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# Federal Employee Attitudes

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Phase 2:  
Follow-up Survey  
1980

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## Preliminary Report

**FEDERAL EMPLOYEE ATTITUDES**

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**Preliminary Report**

**U.S. Office of Personnel Management  
Office of Planning and Evaluation**

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## INTRODUCTION

### Background

The Civil Service Reform Act (CSRA) made fundamental changes in the ways in which Federal employees are to be managed, appraised, rewarded and removed from their jobs. The provisions of the Act, which include the Senior Executive Service (SES), merit pay, and new performance appraisal systems, are in various stages of implementation across the government:

- Major aspects of SES, including new procedures for managing, selecting, rewarding, removing, and training Federal executives, have been implemented;
- Most employees covered by merit pay are currently in an appraisal cycle which will lead to salary adjustments based on performance. Although a small number of employees had merit pay salary adjustments last October, most merit pay employees will experience their first pay-for-performance adjustments in October, 1981;
- New performance appraisal systems for all GS employees are scheduled to be implemented government-wide in October, 1981;
- New procedures for removing unacceptable performers are linked with the new CSRA performance appraisal systems. These procedures will be implemented several months after the performance appraisal systems are in place.

Information on the effects of these changes is being collected by a variety of methods. One of these methods is the Federal Employee Attitude Survey (FEAS), a questionnaire which gathers data on employee attitudes toward their jobs and workplaces and their perceptions of the effects of new CSRA programs. This preliminary report provides a description of some of the major findings of the second survey, administered in November, 1980, to senior-level employees.\* The report is organized into two major sections: Attitudes Toward Job and Workplace and Attitudes Toward Civil Service Reform (including Senior Executive Service, Merit Pay, Performance Appraisal, Actions Based on Unacceptable Performance, Labor-Management Relations, and Whistleblowing). The complete, final report is scheduled to be issued in late summer, 1981.

### Survey Procedures

The first Federal Employee Attitude Survey was administered in May, 1979, to a stratified random sample of Federal civilian employees at all levels. This survey collected baseline data on employee attitudes toward their jobs and workplaces and their perceptions of Federal personnel management practices at that time. The second FEAS was distributed to a stratified random sample of 13,000 senior-level employees in November, 1980.

\* NOTE: In this report, "senior-level employees" refers to all Federal civilian employees at pay grades GS 13 and above. This group is comprised of two subgroups: GS 13, 14, and 15 employees, who are identified as GS 13-15 in the report, and members of the Senior Executive Service, GS 16 and above equivalents, and Executive Level I-V employees, who are identified as executives.

Approximately 10,000 of these were returned, for a response rate of 75 percent. Along with items repeated from the first survey, items which gathered data on employee perceptions of civil service reform were included.

This report presents the preliminary analysis of data from the second survey. Where appropriate, information on any significant shifts from the 1979 to 1980 surveys is provided.

### ATTITUDES TOWARD JOB AND WORKPLACE

Employees' attitudes toward their jobs and workplace are determined by a variety of factors, many of which relate directly to the job being done and to the day-to-day "climate" of the organization in which the work is being performed. A number of questions relating to job and workplace asked in the first survey, conducted in May, 1979, were repeated in the second survey, distributed in late 1980 and early 1981. This section describes those attitudes, and focuses particularly on areas of change between 1979 and 1980.

#### Overall Job Satisfaction

- ° There were no major changes either in overall job satisfaction or in satisfaction with where senior-level employees work between 1979 and 1980. In 1979, 87 percent of senior-level employees agreed that "In general, I like working here," and 82 percent agreed that "In general, I am satisfied with my job." In 1980, 86 percent were satisfied with where they work and 79 percent with their jobs.
- ° Executives in 1980 were somewhat more likely than GS 13-15 employees to express satisfaction with both job and workplace. Ninety-one percent of executives were satisfied with where they work, compared with 85 percent of GS 13-15 employees. Eighty-five percent of executives, and 79 percent of GS 13-15 employees, were satisfied with their jobs.

As these findings indicate, senior-level employees continued to be generally positive about their jobs and organizations. However, as the sections below describe more fully, they were less certain about other factors relating to job satisfaction.

#### Job-Satisfaction Factors

- ° In both surveys, senior-level employees were asked to indicate how important they considered a series of work-related items to be in terms of what they wanted from their work. Both executives (98%) and GS 13-15 employees (96%) regarded getting a feeling of accomplishment from their jobs as being very important in what they want from their work. Roughly the same proportions also attach great importance to the chances they have to accomplish something worthwhile.
- ° Not surprisingly, GS 13-15 employees and executives differed on the importance they attached to their chances of getting a promotion.

Fifty-eight percent of GS 13-15 employees considered this very important in 1979, and 60 percent in 1980, compared with 45 percent of executives in both 1979 and 1980. In 1980, executives (52%) were more likely than GS 13-15 employees (42%) to rate as "very important" their chances for getting a performance award.

- Despite the importance of these factors to their jobs, senior-level employees in 1980 do not think there is much likelihood that they will actually receive them. Almost the same percentage (63%) of GS 13-15 employees who regarded their chances for promotion as very important to them felt that it was not likely that they would actually receive one. Only 23 percent of the executives thought it was very likely that they would receive a performance award.
- In 1980, job security was of greater concern to the GS 13-15 group than it was to executives. Sixty-three percent of GS 13-15 employees rated job security as very important, compared with only 40 percent of executives.
- Between 1979 and 1980, there was a slight decline in the percentage of senior-level employees who were satisfied with the recognition they receive for public service (from 43% in 1979 to 40% in 1980).

Comparison of senior-level employees' responses to the importance of promotions or performance awards with their estimates of the likelihood of receiving such rewards reveals an increased gap between the importance of such rewards to employees' job satisfaction and their perception of their chances of receiving them. At the same time that such factors as chances for a promotion or receiving a performance reward increased in importance, employees' estimates of the likelihood of their receiving such rewards declined.

#### Responsiveness to Change and Organizational Trust

- Employees are fairly positive about the possibility of change in their organizations. This has not changed over time: half of all senior-level employees disagreed with the statement that it was not possible to change things in both 1979 and 1980.
- Overall levels of organizational trust remained about the same between 1979 and 1980. In 1980, forty-six percent of senior-level employees felt that their organizations could be trusted, compared with 42 percent in 1979.

#### Organizational Effectiveness

- Almost eight out of every ten senior-level employees in both 1979 and 1980 felt their organizations were effective in accomplishing their goals.
- The 1980 survey asked respondents to rate their organizations' effectiveness on four factors: innovation, efficiency, providing high

quality service or products, and courtesy and helpfulness to the public. Executives were much more positive in their responses to all four items than GS 13-15 employees. Both groups of employees rated courtesy and helpfulness to the public highest: eighty-four percent of executives and 78 percent of GS 13-15 employees rated their organizations "good" on this item. Eighty percent of executives and 68 percent of GS 13-15 employees felt their organizations provided high quality service or products. A large proportion of executives (66%) and GS 13-15 employees (49%) felt their organizations were innovative. Sixty-two percent of executives and 45 percent of GS 13-15 employees gave their organizations a "good" rating on efficiency.

#### Plans to Leave the Organization

- ° In 1980, 49 percent of GS 13-15 employees and 79 percent of executives who planned to look for new jobs stated they would look outside the Federal sector.
- ° Of all factors they would consider in looking for a new job, both GS 13-15 employees and executives checked "better pay" most frequently, followed by "more responsibility" and "more interesting work."

### ATTITUDES TOWARD CIVIL SERVICE REFORM

#### SENIOR EXECUTIVE SERVICE

The Senior Executive Service (SES), created by CSRA, is an entire personnel system for Federal executives. Basic changes in four main areas of executive personnel management were made: position management, staffing, performance incentives, and executive development.

The survey collected information on executive attitudes toward the areas of staffing, performance incentives, and executive development. In addition, information was gathered on executive pay satisfaction, responsiveness to management, general opinions of the SES, and a variety of other issues. The following discussion presents the preliminary findings for pay satisfaction and performance incentives, including attitudes toward the SES bonus system.

#### Pay Satisfaction

- ° Executive dissatisfaction with pay has increased substantially. In 1980, 72 percent of executives were dissatisfied with their pay, compared with 50 percent in 1979. However, GS 13-15 employees are more satisfied now than before. In 1980, 67 percent were satisfied with their pay, compared with 52 percent in 1979.

In October, 1980, just before the second FEAS was administered, GS employees received a 9.1 percent pay increase, while the salaries of Federal executives

remained frozen. The continuing cap on executive salaries is reflected in the large amount of executive dissatisfaction with pay, a dissatisfaction which is growing over time.

#### Effects of the Pay Cap on Executive Retention and Hiring

- A majority of executives (52%) said that they were considering leaving Federal employment because of the current salary ceiling. Many others (16%) described themselves as undecided.
- About one-third (34%) of executives indicated that they would probably look for a new job during the next year. Seventy-nine percent of the executives who plan to look for a job expect to look outside of government; 85 percent of these individuals cited "better pay" as a major reason.
- Sixty percent of executives did not believe that there are sufficient incentives to retain highly competent executives in the Federal service. An additional 19 percent were undecided on this issue.
- A very large proportion (89%) of executives agreed that the pay cap makes it hard to recruit qualified SES candidates from the private sector.

The pay cap has become a significant issue in terms of executive retention and recruitment. The survey results indicate that a substantial number of Federal executives are either considering or planning to leave government service as a direct result of the limit on their pay. In addition, it is their belief that the pay cap makes it difficult to recruit highly qualified employees from the private sector.

#### Value of Performance Awards (SES Bonuses)

- The opportunity to receive a performance award was more important to executives in 1980 than in 1979. In 1980, 79 percent of executives described the opportunity as either somewhat or very important to them. In 1979, 62 percent said that it was somewhat or very important.
- Executives regarded their chances for receiving a cash award or unscheduled pay increase in 1980 to be about the same as in 1979. In 1980, 47 percent of the executives said that receiving a cash award or unscheduled pay increase was somewhat or very likely; in 1979, 44 percent said that receiving such rewards was somewhat or very likely.
- On the other hand, executive satisfaction with the opportunity for receiving a performance award declined sharply from 1979 to 1980. On the first survey, 24 percent of executives expressed dissatisfaction with their chances for receiving a performance award, compared to 52 percent in 1980.

While executives believe that the opportunity to receive performance awards is more important now than in 1979, they are also more dissatisfied with their personal chances of receiving an award. These results may indicate that, on the one hand, the SES bonus system has created a set

of expectations about the value of receiving a performance award. On the other hand, the 25 percent limit imposed by the Congress on the number of executives who can actually receive an award in one year decreases the overall chances for any particular executive to receive an award, a possible factor underlying the decreased satisfaction. Further, the continuing pay cap may have increased both the importance of and the dissatisfaction with the opportunity to receive an award, since executives may perceive awards as the only means of earning additional income to which they feel entitled.

#### Equity of the Awards Process

- ° Executive opinion about whether or not bonuses go to the best performers is divided: 30 percent believed that the bonuses go to the best performers and 38 percent did not think so.
- ° Executives were also divided on the issue of bonuses going to management favorites. Roughly one-third of the executives felt that they did, one-third felt that they did not, and one-third were undecided.
- ° A majority (58%) of executives agreed that bonuses go primarily to executives in the higher management echelons; only 17 percent disagreed.
- ° Half of the executives were undecided about whether or not their agency's Performance Review Board does a good job.
- ° Forty-four percent were undecided about the fairness of procedures for awarding distinguished and meritorious ranks.

These findings indicate that executives may not have enough information to judge the equity of the awards process. The large amount of "undecided" opinions probably reflects the fact that executives have had experience with only one bonus cycle.

#### Consequences of Poor Performance

- ° Executives are even less certain about whether or not poor executive performers are removed from their jobs; in 1979, 38 percent were undecided and in 1980, 59 percent were undecided.

#### MERIT PAY

Under merit pay, GS 13-15 managers and supervisors are granted pay increases based on their performance. By strengthening the linkage between pay and performance, the merit pay system is intended to encourage recruitment and retention of the most competent mid-level managers and supervisors, to stimulate top performers to maintain high performance levels, and to improve the performance of other merit pay employees.



- ° Almost half (49%) of all senior-level Federal employees think that, in principle, merit pay is a good idea; 66 percent of executives and 57 percent of employees who have already had their salary adjusted under merit pay think that the principle of merit pay is a good one.
- ° About half (51%) of senior-level employees did not think that the performance appraisal system for merit pay employees would distinguish between better and worse performers. A smaller number (38%) of merit pay employees who already had experienced salary adjustments and of executives (23%) did not believe the system would work.

A large number of senior-level employees agreed with the principle of merit pay, but an equally large number express concern about the viability of the performance appraisal system which is the basis of merit pay salary adjustments. Executives, who themselves have had experience with the bonus system, and merit pay employees who have already had their salaries adjusted under the merit pay system, are more positive both about the principle of merit pay and about the ability of performance appraisal systems to distinguish between better and worse performers.

#### PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL

CSRA requires that all agencies establish new performance appraisal systems based upon direct measures of job performance, rather than the indirect measures used in the past (i.e., character traits). These systems are to provide for the establishment of specific performance standards set for each element of job performance. In addition to providing feedback on job performance to employees, performance appraisals will provide the basis upon which all personnel decisions (promotions, training, demotions, etc.) should be made.

At this interim stage, new performance appraisal systems have been established for the majority of SES and merit pay employees. Nearly all SES employees have completed at least one performance appraisal cycle, while most merit pay employees are currently in their first cycle. In interpreting the following data, it is important to be aware that while SES responses may be based on the new performance appraisal systems, most of the other responses will be based on the pre-CSRA systems.

#### Worth of performance appraisal process

- ° Fifty-six percent of all senior-level employees agreed that performance appraisal is worth the time it takes; 27 percent did not. Among executives, 60 percent agreed while 23 percent disagreed.
- ° In 1980, sixty-one percent of senior-level employees agreed that their organizations consider performance appraisal to be an important part of a supervisor's duties; 22 percent did not. In 1979, 56 percent agreed and 21 percent did not. Among the executive population alone there was increase from 63 percent to 71 percent between the two surveys.

Although the majority of senior-level employees agreed that performance appraisal is worthwhile and is considered important by their organizations, the surprisingly large number of such employees disagreeing indicates a problem may exist. The more positive attitudes expressed by the executive population are perhaps due to the greater role these employees have played in implementing the CSRA in general (which would lead to a greater understanding of its intent), and, more specifically, the greater experience executives have had with the new performance appraisal systems.

#### Performance expectations

- ° A majority of employees (62%) feel that they and their supervisors agree on what is meant by good performance. There were no major changes from 1979.

The lack of change for the overall population may reflect the fact that many GS 13-15 employees have not yet completed their first performance appraisal cycle under the new system and have not observed any change.

#### Employee participation in performance appraisal process

- ° Fifty-four percent of senior-level employees reported that they participated in the development of their performance standards, while 38 percent said they did not. Seventy-one percent of the executives reported such participation; 23 percent did not participate in developing their standards.

CSRA encourages employee participation in the performance appraisal process; such participation should increase commitment to performance standards and to the appraisal process in general, as well as giving the employee a sense of control over the work for which he/she is responsible.

#### Fairness and accuracy of supervisors' evaluations

- ° Senior-level employees are still skeptical that performance appraisals are individually-based. Asked whether or not supervisors tend to give the same performance ratings to their subordinates irrespective of performance, 43 percent of senior-level employees agreed, while 39 percent disagreed. In response to this question on the first survey, 47 percent agreed, while 40 percent disagreed.
- ° Ninety-five percent of senior-level supervisors felt that they could accurately evaluate their subordinates' performance.

If the performance appraisal provision of CSRA has the intended effects, employees should increasingly perceive that supervisors do discriminate between levels of performance and that supervisors rate them objectively based on preestablished performance standards. The large percentage of employees (43%) who believe that ratings are assigned regardless of performance is inconsistent with the intent of CSRA.

#### Linkage between performance appraisal and personnel actions

- ° Forty-eight percent of senior-level employees believed that performance appraisals influence personnel actions, while 27 percent did not.

This is a significant decrease from the first survey, in which 61 percent saw this linkage, while 22 percent did not.

This is probably the most serious potential problem for performance appraisal systems uncovered in this survey. It is difficult to identify a reason for this finding at this time, since most senior-level employees do not have experience with the new performance appraisal systems. Because CSRA intended to strengthen the linkage between performance appraisal systems and personnel actions, attitudes toward this issue will become more important over time.

#### ACTIONS BASED ON UNACCEPTABLE PERFORMANCE

CSRA created a new set of procedures for taking action against employees who performed poorly. These procedures require a less severe standard of evidence than previously needed to sustain an appealed action and tie the decision to take action based on unacceptable performance to the performance appraisal system.

Agencies are not permitted to use the new procedures for taking action against poor performers until their new CSRA performance appraisal systems are in place. Therefore, the following findings refer to the pre-CSRA procedures currently in use.

#### Supervisory Willingness to Take Corrective Action

- ° A large proportion (44%) of senior-level employees disagreed that supervisors will take corrective action when necessary. There is little change for senior-level employees (47%) from 1979 to 1980.
- ° One-third of senior-level employees believed that moving employees to positions where they could be ignored is used as a method for dealing with unsatisfactory performers in their organizations.
- ° Senior-level employees generally believe that removal procedures are clear. Almost half (48%) of them disagreed with the statement that removal procedures were unclear. Fifty-nine percent of executives disagreed with the statement.
- ° An extremely high number of supervisors (91%) said that they knew how to take actions against poor performers or whom to contact for help in taking actions.
- ° Forty-nine percent of senior-level employees agreed that downgrading of poor performers is avoided due to paperwork requirements.

These findings indicate that many senior-level employees do not believe that any action, either formal or informal, will be taken against poorly performing employees. This lack of action is not necessarily due to unclear procedures, however, since most supervisors say they know what to do or whom to contact for assistance. The paperwork burden in taking action against poor performers appears to be an important reason for avoiding action.

## LABOR-MANAGEMENT RELATIONS

The Civil Service Reform Act established a statutory base for the Federal labor relations program, created an independent agency to resolve labor-management disputes, and initiated other changes which allow greater union involvement in some matters related to personnel policies and practices.

Twenty-four percent of all senior-level employees said that they supervised bargaining unit employees, either directly or indirectly. Of the executives surveyed, 39 percent said they supervised bargaining unit employees. Only those senior-level employees who identified themselves as having direct or indirect supervisory responsibility for bargaining unit employees responded to the section of the survey which asked about labor-management issues. The following discussion refers only to these particular supervisors, who are called "respondents."

### Familiarity with Labor-Management Relations

- ° Three-fourths (77%) of the respondents stated that they were very or somewhat familiar with the labor relations portions of CSRA.
- ° Eighty-nine percent of the respondents said they were very or somewhat familiar with the contract covering the employees whom they supervised.

In general, it appears that supervisors responsible for bargaining unit employees are familiar with the labor relations changes made by CSRA and with the collective bargaining agreements covering their particular employees.

### Management-Union Relationships

- ° About half (51%) of the respondents agreed that unions and management cooperated with one another to solve organizational problems. Executives were slightly more negative: 43 percent agreed.
- ° Forty-eight percent of the respondents agreed that decisions reached jointly by unions and management were usually more beneficial for the organization than unilateral management decisions; one-fourth disagreed.
- ° Almost half (48%) of the respondents agreed that unions provided effective protection for employees.

As a rule, about half of the respondents believe that the unions and management can and do work together constructively in dealing with organizational problems, to the benefit of both. Supervisors also feel, in general, that the unions are effective in meeting their objective of employee protection.

### Union Influence on Management's Ability to Manage

- ° When asked if the union routinely opposes personnel management moves, supervisors were evenly divided. Thirty-seven percent of the respondents believed that the union routinely interfered, but 36 percent did not.

- ° Thirty-four percent of the respondents agreed that the union often imposes harmful delays in organizational functioning; 43 percent disagreed. Executives were somewhat more likely to see unions as causing delays: 40 percent of executives agreed with this item.

These findings are more ambiguous than those cited earlier. Supervisors are more evenly divided on the issues of union opposition to management and the organizational effects of union involvement in management processes.

#### WHISTLEBLOWING

CSRA established certain protections for employees who "blow the whistle" on cases of fraud, waste, and abuse in government. The intent of this provision was to encourage employees who might otherwise fear for their jobs and job rewards in reporting information which superiors might consider damaging.

- ° The majority of executives (76%) and GS 13-15 employees (61%) said that they are not afraid to "blow the whistle." There is practically no change from 1979 to 1980.
- ° Most (69%) senior-level employees in 1980 do not think that their supervisors would take action against them if they brought cases of waste or inefficiency to their attention. This percentage decreased somewhat from 1979, when 73 percent said that their supervisor would not take action. In 1980, executives expressed more confidence in their supervisors than did GS 13-15 employees. Eighty-one percent of executives did not think their supervisors would take action, compared to 69 percent of GS 13-15 employees.

For further information about the Federal Employee Attitude Survey, contact:

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