

OPM's challenge of creating a high-performance culture - Government Executive

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Executive Summary

This commentary addresses the Office of Personnel Management's stated challenge of creating a high-performance culture across the U.S. federal government, as articulated in a December 8 memo by OPM Director Kupor. The author argues that while OPM's recent structural changes — including Senior Executive Service overhaul, revised performance standards, and the Federal HR 2.0 system — are necessary, they are insufficient without addressing 'softer' dimensions such as leadership quality, psychological safety, behavioral change, and capability building. Drawing on the HPO Center's research identifying 35 characteristics of high-performance organizations, Korn Ferry trust data, McKinsey's organizational health studies, and GAO's High Risk report, the author contends that federal HR systems have historically been decoupled from agency performance outcomes. The commentary identifies specific barriers including the General Schedule system, politically influenced leadership gaps, and the morale damage caused by recent unplanned workforce reductions. The author concludes that current levels of employee distrust and institutional disruption make meaningful cultural transformation unlikely in the near term.

Key Insights

1. OPM's December 2024 memo identifies 'creating a high-performance culture' as the leading management challenge, yet the associated initiatives focus on structural and administrative changes rather than behavioral and cultural dimensions.
2. The HPO Center's research identifies 35 characteristics of high-performance organizations across five factors, with 28 of the 35 involving human behavior — suggesting that structural reforms alone are insufficient for cultural transformation.
3. Unplanned federal workforce reductions have been reported to destroy morale, create trust deficits, and produce 'survivor syndrome' among remaining employees, compounding pre-existing barriers to high performance.

Practical Takeaways

- Organizations undergoing workforce reductions may experience 'survivor syndrome' among remaining staff, with disengagement and psychological safety erosion identified as measurable consequences requiring active management attention.
- The cancellation of the 2025 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey is noted as an indicator of OPM's awareness of workforce sentiment problems, suggesting that alternative listening mechanisms such as Employee Resource Groups may serve as proxies for formal engagement measurement.

Frameworks Mentioned

High Performance Organization (HPO) Framework — A research-based construct developed by the HPO Center identifying 35 characteristics organized into five factors — Management Quality, Openness & Action Orientation, Long-Term Orientation, Continuous Improvement & Renewal, and Employee Quality — linked to organizational performance across industries and countries.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The commentary draws on multiple external sources including GAO, McKinsey, Korn Ferry, NAPA, and the HPO Center, lending institutional credibility to its structural critique. The historical framing of federal HR as perpetually decoupled from agency performance is consistent with longstanding GAO findings. **Limitations:** The article is explicitly a commentary, not empirical research, and several conclusions — particularly that high performance is 'a bridge too far' — reflect the author's interpretive judgment rather than measured outcomes. The author's co-authorship of a referenced ebook ('Preparing Managers for Tomorrow's Government') represents a potential conflict of interest that is disclosed but not contextualized. The article conflates conditions across the entire federal government without accounting for agency-level variation, despite acknowledging GAO as an exception. The treatment of Elon Musk and DOGE, while documented with a Politico quote, introduces political framing that may affect perceived neutrality. Statistics cited (e.g., Korn Ferry's 48% trust figure) lack methodological context regarding sample and date.

Organizational Practice

OPM has implemented changes to the Senior Executive Service performance standards, introduced plans to limit top performance ratings, established meaningful bonuses and awards, and is consolidating federal workforce information under a single platform called Federal HR 2.0. The 2025 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey was cancelled. GAO is cited as a consistent leader in the Partnership for Public Service's Best Places to Work rankings for mid-size agencies, attributed to practices aligned with high-performance organization characteristics.

Strategic Implications

The article's findings point toward a widening gap in federal PMS between structural/administrative reform efforts and the behavioral, cultural, and trust-based conditions identified in performance research as necessary for sustainable high performance. The emphasis on AI as a 'performance multiplier' alongside the noted erosion of psychological safety suggests a tension in current federal PMS trajectories between technology-driven efficiency and human capital investment. The documented collapse of employee trust and morale creates measurable headwinds for any performance culture initiative, implying that workforce sentiment metrics may become increasingly central to evaluating PMS effectiveness in public sector contexts.

