

# Public Management Report

An occasional (and maybe insightful) examination of the issues, dilemmas, challenges, and opportunities in leadership, governance, management, and performance in public agencies.

On why public managers need to work at closing their:

## Managerial Perception Gap

Last month, Hudson Talent Management released its managerial survey of 1,854 workers in the United States. When Hudson asked managers to rate themselves, 43 percent reported that they were doing an “excellent” job, while 49 percent reported that they were “good.” No manager said that he or she was doing a “poor” job.

These results are not surprising. In fact, they are quite consistent with numerous other surveys in which people are asked to evaluate themselves. It makes no difference about what behavior or skill we humans are asked to judge ourselves: intelligence, ethics, athleticism, health, driving. Regardless of the characteristic, the vast majority of us report that we, personally, are well above average.

My favorite example comes from a survey of school principals in New Jersey. Of the 130 principals who responded, how many do you think reported that they were in the top 10 percent of principals in the state? Answer: 96—or 74 percent. That is, nearly three-quarters of those who responded to the survey, thought they were among the very elite of the state’s principals.

Moreover, all of those who responded thought they were in the top half. That is: every one of these 130 principals concluded that he or she was above average.



Why should managers be any different?

Employees, however, have a slightly different view of their managers. While 92 percent of the managers told Hudson that they were excellent or good, only 63 percent of the employees gave one of these two ratings to their boss. Only 31 percent rated their boss or supervisor as “excellent”; another 32 percent judged their boss to be “good.” Moreover, 10 percent rated their boss as “poor.” (For a summary of these data, see the table on page 2.)

This suggests a slight mismatch in perceptions. Employees don’t have quite the same admiration for their superiors as these superiors have for themselves. (I have no idea how the teachers in New Jersey schools evaluate their principals.)

The Hudson survey covered managers and employees from both the private and public sectors. So how do the managers in government rate themselves? And what do their subordinates think?

Compared with all managers, those in government have an even higher view of themselves. Exactly half of the public managers rated themselves as excellent, and another 46 percent thought they were good. Only 3 percent admitted to being fair. And, as already noted, no manager—public or private—evalu-

ated himself or herself as poor. Compared with U.S. managers in general, American public managers are an even cockier breed.

So what do public employees think? Do they also think that their managers in government are even better than managers in general? Not quite.

In fact, only 31 percent of public employees thought their boss was excellent, while another 34 percent called their boss good. As for poor managers, 15 percent of public employees put their boss in that category.

So (as the table below suggests) public managers rate themselves higher than other managers do. But public employees give a lower rating to their bosses than other employees do.

But is this inconsistency between the public and private sectors important? Not as important, I think, as the disparity in the perceptions of managers and their employees. Indeed, public managers need to be aware that their subordinates may not hold them in as high esteem as they hold themselves. And they ought to do something about this gap.

*Like the rest of us, public managers think they are very good. Unfortunately, their employees don't rate them quite as highly. Thus, if public managers are to exercise leadership, they need to eliminate this perception gap.*

Robert Morgan, chief operating officer at Hudson Talent Management, is an advocate of "360-degree reviews." In government as in business, the typical personnel evaluation is done by each individual's boss. A 360-degree review, however, draws on the judgments of a variety of people—subordinates, peers, customers, vendors, collaborators. After all, the boss does not have a monopoly on useful information about any individual's work.

Moreover, argues Morgan, 360-degree reviews can help managers by giving them a dose of reality about their own work. Of course, it could be the employees, not the managers, who lack an appreciation of what makes a manager effective. Managerial competence—as Margaret Wolfe Hungerford suggested about beauty—is in the eye of the beholder.

For public managers, however, debating competing versions of the truth is less useful than mending the perceptions. They need to convince the people in their agency to take on new challenges, to pursue their **performance targets** with intelligence and energy, and to think creatively about how to achieve their common mission. This takes leadership. And to exercise such leadership, public managers need to earn the confidence of their employees. **B**

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Rating	How would you rate yourself as a manager or boss?		How do you rate your boss or supervisor?	
	Total	Gov't	Total	Gov't
Excellent	43%	50%	35%	31%
Good	49%	46%	32%	34%
Fair	6%	3%	19%	18%
Poor	0%	0%	10%	15%
Not Sure	1%	2%	4%	1%

Source:

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