On the Border (Patrol): Surveying Methods for an Agency in Transition to the Department of Homeland Security

TERENCE M. GARRETT, PHD
AND GEOFFREY D. PETERSON, PHD

The dynamics of government agency transition – its effects on people, policy and programs — are complex and difficult to measure. At no place in government has this transition been more turbulent than in agencies thrust into the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). This paper proposes a means to measure the impact and effect of transition — specifically the US Border Patrol’s — into DHS. A survey to measure these dynamics will be suggested.

The idea for the survey was developed through a discourse with the former Deputy Director of the US Border Patrol in McAllen, Texas. The Deputy Director expressed some concerns over the anxiety existing in the agency as it was heading towards the transition to the Department of Homeland Security, both in McAllen, Texas and in Washington, DC. After initial positive feedback regarding the usefulness of the survey, DHS, Border Patrol and General Accounting Office (GAO) policy-makers declined to authorize the research. Nevertheless, there are valid lessons to be learned from the process itself. In addition, our survey instrument may prove useful in future analysis.

In the sections that follow, we will be explaining how the survey would have been beneficial in a practical manner for affected personnel in the government agency transition. The spectrum of personnel systems currently under deliberation by Congress and the DHS executives will also be outlined, as well as the Government’s current vision of management philosophy.

Terence M. Garrett, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Public Administration, at the University of Texas-Pan American. Geoffrey D. Peterson, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Political Science, and Director of the UW-Eau Claire Political Research Institute at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire.
Survey Design

Our proposed survey was web-based. The increasing use of web-based surveys has proven a cost-effective method when appropriately implemented. Because the costs associated with implementing a web survey are so low when compared to phone or mail surveys, it is possible to create and distribute surveys on a wider variety of topics than would normally be considered when cost per question is at a premium. While web surveys are not appropriate measures of large populations where access to the Internet varies, there are many situations in which web-based surveys can prove remarkably effective. Within smaller populations with access to the Internet, it is possible to garner a reasonable sample for analysis using web-based surveys. While there is the potential for such surveys to not fully represent the population as a whole, this impact can be limited through the collection of appropriate demographic data from the respondents.

The goals of this survey were to gather a variety of information about the attitudes and potential concerns of the line employees in the DHS, as well as contrasting the differences between line employees and mid-level management within the DHS. A variety of factors were to be measured, including concerns about employee-management relations, the role of unions after the merger, and the nature of the expected interactions with the new personnel. Information regarding the educational background and work history of the respondent would also have been collected.

The anonymous survey was designed to be processed through the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire’s web form server, which records all of the information reported on the survey in a comma-delimited format that is easily imported into a variety of statistical packages. The server does not record who sent the survey in, nor does it record any information about the computer or Internet Protocol (IP) address used to send in the survey. Using this survey collection method anonymity is assured.

Personnel Classification Systems: Who Gets to Decide?

External political pressures as a result of the al-Qaeda attack on September 11, 2001, have exacerbated the widely-held belief that government agencies have performed poorly. From the political perspective of the executive and legislative branches of government, it is rather easy to place a large part of the blame on civil servants who failed to recognize the threat of a terrorist attack. Rainey opines “We often end up treating government agencies and employees as if they are villains, while hoping that they will behave like angels.”

1 Hal Rainey, Facing Fundamental Challenges in Reforming Public Personnel
the attacks afforded the Bush Administration and Congress the chance to reorganize the federal bureaucracy on a scale not seen since the reorganization of the Department of Defense in 1947. The new Department of Homeland Security presents political operatives with the opportunity to change the civil service system in the areas of job security and remuneration.

The pay and classification options for the new DHS personnel system center around three primary themes. The first is “time focused” which is essentially the status quo based on traditional graded systems with pay progression based primarily on time in grade. The second, or “performance based,” and the one ultimately selected, emphasizes individual and organizational performance and the implementation of “pay bands” to base salaries closer to the market rate and giving management more discretion over remuneration. The third and final option is known as “competency focused.” The general principle here is that overall pay would be based on occupational surveys. Employees would rise through the civil service system through the acquisition of required competencies.

The ultimate authority to decide which personnel system will be put into effect rests with those in power: Congress and the executives, both politically appointed and senior-echelon managers in the current federal civil service. Mid-level managers, unions, and regular government employees have no say regarding what system is put into effect.

---

2 See “Homeland Security Manager Faces Challenges of New Agency, New Pay System” by Stephen Barr of The Washington Post, February 17, 2004. In this particular article, DHS Undersecretary for Management, Ms. Janet Hale as she “joined other administration officials to announce the launch of a new pay and personnel system for most of the department’s employees-- one of the biggest changes in the civil service in more than 50 years. Under the plan, Homeland Security civil service employees will be paid according to their occupation, geographic location and job performance. Federal unions will have no say in the deployment of personnel, the assignment of work and the use of new technology.”

3 This last point is reinforced by the GAO’s Report to Congressional Subcommittees “Results-Oriented Cultures: Implementation Steps to Assist Mergers and Organizational Transformations.” Especially important are the report’s “Key Practices and Implementation Steps for Mergers and Organizational Transformation.” However, we believe our survey would be a better representation of all federal employees who either were (1) not truly represented at the DHS town hall meetings (focus groups) by those selected to attend; or, (2) present at the focus group sessions but were unable to articulate the intensity of their objections to the goals of the DHS transition team. In any event, our Government Agency Survey would have been another potential voice for those under-represented in the focus groups.
This occurred despite the efforts of using focus groups as authorized by the Undersecretary for Management in the DHS, Ms. Janet Hale. Focus groups are useful for fact-finding and obtaining feedback particularly when a public policy is at stake and several citizens (in this case federal employees) are affected. However, focus groups may also be used to find the means necessary to manipulate or maneuver the target population into a public policy change at odds with their own true preferences. This last aspect is illustrated by important buzz words recognized by the Human Resources Management Systems Senior Review Committee from the focus group surveys in July 2003. The focus group participants’ advice to the design team follows:

- Improve the **ability** (e.g., through increased training) and increase the **accountability** of management, which is central to the success of DHS’ future HR system
- Communicate to keep employees **continuously informed** of system progress and changes
- Move **slowly** and **plan** carefully to ensure success
- Ensure **greater consistency** across DHS personnel systems, but allow **customization and tailoring** to meet workforce needs
- Protect employees’ interests by assuring consistency and fairness
- Don’t change for the sake of change
- Don’t reduce levels of **pay and benefits** currently in place

The focus group participants are obviously concerned with the rapid transition to the new Department of Homeland Security. This thread continues, with their perceptions that the current traditional system of pay and classification is generally acceptable to their present needs, with a few exceptions that delve into issues regarding pay equity, consistency, and proper checks and balances between management and labor. Members of the HRM Systems Senior Review Committee are cognizant of key words and phrases that are important to lower-ranked management and the rank and file employees.

Terms and phrases such as “accountability” and “performance management” hold different meaning for affected civil servants large-

---

4 See the draft of the “Preliminary Focus Group Synopsis” from the Human Resources Management Systems Senior Review Committee Meeting, Washington, D.C., July 25, 2003. The “Background of Focus Groups” includes 54 focus groups that had the following characteristics: (1) a diverse representation of demographic factors based on DHS components, job/series, geographic locations, union/non-union, age, gender and ethnicity; (2) 44 focus groups were with rank and file employees, 10 were with managers; (3) the focus groups contained non-bargaining and bargaining unit participants selected by managers and unions, respectively; and, (4) Six human resource functions were considered: pay, classification, performance management, labor relations, discipline, and appeals.
ly based on where they are in the organizational hierarchy. Phenomenological psychologist Eugene Gendlin posits that word meanings may change as “a metaphor achieves a new meaning...by drawing on old experience and by using symbols that already have some other, old familiar meaning. Old symbols and their meanings are employed in a new way to conceptualize the new meaning”.\(^5\) Garrett shows how the incompatibility of knowledge and the differences in the meaning of language between workers and managers led to disaster in the ill-fated Bureau of Alcohol and Firearms raid on the Branch Davidian Compound in Waco, Texas in 1993, and launch of the Challenger space shuttle in 1986.\(^6\) The key here is to recognize the differences in executive/ manager/worker knowledge and word meaning as symbols that can be manipulated by executives and managers in organizations. In addition to the terms listed above, one of the primary reasons for the Government Agency Survey was to determine how various members of the DHS interpreted word meanings such as transition, relationships between agencies, homeland security, fairness, effective operation, civil service versus at-will employment, and representation.

**DHS’ New Vision of Public Management**

The politicization of the federal bureaucracy continues apace. The essence is found in a recent General Accounting Office (GAO) and Comptroller General’s forum on *High-Performing Organizations: Metrics, Means, and Mechanisms for Achieving High Performance in the 21st Century Public Management Environment*.\(^7\) The forum participants represented senior executive management or executive leadership positions in the public and private sectors. The focus of the forum was to make government more “high-performing” by running it more like a private sector business. The “key characteristics and capabilities of high-performing organizations” are as follows:

- **A clear, well-articulated, and compelling mission.** High-performing organizations have a clear, well-articulated, and compelling mission, the strategic goals to achieve it, and a performance management system that aligns with these goals to

---

5 Eugene Gendlin, *Experience and the Creation of Meaning* 113 (1962).
7 In its essence, the GAO forum uses the language of private business which emphasizes economy, efficiency and effectiveness with some mention of accountability to the people, as customers or clients. There is much in common here with former Vice President Al Gore’s National Performance Review initiative popular during the Clinton administration.
show employees how their performance can contribute to overall organizational results.

- **Strategic use of partnerships.** Since the federal government is increasingly reliant on partners to achieve its outcomes, becoming a high-performing organization requires that federal agencies effectively manage relationships with other organizations outside of their direct control.

- **Focus on needs of clients and customers.** Serving the needs of clients and customers involves identifying their needs, striving to meet them, measuring performance, and publicly reporting on progress to help assure appropriate transparency and accountability.

- **Strategic management of people.** Most high-performing organizations have strong, charismatic, visionary, and sustained leadership, the capability to identify what skills and competencies the employees and the organization need, and other key characteristics including effective recruiting, comprehensive training and development, retention of high-performing employees, and a streamlined hiring process.

This “New Public Management” vision has the following characteristics:

1. Values — cost-effectiveness, responsiveness to customers;
2. Structure — Competitive, firmlike;
3. View of the individual — customer;
4. Cognitive approach — Theory, observation, measurement, experimentation;
5. Budgeting — Performance-based, market-driven;
6. Decision making — Decentralized, cost-minimizing; and,
7. Government function characterized by execution.8

We see these elements in the High Performance initiative espoused by the Comptroller General of the GAO, Mr. David M. Walker. Particularly instructive here is the statement “As the federal government’s leading accountability organization, we have made a concerted effort to identify and encourage the implementation of human capital practices that improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability of the federal government.”9 The two goals central to

---


9 *Managing the Results: Using Strategic Human Capital Management to Drive Transformational Change*, testimony before the National Commission on the Public Service GAO-02-04OT (testimony of David M. Walker, General Accounting Office).
the idea of human capital include: (1) "People are assets whose value can be enhanced through investment. As with any investment, the goal is to maximize value while managing risk;" and, (2) "An organization’s human capital approaches should be designed, implemented, and assessed by the standard of how well they help the organization pursue its mission and achieve desired results or outcomes." Federal employees’ labor is considered to be “human capital” put into the service of the executive leadership. The objectification of human beings (the workers) is complete. Perhaps it is the view of DHS executives that human capital should not be consulted directly except perhaps through management-run focus groups.

Discussion

Our proposed Government Agency Survey would have cost the U.S. Border Patrol and/or the Department of Homeland Security nothing. The internet provides an inexpensive means to survey a rather large number of people in a short amount of time. The questions that would have been included touch on the importance of civil service issues central to all members of the DHS organization particularly in the areas of job security and remuneration.10

The focus groups used by DHS are one way to capture some of the intensity of organizational stakeholders in the DHS transition. However, we believe our survey would have provided a more comprehensive picture. At the least, the Government Agency Survey would provide all members of the DHS organization an opportunity to express their perceptions and preferences on matters that directly affect them.

The current transition to DHS is executive management-driven with little apparent regard for mid-level managers, low-level supervi-

10 See Stephen Barr (February 24, 2004). Barr cites the concerns of Senator Voinovich and Representative Jo Ann Davis on the problems currently being addressed on remuneration and working conditions in Congress. These three questions were issued by the key members of Congress concerning the DHS transition: (1) How will the new pay system work? Will it keep pace with the General Schedule (the system used to pay white-collar employees in other parts of the government)?; (2) Will it be harder for Homeland Security employees to take on the department over disciplinary actions when they feel that the punishment was blown out of proportion?; and, (3) Will Homeland Security employees be forced to relocate against their will? Ironically, these three questions are at the core of our Government Agency Survey.
sors, and other workers involved in the transition.\(^\text{11}\) We have stated that language can be used to manipulate organizational participants towards the goals and objectives of the senior leadership. In the wake of executive management choices made during the transition, constituent groups are questioning the changes in pay and worker longevity.\(^\text{12}\) These actions and how they have been implemented will cause controversy and continued charges of recrimination and deception against its advocates. Simple agency changes on a small scale can be problematic for executives, managers, workers and the public. Massive organizational changes like the DHS transition magnify the situation tremendously.

The proposed survey, reproduced at Appendix 2, zeroes in on various factors measuring the impact of transition. Some examples are:

- Duration of employment
- Change in senior management
- Impact on communication
- Impact on inter-agency cooperation
- Better or worse treatment as an employee
- Role of union in transition
- Fairness and equity in the transition
- Comparison with previous agency

While these queries elicit opinions in a subjective sense, the range of opinions will illustrate the dynamics, good or bad, in agency transition.

---

\(^{11}\) See Christopher Lee (February 24, 2004). In this article, Lee examines transition problems in the DHS regarding the loss of rights for union representation, worker uncertainty, and potential problems with the independent Merit Systems Protection Board as to language changes as “managers could discipline employees after finding ‘substantial evidence’ of wrongdoing, a lower standard than the current ‘preponderance of the evidence’ requirement” for example.

\(^{12}\) See Barr (March 3, 2004). While this article primarily concerns the Department of Defense, techniques employed by the DHS in terms of changing the language in the rules governing civil service employees are used as follows: “Union representatives contend the Pentagon is going beyond what Congress intended by redefining ‘collective bargaining’ as ‘consultation’ and by discussing proposals that would set aside union contracts, exclude some categories of Defense employees from union jurisdiction and create in-house boards to decide grievances rather than independent third parties.”
References


APPENDIX I:

Informed Consent Email for the Government Agency Survey

This e-mail is to invite you to participate in our web-based survey regarding the impact of the creation of the Department of Homeland Security. We are looking at ways in which the merger of multiple federal agencies has affected the workplace for federal employees, both positively and negatively. This survey has been approved by the Human Subjects Review Committees at both the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire and the University of Texas-Pan American. The survey should take between five and ten minutes to complete. All responses can be anonymous at your discretion and only the two primary researchers will have access to the individual-level data. You may cancel your participation in the survey at any time simply by closing the window. If you complete the survey, the results will be recorded. If you have any questions regarding the survey, you can contact the primary researchers at petersgd@uwec.edu or garrett@panam.edu. If you have questions about the university approval of this survey, you can contact the chair of the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire Human Subjects Committee (Dr. William Frankenberger: frankewr@uwec.edu) or the chair of the University of Texas-Pan American Human Subjects Committee (Dr. Mark Granberry: granberry@panam.edu).

Clicking on the following link will be considered an acceptance of these guidelines and your official notification of informed consent to participate in the survey.

http://www.uwec.edu/petersgd/survey11.htm

We thank you for your time and willingness to help us further understand the nature of bureaucratic mergers in the federal government.

Sincerely,

Terence Garrett Geoffrey D. Peterson
Public Administration Program Department of Political Science
University of Texas-Pan American University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire
Missing what goes here a PDF possibly