Fair and Equitable Treatment Study
Focus Group Protocol

Introduction

Facilitators-Introduce selves.

MSPB role-The U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board is an independent Federal agency that has 2 primary roles:

1) Adjudication-hearing and deciding employee appeals of personnel actions (e.g., removals, suspensions, demotions) and administrative decisions (e.g., retirement benefits);
2) Conducting studies the state of the Federal Government's merit systems to determine whether they are operating in accord with the merit principles and free from prohibited personnel practices. (Office of Policy and Evaluation)

Examples of the merit principles that are particularly relevant to today's discussion:

1) "Recruitment should be from qualified individuals from appropriate sources in an endeavor to achieve a work force from all segments of society, and selection and advancement should be determined solely on the basis of relative ability, knowledge and skills, after fair and open competition which assures that all receive equal opportunity."

2) "All employees and applicants for employment should receive fair and equitable treatment in all aspects of personnel management without regard to political affiliation, race, color, religion, national origin, sex, marital status, age, or handicapping condition," in terms of selection, advancement, pay, performance management, and adverse actions.

Our most recent studies include a report on the probationary period and reforming Federal hiring. If you'd like to read any of our reports or newsletters, please take a look at our website at www.mspb.gov/studies/ or you can leave us your name and mailing address and the name of the report you'd like and we'll send it to you. You can also sign up to receive email notification when we release new reports or subscribe to our newsletter.

OPE past research-We are currently preparing an update of the Fair and Equitable Treatment Study (1996) and the Glass Ceiling Study (1992), and a 1997 report on "Barriers to Hispanic Representation" in the Federal workforce.

Purpose of discussion groups

To collect opinions about workforce issues from a diverse population of Federal employees. We will discuss some topics today that may represent common policy goals, but some aspects may remain open to public debate. We want to hear your thoughts.

Format/Groundrules-We will pose questions to the group and facilitate an open discussion. Please respect the right of others to speak and for them to possibly disagree with your opinion. While we recognize that discussion of issues involving race and sex are often sensitive, we value your input so we hope you will freely share your perspectives and experiences. We're interested in your comments that may reflect your own experiences, as well as those of your colleagues.

Confidentiality-To foster an environment where you can feel comfortable sharing your opinions, we assure you that comments will not be attributed to individuals unless permission is expressly granted. We may use quotes to illustrate points made in future publications, but we will be careful to strip out any information that would identify you individually.

We also request that you honor the confidentiality of this setting and not share details of our discussion (e.g., names, agencies linked with comments) with others outside this group.

To accurately capture the comments and enable me/us to interact more fully with you, we would like to record the discussion. Is everyone comfortable with this? If not, I will just take brief notes during the discussion.

(Optional) Construction of groups-Some participants volunteered or were nominated for these discussion groups based on their interest in the topics. Others we requested after randomly pulling names from the Civilian Personnel Data File in a manner to provide a diverse perspective across the groups in terms of sex and race and national origin. Additionally, we aimed for a broad representation in terms of agencies, occupations, and grades.

Questions?

<u>Introductions</u>-whatever you'd like to share about yourself -name, agency, occupation, how long you've been with the gov't, what attracted you to work for the Federal Gov't, and why you've stayed?

(Optional) What have you found to be advantages and disadvantages of working for the Gov't?

1. As noted in the merit principles, one of the ideals of the Federal service is a work force that represents "all segments of society." How close is your agency to that vision? How well has it recruited and managed a diverse workforce? Where is it lacking?

2. As we mentioned earlier, "fair and equitable treatment" is also mandated by the merit system principles.

- Despite this ideal, in your agencies, do personal characteristics (that are not job-related, e.g., sex, race, national origin religion, age, marital status) create challenges for employees in the workplace? (In other words, does discrimination still occur?)

- Which personal characteristics have created challenges? Do certain groups have unique challenges in specific areas?

- What kinds of challenges do you see? (e.g., recruitment, hiring, advancement, training, pay, awards, performance appraisal, discipline, retention)

- Based on your own observations, do you think the amount of discrimination has remained the same, increased, decreased over the past 10 years? Are things better, worse, or the same compared to 10 years ago?

3. How can agencies better manage a diverse workforce? Will these strategies differ by particular group (e.g., race/national origin, sex)?
- Recruit
- Hire
- Train/prepare
- Advance/promote
- Manage performance (pay, performance management, awards, discipline)
- Retain

3a. (For HR or managers only) There has been a lot of discussion regarding the impending "retirement wave" and increased diversity of the workforce. Do you expect that changes in the composition of the Civilian Labor Force/Federal workforce will affect the Government? Do you have any additional recommendations regarding what agencies, managers, and supervisors should do to more effectively obtain and utilize the future workforce?

4. Do you feel that changes in the Federal civil service systems (e.g. pay for performance, changes in appeals and labor relations, changes in job descriptions and classifications) will affect fairness in the workplace?   How? If so, what do you recommend to preserve the merit principles and ensure employees are managed efficiently and effectively?

5. In the spring, we plan to administer a Fair and Equitable Treatment survey of Federal Government employees to cover a number of the topics we've discussed today. What topics would you recommend that we cover in this survey?

6. What can we (MSPB) do to ensure fair and equitable treatment of a diverse workforce?