

Positive Public Service
Turning Purpose Into Progress by Changing How Government Works From the Inside

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Master of Applied Positive Psychology

Advisor: Barry Schwartz, PhD.

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Abstract

Positive psychology research has shown that fostering well-being in the workplace is connected to healthier and more engaged employees as well as improved organizational performance. But government has largely taken a backseat as a subject of study in this field. Over 22 million people are employed in the public sector in the United States alone, warranting closer attention. To that end, in this paper I review relevant positive psychology literature, examine some of the unique attributes of public sector work, discuss an analysis of survey data representing over 600,000 state, local, and federal employees, and present a qualitative study of public servants' best experiences. I use this information to present strategies to cultivate more fulfilling and impactful work in the public sector. I suggest that instead of focusing on making bureaucracy less bad, we should focus on making good government even better. The field of positive psychology has demonstrated that people's lives can be full of positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishment, and the same should be expected of government work.

Dedication

For my niece and nephew, who have redefined both meaning and meaningfulness.

Acknowledgments

In following two of my favorite sources of information - the latest management research and Oprah - I was unsuspectingly led to the field of positive psychology. This area of science confirmed what I had intuitively thought might be true – that people can and should strive to optimize their experiences both in their personal and professional lives. Research has shown that we have a remarkable amount of control over this, and the benefits, including better health, more fulfilling relationships, and engaging work, make it a worthwhile pursuit. The field particularly resonated with me as it applied to the latter of these domains – engaging work. The first two came more naturally, thanks to my wonderful family and friends. But in my work a positive approach was at times met with resistance by those who preferred to lead by intimidation or worse - micromanagement. I've been lucky, however, to have many wonderful role models who have shown me a better way, including John DiRenzo, Mel Paret, Mike Walsh, Patricia Lancaster, Marilyn King-Festa, Fatma Amer, Phyllis Arnold, Carole Post, Elizabeth Squadron, and Shari Hyman. And so as I read more about the field of positive organizational scholarship in particular, the more I wanted to learn.

Enter the Master of Applied Positive Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. This program invigorated me and enlightened me, and fired up my motivation to better understand how this valuable research can be applied to my professional field in particular – the public sector. I want to thank Martin Seligman for paving the way, James Pawelski and Leona Brandwene for orchestrating a remarkable program, Angela Duckworth for igniting my passion and perseverance, Karen Reivich for an invaluable education, Claire Robertson-Kraft, Reb Rebele, Gloria Park, Elizabeth Linos, and the MAPP Assistant Instructors for their support. Special thanks to Judy Saltzberg Levick and Meredith Myers. Judy was an encouraging guiding

force throughout my capstone work and Meredith's class on positive organizations was illuminating and inspiring, due in part to her line up of rock stars who captivated me in each lecture: David Cooperrider, Amy Wrzesniewski, Jane Dutton, Adam Grant, and Tom Rath. Thank you to Bill Heinzen, Anthony Crowell, Jean Brewer, and Charles McFaul for their valuable perspectives on government, and to all of my current and former colleagues who personify good government. And thank you to all of the public servants who were willing to share their best work experiences for this paper and taught me some invaluable lessons that I hope others will benefit from. Most of all, my enormous gratitude goes to Barry Schwartz, whose important research and perspectives on work and practical wisdom have reshaped how I think, manage, and try to serve the public every day.

Introduction

I've worked in the public sector for over twenty years both as a consultant and government employee, and have seen government at its best. But I've also seen many challenges that stifle committed public servants even when they are doing some good in the world. I believe a lot of frustration stems from their perception that they are not maximizing their potential, hindering government's effectiveness as a result. When people who want to make a difference are not fully utilizing their skills and talents, it can have a debilitating effect. And bureaucracies are fertile ground for that. I know it first-hand. The question is, what is holding them back? There is a lot of insight that can be gleaned from research on the experiences of public servants. The information points to a variety of opportunities to help government tackle public sector challenges by enabling more fulfilling work for the employees who have been called upon to address them.

A look at data from a survey of federal workers indicates the challenge before us. Ninety percent of respondents agreed that the work they do is important (United States Office of Personnel Management, 2016a). That should be a strong reflection of how people feel about what they do. But a much lower percentage of those employees - 66 percent - are satisfied with their job (United States Office of Personnel Management, 2016a). What is the reason for that gap? It is more pronounced when you take into account data on employee engagement in the public sector, which indicates that workers need something more. A Gallup poll found that 71 percent of state and local government employees are not engaged in their jobs, costing potentially \$100 billion (Clifton, 2016). This price seems steep, but isn't such a stretch when you consider that nearly 22 million people are employed in public sector jobs at the federal, state, and local level (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015).

But this paper is less about the waste of money and more about the wasted opportunity. The fundamental structure of a democratic government enables us to pool our resources so that we are in a better position to collectively tackle big problems that matter to citizens. The issues may change but government remains a vital mechanism to deploy shared resources to serve and strengthen our communities. And whether government is “small” or “big”, depending on how political winds blow, the people enlisted in its diverse workforce on the front lines are there to help us be more secure, educated, healthy, connected, innovative, and fulfilled. But to do that effectively, those very people need to be engaged in their work. And the people who manage them need to clear a path that helps make it possible.

This paper examines how research from the field of positive psychology and government employee data can be applied to enhance public service. Although this paper is primarily about the institution of American government, a number of the studies quoted contain data from other countries. To the extent it’s relevant, I’ve made efforts to acknowledge that when referenced. The next section of this paper summarizes the field of positive psychology and its implications for the workplace, including the important responsibility of managers. This is followed by a review of distinguishing characteristics about the public sector that should be taken into consideration when applying positive psychology. I then examine data on current levels of government employee satisfaction and engagement, helping to frame the challenge before us. After that, we hear from public servants directly about their best experiences in government and what factors shaped them. Finally, I present some recommendations on how best to foster greater meaning, engagement and productivity in government.

At the end of the day, it’s not about making bureaucracy less bad – it’s about making good government even greater. Too much is at stake not to seize the opportunity to do so, given

recent advancements in research on the workplace. It's not a pipe dream. Many public servants have found invigorating work delivering critical services in ways they didn't think possible. I know that first-hand, too.

Positive Psychology and the Workplace

I've conducted interviews with several public servants about their best experiences working for the government. I'll present more on those interviews later in this paper, but at the outset it's worth framing the idea that meaningful, impactful work in the government exists. For example, one of the people I interviewed described his best experience as follows:

It made me feel like I could have done it for free. Brought me personal fulfillment at a level that I hadn't encountered professionally before. It made me personally optimistic and countered the perception that work is a thing that you do as opposed to being a big part of yourself.

This may run counter to what people may think of government workers, particularly when seeing embattled public servants in the media or looking over the counter at a seemingly complacent clerk at a DMV office. But that doesn't mean that public servants have to settle for less. The field of positive psychology has advanced the view, supported by empirical evidence, that it is possible to have an enriching and productive life - and that includes in the workplace.

Positive Psychology

In introducing the field of positive psychology at the turn of the new millennium, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) presented a framework of study that turned from psychology's historical focus on pathology to instead look at what goes well in people's lives and why. So rather than the absence of the negative, it focuses on the presence of the preferred (Pawelski, 2016). Contemplating what contributes to the good life was not a novel subject, it

dates back as far as Aristotle and his opinion on well-being or, as he called it, “eudaimonia” (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010, p. 280). But this new effort helped bring to the forefront a concentrated, scientific focus on the subject (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2006). In the years since, a growing body of research has developed on what contributes to and results from well-being. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) pointed to three main areas of focus: positive experiences, positive personal characteristics, and positive institutions.

In regards to the first component, positive experiences, Seligman (2011) developed a model for well-being that is comprised of five elements: positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishment, also known as PERMA. The first item, positive emotion, includes happiness and life satisfaction. But rather than the ultimate end goal, these two items are just component parts of well-being (Seligman, 2011). The next element, engagement, is a subjective state identified retrospectively by the sensation of time having stopped and emotions having been suspended during an enjoyable pursuit, producing a state of “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The third element, relationships, speaks to the value of connectedness to other people, while the fourth element, meaning, encapsulates both subjectively and objectively what gives purpose to our lives (Seligman, 2011). And finally, accomplishment speaks to the need for achievement for its own sake (Seligman, 2011).

In examining the second area of focus, personal characteristics, Peterson and Seligman (2004) embarked on an effort to identify and categorize human strengths. They combed through literature and research to identify characteristics that met a range of criteria, including being fulfilling, valued in their own right, not diminishing to others, and applicable across different situations and time. They ultimately identified 24 character strengths such as kindness, gratitude, humor, perseverance, honesty, and compassion (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In subsequent

research, Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson (2005) found that identification and use of an individual's strengths in a new way increased happiness. Other research, as summarized by Niemiec (2013), has also shown that greater cultivation of one's strengths is associated strongly with life satisfaction.

The final component, positive institutions, looks at a bigger picture when it comes to fostering positive experiences and traits (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It considers groups at every level – from the family unit to broader communities, as well as larger constructs such as democracy and education (Seligman, 2002). Prilleltensky (2005) asserts that entities such as these are interlinked with individual well-being and thus must integrate strength development with prevention strategies, greater empowerment, and community building. And though efforts within the field of psychology have focused largely around the individual, a growing body of research has emerged with respect to organizations.

Positive Organizational Scholarship

Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) examines how organizations can unlock the potential of their employees so that they have more fulfilling experiences, collaborate more effectively together, and help their organizations thrive (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). It does not dismiss the importance of profitability or competition but instead places greater emphasis on constructs such as meaning, connections, positive emotion, and resilience, and focuses on organizations' creation of abundance and well-being (Cameron et al., 2003).

Kelloway and Day (2005a) identified six elements of workplaces that influence well-being:

- Safety of work environment
- Work-life balance
- Culture of support, respect & fairness

- Employee involvement and development
- Work content and characteristics
- Interpersonal relationships at work

Organizations must thus consider both the physical and psychosocial environment, as well as employee health (Day & Randell, 2014).

POS points to a number of approaches to creating and bolstering these elements. The most foundational of them is establishing high-quality connections (HQCs) between people, fueled by mutual respect, trust, and active engagement (Dutton, 2003). Threaded through much of the research is the importance of positivity, which helps people see greater opportunities, triggers growth, and better enables them to navigate challenges (Fredrickson, 2009). Job crafting entails strategies to change people's connections to others, their perspective towards the value of their work, or the actual tasks they are performing to foster a greater sense of purpose (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Placing greater attention and importance on giving in an organization's culture promotes greater information sharing, empowerment and collaboration among the workforce (Grant, 2013). Appreciative Inquiry builds on all of these by including a wide range of stakeholders at all ranks of an organization, focused on unearthing what's best about an organization and what is possible in order to drive transformation (Stavros, Godwin, & Cooperrider, 2016).

Benefits

The benefits of fostering well-being in the workplace are broad. Kelloway and Day (2005b) identify three outcomes: individual, organizational, and societal. In their model, individual outcomes include psychological, physical and behavioral benefits. Organizational outcomes include retention, productivity, reputation, customer satisfaction, and financial

benefits. And societal outcomes, they argue, enhance communities and government programs.

Cooper and Bevan (2014) point to research supporting a range of benefits derived from workplace health and well-being that include:

- Reduced sickness absence from work
- Reduced accidents at work
- Improved employee retention
- Higher employee engagement and commitment
- High labor productivity
- Enhanced employer brand
- Greater employee resilience

Tenney, Poole, and Diener (2016) similarly identify relationships between subjective well-being and lower absenteeism, stronger motivation, creativity, and lower turnover, all of which are positively correlated with performance. Diener and Seligman (2004), also point to research that shows employee well-being relates to better performance, customer satisfaction, and financial outcomes. A meta-analysis determined that life satisfaction was positively correlated with work-related variables such as job performance and commitment (Erdogan, Bauer, Truxillo, & Mansfield, 2012). And, more broadly, well-being has been found to contribute to health and longevity (Diener & Chan, 2011).

These outcomes help thwart “presenteeism” (Cooper & Bevan, 2014, p. 38) and “resigned satisfaction” (Giauque, Ritz, Varone, & Anderfuhren-Biget, 2012, p. 175), in which employees don’t perform up to their potential, nor aspire to do so. This conjures up thoughts of the stereotypical bureaucrat. By addressing this challenge, POS helps organizations recognize that there can be – and should be - more to an employee’s work than showing up and punching

the clock. And Luthans (2002) contends that capabilities and states that contribute to harnessing this potential can be cultivated through training, self-development, and better management.

One of the best examples of the integration of positive psychology principles and government is reflected in the City of Cleveland's development of a strategic sustainability plan. In 2009, faced with economic decline, Mayor Frank Jackson established an ambitious vision to transform the city (Cooperrider, 2012). Leveraging appreciative inquiry, the mayor convened over 700 stakeholders to help identify the municipality's strengths and build on them to create a ten year plan of initiatives to improve the economy and make the city greener (Cooperrider, 2012). The plan kick started government, redirecting the city's focus. Its mission "to design and develop a thriving and resilient Cleveland that leverages its wealth of assets to build economic, social and environmental well-being for all" continues to this day and is having a positive impact (Sustainable Cleveland, n.d.).

The Manager's Role

Managers at all levels have an important responsibility to provide support, guidance, and inspiration. Rath and Harter (2010) advocate for managers to step up in creating workplace environments that foster well-being. Not doing so, they argue, can come at a great cost - hindering an organization's ability to grow and diminishing respect that employees feel for their managers. As such, it is important for managers to care about their employees - and that caring should extend beyond the workplace, valuing them as people not just workers. Their research found that employees who feel that their boss cares about them as a person are also more likely to be top performers, do better work, and are less likely to leave their job (Rath & Harter, 2010). Further research has shown that employees who feel ignored by their boss have a forty percent chance of being actively disengaged, while those who feel that they have a manager who is

paying attention to them have only a one percent chance of being disengaged (Rath & Harter, 2010).

But addressing this means facing an entrenched culture of work that hinders employee engagement, meaning, and thus well-being. Schwartz (2015) points to decades of misperceptions of what motivates workers that need to be overcome, and which have resulted in the removal of discretion from people's jobs, restricting them from being able to engage in meaningful work. And though some employees have figured out on their own how to cultivate a greater sense of meaning in what they do (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), they are often thwarted by managers who are preoccupied with budget, reputation, and maintaining their own sense of control. But Schwartz (2015) argues that we can confront the ideologies that have held people back and instead create workplaces where people can do work that they value.

There are few places where finding such value in one's work is of more consequence than the public sector. If government workers like what they do and perform well, they can make a difference in the lives of countless people. For example, communities that foster well-being provide beneficial services such as affordable housing, clean air, accessible transportation, and high-quality healthcare and education (Prilleltensky, 2005). Such an impact, coupled with recognition, can lead public servants to the important realization that what they do matters (Prilleltensky, 2014). And because it is possible, it's worth heeding the positive psychology research that helps inform both why and how to pursue it. But doing so requires addressing some challenges that are unique to the public sector.

Public Sector Differences

Research on improving workers' experiences seldom, if ever, mentions whether the same strategies can uniformly work for both public and private workforces. As a result, conditions that are specific to the public sector are not acknowledged for the potential impact they may have. But there certainly are some differences worth looking into. President Obama spoke to this recently when distinguishing government from the tech industry (Hiltzik, 2016). He said:

Government will never run the way Silicon Valley runs because, by definition, democracy is messy... This is a big, diverse country with a lot of interests and a lot of disparate points of view. And part of government's job, by the way, is dealing with problems that nobody else wants to deal with... government has to care for, for example, veterans who come home. That's not on your balance sheet, that's on our collective balance sheet, because we have a sacred duty to take care of those veterans. And that's hard and it's messy, and we're building up legacy systems that we can't just blow up. (para. 3)

President Obama's view helps illustrate that at least some of the differences in government, as bureaucratic as they might be, exist by necessity, many of which I have had personal experience navigating in my career. We'll review some of those characteristics in this section, along with some data that helps determine how significant they might (or might not) be.

Control Issues

Government organizations aren't independently run entities. Unlike the uber successful online eyeglass retailer, Warby Parker, which was started by four friends who wanted to transform the eyewear industry, public agencies aren't conceived in a computer lab by ambitious MBA buddies who develop an idea, secure investor funding and run with it (Chafkin, 2015). And

that's not to diminish the company's accomplishments, having revolutionized an industry and achieved over \$100 million in annual revenue within five years of its inception (Chafkin, 2015). But the force that drives Warby Parker and companies like it are different than the powers that establish and oversee public sector entities. Along these lines, Bower (1977) identified four overarching characteristics of public management forty years ago that are still relevant today, largely dealing with matters of control:

- Having goals imposed on agencies by external groups
- Being responsible for the operation of systems established by other entities
- Working with people over whom managers do not have control
- Dealing with shorter timeframes to implement changes

The first two points speak to the influence of the electorate, politicians and special interest groups in driving change. Often government programs stem from legislation, much like the agencies charged with overseeing them. Staff of public entities are stewards of mandates enshrined in enabling statutes and regulations set by city councils, state legislatures or, at the federal level, Congress. Challenges in the execution of policy goals can be a result of shortcomings in the design of policies and regulations shaped by those outside parties (Eggers & O'Leary, 2009). A survey of government executives found that only 16 percent of senior managers in government believe that legislation effectively establishes programs that can really work (Green, 2009). Regarding lack of control over certain parties, Bower (1977) speaks to the variety of special interest groups as well as the press who often must be dealt with in order to conduct operations. And he points to election cycles as the reason public officials need to make haste in order to demonstrate satisfactory progress to these various stakeholders.

Many times I, along with my colleagues have awaited legislation with trepidation that new requirements would be imposed on our organization for implementation without sufficient consideration of resources, timing, or even reality. The best we can hope for is a seat at the table to provide input. Sometimes the expertise is welcome, other times operational pragmatism is looked upon by others as a real drag. One example comes to mind from when I was helping with the development of a law requiring buildings to accommodate people's bikes when they peddled to work - a well-intentioned and seemingly innocuous policy goal. Some City Council members and political appointees would have very much liked not to have had to consider the actual challenges. For example, what if a building has no storage capacity? Or no freight elevator? How should people handle egress in an emergency should there be an evacuation due to fire and bikes were parked in the hallway? And what violations should be issued if a building refused access? Not the most intriguing of issues but necessary to implement thoughtfully. And the urgency to announce such an initiative added pressure to sort out the details quickly or handle them after the fact, neither ideal.

More Potential Differences

Beyond issues of control, there are other elements to consider when it comes to what sets government apart from the private sector. Lavigna (2014) identifies nine additional factors that he contends set government apart:

- Negative public attitudes towards government
- Public exposure
- Regular turnover of political leadership
- Progress that is difficult to determine
- An aging workforce

- Civil-service employee protections
- Strong union influence
- Limited financial incentives
- Workers driven to make a difference

Let's dive a little more deeply into each of these, starting with the last factor - workers who want to make a difference. Many people who join the government are prosocially motivated, meaning that they want to be in a position to help others (Bolino & Grant, 2016). I'm one such person. As noble as that may sound, however, such an inclination does not always equate with a meaningful experience. In fact, it can set one up for frustration. Highlighting this point, research has shown that perceiving a calling can be detrimental to one's well-being if the call goes unanswered, stemming from stress, regret or disappointment (Duffy, Douglass, Autin, England, & Dik, 2016). This makes me recall the time I was eager to help with the repair effort for homes destroyed by hurricane Sandy, only to learn that a litany of different city, state, and federal requirements and priorities stood in the way of being able to take action. Despite my desire to help, the initial delay due to bureaucratic requirements and competing policy directives was exasperating.

But even when government is making progress, it does not always satiate public servants' desire to help. That can be attributable to the sluggish pace of change, making it difficult to sense accomplishment. Though not futile, government efforts can take time – often by necessity. And it creates a tension with the potential simultaneous need to quickly demonstrate progress, as mentioned earlier. Solving the affordable housing crisis or combatting climate change, for example, isn't a quick fix. And some efforts may not have an immediate, tangible impact. For example, early in my career I worked on an economic development study that helped make the

case for expanding the Metrorail public transit system further into Northern Virginia. Lawmakers were pleased with the case that the team I was on had helped build, but it would be another 22 years (!) before the new line was completed and I would get to ride on it. Bolino and Grant (2106, p. 50) aptly characterize this, saying that "the costs of prosocial behaviors tend to emerge quickly, whereas the benefits are more delayed."

As for public exposure, when government employees are in the trenches, actively doing their work, the emotional requirements of dealing with scrutiny from a critical public can take a toll. Consider the traffic cop who has to bear the shouts of an unhappy driver who received a ticket, the clerk at a licensing window dealing with an impatient customer who would rather not fill out a form, or the public affairs official who must listen to constituent complaints at a community board meeting. Even when concerns are legitimate, they are not always conveyed constructively. And then there are those times when comments are neither legitimate nor constructive. I remember when the head of a trade group threatened to throw me out of a window when I explained a new initiative to put an antiquated permit process online. I couldn't respond how I really wanted to, having to remain calm and professional – even cordial. This kind of emotional labor, also known as "false face acting" (Hsieh, Jin, & Guy, 2012, p. 43), has been found to be correlated with burnout (Hsieh et al., 2012). Such difficulty can be exacerbated when serving a public that is generally unhappy with government. One study showed that one in five adults cite dissatisfaction with government as the top issue facing the country (Swift, 2017).

Public servants at their best can soldier on, but rigid regulations create a framework for managing personnel that has limited flexibility, making it nearly impossible to provide rewards to strong performers or take appropriate action with those who aren't cutting it. Regarding the former, unlike in private companies, taxpayer dollars aren't directed towards performance

bonuses or gift certificates, and stock options don't exist (Lavigna, 2014). Meanwhile, civil service requirements can make it difficult to provide timely promotions and raises based on performance rather than longevity (Thompson, 2010). And though poor performers may be challenging to remove, this limitation stems from well-intentioned regulations created to protect civil servants from politically motivated personnel actions (Bowman & West, 2009).

Such protections are further bolstered by public employee unions, membership of which has held steady in the public sector, standing at 36.8 percent of the workforce - much higher than the dwindling membership in the private sector which is now at 7.7 percent (Kearney, 2010). Unions arguably hinder management discretion and personnel actions, and, through collective bargaining, achieve increases in salaries and benefits that raise across-the-board operating costs, thus redirecting funds from activities that could more specifically target performance improvement strategies (Nicholson-Crotty, Grissom, & Nicholson-Crotty, 2012). But nearly half of U.S. states have right-to-work laws, loosening unions' hold, and the data is mixed as to the actual benefits derived from such laws (Crampton & Hodge, 2014).

Political turnover in government makes it wise to enable some form of protections for civil servants, who with each election cycle are faced with the potential of a shift in leadership and mandates while having to keep basic services going. Such changes embed a certain amount of instability that the private sector does not have to confront - at least not with enforced regularity brought on by term limits and elections. But a study of over 4,000 public sector workers, surveyed from 1991 to 2008, found that the effects of elections on job satisfaction, even when the political parties in power changed, were weak and temporary (Tabvuma, Bui, & Homberg, 2014), which was also found to be true in another study on regime change after the reunification of East and West Germany (Jilke, 2016).

The resilience of public servants in regards to such shifts may be attributable to the remaining difference suggested by Lavigna (2014) with regards to seniority of the public sector workforce when compared to the private sector. He notes that, in 2013, 56.7 percent of federal workers were between the ages of 45 and 64, compared to 42.4 percent in the private sector (Lavigna, 2014). And a comparison of census data from 2000 to 2011 shows an increase in the percentage of state and local government employees over the age of 50 - rising to 47 percent from 37 percent (Eggers & Byler, 2014). Faced with my first election cycle as a city employee, I wondered about the potential impact of a change in administration. One of my colleagues who had worked for the same agency for many years was unphased, assuring me that he had seen a number of administrations come and go and I would as well. Career civil servants have weathered a lot of transitions in their time.

Though all of these traits exist in government, the question remains as to whether they really set public entities apart from those in the private sector in a way that requires special considerations for engaging the public sector workforce. The next section explores this further.

Public and Private Sector Comparisons

The factors mentioned above certainly exist within government. But do they qualify as unique? Going back to Warby Parker as an example, the company does not necessarily lack at least some of these conditions. The eyewear company has a prosocial component - it provides financial support to nonprofit organizations that provide eyeglasses to people in need (Warby Parker, n.d.). It also has a fervent customer service focus (Chafkin, 2015) which benefits from some motivation to help others. And though it does not have legislated mandates driving its business strategy, the company must surely navigate regulatory requirements that govern commercial operations. And in terms of stakeholders, it contends with suppliers, investors, the

media, and discerning customers whose loyalty it must maintain. Yes, I own several pairs of their glasses.

Boyne (2002) analyzed thirty-four studies conducted between 1960 and 1999 of differences between public agencies and private companies to determine which of those differences were significant. He developed thirteen hypotheses among four main themes: environment, goals, structures, and values (Boyne, 2002, p. 103). They are shown in Exhibit 3-1, along with whether he identified studies that addressed the topic (Boyne, 2002).

Exhibit 3-1: Boyne Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Study Data Available?
<i>Environment</i>	
Public managers work in a more complex environment	No
Public organizations are more open to environmental influences	Yes
The environment of public agencies is less stable	No
Public managers face less intense competitive pressures	No
<i>Goals</i>	
Public managers are required to pursue a larger number of goals	No
The goals of public agencies are more vague	No
The goals of public organizations are distinctive	Yes
<i>Structures</i>	
Public organizations are more bureaucratic	Yes
More red tape is present in decision making by public bodies	Yes
Managers in public agencies have less autonomy from superiors	Yes
<i>Values</i>	
Public sector managers are less materialistic	Yes
Motivation to serve the public interest is higher in the public sector	Yes
Public managers have weaker organizational commitment	Yes

Of those thirteen hypotheses, the research he examined addressed eight, as noted in Exhibit 3-1. Boyne (2002), acknowledged the challenge that this paper's section presupposes - that little data is available regarding the true differences between the private and public sectors. He noted that this is particularly evident when it comes to assessment of the impact of external influences (akin to the control issues mentioned earlier in this section), making it difficult to determine if there is in fact a difference. For the studies available on goals, Boyne (2002) determined that little difference was indicated in terms of clarity, and no research was available comparing the substance of goals between the two sectors.

Boyne (2002) did find, however, a significant difference in the amount of bureaucracy present in government as compared to the private sector, which I argue also hinders a sense of control. This was supported by the largest number of studies he reviewed, indicating that government was marked by a larger number of procedures and requirements, greater inflexibility and risk-aversion (Boyne, 2002). He also found supporting evidence, though less strong, for the hypotheses that government organizations have to deal with more red tape in decision making and that public managers have less autonomy. Public sector employees certainly are subject to a voluminous set of regulations governing how they do their jobs. As just one example, I've contended with the steps involved to purchase new goods or services, which are burdensome to say the least. There are 174 pages of rules governing the procurement process in New York City alone (New York City Procurement Policy Board, n.d.). You can't just go to amazon.com. Studies have shown that such red tape has a detrimental effect on public servants, triggering alienation and meaninglessness (DeHart-Davis & Pandey, 2005) and reduces employees' aspirations and expectations (Giauque et. al, 2012).

In regards to values, Boyne (2002) contended that the existing research strongly supported the distinction between what motivates public and private managers. This was most notable in regards to financial incentives, such as salary, which were found to be less of a driver in the public sector. Boyne also found empirical evidence supporting the hypothesis that public managers have significantly lower organizational commitment, defined early in its conception as “the overall strength of an individual’s identification with and involvement in an organization” (Mowday, 1998, p. 389). In terms of prosocial motivation, Boyne (2002) found evidence that public managers were more driven than their private sector counterparts to serve the public.

Buelens and Van den Brock (2007) looked specifically at the issue of motivation more closely to see how it manifests itself in the public and private sectors in Belgium. As with Boyne, they were concerned with testing a number of hypotheses, including (Buelens & Van den Brock, 2007):

- Public sector employees are less motivated by extrinsic monetary rewards
- Public sector employees are more motivated by a supportive working environment
- Public sector employees report fewer working hours and less willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization
- Hierarchical level is at least as important as differences in the sector of employment in explaining motivational differences
- Sector of employment is more important than demographic data such as gender, age, or education explaining motivational differences
- Compared to private sector workers, public sector workers experience less work-family conflict

They surveyed nearly 4,000 workers - approximately 3,300 from the private sector and 400 from the public sector, asking 125 questions related to work. A few findings stand out. In line with Boyne's results, the largest difference they found was that government employees were significantly less motivated by salary - a distinction that was less pronounced for people in higher positions but still significant. Also, government employees worked fewer hours on average and were less unconditionally committed to their work (Buelens & Van den Brock, 2007). But in interpreting the latter findings, Buelens and Van den Brock (2007) were reluctant to consider this a reflection of complacency. Instead they asserted that "public sector employees make positive choices. They do not opt for the rat race...[and are] significantly more motivated by work-family relationships" (Buelens & Van den Brock, 2007, p. 70).

Discussion on Differences

The findings from these studies provide some useful insights but have some obvious limitations. First, the amount of data from studies on the difference between public and private sector employees is scant. Boyne (2002) scoured four decades of research, only to come up with 34 studies, and the studies were largely silent on the potential differences associated with external pressures faced by public managers that limit control. Also, the available research includes a number of countries. Buelens and Van den Brock (2007), for example, focused on Belgium, which may influence the external validity of their conclusions and raises the broader question, not addressed in this paper, on how civil servant experiences differ between cultures and countries, let alone municipalities. Still, when taking into account the research and my own experiences, a few public sector considerations are worth our attention:

- The impact of external influences
- Employees motivated by more than money

- The proliferation of bureaucratic restrictions
- The opportunity to foster greater commitment among employees

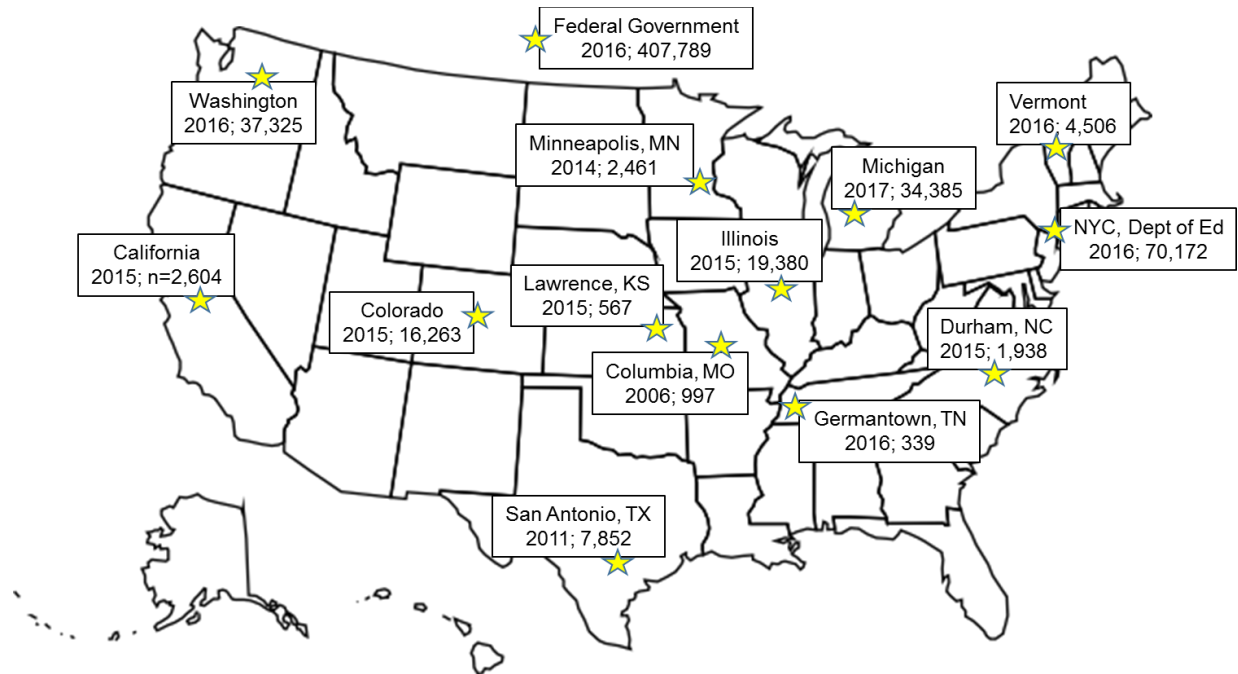
The existence of these factors alone does not necessarily equate to a need that can easily be addressed. But it is imperative to be aware of these conditions in order to understand how to best improve the experiences and impact of the public sector work force. The potential ramifications are substantial when you consider the scale of government. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015), nearly 22 million people work for the government. That includes approximately 2.7 million at the federal level and 19 million at state and local governments. And those public servants hold a wide variety of roles that is unmatched in any private sector organization. A scan through census data (United States Census Bureau, 2015) is a good reminder of the breadth of state and local government full-time roles, including: judicial and legal (394,414 employees), police protection (879,307 employees), solid waste management (98,619 employees), hospitals (858,208), and elementary and secondary education (4,265,938 employees), to name a few.

So, as President Obama noted, government is different. As such, we should not turn a blind eye to the distinctions. The lessons from the private sector and more broadly from POS need to take this into account. What works for Warby Parker may be great, but at the end of the day - even with the prosocial mission that complements its operations - the company is focused on making two things: money and eyeglasses. Governments have more on their plate. The question is, how are the employees dealing with it and what can we learn from them? Some recent survey data from a variety of government entities provides some more illumination, which we will discuss in the next two sections.

Public Servant Job Satisfaction and Engagement

In recent years, several jurisdictions in the United States have conducted employee surveys to assess opinions regarding a number of work elements. Fourteen surveys were reviewed as part of this analysis, as noted in Exhibit 4-1.

Exhibit 4-1: Public Employee Surveys and Number of Respondents



The largest of the surveys is the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) 2016 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, completed by over 400,000 federal employees (United States Office of Personnel Management, 2016a). OPM weighted the results to accurately reflect the larger federal employee population. The respondents included both full-time and part-time staff, representing 80 different agencies of all sizes. The survey included 84 questions on a range of topics regarding employee perceptions of their work in the following six categories:

- My Work Experience
- My Agency
- My Supervisor
- Leadership
- My Satisfaction
- Work/Life Programs

The state and local jurisdictions issued questionnaires similar in format and content to the Viewpoint survey, though questions were not identical. In addition to the themes above, which were common throughout all of the surveys, Colorado, Illinois and Washington also asked questions pertaining to customer service and customer interactions (State of Colorado, 2015; State of Illinois, 2015; Washington State, 2017). Unlike the Viewpoint survey, the state and local government questionnaires were mostly issued to all employees, rather than a sample. California used a small employee sample population, and had a shorter survey than the others, which was comprised of ten questions (Government Operations Agency and CalHR, 2015). Summary reports for all are available online, and the Federal Viewpoint survey made its data set publicly available for further analysis (United States Office of Personnel Management, 2016b).

Though the surveys might not have included every question that a budding student of positive psychology would like to ask, the results help illuminate the perceptions of over 600,000 government employees at the local, state and federal level in different regions throughout the United States. It also indicates what the various government leaders think matters, based on what they have decided to measure and report. In this section I'll review some of the key data from these surveys, along with some additional research on job satisfaction and engagement. This helps further flesh out target areas for increasing the fulfilling and impactful nature of jobs in the public sector.

The Upsides and Downsides to Public Sector Employment

In the Federal Employee Viewpoint survey, 90 percent of respondents agreed that the work they do is important, 83 percent said they like the kind of work they do, and 83 percent also said they know how their work relates to their agency's goals (United States Office of Personnel Management, 2016a). In addition, employees surveyed largely felt that they are held

accountable, think highly of the work done by their unit, and are respected by their boss. The responses are summarized in Exhibit 4-2 (see page 30).

Four of these themes were consistent with many of the state and local jurisdictions' responses (City of Columbia, 2006; City of Germantown, 2016; City of Lawrence, 2015; City of Minneapolis, 2014; City of San Antonio, 2011; Government Operations Agency and CalHR, 2015; State of Colorado, 2015; State of Illinois, 2015; State of Michigan, 2017; United States Office of Personnel Management, 2016a; Vermont Department of Human Resources, 2017; Washington State, 2017). Understanding of how one's job connects to the goals of the organization, importance of one's work, the quality of work done by colleagues, and supervisor treatment were among the most positively rated questions, as shown in Exhibit 4-3 (see page 30).

A number of other questions garnered very positive responses, but were not consistently asked across many surveys. Those include:

- I like the kind of work that I do: Germantown-91%, Columbia-88%, federal government-83% (City of Germantown, 2016; City of Columbia, 2006; United States Office of Personnel Management, 2016a)
- I understand my job responsibilities: Vermont-92%, California-89.9%, Michigan-89%, Durham-88%, Washington-87% (Vermont Department of Human Resources, 2017; Government Operations Agency and CalHR, 2015; State of Michigan, 2017; City of Durham, 2015; Washington State, 2017)
- I am proud to work for the City: San Antonio-86%, Minneapolis-75% (City of San Antonio, 2011; City of Minneapolis, 2014)
- I'm committed to my job: San Antonio-92% (City of San Antonio, 2011)

Exhibit 4-2: Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey Highest Positive Responses

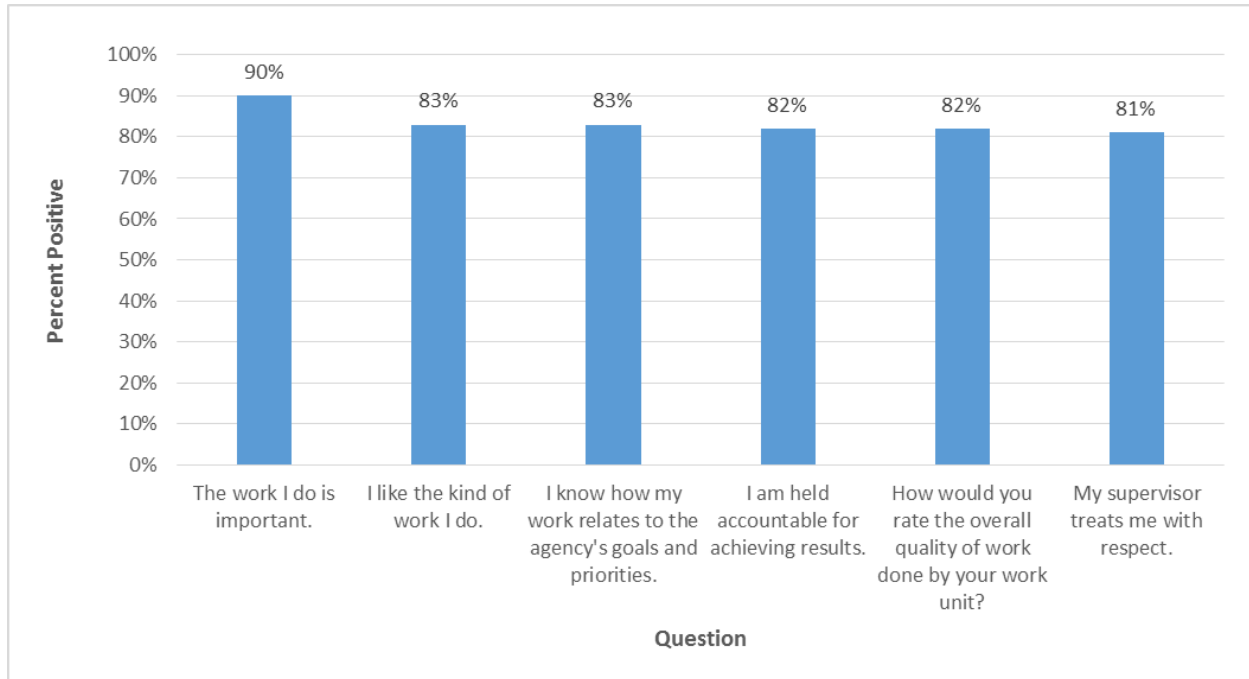
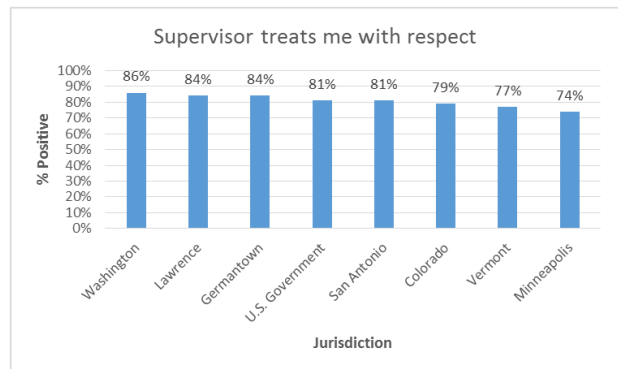
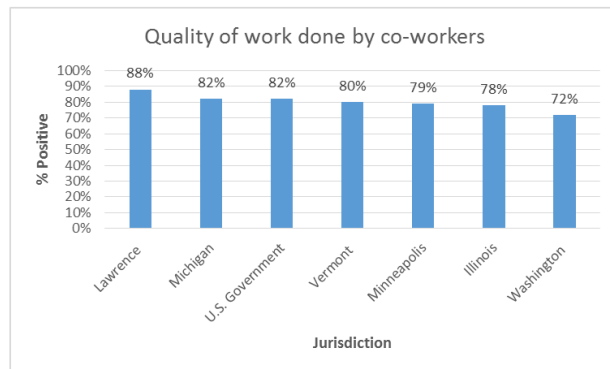
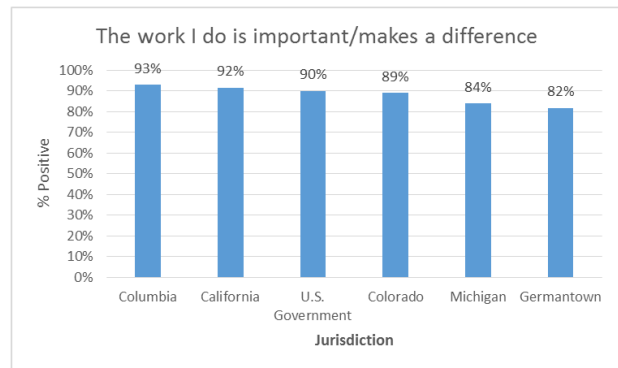
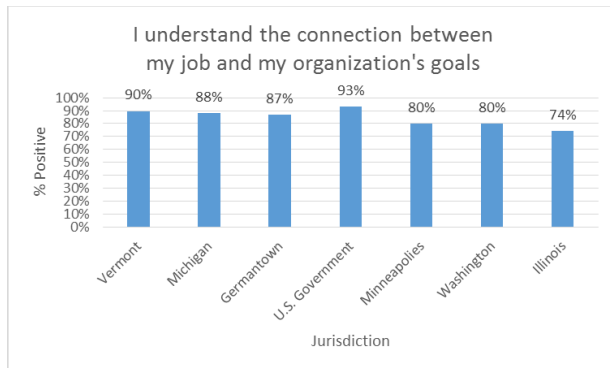


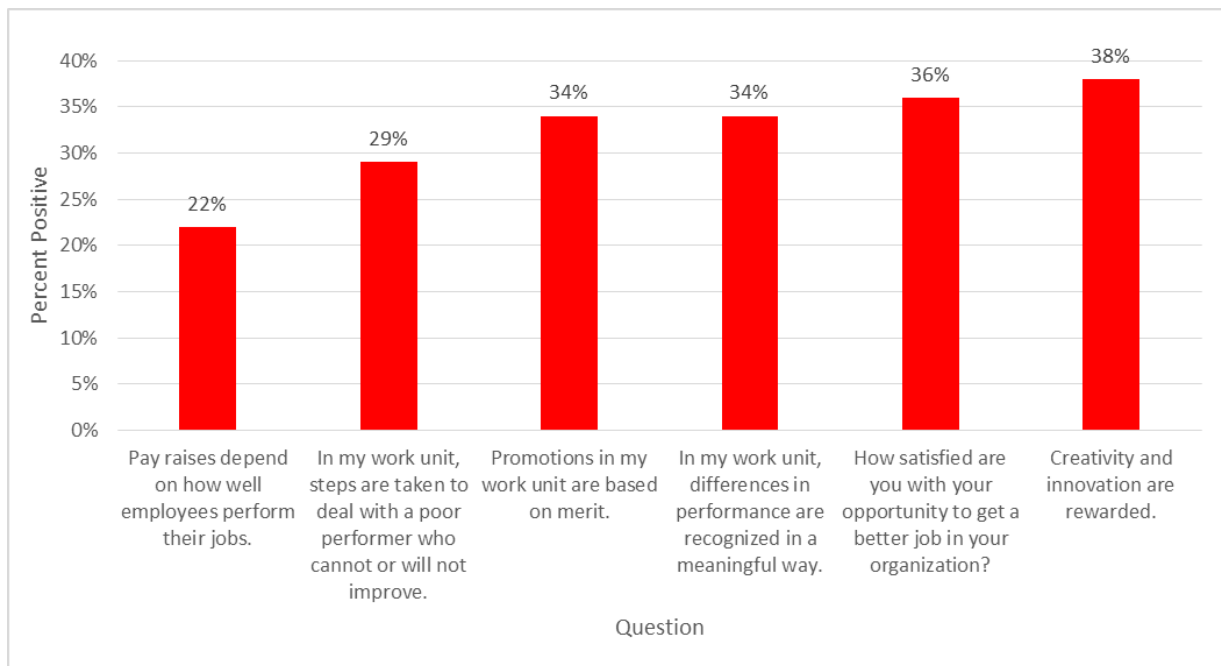
Exhibit 4-3: Highly Rated Themes Across Jurisdictions



- Good citizen customer service is emphasized by my immediate supervisor: Lawrence-85% (City of Lawrence, 2015)
- I usually look forward to each working day at my school: NYC Department of Education-84% (New York City Department of Education, 2016)
- Good job security: Vermont-80% (Vermont Department of Human Resources, 2017)

Not all questions garnered such positive responses. For the federal Viewpoint survey, six items were rated less than 40 percent positive, as shown in Exhibit 4-4. The subjects included raises and promotions based on merit, handling of poor performers, opportunity for a better job, and rewarding creativity and innovation (United States Office of Personnel Management, 2016a).

Exhibit 4-4: Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey Lowest Positive Responses



Notice a theme? They all largely deal with rewards and recognition. These findings were similar for many of the state and local governments as well (City of Columbia, 2006; City of Durham, 2015; City of Germantown, 2016; City of Lawrence, 2015; City of Minneapolis, 2014; City of

San Antonio, 2011; Government Operations Agency and CalHR, 2015; State of Colorado, 2015; State of Illinois, 2015; United States Office of Personnel Management, 2016a; Vermont Department of Human Resources, 2017; Washington State, 2017). Recognition, promotion, and rewarding creativity and innovation were among the lowest rated issues in several jurisdictions, as shown in Exhibit 4-5.

Exhibit 4-5: Low Rated Themes Across Jurisdictions



Other low rated elements found among different jurisdictions but not asked consistently across many surveys include:

- Openness to employees’ ideas and suggestions: Durham-35%, Michigan-47%, Minneapolis-51% (City of Durham, 2015; State of Michigan, 2017; City of Minneapolis, 2014)

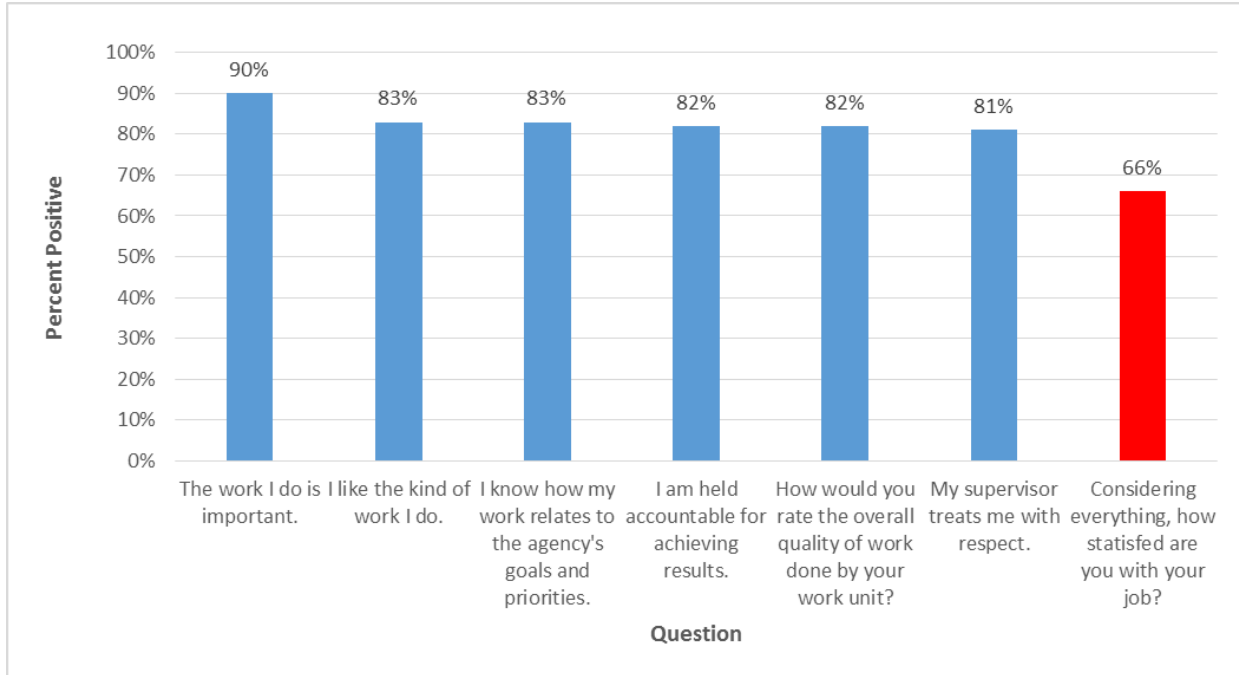
- Sufficient staffing levels: San Antonio-28%, Vermont-35%, Minneapolis-41%, Lawrence-48% (City of San Antonio, 2011; Vermont Department of Human Resources, 2017; City of Minneapolis, 2014; City of Lawrence, 2015)
- Poor performers are disciplined: Columbia-32%, Lawrence-34%, Germantown-40% (City of Columbia, 2006; City of Lawrence, 2015; City of Germantown, 2016)
- I have a best friend at work: Germantown-43% (City of Germantown, 2016)
- I have a mentor at work: San Antonio-30% (City of San Antonio, 2011)

These may very well counter the more positive elements of employees' experiences and drag down job satisfaction. Let's take a look at job satisfaction measures to find out.

Job Satisfaction

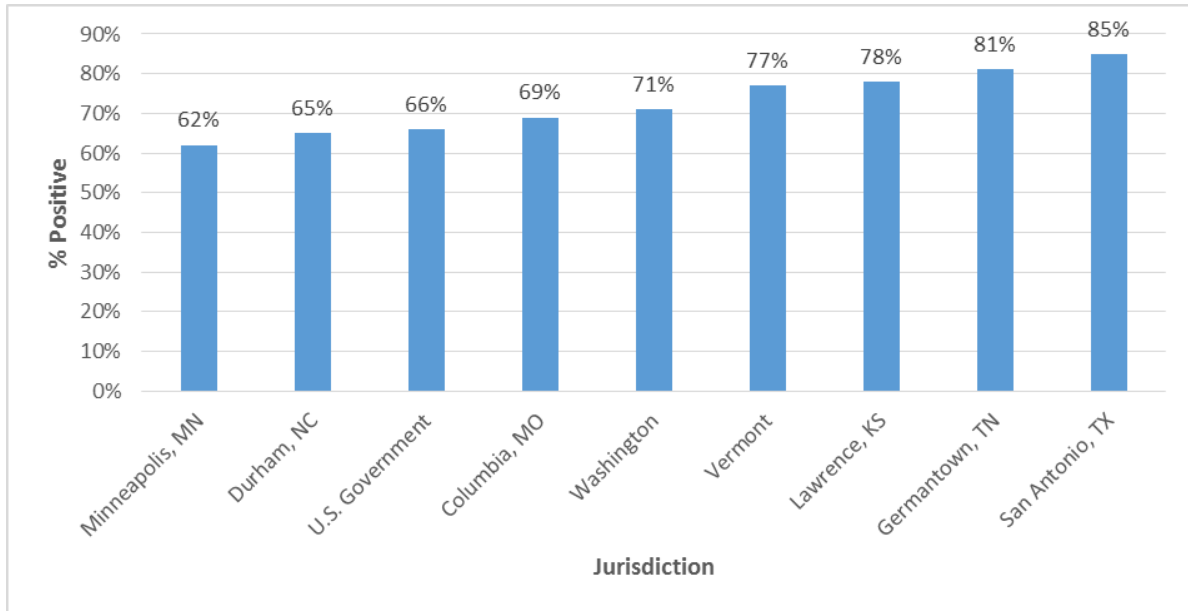
The percentage of positive responses regarding employees' work when it comes to liking their job, being able to connect it to the organization's mission, and the quality of work done by one's unit is heartening. And yet the percentage of respondents who are satisfied with their job tends to be much lower. Take the federal government as an example. Job satisfaction stood at approximately 66 percent (United States Office of Personnel Management, 2016a). It's a stark contrast to the most positive metrics presented earlier, as shown in Exhibit 4-6.

Exhibit 4-6: Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey Positive Responses and Job Satisfaction



There's a similar gap between these indicators and the level of job satisfaction among most of the jurisdictions that measure it. But the level of job satisfaction itself is largely higher than that found among federal respondents (City of Columbia, 2006; City of Durham, 2015; City of Germantown, 2016; City of Lawrence, 2015; City of Minneapolis, 2014; City of San Antonio, 2011; United States Office of Personnel Management, 2016a; Vermont Department of Human Resources, 2017; Washington State, 2017). A summary of the job satisfaction responses among the nine jurisdictions that explicitly measure it by asking respondents to rate their job satisfaction is shown in Exhibit 4-7.

Exhibit 4-7: Job Satisfaction Rates



With similarities in the highest and lowest rated themes across various surveys, it’s not immediately apparent what contributes to the variety in job satisfaction levels most. Fortunately, with the federal government’s data set publicly available, it’s possible to conduct a correlation analysis to determine the key drivers of satisfaction for its respondents (United States Office of Personnel Management, 2016b). I did so for each of the Viewpoint questions. The questions most highly correlated to job satisfaction are shown in Exhibit 4-8 (see page 36), with the mean score (on a Likert scale of 1-strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree for most questions), standard deviation, correlation coefficient, and the percentage of respondents who answered positively (agree or strongly agree - for most questions).

Data was not readily available to conduct a similar analysis for the other surveys, but San Antonio did conduct its own correlational analysis. The city found that “how fairly rewards and recognition are distributed at the department level” was the variable most highly correlated with job satisfaction (City of San Antonio, 2011). Other highly correlated variables included how

**Exhibit 4-8: Federal Employee Viewpoint Questions
Most Highly Correlated with Job Satisfaction**

Question	Mean	SD	Correlation	% Positive
Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your organization?	3.45	1.13	.78*	57
I recommend my organization as a good place to work.	3.65	1.13	.73*	64
My work gives me a feeling of personal accomplishment.	3.82	1.12	.68*	72
How satisfied are you with your involvement in decisions that affect your work?	3.33	1.16	.67*	51
My talents are used well in the workplace.	3.40	1.22	.66*	58
How satisfied are you with the recognition you receive for doing a good job?	3.28	1.21	.63*	48
How satisfied are you with the policies and practices of your senior leaders?	3.15	1.15	.63*	42
How satisfied are you with your opportunity to get a better job in your organization?	2.93	1.24	.62*	36
I am given a real opportunity to improve my skills in my organization.	3.56	1.16	.62*	63
I feel encouraged to come up with new and better ways of doing things.	3.48	1.23	.62*	58
Employees have a feeling of personal empowerment with respect to work processes.	3.12	1.17	.62*	45
How satisfied are you with the information you receive from management on what's going on in your organization?	3.26	1.16	.61*	48

Level of significance: *=p<.01

fairly employees felt their work was evaluated, having a mentor at work, how conflict was resolved, and availability of technology and equipment needed to do one's job (City of San Antonio, 2011).

A number of other studies have examined job satisfaction and its drivers in the government. An analysis of a sample of municipal clerks in 41 states showed job satisfaction at 91 percent (Gordon, 2011). The variables that most explained variation in job satisfaction among them was determined to be equipment and resources, overall supervisory relations, and departmental esprit de corps. In a sample of 217 public managers of special districts (entities established by governments for specific purposes such as toll roads, airports, and business improvement), the job satisfaction rate was nearly 97 percent (West & Berman, 2009). The most strongly associated variables with job satisfaction included talents being used well in the workplace, opportunities to improve one's skills, level of pay, and job security. And an analysis of local, state and federal public health worker data showed that job satisfaction was most highly associated with pay, perceived organizational support, and employee involvement (Leider, Harper, Shon, Sellers, & Castrucci, 2016). Supervisor relations, having interesting work and being able to work independently were found to be significant in a study across a number of countries (Taylor & Westover, 2011)

These findings align with earlier studies of public sector employees that found a number of variables to have a significant correlation with job satisfaction. That includes goal clarity - seeing a clear connection between one's work and the organization's mission (Ting, 1997; Wright & Davis, 2001) and meaning (DeSantis & Durst, 1996). Being able to utilize one's skills and being able to do what one does best were found to be particularly significant (DeSantis & Durst; Ting, 1996) compared to other variables. Promotional opportunities were also found to be

a prominent factor (Ellickson, 2002; Ting, 1997). Supervisors had a significant effect, both in terms of one's perception of their competency (DeSantis & Durst, 1996) as well as the nature of one's relationship with their supervisor (Ting, 1997; Ellickson, 2002).

The following themes emerge upon reviewing all of this data:

- Public servants largely like what they do and see how it connects to their organization's mission.
- Public servants think highly of their colleagues and the work they do.
- It is important that public servants feel a sense of accomplishment and inclusion.
- Employees want to make full use of their talents and skills, be empowered to do so, and want opportunities to learn more.
- Recognition matters as does advancement, and it should be tied to performance.
- Supervisory relations are impactful.

As shown in Exhibit 4-7, there is room for improvement among all of the most highly correlated items, based on the percentage of positive responses. And that appears to be the case at the state and local level as well, particularly with regards to recognition, promotions, and ability to use one's skills, as shown in Exhibit 4-6. But even though there is work to be done here, government shouldn't settle for satisfaction as the main objective. As POS has found, there can be more to work that's worth striving for in order to optimize one's experience and contribution. And that is where engagement comes into play.

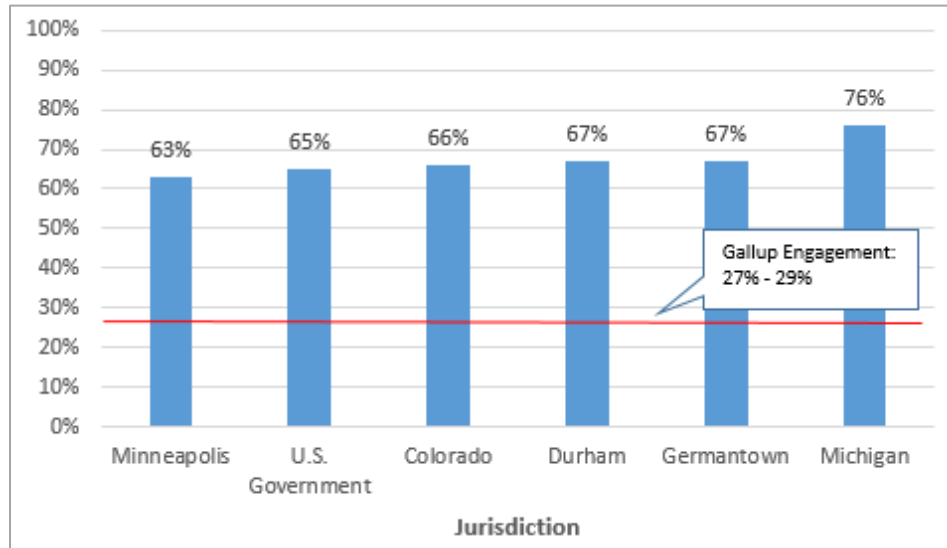
Employee Engagement Indices

Engagement is a useful measure because it speaks to a state of optimal functioning (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). As the “E” in PERMA, the gratifying state of intense absorption in a challenging task is one of the central components of human flourishing (Seligman, 2011). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) found that people familiar with being in this state refer to it as a “flow experience” (p. 94), and contended that it leads to work being more purposeful, enjoyable, and productive. Compared to job satisfaction, which is likened to a measure of tolerability, engagement is considered more active, coupled with greater excitement and energy (Warr & Inceoglu, 2012).

It’s no wonder, then, that people have started taking a closer look at engagement when evaluating workers’ experiences. Gallup conducted surveys of government employees across the country and found that only 29 percent of state and local public servants (Clifton, 2016) and 27 percent of federal workers (Ander & Swift, 2014) are engaged in their jobs. That’s in stark contrast to the job satisfaction rates noted in Exhibit 4-3, which ranged from 62 percent to 85 percent. The ramifications are more serious when you consider Gallup’s assertion that this costs taxpayers as much as \$118 billion in lost productivity annually (Ander & Swift, 2014; Clifton, 2016).

Several of the jurisdictions focused in some manner on employee engagement, including Durham, California, Colorado, Michigan, Minneapolis, Germantown, Vermont, Washington, and the federal government. Six of these jurisdictions calculated an engagement index or score based on a particular subset of questions (City of Durham, 2015; City of Germantown, 2016; City of Minneapolis, 2014; State of Colorado, 2015; State of Michigan, 2017; United States Office of Personnel Management, 2016a). The scores are presented in Exhibit 4-9.

Exhibit 4-9: Engagement Levels



As you can see, these measures of engagement are much higher than that found by Gallup (Ander & Swift, 2014; Clifton, 2016). The culprit in this discrepancy may be the difference in the questions asked by the jurisdictions compared to the polling organization. None of the surveys are identical in their engagement measures, though there are some themes shared among a few of them. Exhibit 4-10 presents a list of these themes with the number of jurisdictions (out of the six with engagement measures) that include a version of them in their surveys, along with my assessment as to whether Gallup includes the concept in their tool (Wagner & Harter, 2006).

Gallup also includes additional themes related to career development and work relationships in its engagement measures which, along with their other measures, they have found to be associated most strongly with performance (Wagner & Harter, 2006). The latter themes weren't found in more than one jurisdiction survey and thus are not included in Exhibit 4-10. Note that the Gallup measures are copyrighted and it is not permissible to post their actual items. You can find more information on their methodology here:

http://www.gallup.com/topic/employee_engagement.aspx.

Exhibit 4-10: Common Engagement Questions

Theme	Jurisdictions	Gallup
Opinion of colleagues' work/relationships	5	X
Would recommend the organization to others	4	
Proud to work for the organization/jurisdiction	4	
Plan to stay at the organization	4	
Opportunities to learn and grow	4	X
Treatment by supervisor	4	X
Utilization of talents and skills	3	X
Recognition for performance	3	X
Sees connection between job and organization goals	3	
Sufficient resources to do the job	3	X
Input and involvement in decisions	3	X
Job is important/makes a difference	3	X
Training	2	
Enough information to do the job	2	
Encouraged to come up with new ways of doing things	2	
Understand what is expected of me to do the job	2	X

Nimon, Shuck, and Zigarmi (2016) developed a methodology to assess the similarities between different engagement and job satisfaction surveys. Through their analysis, they could identify similarities (or differences) among questions that could help account for the degree of variance in survey responses. Such an examination of the wording of questions asked in the various surveys mentioned here might help determine if there are important variations that caused different results among measures of the same concept.

To get a more accurate sense of engagement, it would be useful for jurisdictions to measure consistently and in a way that aligns more closely with the construct as put forward by positive psychology, with a focus on optimal functioning (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The best candidate for this may be the nine question version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9), which has been statistically validated in ten different countries, including the U.S., as a measure of workplace engagement (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006) and is the most widely used engagement measure (Vigoda-Gadot, Eldor, & Schohat, 2012). The questions are divided among three dimensions: vigor, absorption, and dedication, as follows (Schaufeli et al., 2006):

- Vigor
 - At my work, I feel bursting with energy
 - At my job, I feel strong and vigorous
 - When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work
- Absorption
 - I feel happy when I am working intensely
 - I am immersed in my work
 - I get carried away when I am working
- Dedication
 - I am enthusiastic about my job
 - My job inspires me
 - I am proud of the work I do

Not only are these questions largely different than those asked on the jurisdiction surveys (and the Gallup questions, for that matter) - the scale is set up in a notably different way as well.

Instead of degrees of agreement as used on the jurisdiction surveys (strongly disagree to strongly agree), the UWES-9 utilizes a seven-point scale based on *frequency*, ranging from “never” to “always/every day” (Schaufeli et al., 2006).

Though engagement has become more of a focus in organizational literature, little research has been done on the matter specific to the public sector (Vigoda-Gadot et al., 2012). The benefit of using such questions when surveying government employees is that it can help illuminate how much room for improvement there is to develop invigorating work. And it’s not just a question of whether or not public servants are engaged - it matters how often they are as well. By including such measures as a supplement to the other questions asked of public servants noted throughout this section, government organizations can better determine the potential that exists to improve their work.

As Vigoda-Gadot et al. (2016, p. 529) said, “public organizations need public servants who feel energetic and dedicated, are absorbed in their work for the public and hence are physically and mentally engaged.” Engagement coupled with other important factors such as opportunities for learning and growth, recognition, and utilizing one’s skills are a potent combination. And you don’t need to take my word for it. In the next section we’ll review feedback from public servants on the most integral components of their best experiences working for the government.

Public Servants' Best Experiences

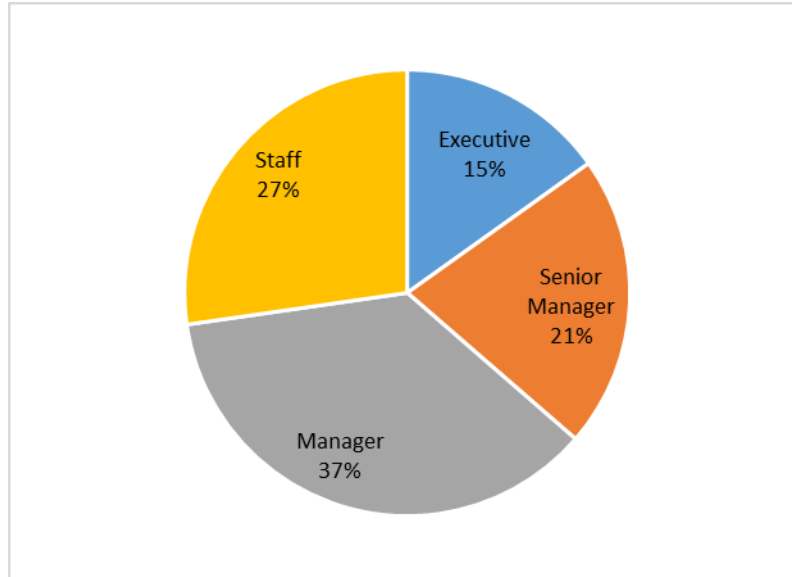
The survey instruments and studies discussed so far help to paint a picture of the elements that are central to cultivating motivated and fulfilled public servants. But the picture is incomplete. For example, though Gallup's methodology is under lock and key, it indicates how bad the engagement problem potentially is in the public sector. The Federal Employee Viewpoint study and state and local surveys, on the other hand, shed some light on what contributes to job satisfaction but don't ask all of the questions that might be even more revealing – like those in the UWES-9 scale. And perhaps most important, these data and tools don't tell us what optimal functioning really looks like or feels like in the public sector. The best way to find out such information is to go straight to the source – government workers themselves – and ask them.

Interviews

I conducted thirty-three interviews with current and prior public servants. This exceeded the sample size of twelve that was found to be necessary by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) to unearth the range of various perspectives in a population through qualitative research. Interview participants represented different positions, responsibilities, and experience. I've categorized them by level as follows:

- Executives: Appointed by elected officials to run agencies and mayoral offices
- Senior managers: Responsible for large divisions within agencies
- Managers: Supervise small units or project teams
- Staff: No responsibility for staff supervision

Overall, the breakdown by level is presented in Exhibit 5-1.

Exhibit 5-1: Distribution of Participants by Level

Disciplines that were represented included social services, transportation, enforcement, construction, emergency response, technology, housing policy, legislative affairs, education, and legal counsel. Though largely municipal employees - and mostly from New York City, some respondents were from state and federal government organizations.

Based on the principles of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, 2012), the interview questions were designed to get public servants thinking about their best experiences working for government. Such experiences could be a moment, particular project, job or period of time. I left it to each respondent to determine what his or her “best experience” was. Then, to elicit descriptions about the experience, I asked the following seven questions:

1. What words would you use to describe the experience?
2. Reflecting on the same experience, were there things that other people did that helped make this a positive experience? If so, what were they?
3. Did you play a role in making the experience positive? If so, describe what you did.
4. How did this experience make you feel about your job?

5. How did this experience make you feel about your colleagues and your organization?
6. How did this experience make you feel about yourself?
7. What do you think is the most important factor that affects job satisfaction?

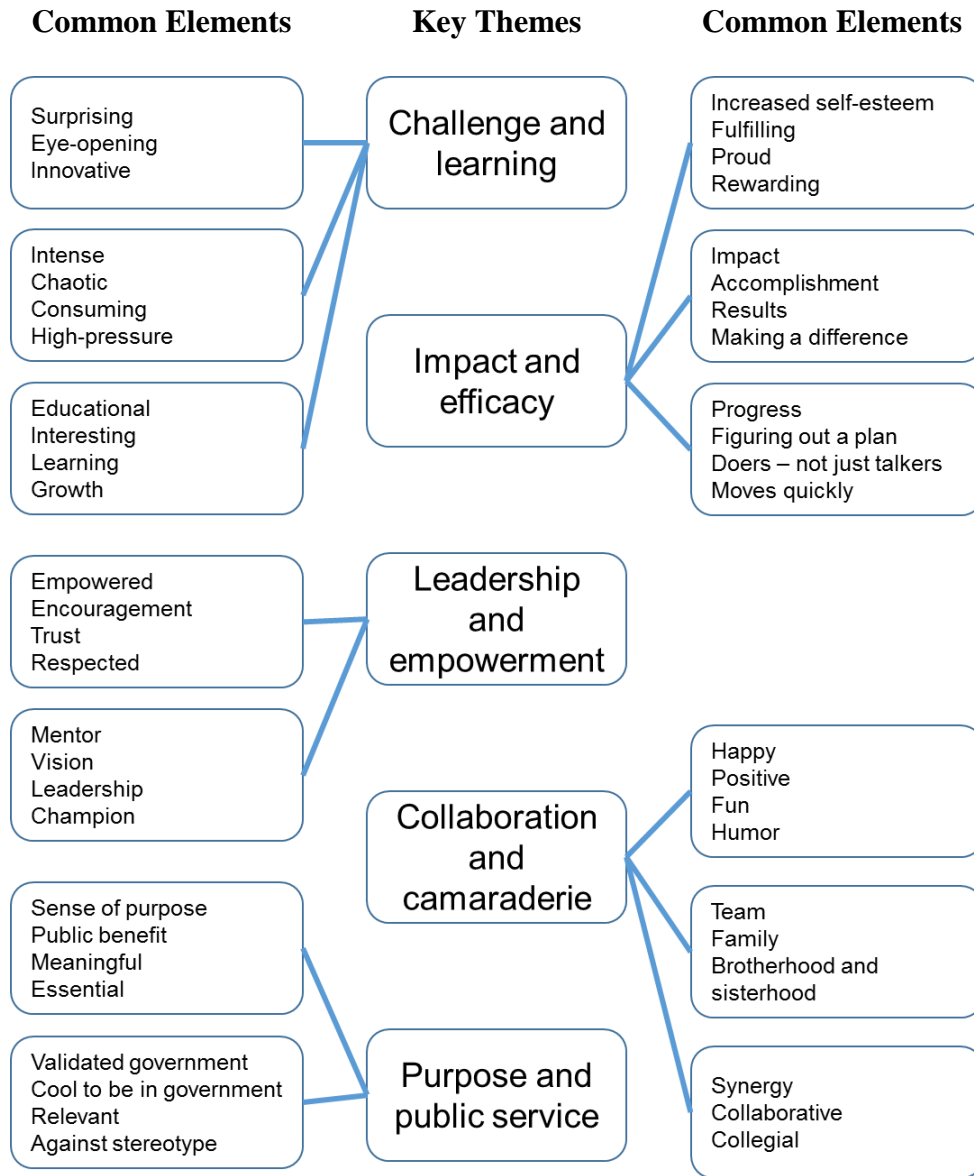
Participants consented to the interview and were allowed to withdraw at any time.

Interviews for the most part were conducted over the telephone. I transcribed the responses during the interviews, which lasted approximately 30 minutes each. Participants were requested to answer each question as they saw fit – using as much or as little detail as they felt necessary to convey their response.

Analysis

I based my analysis methodology in part on qualitative research conducted by Bateman and Barry (2012) in a study of individuals who pursue long-term goals. I compiled responses by each of the questions asked, without attribution. I began reviewing the compiled responses about halfway through the interviews when ten interviews had been completed. I analyzed the responses first by amassing the different elements that were mentioned as contributing to the participants' best experiences. This included particular words or phrases used in the participants' answers to each of the questions. I then took those elements and grouped them into broader key themes, similar in concept to the "aggregate dimensions" in Batemen and Barry's work (2012, p. 991). This process continued until no additional major themes could be identified. A summary of the different elements and how they were organized into the five key themes is presented in Exhibit 5-2.

Exhibit 5-2: Identification of Key Themes



In Their Own Words

It was remarkable how engrossing the interviews were. The vast majority of respondents had strong memories and feelings about what contributed to their best experiences and said they enjoyed revisiting those situations. According to their descriptions, their best experiences often shaped them in new ways, raised their awareness, strengthened bonds, and were connected to accomplishments of which they were very proud. In this section I’ll highlight key quotes from

the interviews that are representative of the common themes I identified from all of the responses.

Challenge and learning.

A common thread through nearly every experience was that there was a level of difficulty involved in the work. People's best experiences often required significant effort.

Personally working through, spending the time to go through the pain and learn the details of something and then be able to learn or grasp something you didn't know and then be able to confidentially speak about it.

I let it be consuming and that was important given how high stakes it was.

The whole time wasn't rosy. It took work.

Every time an emergency happened or some big project....the challenges that I saw and the way that I was able to help...was very satisfying.

It was a needle in a haystack thing and I worked until I found the needle. And I worked nights and weekends to get to that eureka moment.

Respondents also often spoke positively about the amount of learning that came with the experience and that they were doing something new.

It was a really different skill set that I had to use and it made the rest of my job make sense.

I learned from the young ones, they learned from me – that reciprocating, daily learning...was fantastic.

I assumed that I did not have the answers; that my job was to find the answers or the solution. So I asked more questions and talked less.

Questioning myself or questioning processes was an interesting thing.

Learning is very important...and as long you can keep learning, that's what keeps things interesting.

It really was a learning experience about myself that I still miss.

Impact and efficacy.

Many respondents noted how important it was that progress was being made or goals were being reached.

If you are driven to make meaningful, positive change then seeing the result of your effort is everything.

We set a goal and worked very hard to achieve it. It wasn't just chitty chatting and going nowhere – I can't stand that.

Let's do it right now and do it correctly instead of letting it fall down the line.

I was able to challenge every rule within the government system and have the best productivity in return.

You felt energized to be doing something that was important to so many people and you felt like you had an impact that you could feel immediately.

Big effect on people - changed people's lives for years.

I had felt like I had done nothing to benefit other people – how could I say that when I was [working for the government]? But what did I do to benefit other people? That perspective changed after this experience. I said “wow – look what we've done!”

At the end of it, I felt very accomplished. I wished I could have done more and that we had time to do more. I got more done than I could have imagined.

Feeling there is a common goal on which we are making progress.

On top of that, many respondents also noted that they realized through the experience how much their own abilities and efforts came into play, and thought more of their own capability as a result.

I felt proud and confident that I could do things I never thought I could do before.

I remember feeling extremely competent. It was really using my strengths in service...all of my values came together.

I found skills and strength inside myself that were previously unidentified that I needed that I didn't know that I needed and it was glorious.

The challenges we faced, it made me feel good because I didn't realize I had it in me. It was really a learning experience about myself.

Made me feel like I could have done it for free. Brought me personal fulfillment at a level that I hadn't encountered professionally before. It made me personally optimistic and countered the perception that work is thing that you do as opposed to being a big part of yourself.

The two main things would be one, make me feel satisfied that what I do matters because I have this anchor of helping others - it fulfills that; and also makes me feel that I am good at what I do or that I can be successful.

It pushed me to do things that I never thought I'd be able to do. Made me feel as though I can accomplish things that I never thought I could accomplish before. Made me feel better about myself and my potential.

There was often an element of surprise that accompanied these realizations.

Leadership and empowerment.

Supervisors were frequently mentioned for their role in motivating them and helping to shape their approach to the work. Establishing a clear mission repeatedly came up as part of this.

I was going to say chemistry amongst people [was most important] but that's not enough....a really good leader can take an average group of people that don't have the best chemistry and shape that. If meaning were enough I don't think you'd need to provide bagels and coffee to get people to show up at every meeting.

[The boss gives] people context for what they are doing and then seeing the big picture and how what you are doing fits into that.

My boss instilled in me...two things: have patience and trust your instincts. His being such a good mentor taught me...a new way of thinking of things.

My supervisor clearly defined what the project was and what the point of it was and why we were doing it.

I think a philosophy of mutual respect goes a long way. One of my sayings is that "If you can't hire or fire, you have to inspire."

We had the support of the executives, it was mission focused – it was part of a broader goal or narrative, that we buy-in, that they would be there to help navigate through any obstacles.

Management's willingness to spend money on this – we are such a small agency – everyone's thinking we are tiny, who cares. That made me feel like we are trying to make more of ourselves, we're trying to do more and maybe we'll grow.

A very senior person said "this person is being screwed...find a way to help him."

What seemed just as important was having a supervisor that empowered them and was supportive.

My manager really zeroed in on what my strengths were and used them, or allowed me to use them to serve a greater mission.

Being allowed to think outside of the box rather than being told constantly “this is what I need you to do, do it.” Not being crammed down throats.

My [boss] said “I hired you because I know that you can do this and I’d rather have you ask for forgiveness than not do it at all.”

If the boss is your champion you’ll work harder.

You don’t need to be cutthroat. You don’t need to give people heart attacks to get things done.

My opinion is valued and...I feel what I have to say is listened to. Even if it isn’t implemented.

The [leadership] was passively supportive – they didn’t get in the way and when I needed them they were there.

I had always worked in the executive branch of the agency but when this supervisor came it was like a breath of fresh air. She treated me like a colleague and not like I was her employee. She treated me with respect and involved me.

Collaboration and camaraderie.

Collaboration was one of the most common words mentioned. In considering their best experiences, respondents often voiced the importance of the teamwork involved in getting things done.

Teamwork, high level thinkers, doers – not just talkers – people who can make stuff happen.

I realized that no matter how smart you are, you can never do it by yourself. I just felt whole with this team.

In working alongside some of my colleagues there was an urgency and immediacy to the work that broke some of the typical BS that one encounters in other environments.

Everyone was so focused on getting the work done that we could be ourselves.

We came with such diverse backgrounds, working on different kinds of things. There was no competition – no negative stuff happened.

In terms of coworkers, building energy off of one another around the same problem.

Many people reflected on the bonds that were formed.

Your work has to be a community for you and you have to be connected to the people and the effort.

It created a camaraderie that even now...I am still sometimes stunned by the brotherhood and sisterhood that we have.

I have a photo of our team taken after [the accomplishment] ...I can look at each person's face and see the work that we did together.

There had been a bond developed through the work.

Collegiality and camaraderie with different groups of people that requires a commonality with them at the same time.

Another important element expressed about the interpersonal aspect of the work was how it fostered positive emotion, even when - or perhaps especially when - under pressure.

Fun in the workplace, fun with colleagues, fun in the face of adversity.

I made it so it wasn't a chore; if you are optimistic you can sell it and make it work better than make it a pit of despair that everyone falls into; you just have to be positive.

If you are not coming to work and being happy it puts a negative...it freezes our brain from thinking progressively or being innovative.

I would do things like plan happy hours, going to neighborhoods and restaurants that ended up really building a good team.

Getting to know...their individual personalities and talents and humor so you can get a group of people to work together and have fun...doing it creates a positive energy, you can laugh a lot and it gives them inspiration to keep going.

Purpose and public service.

When reflecting on their best experiences, respondents often referenced a connection with purpose or making a difference.

I felt that I was living according to purpose and serving something bigger than myself.

I think one [factor] is purpose. And that purpose...can be to make someone's day run smoothly. Can be a little "p" or a big "P".

I really felt a sense of service in doing this.

For something not to be punitive made me feel like we were assisting – being helpful rather than detrimental.

Made me feel like my job was meaningful and it was a worthwhile pursuit.

The feeling of contributing to something bigger than yourself and being part of something meaningful made it very worthwhile.

Seeing that come to light made me feel [there was] a real purpose to the organization.

I think it's the people you work with and having a sense of purpose. That's the ultimate happy place. Because if you have one or the other, eh, but if you have both you are doing really well.

This experience of literally delivering services with my own hands was like nothing I've done before. When you have that direct contact it's amazing.

It's also what you are doing – do you see at least one positive thing – anything you do that contributes to a positive experience each day - whether dealing with clients or other coworkers – and if you don't, that affects what your performance is.

Many mentioned that it was such a significant experience because it validated their choice to be in public service and reminded them of the importance of government work.

Not all but many in government...are making a choice to be there – so the great experience really validated this choice to serve the public.

It felt sexy and cool to work for the government.

It constantly amazes me how much city workers can do...how much they work, care and follow through. Because that exists and persists...makes working and having that vantage point attractive. They could be working somewhere else for a lot more money. Gives us older critical people the strength to go forward.

It made me feel like I was in the right place. It made me feel that I chose correctly and [it was] eye-opening because it [was] in stark contrast to the private sector in a good way.

I think sometimes....it's easy to get detached from the people you are serving....so being on a...successful team allowed me to reconnect and remember that this is taxpayer dollars, hard earned money being spent to pay my salary to get things done.

I felt like I was making an impact. That I was improving people's daily lives...[and] also a bigger outcome for the city.

It made me realize that government doesn't have to be the stereotype that people make of it...that the day to day things that get done, the basic service levels, can be done at a very high level.

Discussion.

Though the themes in this section emerged early on in the interview process, and were further bolstered as more and more interviews were conducted, it would be presumptuous to assume that these 33 individuals are entirely representative of the 22 million government employees in the United States, let alone public servants in other countries around the world. Nevertheless, in seeing how they echo drivers of job satisfaction and the elements of engagement, they appear to capture the important components of fulfilling work in the public sector. Beyond that, they indicate the presence of what Vogt (2005, p. 112) refers to as an “equilibrium between their abilities and the challenges they faced.” Not to mention, respondents collectively touched on all of the core elements of human flourishing: positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning and accomplishment (Seligman, 2011).

These responses did not include my own reflections on my best experience working for the government, and I had not shared it during the interviews so as not to influence the respondents. But mine mirror these themes as much as any of theirs. I had a leader who cleared a path for me to do things I never thought possible, and gave me the resources and encouragement

I needed to get it done. I had close colleagues with whom I thought we could tackle any problem - and we often surprised people, including ourselves, with what we accomplished. And those accomplishments were hard fought, at times seeming nearly impossible. But we powered through - often with long hours and even the occasional all-nighter - making incremental progress along the way. We made a difference. And through it all we had fun.

Such experiences raise the bar for whatever comes next, but makes reaching it that much more gratifying. And perhaps what is most important about the responses garnered through these interviews is the recognition that such optimal work experiences in government are without a doubt possible.

Positive Public Service

This paper has centered around the theme that the experience of government workers is a critical component of effective public service. No matter what ambitious public policy goals are created or day to day operations are mandated, it's up to public servants to carry them out and see them through. And this isn't an easy feat, considering the challenges I've identified in this paper that are unique to government and add to the hurdles present in workplaces more generally. But those challenges, coupled with lessons from positive psychology and the quantitative and qualitative data on public servant experiences can be leveraged to create more fulfilling and impactful government work.

This must be rooted in the concept discussed at the beginning of this paper that managers have a responsibility—better yet a duty—to their employees to cultivate such work. And focusing on workers does not come at the expense of services to citizens. The more important the public *service* that needs to be provided, the more vital the public *servants* are who are depended upon to provide it. The influence of managers in this regard cannot be understated. As we've seen in

the research discussed throughout this paper, managers influence people's work experiences when it comes to engagement (Rath & Harter, 2010), and play an important role in job satisfaction (DeSantis & Durst, 1996; Ellickson, 2002, Gordon, 2011; Taylor & Westover, 2011; Ting, 1997). Research has also shown that management has a strong association with employee organizational commitment in the public sector (Johnson, 2015; Moldogaziev & Silvia, 2014).

I attended a lecture recently by Isaac Prilleltensky (2017), who boiled this down even further by saying "the worst manager is the one who doesn't pay attention." I believe there are five strategies that leaders and managers in government should pay attention to in order to more mindfully foster a positive public service experience for the government workforce. They include

- Putting public servants first
- Designing meaningful work
- Turning obstacles into opportunities
- Creating meaningful measures
- Looking forward

I'll explain these strategies further throughout this section, recommending actions that leaders and managers in government should take, as well as areas for future study.

Putting Public Servants First

The first strategy, putting public servants first, informs all the others. Government can take a cue from a leader in a different type of service sector - Danny Meyer. The successful New York City restaurateur has developed a service model that puts his employees first. Meyer (2006) refers to this as "The Virtuous Cycle of Enlightened Hospitality" (p. 237). He prioritizes the employees in his organization above his customers, which rank second, followed by the

community in which he operates, then suppliers, and finally investors, in that order. He asserts that having any other priority order to his model would impede the loyalty, enthusiasm, motivation and longevity of his team, which would ultimately impact the experience of customers and the bottom line (Meyer, 2006). And this strategy is working. His business continues to grow, with an annual revenue estimated to be as much as \$500 million - while employee turnover is nearly half the industry average (Fickensher, 2014).

At Meyer's organization, Union Square Hospitality Group (USHG), he describes why prioritizing employees above customers is so important:

The interest of our employees must be placed directly ahead of those of our guests because the only way we can consistently earn raves, win repeat business, and develop bonds of loyalty with our guests is first to ensure that our own team members feel jazzed about coming to work. (Meyer, 2006, p. 238)

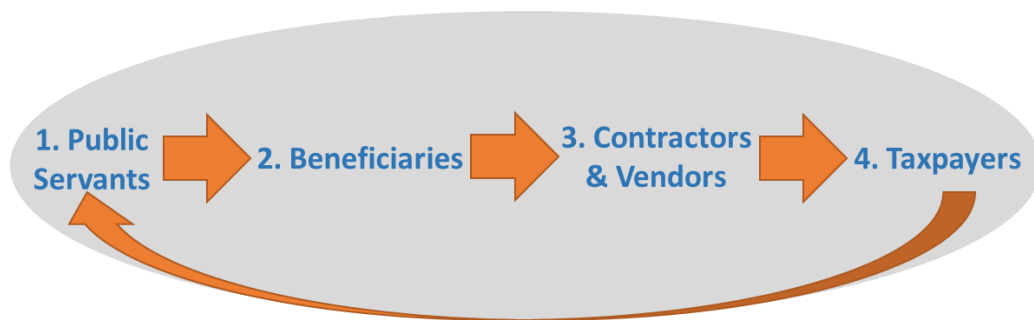
He also explains why investors should not come first. Even though government does not strictly have investors, his perspective helps illuminate the risks with putting any stakeholder before employees:

You can...potentially make a speedier financial hit for [investors], but it's not as likely to sustain itself over time. There will inevitably be a revolving door of staff members who, finding themselves in a business culture that does not place their own or the customers' interest ahead of the other key stakeholders, will quickly cease to feel particularly proud, motivated, or enthusiastic about coming to work. (Meyer, 2006, p. 239)

And though Meyer's output is primarily food and profits, his philosophy can be extrapolated to apply to a positive public service version of Enlightened Hospitality, which would clearly start with public servants as the top priority. Following public servants, the public

service equivalent of USHG’s customers from Meyer’s model would be those who are being helped by government, otherwise known as “beneficiaries” (Grant, 2007, p. 395). And though beneficiaries could be considered citizens at large, I would urge public managers to think more specifically about who they are helping depending on their work, such as elementary students in a public school, patients in a public hospital, hurricane victims in a recovery effort, or commuters traveling on public transportation, for example. I believe this category also addresses the community component in the Enlightened Hospitality model (Meyer, 2006). Next in the priority order would be government contractors and vendors that provide the tools and equipment that public sector organizations need to do their work. Lastly, taxpayers would take the place of investors – particularly those who vote and thus can influence how government allocates its resources. As with Meyer’s model, this contributes to a cycle that further enhances public servants’ experiences and motivates them to continue doing great work. The public service version of Meyer’s Enlightened Hospitality model (2006) would look something like Exhibit 6.1.

Exhibit 6-1: Enlightened Public Service



As a stark comparison, the negative impact of destructive leadership illuminates the perils of the alternative to an employees-first approach. In a meta-analysis on the subject, Scyhns and Schilling (2012) reviewed the effects of hostile and obstructive behavior by leaders, such as taking credit for employees’ work, scapegoating, being abusive, and prohibiting interaction amongst colleagues. In assessing 57 studies on the subject, the researchers found that such

leadership negatively correlates with employee well-being and performance and is also related to greater turnover intention and counterproductive work behavior (Scyhns & Schilling, 2012). And though it may not intuitively come as a surprise, it's worth acknowledging that such management styles exist in the public sector. I have personally encountered leaders that would benefit from being reminded of these results and will refrain from discussing the current political climate in Washington.

This is why empowerment, inclusion, and recognition are such an important part of a public-servants-first strategy, and, as discussed earlier in this paper, also important components of job satisfaction and public servants' best experiences. Perhaps it is no coincidence, then, that a study of municipal workers found these constructs to be significantly associated with interpersonal trust, which in turn was related to organizational commitment and productivity (Nyhan, 2000). It's imperative that an employee-first strategy foster trust, which is a cornerstone of a positive and productive workplace built on meaningful connections between colleagues, including supervisors and their employees (Dutton, 2003). And Meyer (2006) sees trust as a crucial part of his own strategy. He says:

Some bosses and managers rule by constantly threatening disapproval or, as is often worse, by giving no feedback whatsoever. Being non-responsive keeps employees on edge, off-balance, feeling vulnerable and divided. It's not an oversight; it's a strategy-or it's insecurity about confronting conflict. Either way, it's counterproductive. It will not sustain a healthy workplace. Our managers need to understand the dramatic distinction between fear-based and trust-based control. Analyzing this distinction helps us to sharpen the managerial skills needed to define excellence and failure in our model of enlightened hospitality. (p. 212)

Leaders and managers thus should pay attention to the environment they create, building one in which employees feel - and are - central to accomplishing the organization's prosocial mission.

Designing Meaningful Work

If public servants are put first, then their work needs to be designed to enable them to feel “jazzed”, as Meyer (2006, 238) says. Remember, based on the interviews I conducted, this type of sentiment towards public service is very possible. In a review of the meaning of work literature, Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski (2010) point to two ways this can be fostered. First, by finding meaning – the *type* of significance attached to the work – and, second, by increasing meaningfulness – the *amount* of significance derived from it.

As shown in the government employee survey data presented earlier, government employees largely already find meaning in their jobs. They recognized that their work is important and, as also discussed earlier in this paper, they tend to be more prosocially motivated and less driven by material rewards than those in the private sector (Boyne, 2002; Buelens & Van den Brock, 2007). And so the meaningfulness they find in their job deserves more attention in order to determine if opportunities exist to increase the amount of significance they derive from their work.

Some of this is within an employee's control. Through job crafting, people can either change their tasks, adjust how they perceive the value of what they do, or modify their interactions with others to increase the amount of meaning in their job (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Doing so can help align their work with their values, strengths, and passions, resulting in them being more engaged and satisfied (Wrzesniewski, Berg, & Dutton, 2010; Tims, Bakker, & Derks, 2013), which enables them to view their work more as a calling (Wrzesniewski,

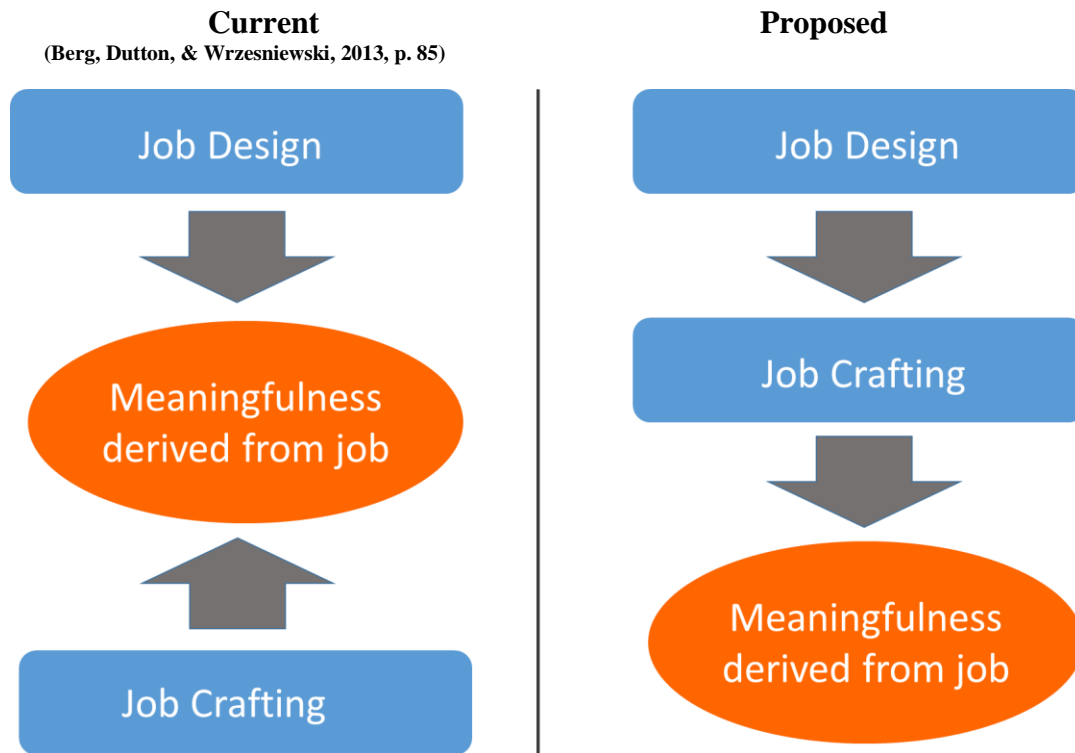
McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). Reframing their job so they are living a calling rather than simply perceiving one has been found to boost job satisfaction (Duffy et al., 2016).

But this should not be left solely to the employee, and managers would fall short of their duty by simply encouraging or permitting such an endeavor. As Schwartz (2015, p. 85) rightly asserts, “People aren’t stuck being one way or another. But nor are they free to invent themselves without constraint.” Thus, managers must take an active role to remove constraints by designing work that helps foster greater meaningfulness. This effort should not be limited to certain types of jobs. Clerical and professional staff have equally been found able to see their work as a calling (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), as have janitors, nurses beauticians, and engineers (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). However, the level of one’s position can influence the type of constraints a worker faces in cultivating greater meaningfulness. In a qualitative review of employee experiences, Berg, Wrzesniewski, and Dutton (2010) found that higher-rank participants were hindered by the number of responsibilities that got in the way of them being able to craft their work, while lower-rank employees noted that they were stymied by having less autonomy due to the prescribed nature of their jobs.

And that’s why the influence of leaders and managers is so important to help employees navigate either type of challenge by reframing the context in which they work. Berg, Grant, and Johnson (2010) found that employees were more likely to pursue unanswered callings if they worked in an environment in which they had greater discretion and autonomy. Employees can rarely, if ever, bestow such autonomy and discretion upon themselves. It requires a manager to do that. And so I suggest a shift, at least for government, from the model in which job design (led by the manager) and crafting (led by the employee) simultaneously influence job performance (Berg, Dutton, & Wrzesniewski, 2013) to one in which design is an *antecedent* to crafting,

enabling it to occur, thus enabling more meaningful work. This difference is shown in Exhibit 6-2.

Exhibit 6-2: Current and Proposed Models of Job Design and Crafting Relationship



In my proposed model, a manager would create a job description for the employee with responsibilities that align with the mission of the organization, while providing sufficient autonomy that enables the employee to determine how best she can accomplish them. Furthermore, the manager would assign work that takes into consideration the employee’s strengths and interests, continually looking for new ways that she could make more of a contribution. That way, the employee is empowered to craft her job – not being left to her own devices to navigate around an overly prescriptive set of tasks. Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) view on fostering engagement at work speaks to this model, which he describes as follows:

To improve the quality of life through work, two complementary strategies are necessary. On the one hand jobs should be redesigned so that they resemble as closely as possible

flow activities...But it will also be necessary to help people...by training them to recognize opportunities for action, to hone their skills, to set reachable goals. Neither one of these strategies is likely to make work much more enjoyable by itself; in combination, they should contribute enormously to optimal experience. (p. 317)

There is a cautionary tale in reshaping employees' work to better reflect their interests and abilities that's worth mentioning. Tims et al. (2015) found in a study that colleagues of employees who engage in job crafting experience an increase in workload and burnout, stemming from a shift in the burden of certain undesirable tasks to others. This speaks further to the importance of managers' role in job design, so they can take the needs of all of their staff – and the organization – into consideration. This is all the more necessary in government, where constraints that exist in a bureaucracy are difficult to be navigated alone by an employee.

Turning Obstacles into Opportunities

In government, there are two main elements often perceived as obstacles that need to be turned into opportunities to help create more meaningful work: rules and regulations and employment protections. Regarding the first element, rules and regulations aren't meant to be broken – but they can in fact be changed. Government should identify overly restrictive rules and regulations that impede public servants from doing their best work. Schwartz and Sharpe (2010) note how rules (and incentives) can create workforces that are not interested or not capable of exercising good judgment and discretion. And in government, many regulations are established in the name of integrity to allegedly keep public servants in check. But this is often done at the expense of their own engagement with their work. Recall the connection found between resigned satisfaction and burdensome rules (Giauque et al., 2012) mentioned earlier. This can be combatted in part by heeding Schwartz and Sharpe's (2010) call for "practical wisdom" in the

workplace, in which employees feel that they have the ability to use their best judgment rather than having to rely solely on prescriptive guidelines and instructions. Organizations too often implement too many rules and incentives, thus strangling the potential for practical wisdom. (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010).

Public servants should not accept nonsensical regulatory restrictions as permanent and managers should not feed the perception that they are a fait accompli. One of the most gratifying projects I had ever been part of was managing the overhaul of the New York City Building Code. It was the first time the arcane set of thousands of sections of construction regulations had been comprehensively tackled in decades, and the need to address advances in safety, efficiency, and sustainability made it an overdue imperative. As noted in the New York Times (An overdue overhaul, 2007) upon the bill's introduction to the Council:

For nearly 40 years, New York's building codes have defied common sense, more nearly resembling a Rube Goldberg vision than a vehicle for regulating building in a hyper-expanding city. Indeed, the important task of overhauling construction standards seemed so daunting that one mayor after another ducked it until Michael Bloomberg took it on. (para. 1)

I saw firsthand what was possible when a leader had a vision, there was political will, and a talented team of eager public servants working with industry experts to get the job done. After years of work, the code passed in the City Council. So instead of an immovable object, managers should help public servants see flaws in regulations as opportunities to make important changes.

Sometimes, however, rules are important. And research on government organizations have shown that there is a positive relationship between job satisfaction and the perception that rules are necessary and being consistently applied, referred to as "green tape" (DeHart-Davis,

Davis, & Mohr, 2014, p. 851). There's also opportunity to interpret existing regulations and challenge assumptions that certain perceived restrictions are in fact intended. For example, when I was managing the implementation of the first online permit process in New York City, attempting to bring an agency into the 21st century, I was told by an experienced senior manager that the concept was a non-starter because the law required "signatures" on applications. How could that be done without a paper and pen?, she argued. But with some diligent scrutiny and research, along with helpful guidance from creative and willing experts, we figured out how it was in fact permissible to move forward. It was mind-numbing at times, that in the midst of the internet boom government had to jump through so many more hoops to create an online process. Successfully doing so, however, and ultimately modernizing and streamlining a formerly sluggish paper-based process made it worth it. As many of the participants in my interviews noted, taking on such challenges and forging new ground not thought possible by some is often a powerful part of public service, and a terrific opportunity for government workers to use their talents and come up with new and better ways of doing things – elements that were found earlier in this paper to be significantly correlated with job satisfaction.

That kind of effort, however, can seem particularly hopeless when it comes to certain personnel regulations, due to two main factors: civil service systems and public employee unions. Ironically, both exist as mechanisms for the necessary protection of employees, shielding them from patronage and corruption (Ujhelyi, 2014), while at the same time holding many of them back from opportunities they deserve. These opportunities include both recognition and career growth, both of which, as I discussed earlier, were found to be highly correlated with job satisfaction *and* were among the lowest rated items in a number of the employee surveys reviewed.

In New York City government alone, for example, getting a new job - whether you are an existing employee or not, often requires navigating civil service regulations that include a rigid testing requirement for each job title that one is interested in and waiting to be summoned for an interview based on how your test score ranked (New York City Department of Citywide Administrative Services, n.d.). Some of the shortcomings of an emphasis on testing and scores have been exposed by research that indicates that passion and perseverance are more strongly connected to performance (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). But even for those already working for the government, unless one navigates the civil service system – and accompanying testing requirements, a person is often relegated to the confines of his existing job description. Stepping outside of that job is considered “out of title work” - which is prohibited by law and challenged by unions (Personnel Rules and Regulations of the City of New York, n.d.). Combined, this all hinders managers’ flexibility in designing meaningful work – and in recognizing employees who do it well.

At this moment, I know a talented individual who is eager to make a difference but is dismayed by the hoops she is jumping through to get a position in the public sector - even though an agency is interested in hiring her. And similarly I know a manager at an agency who wants to recognize a stellar employee for excellent work and promote her to a new position that will enable her to take on more responsibility and have greater impact. The manager has encountered roadblock after roadblock, as the civil service structure requires the commensurate testing as well as navigating a centralized personnel process to create a new position. But a manager saying his or her hands are tied by such requirements and is thus unable to hire someone, sufficiently acknowledge an employee, or create a job with new challenges and responsibilities – all of which I’ve heard or said a number of times - is of little solace to an existing or potential public servant.

And it is certainly not a way to put them first, particularly when feeling powerless against such regulations leads to reduced organizational commitment and greater turnover intention (DeHart-Davis & Pandey, 2005).

Many efforts have been made over the last few decades to change civil service regulations to allow for greater flexibility, particularly with regards to pay for performance, having control over setting personnel policy and procedures, and for hiring, firing and disciplinary actions (Brewer & Kellough, 2016). Research on the issue tends to oversimplify reforms as a tug of war between political control and employee protection (Bowman & West, 2009; Thompson, 2010; Ujhelyi, 2014). They focus on change leading to one of two outcomes: greater patronage (Bowman & West, 2009) or increasing the complacency of civil servants (Ujhelyi, 2013). This view is too narrow, and does not give the government workforce enough credit. The problem is, as Brewer and Kellough (2016) assert, that “civil service reform is, at its core, a political process” (p. 185).

Unions ardently support employee protections, and thus limits to managerial flexibility (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2012) in the interest of preventing arbitrary treatment of employees in favor of greater consistency (Davis, 2013). Through collective bargaining, they have significant influence over wages, benefits and employment procedures (Kearney, 2010). Many states have limited bargaining rights (Kearney, 2010) and public approval of unions, though on a recent upswing, has shown significant variability and has not returned to the high levels present in the 1970s (Saad, 2015). Though union membership is higher in the public sector than the private sector, as mentioned earlier (Kearney, 2010), their fate is unclear as they face further political reform attempts that seek to reduce their power (Crampton & Hodge, 2014).

The protections afforded by civil service regulations and championed by unions fall short of what's needed to optimize public servants' potential. It's great to have the bases covered - to fend off political corruption and capricious employment decisions, while providing decent paying jobs with solid benefits. That's not to be taken for granted. But given the prominence of both institutions, they must be part of a solution that does more than protect employees. They must help generate the best type of work experiences possible for public servants. Instead of focusing on making things easier for managers, or settling for stability and uniformity for employees, civil service reform and union demands should be focused on how to cultivate engagement, fulfillment, innovation, and exceptional service among the public sector workforce. Rather than being obstacles, both should be viewed as a mechanism to help make this happen. But it will take significant attention and effort. And all stakeholders should have a vested interest if they are serious about government being more effective. As Davis (2013) notes:

In some ways, management and labor may share similar values, such as a preference for service to society, as important work rewards associated with public service. If management and labor can agree on bargaining outcomes that fulfill preferred values, the bargaining process could contribute to higher performing public agencies. (p. 80)

Creating Meaningful Measures

Adler and Seligman (2016) point to a bevy of research that now shows that people with higher well-being are more likely to have better health, more fulfilling relationships, less burnout, and greater accomplishment. As such, they advocate for government to turn its attention towards well-being measures to better inform public policy decisions, asserting that oft cited GDP measures fall short of capturing an adequate picture of social progress (Adler & Seligman, 2016). But, for much the same reason, in order for government to do so successfully, it should

first look inward with a similar eye towards public servants. How can we expect government to effectively prioritize and cultivate the public's well-being if it cannot first do the same for its own workforce?

Earlier in this paper we saw the efforts various government agencies have made to measure employees' perspectives on their work. The surveys I covered measured opinions on supervisors, colleagues, the office environment, and pay and benefits more than employees' own sense of satisfaction or accomplishment. In the Federal Employee Viewpoint survey, out of 84 questions, none ask if their job is *sufficiently* meaningful, challenging, or impactful, or - as I previously pointed out - engaging (United States Office of Personnel Management, 2016a). By not asking whether or not the experiences are enough, government agencies are sending a silent message that enough is too much to expect.

There does not need to be a greater number of questions on such surveys, but there should be deeper ones. Again, it raises the idea that not only should one ask whether or not a certain condition exists but rather how often or how much it does. It should not be a binary measure. The frequency and quantity of satisfactory outcomes would make the information much more useful. For example, someone may feel she is making a difference on occasion, but is she making as much of a difference as she thinks she could be? Is the "equilibrium" between ability and challenge (Vogt, 2005, p. 112), as discussed previously, being realized? The "inquiry is intervention" principle of Appreciative Inquiry (Stavros et al., 2016, p. 102) speaks to how the types of questions we ask influence where the organization focuses its attention and, by virtue of the nature of the questions themselves, sets the tone for what kind of change organizations expect are possible. As leaders in this area note, "If we want to learn about how to create an engaged

workforce, we must ask questions about when people have felt most engaged and what engagement looks like to them” (Stavros et al., 2016, p. 102).

To this end, public managers should also evaluate what they can do to help employees better understand the extent of their own impact on beneficiaries. Grant (2007) identifies four job dimensions of such prosocial impact. The first is the degree of impact, or the significance the effect one has on another person. Second is the scope of impact - the number of people benefitting from one’s work. The third is the frequency of the impact, how often the opportunity occurs to make a difference for others. Finally, the focus of the impact is based on how much of one’s job is comprised of helping others.

Given the prosocial nature of many public servants (Bolino & Grant, 2016; Boyne, 2002; Buelens & Van den Brock, 2007), leaders and managers in government should regularly attempt to determine how these dimensions measure up for their staff. The default should not just be the generic number of citizens that a jurisdiction serves, not if they are truly going to connect one’s work to a meaningful result. As discussed earlier in this paper, making a difference is an important component of a public servant’s best experiences and is connected to job satisfaction. And Grant (2008) conducted an experiment showing that contact with beneficiaries increases the productivity of employees, which should add greater incentive for leaders and managers to take up this effort. Perhaps most important, by measuring the four dimensions of impact, government can identify how impact can be increased and take measures to change the organization’s goals and people’s work. This adds greater credence to the need for job design (Schwartz, 2015; Grant, 2007). The ability for transformational leaders to make such changes is also bolstered when beneficiary contact is part of the equation (Grant, 2012). And people who are more conscious

about the benefits of prosocial behavior are more inclined to act accordingly (Grant & Dutton, 2012).

This type of measurement meshes with the larger call from leaders in the field of positive psychology for national well-being measures (Adler & Seligman, 2016; Diener & Seligman, 2004). In assessing the impact of public servants, leaders and managers in government should ultimately be focused on how their work contributes to the greater well-being of those they serve. And so meaningful measures need to go beyond economic statistics, like income and GDP (Diener & Seligman, 2004), and productivity measures like those tracked on New York City's Mayor's Management Report, (City of New York, 2016) such as calls answered, employees trained, violations issued, arrests made, number of complaints, revenue collected, and tons of refuse disposed, to capture what the results of all of these numbers really mean for the beneficiaries being helped. The transactional nature of these measures limits the meaning to be found in the work, which in turn could lead to burn-out (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002) and contribute to stress and regret from not being able to live out one's calling (Duffy et al., 2016).

But managers should not wait for a larger national or municipal index to be created - they should start with their own team, understanding their own staff's experiences better and identifying ways within their control to help them better understand and expand the impact they are actually having.

Looking Forward

In implementing these strategies, leaders and managers in the public sector must also have an eye toward the future. As I've previously discussed, the government workforce is aging (Lavigna, 2014; Eggers & Byler, 2014) and so considerations must be made not only for the current employees in government, but those who will join its ranks in the years to come. Creating

an optimal work experience in the government is bound to help entice new recruits, especially if it leads to improvements in services as well as public perceptions of government. And having the ability to attract talented and prosocially motivated candidates should not be taken for granted. A 2013 survey of over 37,000 students from 646 colleges and universities across the United States found that only 5.4 percent of the respondents plan to work the government after graduation, a number that continued to decline over the previous five years (Partnership for Public Service and the National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2014).

Government doesn't corner the market on helping others. The non-profit sector along with private sector companies with a prosocial component to their mission also have the potential to lure prosocially motivated individuals to join their ranks (Lewis & Frank, 2002). Research on the larger U.S. population has found in general that, regardless of education or age, a minority of people prefer to work in the government (Lewis & Frank, 2002). Combined with the lack of interest of college students, this makes it imperative that the public sector do more to attract qualified people, including the strategies discussed in this section. As Lurie (2014) asserts, "the fate of country, quite literally, is in the hands of our public servants - we deserve, we need, to hire the best and treat them well" (para. 15). Though a high-profile event like 9/11 may change people's feeling towards working for government (Wrzesniewski, 2002) and increase the job satisfaction of existing public servants (Van Ryzin, 2014), it shouldn't take a national tragedy for this kind of shift to occur.

Feldman (2005) offers three imperatives to help improve government work, on which I will elaborate with my own perspectives here. The first of these is to generate political interest in skilled public managers. Given the American public's low opinion of government (Swift, 2017), its leaders should certainly feel more compelled to enable and inspire effective management that

cultivates engagement and impactful service. The need to compete for and retain talented, motivated staff should serve as incentive too. And, if that's not enough, recognizing that the existing government workforce has greater representation of minorities than the private sector (Lewis & Frank, 2002; United States Office of Personnel Management, 2014) should also embolden leaders who value diversity. People need to make this a part of the political dialogue.

The second component is to invest in training that will help managers learn how to develop public servants' skills and contributions (Feldman, 2005). This should be done through government led training programs as part of staff development efforts, and also should play more of a central role in the undergraduate and graduate education of students pursuing a career in government. A helpful example exists with the U.S. Army, which has a robust training program. In conjunction with the University of Pennsylvania, the program teaches thousands of military personnel how to bolster their resilience, leveraging optimism, gratitude, and character strengths among other skills (Reivich, Seligman, & McBride, 2011). The field of positive psychology is still relatively new, and it's time for valuable lessons from it to be more tightly interwoven with staff trainings and universities' public administration curricula that will help give managers the tools they need to truly put public servants first in the interest of generating more fulfillment and greater beneficiary impact.

And finally, Feldman (2005), urges that expanded research be conducted on how to effectively run public sector organizations. This paper has been written with this very goal in mind and much more needs to be done. Some of the areas that would benefit from additional research have been discussed earlier in this paper, such as analyzing the impact of external influences on government as compared to the private sector (Boyne, 2002). Further study would also be helpful on how to better incorporate measures of engagement in public employee surveys

(Schaufeli et al., 2006), understand the gap between engagement and job satisfaction levels, and to collect and analyze more qualitative research on public servants' best experiences.

Determining how best to measure perceived impact, as previously discussed, would be useful as well, along with exploring how resiliency related skills can play a greater role (Reivich & Shatté, 2002). Researchers and practitioners should also work together to identify where regulations provide room for more empowerment and innovation than might readily seem apparent, assess how civil service reforms can be thoughtfully developed without sacrificing employee protections, and evaluate the impact of redesigning and crafting jobs specifically in the public sector. Understanding more about the differences in government work and public servants in different countries and cultures would be informative. And Bolino and Grant (2016) identify a number of areas regarding the potential costs of prosocial behavior that warrant a closer look as well.

Conclusion

I've seen a lot throughout my career in government. Natural disasters, deadly construction accidents, and political controversies along with forward-thinking sustainability initiatives, enhanced services for those in need, ambitious regulatory reform, and innovative modernization. And though I've accomplished a lot, I'm not necessarily a model public servant. I've made my share of mistakes, and have no doubt played a part in a few bureaucratic hurdles that have frustrated the public along the way. But I've learned a lot too and, as I've said before, have seen government at its best. I understand deeply the tremendous potential that public servants have. Frankly, they don't get the credit they deserve for what they already accomplish, but opportunities for even more impactful work remain - opportunities that many of them would welcome in the interest of making more of difference. Public servants around the world know

why they do what they do. Many clearly identify with a *purpose*. But what they can never get enough of is the other important part of the public service equation. And that is to make *progress*. Leaders and managers need to take this to heart and learn how they can help create more fulfilling and impactful work. My fervent hope is that more research in this area will help create new opportunities for the prosocial among us to be energized by public service, turning purpose into meaningful progress that we can see and feel time and time again. The field of positive psychology has demonstrated that people's lives can be full of positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (Seligman, 2011), and so the same should be expected of government work. And that is what positive public service is all about.

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