

CHAPTER 9

How to Attract the Best Talent and Motivate Public Servants to be Champions of Change and Embrace Mindsets for Sustainable Development

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is more valid today than ever before. And the importance of the role of government and public servants has never been more apparent than it is now. During the COVID-19, governments have been on the front lines in combating the pandemic with public employees risking their health to assist people. The pandemic has resulted in large scale job loss in many countries, putting strains on government resources and disrupting civil society. Governments have been implementing innovative solutions to limit the impact of the pandemic, underling the importance of investing in public sector human resource professionals who are motivated and well prepared. However, attracting and motivating the best talents for the public sector, and creating a culture of leadership, which could lead to a transformational change require strategic Human Resource and Talent Management. To produce a sustained competitive advantage, government organizations should invest in human resource and management practices and ensure that they shift from being transactional to being more strategic. This chapter examines how to attract the best talent in the public sector, and how to motivate them once they join the public service. Governments have complex missions making it crucial for them to be employers of choice able to attract, retain, and motivate top talents to implement the 2030 Agenda effectively.

1

Attracting the best talent*

A framework for transformative human resources was established by the International Public Management Association for Human Resources (IPMA-HR) in its *HR 20/20 Report: [The IPMA-HR Guide to Transformative HR](#)*¹⁰². The report recommends that all public sector human resource programs be viewed through the following lenses: strategic orientation, business acumen, innovation, and equity/inclusion. The report also includes five key focus areas that will help to meet the strategic and tactical needs of organizations: leadership, culture, talent management, technology, and communications.

The HR 20/20 report states: “the desired outcome of government is to protect and enhance the quality of life of its citizens. The services provided to respective constituents, at every level of government, are largely driven by the people employed by public sector organizations.

Employees who are skilled at what they do, who are committed to the public good, and who act in an innovative, ethical, and responsible manner, create an efficient, effective, and responsible government.

Because the business of HR revolves around human capital resource management, HR professionals can help fundamentally influence and shape organizational outcomes by identifying future trends and assisting in navigating successfully through them” (International Public Management Association for Human Resources (IPMA-HR), 2020.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reported that many countries have developed job retention programs to keep people employed¹⁰³. Measures have included subsidizing hours not worked and increasing the earnings of workers who have had their hours reduced.

In its sectoral brief “COVID-19 and the Public Service”, the International Labour Organization states that “As custodians of public goods, public servants are indispensable conduits for the recovery. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates the crucial importance of disaster preparedness and that private-sector partners cannot manage alone the scope of interventions needed now.... Governments should coordinate the recovery from the crisis among the different levels of public administration-- including local governments-- and with

the private sector. They should do so in ways that reduce inequalities that aggravate the effects of the crisis and mobilize citizens to energize the long-term recovery”¹⁰⁴.

The OECD has issued a report titled *Public Servants and the Coronavirus Pandemic: Emerging Responses and Initial Recommendations* (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2020, Page 7) that states:

“The pandemic response has shone a spotlight on the work and worth of public servants. The crisis thus presents a new opportunity to reinforce the attractiveness of the public service as a career of choice for a new generation of skilled workers who are motivated by public values. Governments can emphasize the impact and value of a public service career through communication and outreach strategies, helped by streamlined tools and ways of working, such as online assessment and video screening. Senior civil servants, increasingly in the public eye through the management of the crisis, can amplify the message.

The pandemic has also highlighted the duty of care of the government to its employees. In many countries, leave and pay arrangements have been adapted to enable staff to recover from illness or care for others. Governments are also taking special measures to protect the mental health of employees, tracked through employee surveys, and addressed through access to counselling and peer support. Engaging and motivating healthy public sector employees’ post-pandemic will be a fundamental success factor for longer-term change and innovation.”

The Center for State and Local Government Excellence¹⁰⁵ in the United States released the results of a survey conducted in May 2020, which found that despite being deeply worried about their personal safety, family finances, potential job loss/furlough and compensation reductions, public sector employees remain committed to serving their communities during the pandemic. Over 60% of the survey respondents who are state and local government employees in the United States indicated that they value serving their community while almost half believe the public has a greater appreciation of the important work they are performing.

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, governments are facing additional recruitment challenges. Many countries have shortages of people with the critical skills needed to fight the pandemic in the medical field, such as epidemiologists, nurses, and quarantine staff. During the Annual Conference of the Astana Civil Service Hub (ACSH), held virtually in June 2020, the Director of the HR Policy Division at the Ministry of Personnel

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Management of the Republic of Korea highlighted that in the Republic of Korea, the job-posting period was reduced, and recruitments were conducted swiftly in three to four weeks, which is quicker than before¹⁰⁶.

Previously, those who were newly recruited were required to complete training before being assigned, but this was modified so that they could start work and take mandatory online training later. It was also highlighted that the Government of the Republic of Korea is investigating and implementing ways to facilitate “no contact” recruitment and deliver more frequent recruitment of smaller numbers of applicants. As the Republic of Korea resumed written exams for jobs, they put in place measures designed to prevent infection and protect the health and safety of both applicants and staff. These measures included: checking to see if any applicants were infected or under self-quarantine; reviewing immigration history to see if applicants had travelled to other countries; requiring applicants who were under quarantine to take the exams in separate places; and ensuring that applicants entered test venues through specific entrances and underwent a fever check and hand sanitization. Masks were required to be worn by applicants, and the number of people in the testing room was reduced significantly to allow for the doubling of the distance between applicants. The windows in the examination rooms were opened frequently to allow for ventilation, and test venues were disinfected both before and after the exams were administered.

When recruiting new public servants, the mission of the government should serve as a competitive advantage. Governments can emphasize how employees can make a difference in their communities, region, and country by working for the government. Surveys have shown that younger people especially are looking to work for organizations that support their values and serve the greater good. Governments need to ensure that their cultures are supportive of employees and can emphasize the opportunity for greater job security, work-life balance, and opportunities for professional development. Additionally, governments need to do a better job of informing

applicants and employees of the myriad opportunities in a public sector career. At a time when research shows that people will have multiple careers during their working life, governments should promote the opportunities that enable individuals to gain experience in different sectors while working for the same governmental organization. There are many recruiting initiatives that governments might wish to consider adopting, as highlighted in Table 9.1.

With the expectation that there will continue to be an increased amount of remote work, governments can expand their geographic recruitment efforts giving them access to talent that will help them fill mission critical positions.

Table 9.1: Possible Government Recruiting Initiatives

Use of social media, digital platforms, and on-line job boards: in a digital age, these tools will enable governments to reach greater numbers of employees and to target talent in specific fields, especially those for which they are experiencing recruitment challenges.

Use of employee videos: this can be an effective tool highlighting current employees that will inform applicants as to why they enjoy working for the government. It can also be a good way to spotlight the different career opportunities that are available.

Streamlined online applications: to compete for talent, governments need to provide for online applications and to shorten applications so that they only ask for essential information.

Faster hiring: governments have been criticized for decades for the length of time it takes for them to hire applicants. The private sector makes hiring decisions much quicker, and governments lose talented applicants due to the slowness of the hiring process. While faster hiring is encouraged, it is equally important that governments hire high-quality talent. They should develop metrics demonstrating the quality of new hires. Additionally, it needs to be acknowledged that there are public sector positions such as public safety that require more extensive background checks or psychological assessments, which will inevitably result in a prolonged hiring period.

Reviewing job requirements: it is important for governmental employers to review their job requirements to eliminate those that may be an artificial barrier to diversifying the public service. For example, for some positions, years of experience could be considered as a substitute for a college education.

Reviewing job descriptions: government job descriptions should be reviewed and updated to make them more appealing and descriptive of the work by eliminating overly bureaucratic, jargon-filled language.

Remote interviews: due to the coronavirus, governments may need to conduct interviews remotely with software such as Zoom.

Internships: this is a way for governments to bring on students to experience government employment. It also provides both the government and the interns an opportunity to see if they are a good fit for a permanent position.

Partnering with Schools: governments should consider establishing partnerships with secondary schools as well as colleges and universities. This is a way to promote public sector careers and develop connections with students who may not be aware of the myriad employment opportunities offered by governments.

Employee Referral Programs: employees can be great ambassadors for governments. Some governments have established employee referral programs that provide incentives for employees to refer family and friends for jobs. The incentives can be distributed over time to ensure that the new employees remain part of the organization.

Job Fairs: these events provide an opportunity for governments to meet either in-person or during the current pandemic virtually with potential candidates. The private sector participates in job fairs, and government presence ensures that it remains competitive in its recruitment.

Mentoring programs: mentors have been utilized effectively in organizations to assist new employees and guide them in their careers. It is important to ensure that the mentors are trained.

2

Motivating government employees

Organizations that want to have a motivated and engaged workforce and be able to hire and retain top talent need to examine and improve the employee experience. Employee experience is the sum of the interactions that employees have with their employers throughout their employment lifecycle from recruitment through to departure. Jacob Morgan, author of *The Future of Work: Attract New Talent, Build Better Leaders and Create a Competitive Culture*, defines employee experience as the combination of the cultural environment, the physical environment, and the technological environment of the workplace.

Surveys, such as [Deloitte 2019 Human Capital Trends survey](#)¹⁰⁷, recognize the need to improve the employee experience, with 84% of respondents rating this issue as important and 28% saying it is one of the three most urgent issues facing their organizations. However, only 9% believed their organizations were ready to address this issue. The Workforce Institute at Kronos conducted a [Working Your Way survey](#) that polled employees from eight countries and found that outdated beliefs about time off, productivity, and workload negatively impact the experience of employees. Fewer than half of the survey respondents believe that preventing employee burnout is a top priority of their organization.

Employee engagement is one way in which to measure the employee experience. Gallup, which has been a leader in employee engagement, reported that, across 155 countries, only 15% of employees are engaged, 67% are not engaged, and the remaining 18% are actively disengaged¹⁰⁸. This data is from all sectors and not just the public sector. All employers want to increase the percentage of engaged employees since they are likely to be top performers who expend maximum effort to get the job done. They are more satisfied, less likely to leave, and will be brand ambassadors. Many employers conduct employee engagement surveys, and it is important that they follow-up to address the issues that are surfaced by the surveys. Failure to do so will drive down engagement.

Professor James Perry in a 1996 article titled *Measuring Public Service Motivation: An Assessment of Construct Reliability and Validity*, published in the *Journal of Public Administration Theory*, established the following four dimensions of public sector motivation:

1. Attraction to public policymaking.
2. Commitment to the public interest.
3. Compassion; and
4. Self-sacrifice, which is defined as the willingness to substitute service to others for tangible personal rewards.

The greater the public service motivation of individuals, the more likely they are to seek employment in a governmental organization.

Research has shown that public service motivation is positively related to employee performance as well as a greater commitment to the organization, higher job satisfaction, lower rates of turnover, and better relationships with other employees.

The Partnership for Public Service, which focuses on the United States federal government, did a survey that found the number one motivation for federal employees is the desire to give back.

There are also extrinsic motivations that need to be considered since they will influence applicant choices and employee behavior. These could include compensation (in the form of both salary and benefits), job security, challenging work, good work-life balance, advancement opportunities, professional development, and wellness programs.

During this time of a global pandemic, employee wellbeing is significantly reduced with employees showing increased levels of stress and anxiety. This will negatively impact their motivation and ability to perform at a high level. Gallup has identified five elements of wellbeing:

- **Career:** liking what you do and being motivated to achieve goals.
- **Social:** having supportive relationships.
- **Physical:** having good health and the energy necessary to accomplish goals.
- **Financial:** managing economic life to reduce stress and increase security.
- **Community:** enjoying where you live and being engaged in the community.

Gallup research¹⁰⁹ has found that those employees who are doing well on all five are: more than twice as likely to say they adapt well to change, much less likely to want to leave their jobs, 40% less likely to miss work for health reasons, and almost 30% less likely to have changed jobs in the past year.

In these stressful times, governmental leaders should make employee wellbeing a top priority.

They can do so by ensuring a culture of caring, being flexible to recognize the different needs of employees, whether they be on the front lines or working remotely, being transparent, communicating frequently, and providing any necessary employee assistance programs. Organizations that do these things are more likely to have a motivated, engaged workforce that performs the critical work of government.

This is a time for governments to emphasize and publicize the value of public service. The Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Mr. Zhenmin Liu¹¹⁰, has underscored that:

This year, more than ever, as we fight the COVID-19 pandemic, we are reminded of the vitality of public service to every aspect of our lives. The response to the crisis has seen innovative and adaptive action by institutions at all levels of government. And by frontline public servants, such as our healthcare workers, teachers, sanitation workers, transit

workers and many others. At the same time, we have watched the incredible strain the pandemic has put on our healthcare systems and on frontline public servants.

The pandemic has provided us with an important moment to reflect on two key issues:

1. *how to better support public servants in their work, and*
2. *how to build institutional resilience in the public sector so that we can better meet such challenges in the future.*

The OECD stated¹¹¹:

Public employees are heroes in this crisis. They are keeping medical systems functioning, families safe, finding novel ways to address the unprecedented economic and social impacts, keeping businesses afloat, and dealing with incredible spikes in unemployment. This is a unique opportunity to renew the image of public service as an attractive workplace that has an impact. Post-crisis, public managers should consider how to showcase the values of a job or career with public service.

Governments have a unique opportunity to leverage the value of government service to attract and motivate the top talent needed to be champions of change who will contribute to the achievement of the sustainable development goals.

3

Strategies to change mindsets and nurture champions of change for the SDGs in public institutions

Changing mindsets and nurturing change champions will be important for the successful implementation of the sustainable development goals. This may require both cultural and organizational transformations. These can be challenging to accomplish, and many transformation efforts ultimately fail. McKinsey identified the following elements that are important in any effort at changing mindsets: leadership, engagement, and effective communication. Please see Figure 9.1.

It is important for organizations to identify change champions that will serve as role models for new mindsets and behaviors that will support change. Change may require people getting out of their comfort zones and as a result, change efforts may experience resistance.

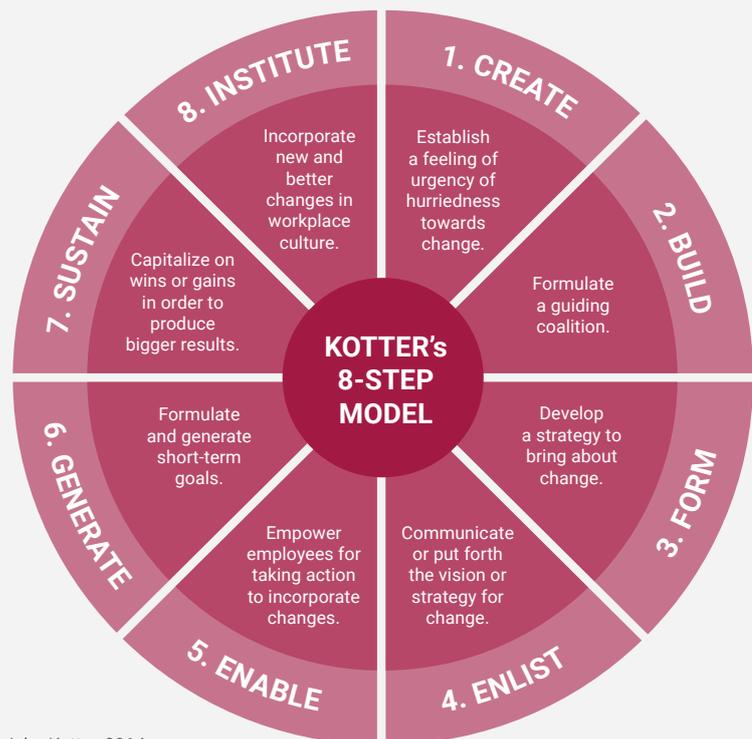
Dr. John Kotter (2014) has developed a change model that has been adopted by many organizations and among the steps he includes is creating a sense of urgency as to why the change is needed, forming a strategic vision, engaging employees, and identifying champions, removing barriers to change, and looking for successes.¹¹² Organizations also need to measure the success of change efforts and be willing to adjust if change initiatives are not progressing as anticipated.

Figure 9.1: Elements that are important in any effort at changing mindsets



Source: McKinsey

Figure 9.2: Kotter's 8-step change model



Author: John Kotter, 2014

4

Conclusion and recommendations

Governments play an essential role in the lives of citizens and need to be able to attract, develop, and retain a dedicated workforce. COVID-19 has magnified the critical and complex role of governments in dealing with crises such as a global pandemic. As citizens recognize that governments have been on the front lines in combating this pandemic, there may be renewed respect for public servants and heightened interest in public service careers. The pandemic can constitute an opportunity for governments to pay further attention to and rethink career guidance provision from a systemic perspective. This might include actions to develop career guidance that moves from information delivery to more collaborative approaches, enhanced using technology, integrated in the services, and underpinned by appropriate/effective strategies for career management skills development” (ILO, 2020)¹¹³.

Some recommendations about how governments can attract top talent and motivate public servants include:

- Having human resource departments continue to perform necessary transactional work but shift to a more transformative role by viewing human resource initiatives through the lenses of innovation, business acumen, strategic orientation and equity and inclusion.
- Leveraging the important missions of governments to create a competitive advantage when recruiting new staff.
- Implementing flexible policies that provide enhanced remote work opportunities while ensuring that managers have the skills needed to manage remote workers.
- Focusing on the employees’ well-being – physical, mental, and financial through enhanced employee assistance programs.
- Adopting innovative recruitment strategies that utilize social media, online applications, employee videos, faster hiring, employee referral programs, internships, and mentoring programs.
- Improving the employee experience, developing a caring culture, and increasing the engagement/satisfaction of employees through employee surveys that result in communicating the results and implementing the recommendations of employees.

Endnotes

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