

Reflection paper on revitalizing the federal government for the 21st century

[History](#)



A Reflection Paper on Revitalizing the Federal Government for the 21st Century This is a reflection paper on the recommendations proposed in the Revitalizing the Federal Government for the 21st century report by the National Commission on the Public Service (Volcker Commission).

The Volcker commission, comprised of members from the three major political parties, recognizes the importance of disciplined policy direction, operational flexibility, and clear and high performance standards as guiding objectives (The National Commission on the Public Service [NCPS], 2003) for an organizational restructuring within the federal government to meet the challenges of the 21st century. This author agrees with the commission in that no such undertaken has occurred since the Hoover Commission some 50 years ago.

It articulates in my view a comprehensive plan to reclaim the dignity once associated with public service, and if effectively utilized could re-establish trust between the American public and its government. The decline in confidence shared by many Americans in the capability of federal personnel to carry out the tasks of public service must be addressed. The National Commission on the Public Service (Volcker Commission) recognized this need and published a 2003 report on the public service sector titled Urgent Business for America: Revitalizing the Federal Government for the 21st Century.

The report, a collective collaboration between veteran government employees, drew upon their knowledge and the expertise of outside sources from every political affiliation to address challenges that plague the civil

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service sector in the 21st century. The members of the commission focused on seven key areas which are: the relationship between the government and the American public, organizational disorder, one size fits all management, vanishing talent, personnel systems, and labor-management conflict (NCPS, 2003).

This author considers trust as the main component of any relationship and agrees with the commission that the distrust between the American people and the government is contributing to the decay of public service. The commission realized that that the policy changes need to combat the problems associated with public service in the 21st century will take a collaborative effort between the citizens of American and government.

I agree with the commission that there is no “ quick fix” that the government shares the blame for the negative perception, and must make every effort possible to regain that trust by sufficiently improving its performance. The organizational structure within the civil service sector was another focal point in the commissions’ report. The members recommended that “ the federal government should be reorganized into a limited number of mission-related executive departments” (NCPS, 2003, p. 14).

The commission points out that most public servants are perplexed as to the application and significance of their agency’s undertaking and more often than not departments share responsibilities that could be combined to form one cohesive unit. For example, I found it very disturbing that as many as 12 different agencies share theresponsibilityof administering over 35foodsafety laws (NCPS, 2003). The disarray with organizational structure also presents

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the problem of effectively managing the mission of these individual agencies. The commission notes that nine agencies operate 27teen pregnancyprograms come back to.

It is my opinion that the solution given by the commission to group related missions under the same organizational structure would enhance employees' sense of purpose andloyalty, provide opportunities for advancement and reduce waste of limited resources (NCPS, 2003). One size doe not fit all; this entire “ cookie cutter” approach to agency structure and management practices is no longer viable. The needs of the American public are far more complex and vary significantly than those confronted by civil service reformers of the past.

Because the tasks performed by public servants range so greatly it is no longer feasible to assume that a single approach to management will be effective in every instance. The commission members make a valid point in that “ excellent performance requires organizationalleadershipandculturethat fit the mission, not just a single theory of administration” (NCPS, 2003, p. 8). The future of attracting and retaining highly qualified workers in the public service profession appears bleak.

The prestige and sense of accomplishment once considered attributes or incentives of public sector employment is on a sharp decline amongst American citizens. This can be attributed to many factors such as inadequate work conditions, differential in public versus private sector salaries, personal safety, and the opportunity for advancement. The two I found most

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interesting were the requirements for disclosure of personal information and the application process. Ethics regulations are enacted by Congress to ensure the integrity of federal employees.

It is a given that more than 250,000 federal employees must make yearly disclosure of the full details of their personal finances (NCPS, 2003). While I agree that such laws are necessary; I also think the process can be modified as not to encompass so many employees. As the commission states Congress needs “to make federal ethics rules cleaner, simpler, and more directly related to the goals they are intended to achieve” (NCPS, 2003, p. 22). The application process within the civil service sector is another deterrent that I agree with the commission on could be streamlined to expedite the procedure.

Those applying for public sector employment find this process tedious and much more complicated than that of the private sector and typically get faster responses private employers. Personnel management systems in public service were originally designed to promote equity among the workforce. The truth of the matter is “equal pay for equal work” is no longer realistic. This concept is antiquated because of the sophisticated high level tasks performed by some government agencies. The recommendation of the commission is to eradicate the General Schedule classification system.

This system has become too cumbersome to administer; to guarantee equity in compensation this system will always require constant tinkering to define “equal work” so that it can ensure “equal pay” (NCPS, 2003). What the commission has suggested, and what I agree with, is a broadband system

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under which the current 15 pay grades are consolidate into six to eight broad bands with wider salary ranges (NCPS, 2003). This would give managers the flexibility to compensate based on capability and performance, and design personnel systems that best sustains the mission of the organization.

The Commission notes that there are three very distinct factors that determine pay for the overwhelming majority of federal workers: how an individual job fits into the General Schedule classification system, geographical location of the job, and the employee's time in service (NCPS, 2003). I was disturbed by the fact that the quality of the work performed was frequently disregarded as a standard. It has to frustrating for workers who provide a high quality of service to be judged on the same merits as those of poor performers.

The Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 was enacted to reward bonuses, merit pay and performance commendations to high performing civil servants (NCPS, 2003). This is rarely the case because of insufficient funds or an evaluation system that acts more as a rubber stamp than an effective means of evaluation. Managers routinely were allocating funds as a means to compensate equitably across the board, and not as inducements or rewards for top achievers. This is an area of reform which much attention should be given.

It is irrational to believe that high performing employees do not “ pick up the slack” for poor performers. It has been my experience that management comes to rely on this (as long as the work is getting done) instead of dealing with poor performers appropriately. This attitude does nothing but destroy

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the morale of the unit as a whole. The last area of concentration by the Volcker Commission was the conflict between labor and management. The commission believes, as do I, that it is entirely possible to modernize the public sector without jeopardizing the fundamentals of the merit system (NCPS, 2003).

I agree that political affiliation should not be a factor for determining employment within the civil service sector, and that individuals employed by this sector should not be subject to arbitrary discipline or dismissal based on political affiliation. I also agree that labor- management collaboration can coexist within the federal government. Numerous recommendations made to the president and Congress. What I found surprising about the report is that the commission instead of focusing exclusively on changes to the public service sector; devoted much attention to a restructuring of the executive branch of government.

Moreover, it calls for “ The House and Senate to realign their committee oversight to match the mission driven reorganization of the executive branch” (NCPS, 2003, p. 17); which is no small feat given the current political climate. The commission also made several other controversial proposals, for example, the President and Congress should work together to drastically decrease the number of executive branch positions (NCPS, 2003).

In calling for an " immediate and significant" increase in judicial, executive, and legislative salaries, the commission also recognizes the long-standing reluctance of members of Congress to vote for a pay increase for themselves (NCPS, 2003). The report calls upon Congress to break the statutory link

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between their salaries and those of judges and senior political appointees (NCPS, 2003). While I found the report be very cohesive and comprehensive, and a blueprint for a more efficient government and better quality of civil service employees; I also felt several issues were not adequately addressed.

Although, the report does present sufficient advice as to restructuring organizational and management systems within the federal government “ it fails to address the core problems affecting the delivery of public services. Primarily too often federal agencies simply don't have the resources they need to meet mission requirements; an emphasis on pay compression for top ranking government positions overlooks the impact of pay disparities on front-line workers; and much more needs to be done to address the negative impact of contracting out (Palguta, 2003).

While the commission's report appropriately focuses on " leadership in government" as a primary area of concern, it tends to define leadership too narrowly as those individuals at the top of the organization. First-line supervisors and mid-level managers are a vital component of the leadership team. Finally, while agreeing that greater management flexibility is needed, there must also be balanced with reasonable safeguards to ensure the basic merit principles are maintained (Palguta, 2003). References The National Commission on the Public Service. (2003). Urgent business for America: revitalizing the federal government for the 21st century. Retrieved from [http://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&q=cache:KSnwxENfsmQJ:www.brookings.edu/gs/cps/volcker/reportfinal.](http://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&q=cache:KSnwxENfsmQJ:www.brookings.edu/gs/cps/volcker/reportfinal.pdf+urgent+business+for+america:+revitalizing+the)

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