



# Moving the Needle on Employee Engagement During the Presidential Transition



As our nation approaches another transfer of power from one administration to the next, roughly 4,000 political appointees are preparing to leave their jobs. To help the government continue to function effectively during the presidential transition, career civil servants—those individuals who comprise the vast majority of the federal workforce and serve across administrations—will be relied on heavily.

Whether serving on an interim basis for political appointees who have departed before their successors are in place, getting newly appointed political employees up to speed, or maintaining focus and continuing to do high-quality work to advance their agency missions, career civil servants are essential to the transfer of power.

At the same time, many career civil servants will have to contend with tremendous uncertainty. Anxiety often permeates the workplace, as employees wonder about the identity of their future supervisors, the status of their portfolios, or even the incoming leadership’s commitment to their agency’s mission. This can threaten employee satisfaction and commitment—two vital components of strong employee engagement.

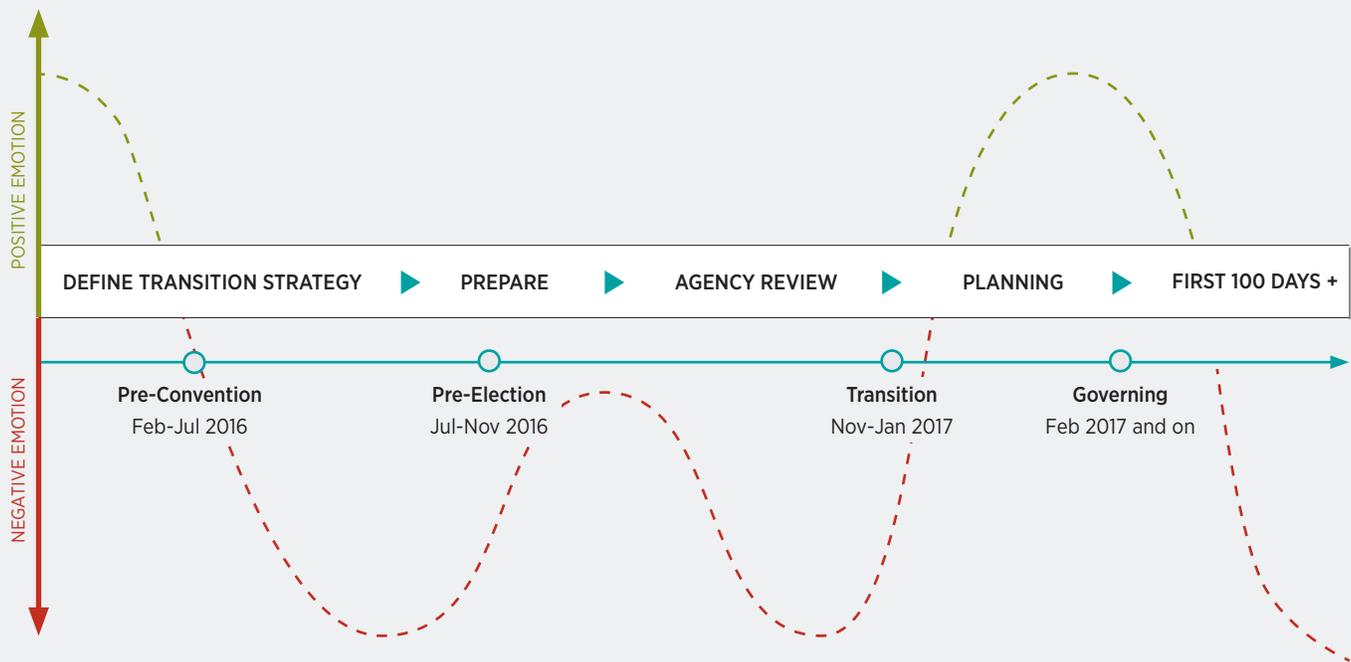
Following a government-wide decline in employee job and workplace satisfaction for four consecutive years, 2015 saw an uptick, according to the *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government*® data. While some insecurity is unavoidable during a transition, leaders can safeguard the progress made in 2015 and build on its momentum by taking steps to reassure employees and keep them focused on and engaged in their work.

Based on a review of *Best Places to Work* data, a series of interviews and a June 2016 panel discussion with public and private sector leaders, the Partnership for Public Service and Deloitte learned that effective communication by leaders at all levels will be a critical factor in maintaining workplace satisfaction and commitment and boosting employee engagement during the 2016-2017 presidential transition.

The presidential transition consists of multiple stages. At each stage, from the period between the conventions and the election, to the time between the election and the president being sworn in, to the new administration’s first 100 days, career civil servants and new political appointees face challenges that effective communication can help to overcome.

## CAREER CIVIL SERVANT JOURNEY

Career civil servants face many uncertainties about the future of their agencies through the presidential transition process.



Source: Deloitte Consulting LLP

# THE ROLE OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN BUILDING AND SUSTAINING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

In a 2013 study, Deloitte reported a statistically significant positive relationship between effective leadership communication and employee engagement.<sup>1</sup> Yet federal leaders often struggle to communicate effectively with their employees, according to *Best Places to Work* data that is based on the Office of Personnel Management’s 2015 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey. Based on employees’ responses to three questions that touch on different aspects of leadership communication, roughly half of the government’s employees are satisfied with the quality of communication they receive from their agencies’ leaders.

In addition, the 2015 data show that the overall opinion of employees regarding their leaders is low, with the government-wide *Best Places to Work* score for effective leadership standing at just 51.6 out of 100. Out of the 10 *Best Places to Work* workplace categories, effective leadership received a lower score than all but one in 2015.

In times of heightened uncertainty, frequent and effective communication is especially important. Yet satisfaction with agency leadership and the quality of its communication may be at risk of declining further during the presidential transition, as many federal agencies might opt to reduce communication with employees during unsure times.<sup>2</sup>

In our June 2016 panel discussion, public and private sector leaders brainstormed ways to maintain employee engagement during the transition, emphasizing the need for leadership to communicate effectively with employees. Participants highlighted the need for leaders to think creatively about the “what,” “who,” “how” and “when” of communicating the transition.



**WHAT**  
SHOULD AGENCIES COMMUNICATE TO EMPLOYEES ABOUT THE TRANSITION



**WHO**  
SHOULD DO THE COMMUNICATING



**HOW**  
SHOULD INFORMATION BE COMMUNICATED



**WHEN**  
COMMUNICATION BUILDS THE TEAM

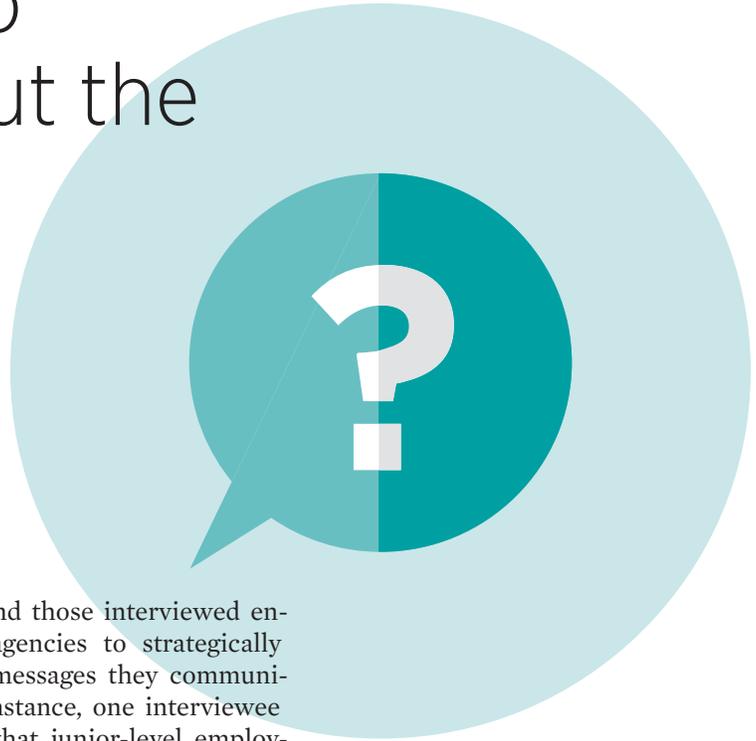
## 2015 PERCENT OF POSITIVE RESPONSES TO COMMUNICATION QUESTIONS

Questions	Government-wide
How satisfied are you with the information you receive from management on what’s going on in your organization?	44.5
Managers promote communication among different work units (for example, about projects, goals, needed resources).	46.6
Managers communicate the goals and priorities of the organization.	55.6

<sup>1</sup> Deloitte Consulting LLP, *Silencing the Static: Engaging Employees in an Unsettled Environment*, July 2014. Retrieved from: <http://bit.ly/2axHQTh>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

# **WHAT** should agencies communicate to employees about the transition?



Communicating regularly with employees throughout the transition can help reduce anxiety, prevent rumors from spreading, keep employees focused on successfully completing their work and ensure that agencies are prepared to accept the incoming administration's teams.

According to panelists and interviewees, employees would appreciate their leaders doing something as simple as acknowledging that a transition is underway and change is coming. To the extent possible, leaders should share what their agencies are doing to prepare for the transition and discuss how the transition is likely to affect the workplace.

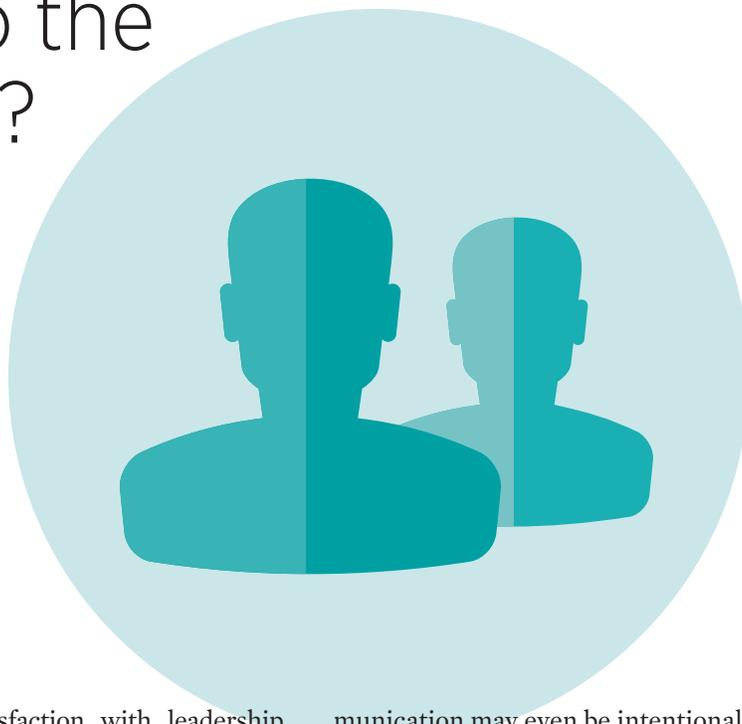
Where transition outcomes are uncertain—for example, the identity or priorities of the incoming team—leaders should be upfront and share that information. One interviewee noted that regular communication about the transition should continue even if there is no news to report, as maintaining momentum is important and regular communication can help employees feel well-informed.

Because the transition affects members of the workforce differently—for example, junior, mid-level and retirement-eligible employees—

panelists and those interviewed encouraged agencies to strategically tailor the messages they communicate. For instance, one interviewee explained that junior-level employees, often going through their first transition, may erroneously believe that incoming leadership can immediately “eliminate their program with a wave of the hand.” A targeted effort to ensure that junior-level employees are correctly informed could prevent unnecessary anxiety.

While the presidential transition can threaten employee engagement if leaders fail to communicate effectively, panelists and interviewees noted that it also can present unique opportunities. One participant asserted that the transition is a good opportunity for leaders to re-engage employees in their agencies' missions. Another urged staff to take advantage of the transition to identify the most important projects in their portfolio and prepare to discuss them with the incoming team. And another interviewee said that the transition is a good time to remind employees how their day-to-day work contributes to mission fulfillment and serves the public.

# WHO should do the communicating?



Decades of research show a link between leadership and employee engagement.<sup>3</sup> Panelists and interviewees urged leaders at all levels—not only senior leaders—to communicate about the transition with employees. One interviewee asserted that while senior leaders tend to communicate well, lower-level managers often struggle. This is borne out in the 2015 *Best Places to Work* data, with managers (whose supervisors are more likely to be senior-level leaders) reporting

higher satisfaction with leadership communication than staff (whose supervisors are likely to be lower-level managers). The satisfaction gap is even larger when comparing members of the senior executive service (whose supervisors are typically the most senior-level members of an agency) to the rest of the workforce.

Thus, key messages that could help foster employee engagement may not get passed from senior leaders to the staff-level workforce if mid-level managers do not effectively communicate with the employees on their teams. At times, poor communication

may even be intentional: two participants lamented that some leaders deliberately keep employees in the dark, believing that “information is power.”

Participants also urged leaders to frequently communicate information, “nine times and nine different ways...even over-communicating...to ensure that everyone gets it.” One interviewee helped implement a leadership development program at his agency that helps leaders have “crucial conversations” with employees, emphasizing the importance of communication during periods of change.

<sup>3</sup> The Conference Board, *DNA of Engagement: How Organizations Build and Sustain Highly Engaging Leaders*, March 2016. Retrieved from: <http://bit.ly/2aNNr8P>

## DIFFERENCE IN RESPONSE BETWEEN STAFF AND MANAGERS OR SES

Questions	Managers	Staff	Difference	SES	Non-SES	Difference
How satisfied are you with the information you receive from management on what's going on in your organization?	58.6	44.0	-14.6	78.3	44.3	-34.0
Managers promote communication among different work units (for example, about projects, goals, needed resources).	60.9	45.7	-15.2	80.3	46.4	-33.9
Managers communicate the goals and priorities of the organization.	67.3	55.8	-11.5	83.8	55.5	-28.3

# HOW should information be communicated?



Certain methods of communication are likely to resonate more strongly with employees of different generations. Therefore, as one participant urged, leaders should “communicate [the transition] in every way they can.” Older employees, for example, may be more accustomed to talking on the phone or receiving information in print, whereas the younger generation is increasingly comfortable with digital communication. Fortunately, leaders seem to understand that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to effective communication, with one panelist noting that training sessions on intergenerational communication are the most popular at her agency.

In-person meetings are one way for leaders to communicate information about the transition to employees. Town hall gatherings are an approach, but can be “frustrating” and should be reserved for instances where the message is relevant to a mass audience or needs to be communicated quickly, according to one participant. Announcing new political appointees or policy initiatives would be appropriate at a town hall meeting. Small-group meetings are often more effective, as they offer employees valuable face time with leaders and enable more nuanced

and collaborative communication.

Technology and print can be effective ways to share information about the transition with employees. One agency developed a wiki—an interactive website that allows users to share and edit information about the transition. Agencies might also consider devoting a section of their employee newsletters to the transition, as one participant suggested.

While it is important for leaders to share information about the transition with employees, employees also should have the opportunity to participate in the transition process. Directly involving lower-level employees can foster buy-in and demonstrate that their opinions are valued.

Members of the staff do not always feel like they have a voice in the workplace. According to the 2015 *Best Places to Work* data, only 47.3

percent of employees are satisfied with their involvement in the decisions that affect their work, and just 34.6 percent believe that the results from the federal survey will be used to make their agency a better place to work.

Participants suggested a number of ways that agencies can involve employees in the transition, including:

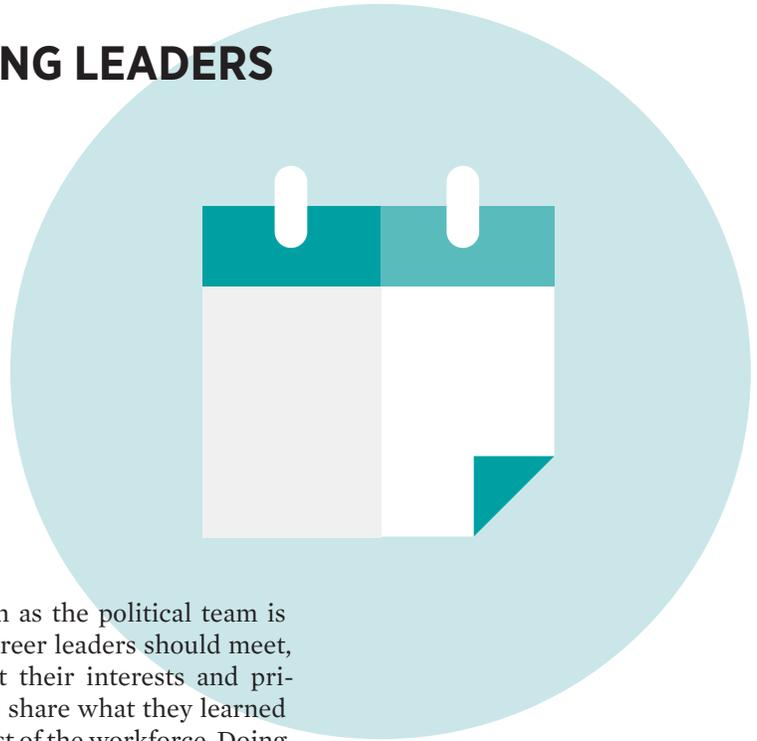
- Allowing junior-level employees to attend meetings with incoming appointees and even deliver briefings on the programs they work on;
- Including junior-level employees on internal transition teams to help represent all points of view; and
- Encouraging “reverse mentoring”—a process where younger workers coach older workers on topics such as using technology in the workplace.

## 2015 PERCENT OF POSITIVE RESPONSES

Questions	Government-wide
How satisfied are you with your involvement in decisions that affect your work?	47.3
I believe the results of this survey will be used to make my agency a better place to work.	34.6

# **WHEN** communication builds the team

## **INTRODUCING THE INCOMING LEADERS**



A good time to introduce new political appointees to the workforce is during the post-inauguration stage of the transition when they are waiting to be confirmed. While the inclination is often to wait for nominees to be confirmed, one panelist argued that “worrying about the presumption of confirmation” wastes valuable time. Indeed, the period between the nomination and the confirmation is when the appointee may have free time. According to participants, this represents an opportunity to take nominees into the field, introduce them to the workforce, and provide education on the agency and its programs. For many, the learning curve will be steep: political appointees often have no prior federal government experience.<sup>4</sup>

As soon as the political team is in place, career leaders should meet, learn about their interests and priorities, and share what they learned with the rest of the workforce. Doing so not only stands to reduce anxiety, but would help ensure that staff does not invest unnecessary time in work that falls outside of the political appointees’ agenda.

<sup>4</sup> Business Executives for National Security, *Making Senior Government Service More Attractive*, May 2015, p. 21. Retrieved from: <http://bit.ly/2aNNr8P>

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## CONCLUSION

The presidential transition presents both challenges to and opportunities for fostering stronger employee satisfaction and commitment. On one hand, the transition brings uncertainty, and many employees worry about working with new leaders and how their agencies and work portfolios might change. Yet the transition can also provide employees at all levels with a unique opportunity to lean in and re-engage. Ultimately, the transition is what leaders make of it, and much of its impact on how employees view their jobs and workplace will hinge on how effectively it is communicated—at all of its stages.

- Leaders at all levels should communicate regularly with employees, sharing what they know and what they do not know about the transition and how it will likely impact their agency.
- Leaders should communicate information in as many ways as possible, recognizing that different approaches may resonate more strongly with different employees.
- When feasible, leaders should permit and encourage employees to participate directly in the transition process.
- Following the inauguration, leaders should waste no time in introducing incoming political appointees to the workforce.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The *Best Places to Work* data is derived from the Office of Personnel Management's Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey data, which includes the views of more than 421,000 respondents who participated in the survey from April through June of 2015. Government-wide scores represent the views of all respondents to the FEVS.

Findings are based on a series of interviews conducted in August 2016 and the views of panelists and employees from across government who participated in a workshop in June 2016.

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