

# Reinvigorating the Spirit of Strategic Human Resource Management

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Government does not work without its people—our public servants. While popular rhetoric may sell stories of the incompetent and lazy public sector worker who cannot be fired, countless studies have shown those who choose to work for government are for the most part highly motivated, dedicated, and skilled employees who often sacrifice greater extrinsic rewards for the benefit of being able to make a difference, serve the public, and promote good governance and public value.

Certain strands of the reform dialogue over the past 40 years worldwide have argued that if we can free these dedicated public workers up from unnecessary bureaucratic constraints, their performance can be highlighted, celebrated, and even improved. Nested within this larger performance movement, federal, state, and local governments have begun connecting the human resource management (HRM) process to agency performance by talking the language of strategic human resource management (SHRM)—an overarching approach to HRM, borrowed from the private sector, that argues for HR policies and practices that connect human resources to organizational strategies to improve performance. People matter for performance and, across the world, governments have passed laws requiring strategic plans, mandated the development of associated workforce plans to think about their HR needs in relation to the strategic plans, appointed “human capital” officers to coordinate people management strategies, and collected metrics on a number of different human capital practices and outcomes to “show” the relationship between their people and their outcomes.

Public sector HRM has made progress in being strategic, but we have more work to do. I do not want the reader to get me wrong—there have been a number of success stories in this growth of SHRM and pockets of significant innovation. I am also a total believer in SHRM—the more public servants can see how what

they do in their work connects to the larger whole of their organizations—their part in helping to accomplish agency or government strategies and goals—the better the workforce will operate along a number of different dimensions. The United States Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has created a comprehensive strategic human capital management process designed to align federal agency workforces with the agency goals to help achieve missions and improve effectiveness. The Government Performance Project, funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, documented SHRM improvements across state governments in the United States, and Sally Selden's 2009 book *Human Capital* provides a comprehensive treatment of how governments have been aligning their HRM practices with larger organizational strategies to foster high performance. In a 2019 issue of the *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Eva Knies and colleagues as guest editors presented a series of studies showing the relationship between HRM and performance in the public sector. We know HRM affects performance and public organizations recognize this relationship and have started creating systems and practices to maximize it.

However, at the same time, governments have made progress in implementing strategic approaches to HRM, some fundamental challenges to government performance (measuring it, reporting on it, and actually achieving it) have both not changed and even worsened in many cases, frustrating the implementation of SHRM practices. Citizens want government services, but their declining willingness to pay for those services have led to increasingly tight budgets. While employment possibilities vary worldwide, in some areas in the United States, record low unemployment makes it hard for governments with scarce resources to make an argument for why they should be considered the employer of choice and recruit new talent to their workforces. Continued political attacks on career public servants and the size of government have led to a drop in the morale of many government workforces.

It is hard to be strategic about your human resources when you are competing for talent but are strapped for resources, when you have to defend the integrity and value of your workplace, when you are constantly hearing attacks on your employees in the news and on social media, and when your ability to hire the people you need to accomplish agency goals is increasingly scrutinized by stakeholders with often limited or biased knowledge of what it takes to make government work well. So what do we do to address these challenges while continuing the movement to SHRM in government? How do we encourage public organizations to embrace the full *spirit* of SHRM?

We do so first by better understanding what works well—really taking inventory of the progress we have made and identifying where we may be talking the language of SHRM without really embodying strategy in action. Studies critiquing strategic planning, including Henry Mintzberg's famous *Harvard Business Review* article, highlight that it is not necessarily the systems or practices themselves that lead to failure but the lack of really embracing the process associated with being strategic. Strategy is not an

end, it is a journey. The time has come to do more evaluations of SHRM and human capital management systems across governments to highlight successful practices and those contextual factors to consider when moving your workforce to a more strategic orientation—to really show the strategic journey. One of the keys to being truly strategic in managing your workforce is recognizing that there are no pure “best practices”; real SHRM is about alignment between *your* policies and practices, *your* mission and goals, and the context in which *your* government operations are happening. There is not a one-size-fits-all answer to becoming strategic in managing HR in public agencies, but we have made enough progress to better highlight HR successes that could be adapted and aligned in more public organizations.

True SHRM requires redesigned HR departments with staff armed with both the transactional knowledge to implement good (and legal) HR policies and practices and the transformational competencies to help HR *lead* in public organizations. HR staff needs to be both compliance and strategically oriented. It requires building cultures of learning and adaptation and it requires investments in truly managing the performance of public employees. SHRM requires engaging with new and perhaps radical approaches to staffing and managing public organizations. Finally, it requires resources—truly managing people *strategically and well* requires an investment in both management capacity and employees.

## Being Strategic Requires Making HR a Full Partner in Your Leadership Team

Whether thinking about a city manager, the director of a state agency, or the department head in a federal government agency, leaders need to have skilled HR professionals as full members of their management team. In my research and in training sessions with local governments, I have encountered HR managers fully involved in all major municipal decisions alongside city managers and I have met those who are only called when there is need to determine whether or not the leadership team is acting in compliance with the law. For those leading in the public sector, you need to cultivate a HR director who is a trusted advisor, who helps think through the people implications of new organizational goals and challenges. Every decision made by a government agency has rippling effects on the workforce and those effects need to be considered as the decision happens to maximize effectiveness and prevent unforeseen problems. You want to serve 50 more clients per month? What does that mean in terms of how many front-line workers you need? What does that mean for the managers who need to direct those workers? How much more paperwork and “invisible” work will be generated for our managers and employees by this growth? How will that affect morale, motivation, and other HR outcomes? Without HR at the table to help managers reflect on these kinds of questions, new strategic initiatives could be filled with hidden landmines that could ultimately lead to failure.

## Being Strategic Requires Thinking About Your HR Managers and Their Skills

While I am arguing HR should be at the table as a full partner, those HR managers need to be trained in the skills and competencies associated with SHRM. The Society for Human Resource Management, drawing on the work of leading HR scholars, has documented the competencies needed to do strategic HR—how well do government HR managers embody these competencies? How do we get people with both the substantive knowledge of HR policies and practices but also the ability to engage in systems thinking to help the organization as a whole perform? At a time when more public administration education programs are removing HRM courses from their core requirements, the pipeline of future public servants into HR positions and ultimately HR leadership is cause for concern and one largely absent from dialogue among Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA) member schools. Thinking about how we are training and encouraging people to enter HR positions in government needs to be a priority conversation in our field as soon as possible.

## Being Strategic Requires Learning, Not Just Reporting

Embracing the spirit of SHRM means creating systems and practices that allow for managers to learn from their human capital metrics—to think about what different outcomes and results mean for how they are staffing and managing their organizations. Public management scholars such as Donald Moynihan and Alexander Kroll have documented the challenges public organizations face in actually using the myriad of performance measures collected at all levels of government. It is one thing to collect data on the average time to fill a position in your government unit, the dollars spent on training per employee per year, and a multiplicity of individual workforce demographic factors. It is another to think about what do the data *mean*—what data tell us about what we are doing in managing our people and how we can improve?

## Being Strategic Requires Periodic Disruptions of Established Practice

I am by no means advocating change for change's sake (we do too much of this based on electoral cycles). However, we know the workplace is changing—new technologies, multiple generations with different needs and priorities, increased attention to work/life balance—and we need to think critically about how we staff and manage public organizations to adjust to those changes (or get ahead of them). When I am teaching HRM and my reaction to a new idea is “that’s not how it is done,” I now immediately stop and think about this. This visceral reaction means this new idea is bumping up against established norms (e.g., working 8 am to 5 pm). Just because we have always done it that way does not mean it still is the right way to do things (or maybe not right in all cases). We had seen success with flexible

work schedules, telework, and other creative staffing strategies. Let's gather more data on these practices and disseminate implementation strategies. What ideas are being left on the table because they challenge unspoken assumptions about how the workplace operates? Not every radical idea will work in public organizations (we need to balance public values), but opening up the floor to discussion may lead to periodic great movements forward in how we do our important work.

## **Being Strategic Requires a Commitment to Investing in HRM, Even When Budgets Are Tight**

It can be hard to be strategic when you are starving for resources. In many governments today, declining revenues and pressures to keep taxes low have led to an underinvestment in human resources—both from the management side and in terms of employees. HR decisions are often made based on stress and scarcity versus strategy and foresight. Saving money through not filling open positions has cascading effects across a government unit. Devolving HRM responsibilities to line managers to save money on “administration,” without providing appropriate training or support, is a recipe for disaster. Good HRM requires capacity—to plan, to do actual performance reviews, to examine current practices, and create new practices. This does not work without well-trained HR managers with the time and capacity to actually manage people (vs. just checking the appropriate boxes).

Scholars and practitioners of public HRM have advocated for and demonstrated the centrality of what we do for government performance. We need to continue to amplify this truth and look for all opportunities to keep reinforcing the message that HRM is the best kind of management.

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