

Testimony
House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Subcommittee on Government Operations
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The Best and Worst Places to Work in the Federal Government
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Thank you for the opportunity to testify about the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) employee engagement activities. In 2016, USDA was the most improved Large Agency moving from 16th place in 2013 to a tie for 9th place in the Partnership for Public Service's Best Places to Work in the Federal Government rankings. At the same time, USDA's employee engagement score was 63.1 out of 100 and represented a 3.7 point increase from 2015 and a 7 point increase since 2013.

USDA has been actively working to improve employee engagement for several years. Such engagement is critical for our mission delivery because research has shown that engaged employees are more productive and generate better results for the organization. The success we have achieved is the result of sustained efforts across the Department focused on employee engagement, empowering employees and recognizing high-performers and best practices. Leaders, managers, supervisors and employees have contributed to these efforts which have helped USDA advance in its transformation into a modern workforce.

How did we get to number nine? To start out with, USDA set a target in our strategic plan to achieve a top 10 ranking by 2018. To get there, we set some specific goals related to the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) results. These goals included achieving a 70 percent participation rate in the survey; a 68 percent positive response on the Employee Engagement Index; and a 65 percent positive response on the Global Satisfaction Index. We also identified five key strategies that we used to drive improvements at USDA: effective communication; employee development; performance management (accountability); support for diversity and inclusion; and work life flexibilities. These goals and strategies were provided to all USDA agencies and staff office leaders along with tips, tools and best practices to carry out these strategies. Following are highlights of how we implemented these strategies and achieved such positive results.

With regard to effective communication, we asked leaders, managers and supervisors to communicate more frequently with employees. Throughout USDA, in both headquarters and offices in the field, employees received more regular updates on activities in their agencies. Leaders held town hall meetings, brown bag sessions, and informal visits. Agencies and offices set up Employee Advisory Councils to get input and empower employees to take action on workplace improvements. These councils provide management with feedback and take actions to improve the workplace, creating a process that involves employees in collaborative decision-making and problem solving with leaders. Additionally, to improve communication, information and training on how to conduct listening sessions and action planning was shared with leaders throughout USDA. To date, hundreds of these sessions have been conducted. The information from these sessions is used to create action plans for improvement, and progress on these actions

are reported to employees. Additionally, we publicized our successes in the monthly “MyUSDA” newsletter” through which employees from our office locations across the country submitted success stories.

Employee development is our second strategy and an item identified as a need in FEVS results and through our listening sessions. At USDA, all employees are given the opportunity to have an Individual Development Plan (IDP) that is updated annually. The IDP represents a commitment that leaders make to the growth and development of employees. When we started, only about 30 percent of employees had IDPs. At the end of FY 2016, over 86 percent of eligible employees had IDPs. To further contribute to employee development, we launched a USDA-wide Mentoring Portal and established mentoring programs in all of our sub-component offices. To demonstrate a commitment to mentoring, we asked leaders to serve as mentors to help us build the leadership pipeline. At the close of FY 2016, 51 percent of our executives were serving as mentors to support the growth and development of employees. In 2014, we created a 360 degree assessment program for our executives, managers, and supervisors along with a policy that they would participate in the assessment at least once every three years to get input from employees and use it in their own plans for improvement. We also asked our executives, managers, and supervisors to take the course, “Maximizing Employee Engagement,” that is free on Human Resource University’s HRU.gov Web site. To date, over 14,000 have completed it, ensuring that we have a common language, understanding, and effective strategies to drive employee engagement improvements across USDA. Employee engagement is part of the way we do business at USDA and we include employee engagement principles in our supervisor training. Finally, we set goals related to these employee development efforts and track and report our progress monthly. These programs have created an environment of support for continual learning that made a significant contribution to workplace improvements.

Our third strategy that contributes to our success is performance management. Performance plans for every employee are linked to the organization’s mission so each person can see how their work contributes to USDA strategic goals. USDA has incorporated employee engagement into the performance plans of all executives, managers, and supervisors. Executives are expected to lead employee engagement activities and Performance Review Boards can use these results in the annual rating process. Additionally, each year, we focus on a different aspect of performance management with required training that we track and report. A focus is also placed on recognizing high performing employees for their efforts. This can be something as informal as a thank you note or a personal word of appreciation, to a more formal program such as an awards program with certificates.

Our fourth strategy has been to support diversity and inclusion in the work place so that we can recruit, retain and develop a high-performing workforce. As a result, we have taken steps to develop leaders ready to step into executive leadership positions. Our Senior Executive Service Candidate Development Program and our recruitment efforts have helped us create a leadership team that looks like the communities we serve. In 2008, 19 percent of USDA’s executives were minorities. At the end of FY 2016, 33 percent were minorities. This compares with 27 percent in the Civilian Labor Force, and 19 percent in the Federal government. Additionally, the percentage of executives at USDA who were women was 24 percent in 2008, and rose to 34 percent in 2016. Diversity and inclusion is also included in our training activities. In addition,

performance plans for executives, managers, and supervisors also require them to address diversity and inclusion.

Our fifth strategy has been to emphasize work-life flexibilities. We have adopted flexible work schedules, and encourage the use of telework. This promotes a partnership between supervisors and employees who work together to ensure that goals are met while allowing for flexibilities that give employees time for family and life issues. We trained our leaders to understand the value of telework and flexible schedules, and helped them understand how to manage in this environment so that the programs are used to promote high performance. Last year alone, participation in telework increased by 6 percent, with 41 percent of eligible employees regularly teleworking. Additionally, 86 percent of our eligible employees are on a flexible work schedule. We know from employee feedback that by having leaders who support work life balance, we are attracting and retaining employees who value this program.

To help us track our progress, we established a USDA-wide Employee Engagement Program Manager who works with representatives from each subcomponent organization to discuss progress, identify best practices, address challenges and barriers, and share successful strategies for improvement. Leaders are accountable for reporting progress with our strategies to our Employee Engagement Program Manager on a monthly basis. Employee Engagement points of contact were created for each USDA agency/office. Members of this group have been trained in action planning facilitation provided by the Partnership for Public Service. The points of contact all have access to the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) UnlockTalent.gov Web site as well as the FEVS reporting site so that they can distribute data from the survey to each of their leadership teams. We also ensured that the most recent FEVS analysis for each unit was shared with employees. Furthermore, we continue to network with our colleagues at other Federal agencies, OPM, the Office of Management and Budget, and the Partnership for Public Service to learn about best practices and continually update our efforts to improve.

These five strategies have driven improvements deep into the culture of USDA to result in lasting changes that make a difference every day as our employees deliver significant results that benefit the public we serve. We not only achieved our goal to be in the top ten Best Places to Work ranking ahead of schedule, we were recognized as, "The Most Improved Large Agency" in 2016, and increased our results in all ten workplace categories that the Partnership for Public Service tracks. We believe that engaging employees will be even more important tomorrow than it is today. We are excited about the successes we have achieved, and look forward to continuing along this path to drive further improvements. We continue to modify and update our strategies as we learn more and as the environment changes so that we can embed these efforts into the daily work of our leaders, managers, and supervisors. We recognize that it is only by doing this that we can build a USDA that will achieve success in facing current challenges and be prepared to excel in an unknown and uncertain future. We expect to see many more positive changes take place at USDA as leaders listen to employees and work together with them to make our Department the best it can be for those of us who work here as well as for the American public we serve.

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Roberta “Bobbi” Jeanquart has served as the Chief Human Capital Officer, Office of Human Resources Management, Departmental Management, U.S. Department of Agriculture since November 2015. In her present position, Bobbi provides vision and leadership to USDA-wide programs in employee and labor relations, recruitment, diversity, veterans and disability employment, work/life, hiring reform, human resources policy, workforce and succession planning, human resources accountability, human resources enterprise systems, executive resources, and Equal Opportunity accountability.

Bobbi began her career at USDA in 2009, serving as the Chief of Staff to the Assistant Secretary for Administration in Departmental Management. In 2011 she became USDA’s Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Office of Congressional Relations and in 2012, the Deputy Director of the Office of Human Resources Management.

Before joining USDA, Bobbi served for ten years as the Executive Director of the National Association of Resource Conservation and Development Councils, a national non-profit organization that provides economic development and conservation assistance to communities in predominantly rural areas. She served as Staff Director for U.S. Representative Marcy Kaptur of Ohio—then the Ranking Member of the House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee.

Bobbi holds a bachelor of arts in political science from Marquette University and completed her graduate studies in comparative politics at the University of Toledo.