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Idea-Ology

The Power of People

"... [T]he best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market..."¹

—Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.

Both within and outside government the importance of human capital has taken on new meaning. It is nearly impossible to pick up a professional journal or periodical, regardless of the occupation or field of interest, and not find a compelling article on some aspect of human capital—be it attracting, retaining, and training quality people or a variety of related subjects. For a number of reasons that are touched on later in this article, it has become increasingly difficult to ensure that government agencies are able to retain a competent, highly motivated and satisfied workforce. Yet, as our nation continues its transformation to a service-based economy, the workforce is clearly the key to success. This transformation applies as well to government and the wide range of services that government provides to the citizens of this country.

The thesis of this article is that there is no segment of government operations which is more “people dependent” than the operation of the various Offices of Inspectors General. Those of us who are in the Inspector General community recognize that we are players in what has been widely described as the “marketplace of ideas.” And, as advanced as we have become technologically, it is still true that ideas only come from people! Thus, it is incumbent upon the IGs to do everything possible to develop their human capital.

Soon we will be meeting with new agency heads and new Members of Congress. As we have done since the inception of the modern inspector general concept, we can and must again prove our worth to these leaders as assisting in the achievement of good government. As we help confront the challenges facing the new Congress and the new Administration, Inspectors General and their staffs do well to heed Justice Holmes and his belief in the virtue of a robust exchange of ideas. That which has come to be known as “the marketplace of ideas” is quite instructive to the role of Inspectors General today. Offices of Inspectors General are in the “ideas” business, and in that business, like others, we must remain competitive.

Our resumes are diverse. We are independent and objective units. We promote economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in agency operations. We wear many hats, and perform

¹ *Abrams v. United States*, 250 U.S. 616, 630 (1919) (Holmes, J., dissenting).

many roles. We are auditors, investigators, and inspectors. We are attorneys, certified public accountants, and computer specialists. We exercise law enforcement authority responsibly. We are junkyard dogs. We are management consultants. Yet, the work we do, the reports we author, and the recommendations for positive change we formulate, will be of no avail if they are not supported by very simple yet priceless commodities: good ideas. Ideas for making government work more efficiently and effectively.

The technological advancements of the information age are, and will continue to be, extraordinary. The pace of change is breathless. At the same time, all of the technological tools at our disposal, and they are many, will not rescue us from irrelevance if we fail to identify, recruit, train, and retain the right skills mix of people. They are the sources of all those good ideas for positive change.

Government downsizing, the coming retirement wave of the baby-boom generation, and a robust economy's thriving private sector, all have combined for a shortage of skilled public sector labor. These and other factors are contributing to an emerging crisis in human capital. Simply put, the Federal government as a whole faces a significant shortage in the coming years of talented and trained staff to perform its diverse missions. This issue has been widely reported in the press, and analyzed by numerous scholars.

We in the Inspector General community must be prepared to anticipate and meet this challenge. Asked the secret of his success, the hockey great Wayne Gretzky once said, "I skate to where the puck will be, not to where it is."² We must have vision. Vision to anticipate. In addition to keeping the Congress and the agency heads informed on this and other issues of concern, we must have the vision to take a hard look at our own operations, and develop strategies for recruiting and retaining the best and the brightest.

² Brian Jeffery, "Building Bigger, Better Platforms: Technology-Makers Race to Bring More Powerful Platforms to Market," *MIDRANGE Systems*, February 24, 1995.

Without them, we will lose all of those good ideas, as well as our competitive advantage in the government marketplace of ideas.

The employees of the various Offices of Inspectors General, in our experience, are some of the most dedicated, enlightened, and motivated public servants to be encountered in public service. David M. Walker, the Comptroller General of the United States has concluded that the approximately 1.8 million employees of the federal government are its greatest asset.³ We agree.

GAO has also sounded the alarm over the emerging crisis of human capital in the Federal government. The Comptroller General has even gone so far as to forewarn that the "shortcomings in the federal government's human capital management systems could well earn them GAO's high-risk designation when the next High Risk series is issued in 2001."⁴ As GAO has noted, the Federal workforce is aging, the job market is exceedingly competitive (particularly for employees with computer and other high-tech skills), and the government downsizing of the previous ten years have all contributed to



a coming shortage of skilled federal labor.

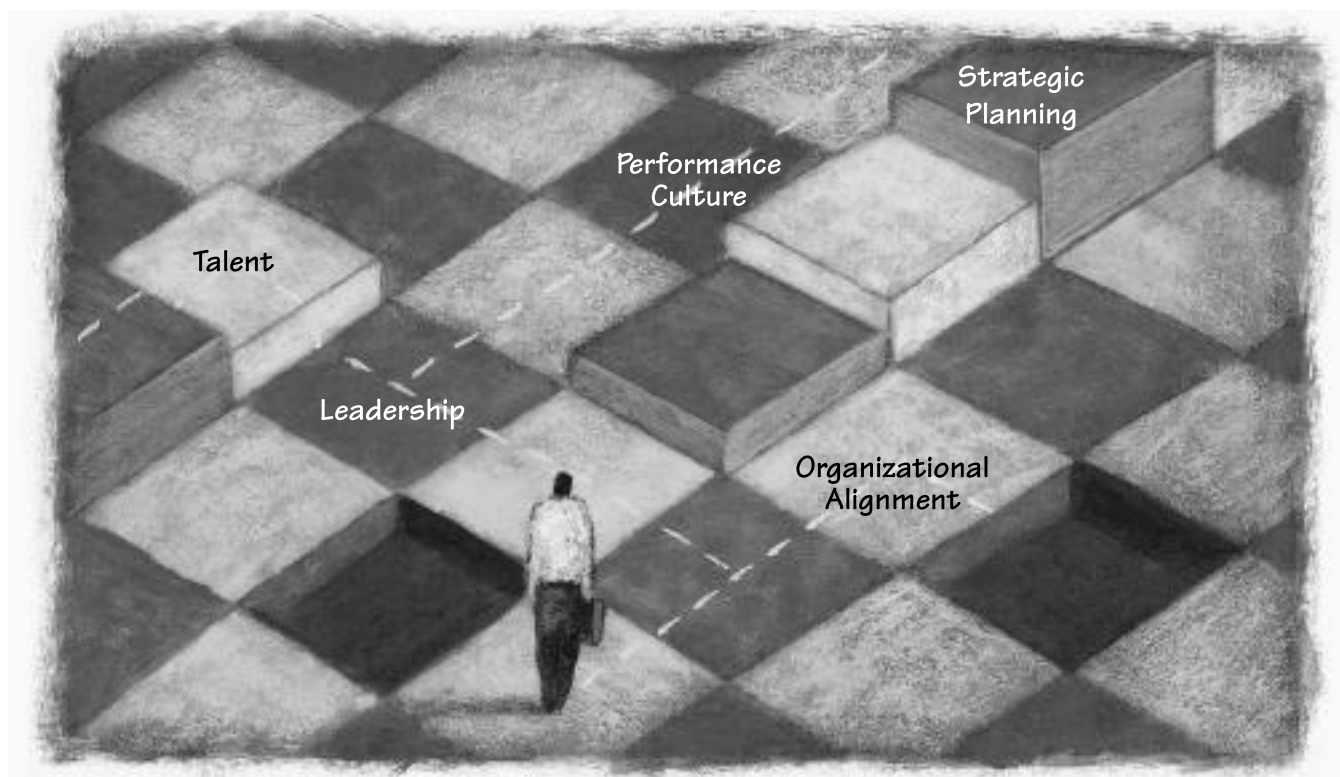
GAO has proposed a checklist for evaluating the efficacy of agency human capital systems. We found this excellent checklist to be directly applicable to the Inspector General community, too:

- *Strategic Planning:* Establish the agency's mission, vision for the future, core values, goals, and strategies.
- *Organizational Alignment:* Integrate human capital strategies with the agency's core business practices.

³ Statement of David M. Walker, Comptroller General of the United States, before the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, Restructuring, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Governmental Affairs, United States Senate (March 9, 2000), p. 1.

⁴ *Id.* at 5.

Evaluating the Efficacy of Agency Human Capital Systems



- **Leadership:** Foster a committed leadership team and provide reasonable continuity through succession planning.
- **Talent:** Recruit, hire, develop, and retain employees with the skills needed for mission accomplishment.
- **Performance Culture:** Enable and motivate performance while ensuring accountability and fairness for all employees.⁵

How do Offices of Inspectors General rate in this evaluation? Has each Inspector General done all that can be done? We must continuously take stock of agency and our own efforts.

The task begins and ends with recruiting and retaining the right people. This has proven ever more difficult given the salaries and benefits available in the private sector. Indeed, a Congressional Budget Office study confirms, as just one example, the significant pay gap between federal executives and their private sector counterparts.⁶

We must emphasize in our recruitment efforts the many advantages of Federal service, and in particular, the many rewards of service with an Office of Inspector General. In our combined 42 years of government service, we

have not encountered a more challenging and satisfying opportunity to make an impact. These views are no doubt shared by others. Indeed, the distinguished Washington attorney E. Barrett Prettyman, Jr., recently completed a term as Inspector General of the District of Columbia. Mr. Prettyman has the distinction of having clerked for no less than three Justices of the United States Supreme Court and has argued numerous cases before the High Court. Interestingly, with all of his assignments over the years, Mr. Prettyman has stated that his service as an inspector general was “the best job I’ve ever had.”⁷

To be sure, the “dot coms” of the information age can offer salary and other remuneration that dwarfs the Federal pay scale. But the satisfaction derived from serving the country and the taxpayers, as Mr. Prettyman and we will attest, is great.

On this point, Roberta L. Gross, the Inspector General of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) has taken a leadership role in promoting existing and underutilized recruitment authorities and incentives, as well as proposing new and innovative solutions to the human capital crisis. This is particularly true with respect to the battle for hard-sought-after information technology

⁵ Id. at 12–13.

⁶ “Comparing the Pay and Benefits of Federal and Nonfederal Executives,” Congressional Budget Office, November 1999.

⁷ “Not Just Another Prettyman,” by Amanda Ripley, *Washington City Paper*, December 4, 1998 (cover story).

workers. In testimony before the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, Restructuring and the District of Columbia, the NASA Inspector General summarized well the challenges facing federal recruiters. And like Mr. Prettyman, the NASA Inspector General observed that “[i]n addition to salaries, bonuses, awards, and other allowances, top notch candidates are often attracted to organizations that are creative or are otherwise highly regarded . . . Outstanding employees will be drawn to progressive, visionary, and high performance organizations.”⁸

We must also continue to maximize our use of the training tools at our disposal. We are fortunate to have institutions like the Inspectors General Auditor Training Institute and the Inspector General Criminal Investigator Academy. Through these organizations, the Inspector General community is endeavoring to offer its staffs the best and latest instruction. Each of us plays a role in ensuring that these organizations continue to meet the needs of the Inspector General community.

Integrating advanced training in a broad range of disciplines, including computer skills, with our core disciplines (investigations, audits, inspections, legal counsel, manage-

ment and policy) represents one of the most pressing training challenges of the next several years. A number of Offices of Inspectors General have created specialized units dealing directly with cyber crimes and other vulnerabilities. We must nevertheless ensure that these skills are also integrated into the overall inspector general mission. We will soon face a paperless workplace. Even now audit workpapers are being created with scanners and not photocopiers.

Where will the next generation of “idea” leaders come from? In large measure, we must “grow our own.” To that end, in April 2000, the Office of Inspector General at the Department of Energy established a formal succession planning program. The program is designed to ensure that there is a ready pool of internal talent for key positions within the Office of Inspector General. This is essential if Inspectors General are to remain relevant contributors of ideas to the effective management of the new Administration, and in the years to come.

In short, when it comes to investing in human capital, if government is to continue to benefit from the invaluable dividends of the good ideas they produce, we must skate to where the puck *will be*, not to where it is. ■

⁸ Prepared Testimony of the Honorable Roberta L. Gross, Inspector General, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, before the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs, Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, Restructuring and the District of Columbia, (May 2, 2000).