Improving Federal Management

Encouraging a growth mindset in managers to increase team performance

Agency Objective Increase the productivity of government teams by improving the performance of Federal managers.

Background Responses to OPM's 2015 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) suggest that improvement is still needed to achieve high employee engagement and satisfaction.[1] Improving the quality of first-level supervision and the direct relationship between an employee and manager are cited by a report to Congress and more than 1,500 journal articles to be one of the most effective ways to improve organizational culture and performance.[2]

The Performance Improvement Council (PIC)[3] set out to create a scalable tool to improve managerial soft-skills for front-line managers in the federal government. The result is an eight-module course entitled "Modern Government Management Traits (Project MGMT)" based on best practices such as Google's "Project Oxygen," which focuses on the eight traits exemplified by successful managers.[4]

Over a 16-week period from April 18 to August 5 2016, approximately 300 federal managers at the Departments of Labor and Energy were emailed materials on a bi-weekly basis for each of the eight self-directed modules and were asked to attend a group meeting to discuss the materials.

Program Change As part of this program, OES worked with PIC to build in (1) a feedback process for employees of participating managers and (2) a manager self-assessment. Additionally, OES randomly selected a subset of participating managers for an incremental "growth mindset"

intervention via email. Priming a growth mindset, or the belief that an individual can develop their intelligence over time, has shown to increase the persistence and performance of students.[5] Research is emerging to demonstrate that managers and employees with a growth mindset are more engaged and support a culture that leads to innovation and increased productivity.[6]

Evaluation Methods To measure the effect of the growth-mindset intervention, all managers and each of their employees were invited to complete a voluntary 14-question online survey assessment of manager performance before the pilot program began (Week 0) and after the pilot program concluded (Week 16). Each survey question presented a statement about manager performance related to one of the eight traits, and asked for a response on a 1-to-7 point scale, with 1 meaning "strongly disagree" and 7 meaning "strongly agree" with the statement.

All managers in this study completed self-assessment surveys. However, some employees did not complete baseline (Week 0) surveys for their managers. Managers for whom employees filled out performance surveys are termed "employee-matched managers". Managers for whom no employees filled out performance surveys are termed "unmatched managers". Prior to randomization, managers are first separated by whether they are employee-matched or

[1] OPM Employee Engagement: https://www.unlocktalent.gov/employee-engagement

[2] "A Call to Action: Improving First-Level Supervision of Federal Employees." Report to the President and Congress of the United States by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board.

[3] https://www.pic.gov/

[4] David A. Garvin, "How Google Sold Its Engineers on Management." Harvard Business Review, vol. 91, no. 12 (2013): 74-82.

[5] Lisa Blackwell et al, "Implicit Theories of Intelligence Predict Achievement Across an Adolescent Transition: A Longitudinal Study and an Intervention." Child Development 78 (2007): 246-263. Eleanor O'Rourke et al, "Brain points: a growth mindset incentive structure boosts persistence in an educational game." Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, 2014: 3339-3348.

[6] Heslin, Peter A., and Don VandeWalle. "Managers' implicit assumptions about personnel." Current Directions in Psychological Science 17.3 (2008): 219-223. Harvard Business Review Staff, "How Companies Can Profit from a "Growth Mindset." Nov. 2014. Heslin, Peter A. "18 Mindsets and employee engagement: theoretical linkages and practical interventions." Handbook of employee engagement: Perspectives, issues, research and practice (2010): 218-226.

unmatched, then blocked by gender, GS-level, and baseline scores and employee characteristics.

For employee-matched managers, OES paired together managers with the same gender, GS-level, employee characteristics, and employee-assessment baseline score created from 14 assessment questions asked of their employees in the baseline. One manager in each pair was randomly assigned to receive the email intervention. Treatment (the email intervention) was assigned randomly to one manager in each pair with 88 assigned treatment and 89 assigned control with the following breakdown:

Level	Male	Female	Total
GS-13	23	30	53
GS-14	31	28	59
GS-15+	32	33	565
Total	86	91	177

For unmatched managers, OES paired together managers with the same gender, GS-level, employee characteristics, and answers to 14 self-assessment questions asked in the baseline survey. One manager in each of the 52 pairs was randomly assigned to receive the email intervention, while the other was assigned to control.

Level	Male	Female	Total
GS-13	11	22	33
GS-14	15	28	43
GS-15+	15	13	28
Total	41	63	104

For employee-matched managers, the outcome of interest is change in average performance score, comparing the average scores given by employees of the manager after the intervention to the average scores given before the intervention before and after the intervention.

For unmatched managers, the outcome of interest is change in self-assessment score pre and post

intervention from manager.

Results The Growth Mindset tools did not have any detectable effect on employee or self-assessments, although the effects are imprecisely measured due to employee and manager response rates. For example, the change in average employee assessment among the managers in the Growth Mindset group was about .17 smaller than the corresponding change in the managers in the control group [p=.3, 95% CI -.49, .15]. This difference (shown in the third boxplot on the right of Figure 1), is mostly driven by the fact that, by change, the baseline scores of the managers in the treatment group were a bit higher than the managers randomly assigned to the control group.
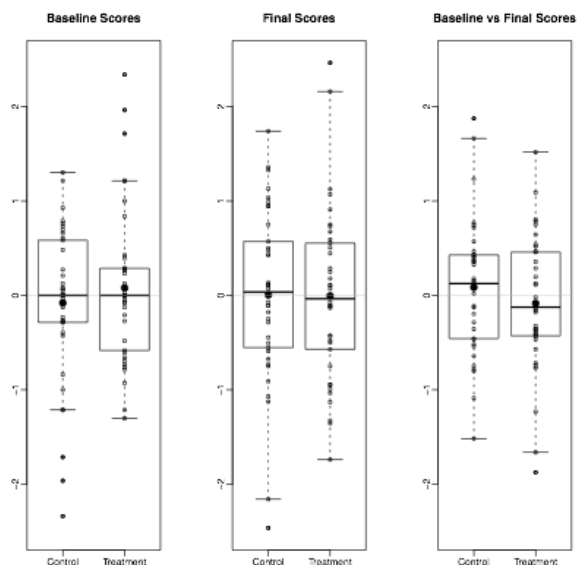

Figure 1: Control versus treatment manager employee assessments. All points are differences within pair.

Employee assessments of managers across all traits decreased slightly(from an average of 4.71 to 4.63); manager self-assessments increased (from 5.76 to 6.19). Managers whose employees did not complete the post-project assessment had on average higher baseline employee assessment

scores than those who responded to both assessments. Manager self-assessment baseline scores did not differ between those who did and did not drop out of the sample.

Conclusion It is worth designing an evaluation that would enable agencies to adapt and deploy low-cost, scalable tools such as Project MGMT and the Growth Mindset resources effectively. Due to the voluntary nature of the manager self-assessments and employee assessments, the response rate for this sample size prevented a more conclusive evaluation. Additionally, a control group that receives assessments but not the tool itself would enable measuring the impact of Project MGMT itself.