS TO SUPPLEMENT ACTION PLANNING

Staff/Manager Alignment Scores fall into three categories:

- **+1 to +50: Well-positioned for change**
Staff and managers at the agency are better aligned than other agencies across government on a majority of questions. These agencies can leverage this strength during times of change by emphasizing unity and cohesion in agency-wide communications.
- **0: Average position for change**
This score could have two interpretations. Staff and managers may be better aligned than other agencies across government on half of the questions, but worse aligned than other agencies across government on the other half of the questions. Or, staff and managers may have average alignment on all questions.
- **-50 to -1: At risk**
Staff and managers at the agency are not well aligned compared with other agencies across government on a majority of questions. These agencies should prepare for additional steps to improve communication and consider additional measures to gain buy-in from staff for policy changes.

STEP 2

IDENTIFY TARGET AREAS TO IMPROVE ALIGNMENT

Look at the alignment data for each question to figure out which areas need more attention. This data may be obtained in one of two ways:

- **Calculate the gaps from scratch**
The Partnership can provide agencies with the normal ranges for each question, so that agency data analysts can use raw survey data to calculate the gaps between managers and staff on each question.

- **Request a full Staff/Manager Alignment data set from the Partnership for Public Service**

As part of the *Best Places to Work* Agency Services program, the Partnership can calculate a full set of question-level alignment data for participating agencies.²

Focus on the questions that have bigger-than-average perception gaps. Are any of the questions related? Do certain themes emerge?

STEP 3

HOLD FOCUS GROUPS TO DISCOVER ROOT CAUSES BEHIND THE GAPS

The executive champion should organize separate focus groups for senior leaders, managers and staff. Sessions should be moderated by a neutral third party (ideally from outside the agency) so that employees feel they can safely and anonymously share their opinions, experiences and concerns. Executives can compare the focus group results to inform the action plan to close the gaps between managers and staff and improve alignment.

STEP 4

INCORPORATE MEASURES TO IMPROVE ALIGNMENT INTO THE ACTION PLAN

Once target areas have been identified, think about specific actions to address those challenges. Possible recommendations for this sample agency could include:

- The *agency head* publicly recognizes exceptional achievements from all business units in periodic agency-wide communications
- *Senior executives* provide additional training for managers on delivering effective performance appraisals
- The *training office* and *union representatives* partner to identify training needs, and provide and publicize additional training opportunities for staff

² These lists are available for 40 federal agencies and 158 subcomponents. Email us at agencyervices@ourpublicservice.org for more information.

- *Supervisors* organize independent sessions with guest speakers from outside the agency and other business units for another learning opportunity

STEP 5

MEASURE PROGRESS AND IMPACT OVER TIME

The *executive champion* for the action planning initiative should ensure that the action plan contains specific metrics for improvement. Progress and impact can be measured quantitatively and qualitatively.

In the short term, pulse surveys and informal conversations with staff will give leaders and managers an immediate sense of what's working and what's not.

In the long term, formal measures will help leaders track policy effectiveness over time.

These measures could include:

- The annual *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government* rankings
- Customer service assessments
- Manager and executive performance reviews
- Budget reviews for business units and specific projects
- Other agency performance metrics

Bringing staff and managers closer together in their understanding of the issues can be a powerful launching point to improve agency performance. The alignment score can be a valuable tool to help agencies achieve even greater results.

WHAT CAN LEADERS DO?

Leaders and managers all play a critical role in improving employee satisfaction for better organizational performance. *Agency heads* create the agency vision and define strategic priorities. *Senior executives* realize the vision by creating and implementing agency-wide policies. *Supervisors* operationalize the vision by managing employees and activities at the front lines. *Union representatives* advocate for the interests of employees. Here are two common challenges that many agencies face, with ideas to help key stakeholders start closing the gaps between managers and staff, and improve the workplace.

COMMON CHALLENGE 1 MAINTAINING EMPLOYEE MORALE

Our research shows that effective leadership is the number one key driver of employee satisfaction and commitment in the federal government. It is crucial for employees to observe firm support for change and clear alignment among leaders and managers for change efforts. If leaders promise improvements, but fail to take steps to deliver on that promise, then employees may be less willing to go the extra mile in their day-to-day roles.

IDEAS FOR AGENCY HEADS

- *Publicly recognize exceptional achievements from all corners of the agency in agency-wide announcements.* If employees don't feel that their job is important, they may be less inclined to expend the extra discretionary effort to do a better job. By recognizing achievements from all departments, employees will develop a better understanding of their colleagues' work, as well as how their own roles connect to the agency's mission.
- *Announce agency plans to use employee data.* Clearly state when and how employee feedback will be used to improve the workplace environment. In addition to an all-staff email, intranet announcement or news release (as appropriate), the agency head should consider hosting several in-person forums to answer questions from staff.
- *Designate an executive champion to support the employee satisfaction improvement initiative.* The executive champion will help to hold other executives accountable for supporting the initiative,

and facilitate buy-in and communication among other key decision makers. The appointment of an executive champion will also demonstrate to staff members that employee satisfaction is a major priority and recognize that the agency is taking steps to improve the workplace environment.

- *Hold a leadership team retreat.* Debrief the senior leadership team on employee survey results to drive greater sensitivity about the long-term problems that have been impeding organizational effectiveness. Leaders can take the opportunity to define their own next steps with regards to improving satisfaction.

IDEAS FOR SENIOR EXECUTIVES

- *Display and articulate ownership of agency priorities.* If staff members do not observe alignment among top leadership, then morale may decline along with staff confidence in agency-wide policy decisions. Senior executives should clearly emphasize how policy changes relate to the agency mission and strategic priorities in both written and verbal communications.
- *Conduct original assessments of organizational issues.* Executives should meet with their colleagues from across the organization, a sampling of other peers from other offices, each employee (when possible) and union representatives to identify frustrations, operational problems, morale issues and perceptions of productivity. Executives should also interview the agency ombudsman and the Office of Equal Opportunity to collect data on trends that have surfaced in grievances, arbitrations and employee concerns.
- *Build a mentoring/coaching program for new executives.* Assign executives who have joined the agency in the last 1-3 years to a mentor drawn from the most seasoned and respected executive alumni. The agency can also hire coaches with experience in organizational development in the public or private sectors.
- *Hold an executive boot camp.* The off-site can equip leaders with a common set of interpersonal and management tools. It can be facilitated by the mentors and cover common challenge areas. The leadership team can also establish stan-

dards for performance management and identify key indicators of success. The “boot camp” can also be used as a training and education tool on managing union relationships.

- *Create an action plan to improve the workplace, led by the executive champion.*

Agencies across government have successfully included staff, managers, leaders and union representatives in the action planning process through focus groups, trainings and workshops to solicit ideas and garner buy-in. Work with the agency’s OPM liaison (usually from within the Offices of Human Resources or Human Capital) to gain access to survey data at the regional, departmental or office level, if it exists.

- *Benchmark successful organizations.*
Invite leaders from other agencies and private-sector businesses to discuss what measures have worked in improving employee satisfaction and performance. This is a creative way to get the attention of leaders and managers and also exposes the agency to new ideas.

IDEAS FOR SUPERVISORS

- *Emphasize teamwork and group performance.*
Setting up cross-functional teams to address complex and inter-organizational or cross-functional problems/challenges can expand organizational loyalty and improve communication and relationships. Group awards encourage and recognize teamwork.
- *Collaborate with employees to set performance goals and expectations.*
Managers and employees should work together to set performance goals at both the individual and team levels, and ensure that employee goals align with managerial goals. This cascading management framework helps to align expectations and drive shared results.

IDEAS FOR UNION REPRESENTATIVES

- *Become knowledgeable about employee survey data.*
The *Best Places to Work* rankings and Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey results provide valuable insight into the aggregate views of staff members. Any agency employee can visit bestplacestowork.org to view agency data and gain access to additional reports.
- *Pursue opportunities to partner with executives and managers to improve the workplace environment.*
Approach the executive champion in charge of action planning and ask for union representatives to participate in the process.

COMMON CHALLENGE 2 **IMPROVING COMMUNICATION** **AND TRANSPARENCY**

Too often, managers assume that employees know or understand things that they don’t. Sometimes managers worry about upsetting employees or causing confusion with too much information. This approach can create a communication vacuum rife with uncertainty, anxiety and distrust among employees.

Improving two-way communication will not only help employees get the information they need, they will also have the opportunity to respond and contribute relevant information to the conversation.

IDEAS FOR AGENCY HEADS

- *Create an anonymous, electronic safe space for communication.*
A moderated forum on the agency intranet, such as a “Tell it to the Director” site, allows employees to honestly and openly raise concerns without fear of attribution (or retribution).
- *Host quarterly brown bag lunches.*
Consider inviting staff, on a first-come, first-serve basis, to have lunch in a conference room for an informal discussion about the agency. Encourage other senior leaders to host similar brown bags to share their experiences and address questions.

IDEAS FOR SENIOR EXECUTIVES

- *Engage employees in the action planning process.*
Agency leaders can hold employee focus groups to solicit ideas, or even form volunteer action planning teams to review the data and offer suggestions for improvement. This approach will allow employees to provide additional feedback and perspective to survey data. Executives can also initiate a labor-management working group specifically focused on improving employee satisfaction.
- *Establish an ombudsman.*
The ombudsman will receive concerns from anyone in the agency and facilitate action, whether it means helping employees mediate their own resolutions, carry the information directly to the decision-makers or referring the complainant to a more formal process (e.g., EEO). The ombudsman can also share employee concerns with the Executive Champion who is leading the employee satisfaction initiative.
- *Debrief managers after senior leadership meetings.*
These debriefings can be fairly frequent, even weekly. Then, have managers share information with

subordinates and collect suggestions to be carried up the chain. Occasional all-staff meetings help to ensure that messages don't get lost in translation.

- *Monitor human capital challenges across the agency to identify model practices and need areas.*
One method could be to establish a committee of Baldrige examiners and experts in safety and health, regulations and human capital. The committee could periodically visit and benchmark different agency offices/site locations and meet with stakeholders including leaders, employees, contractor officials and labor unions to profile leadership systems, morale, the state of regulatory relationships, safety and health performance and communication systems.
- *Create an intranet blog.*
Similar to the "Tell it to the Director" site on the agency intranet mentioned above, staff members can update their own blog to share information and discuss issues.

IDEAS FOR SUPERVISORS

- *Have frequent huddles with staff instead of lengthy, infrequent debriefings.*
Frequent conversations on agency updates and challenges can help employees understand how their roles connect to agency priorities, and provide opportunities to share relevant information. This technique can help information move more quickly and strengthen teams.
- *Manage by walking around.*
Most people rely heavily on e-mail as their primary means of communication, but a physical walk around the floor is an easy way to get to know employees, gain insight into their concerns, answer questions to reduce confusion, enhance buy-in for decisions and improve collaboration. This type of outreach helps break down communication barriers and promotes an atmosphere of trust and community.
- *Share employee concerns with executives.*
Executives may not have the same opportunities to gain insight into the daily challenges that employees and managers face, but managers are uniquely positioned to receive and share important information on what's happening at the front lines. Sharing new employee information with executives regularly (e.g., at the end of every manager debriefing) is a critical part of putting the entire agency onto the same page.

IDEAS FOR UNION REPRESENTATIVES

- *Initiate a labor-management working group specifically designed to improve the workplace environment.*
This partnership can help facilitate information-sharing and improve buy-in for change, as labor and management co-create, co-own and co-present solutions to improve the agency workplace environment.
- *Use the full range of employee data to build the business case for change.*
Certain workplace changes may be necessary at a given agency. Employee feedback from surveys, focus groups and the other channels described above can help the process of aligning strategic concerns from management with the daily front-line concerns from employees.

LEARN MORE

The Partnership's new measure, the **Staff/Manager Alignment Score**, provides an intermediate metric to guide agency improvements.

The Partnership for Public Service provides detailed data analysis, strategic advice and facilitated action planning support to agencies seeking to improve satisfaction. Send an email to agencyservices@ourpublicservice.org for more information on our available resources.

- Staff/Manager Alignment Data Sets for agencies and subcomponents
- A briefing on *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government*
- Action planning advice and support

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APPENDIX HOW WE CALCULATE THE ALIGNMENT SCORE

Step 1 – Determining the Staff/Manager Gap

For this sample agency, 71 percent of managers (employees with supervisory responsibility) responded positively to Question 40, while only 50 percent of staff (employees without supervisory responsibility) responded positively. This agency has a difference, or gap, of 21 percentage points. But is this gap normal?

Workplace category	2010 federal employee viewpoint survey question	Manager % positive responses	Staff % positive responses	Staff/manager gap	Normal range (25th-75th percentile)	Alignment score points
BPTW index	Question 40: I recommend my organization as a good place to work	71	50	21	?	?

Step 2 – Comparing the Gap to the Normal Range

When we line up all gaps for all participating agencies on this question, we find that the normal range is between 7.7 percentage points and 16.0 percentage points. A 21 percentage point gap is greater than the 75th percentile boundary, so we consider it to be significantly *large*.

Workplace category	2010 federal employee viewpoint survey question	Manager % positive responses	Staff % positive responses	Staff/manager gap	Normal range (25th-75th Percentile)	Alignment score points
BPTW index	Question 40: I recommend my organization as a good place to work	71	50	21	7.7 to 16.0	?

Step 3 – Assigning Alignment Score Points

Since the sample agency’s gap on Question 40 falls outside the normal range and is significantly *large*, we subtract one point from its overall alignment score because it means that staff and managers are less aligned than normal on that question. The gap and points are highlighted in red to signal a problem.

Workplace category	2010 federal employee viewpoint survey question	Manager % positive responses	Staff % positive responses	Staff/manager gap	Normal range (25th-75th percentile)	Alignment score points
BPTW index	Question 40: I recommend my organization as a good place to work	71	50	21	7.7 to 16.0	-1

Step 4 – Calculating the Overall Alignment Score

We continue this analysis for all 50 questions that are part of the *Best Places to Work* rankings. The table above shows that gaps falling within the normal range add 0 points to the overall alignment score, while gaps that are significantly *small* add 1 point to the overall alignment score and are highlighted in green to signal strength.

Since we look at 50 questions, an agency’s alignment score can range from -50 to +50.

Workplace category	2010 federal employee viewpoint survey question	Manager % positive responses	Staff % positive responses	Staff/manager gap	Normal range (25th-75th percentile)	Alignment score points
BPTW index	Question 40: I recommend my organization as a good place to work	71	50	21	7.7 to 16.0	-1
BPTW index	Question 69: Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job?	75	67	8	7.0 to 12.7	0
BPTW index	Question 71: Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your organization?	74	70	4	7.5 to 13.0	+1
Sample Agency Alignment Score						0



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1100 New York Avenue NW
Suite 1090 EAST
Washington DC 20005

202 775 9111
ourpublicservice.org



IBM Center for
The Business of Government

600 14th Street NW
Second Floor
Washington DC 20005

202 551 9342
businessofgovernment.org