



United States Department of Agriculture

Employee Listening Sessions

“The Cultural Transformation of USDA”

Sponsored by the Food and Agriculture Council (FAC)



THE FINAL REPORT June 2010

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Secretary Tom Vilsack's Message

The cultural transformation effort is extremely important to me and to the future of USDA. Everyone should be engaged and involved in this effort because it is receiving attention at the highest levels, which includes President Barack Obama. President Obama is very interested in making sure that people who work for the Federal Government are respected and valued.

It is estimated that 50 percent of USDA's workforce will be eligible for retirement within the next few years and decade. I want USDA to be a place where young people are interested in pursuing career opportunities and existing employees will want to continue their careers and see opportunities for advancement into leadership roles.

I see USDA as an amazing Department and want the world to know how each employee contributes to the mission of USDA.

- Thirty-eight million Americans are touched directly by what USDA does with our Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).
- Thirty-one million children across this country and all 50 States and territories will go through a lunch line and be impacted and directed by USDA's work.
- Eleven million women and children are also benefiting from our work in the nutrition area.
- There are 50 to 60 million Americans living in rural America who want economic opportunities and want to be able to turn to their sons and daughters and grandsons and granddaughters and say this is a great place to live, work, and raise your family.
- Today there are farmers struggling in Afghanistan to make the right choice in terms of what they will plant in the spring. Will it be poppy or will it be wheat, or saffron or pomegranate? USDA's work is helping those folks to be able to make the right choices and decisions.
- There's probably a mother or father who is producing a breakfast or dinner for their children without worrying about whether the food they're feeding their youngsters is safe and nutritious, because of the work folks are doing at USDA.
- Today someone turned on the tap in one of the many urban centers of this country and took a drink of water and probably never realized that it was USDA and the Forest Service folks who made that drink possible.

- USDA is responsible for a substantial amount of nutrition assistance and food assistance, especially during this difficult economic time.
- USDA is the resource that is helping to create economic opportunity in rural America at a time when it is desperate for economic opportunity.
- USDA is helping to lead the country in an effort to have a more abundant and safer food supply.
- USDA is leading the effort within the United States to become less dependent on foreign oil, which is not just an economic issue, but also a national security issue.
- USDA's Forest and Private Working Lands Program is responsible not just for preserving our soil and making it more productive, but also responsible for about 80 percent of the drinking water throughout this country.



- USDA is not just focused on domestic issues, but also has significant foreign portfolio that affects this economy.
- USDA is one of the few areas that has created a surplus, which helps to generate jobs within the United States.
- USDA is providing food not only for the United States, but all over the world. USDA is doing it in a humanitarian way in Haiti, Afghanistan, and all parts in between.
- USDA does amazing research that impacts people in their day-to-day lives.

USDA employees perform very important work and should be extraordinarily proud of their work and the Department.

To continue this amazing work, USDA leadership will incorporate the feedback from the listening sessions into an overall plan that all employees will learn as a team, as an administration, and as a Department. USDA's mission areas will commit and work to request and receive feedback on the status of the implementation.

Pearlie S. Reed, Assistant Secretary for Administration, will lead the implementation effort with the support of his entire Departmental Management team and Alma C. Hobbs, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Administration and Chair of the Cultural Transformation Taskforce.



Overview

Secretary Thomas Vilsack of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is personally committed to making a cultural transformation within USDA by creating a diverse, inclusive, and high-performance organization. Secretary Vilsack's commitment to this effort is the result of a conversation with President Barack Obama about the level of dissatisfaction among employees at USDA. This level of employee dissatisfaction was revealed in the Federal Human Capital Survey conducted by the Office of Personnel Management, where USDA ranked in the bottom third of the Federal Departments in terms of people's attitudes about their jobs and how things are working at USDA.

There is expectation from the White House that USDA will begin the process of improving employee morale, and Secretary Vilsack wants to begin this process by sending a message to employees that they are valued and respected.

To fulfill this commitment, Secretary Vilsack began discussions with Assistant Secretary for Administration Pearlie Reed and his team about how to transform USDA into a modern workplace with a modern workforce. This led to the development of a Transformation Taskforce, chaired by Alma C. Hobbs, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Administration. The taskforce sought support from USDA's Food and Agriculture Council (FAC) to sponsor a series of six employee listening sessions and a session with Union representatives across the United States.

- Washington, D.C. – March 31, 2010
- Davis, California – April 7, 2010
- Blue Springs, Missouri – April 14, 2010
- Lakewood, Colorado – April 21, 2010
- Raleigh, North Carolina – April 28, 2010
- Amherst, Massachusetts – May 5, 2010
- Union Representatives, Washington, D.C. – May 14, 2010

The goals of the sessions:

- Provide a platform for employees' input so they will be heard during the cultural transformation process;
- Glean insights from employees so their perspective is understood with the goal of incorporating key insights into the implementation efforts;
- Provide an opportunity for sub-Cabinet officials to engage with employees and provide leadership for the transformation effort.

Employees were able to provide feedback in the five key areas of Leadership, Employee Development, Talent Management, Recruitment and Retention, Customer Focus and Community Outreach.

Employees were able to provide feedback after the live sessions via an online survey provided by an independent contractor. The online survey Web site went live immediately following each session and closed the Friday following the session at 11:59 p.m.

Employees had an opportunity to participate during a town hall-like setting or Webcast on April 15, 2010.

Each of the six sessions were led by an Under Secretary and a member of the Transformation Taskforce and facilitated by an independent contractor who captured the employees' feedback and submitted a final report at the conclusion of the sixth session. The Under Secretary and the Transformation Taskforce will provide visible leadership and additional background on the transformation effort and will answer questions from employees.

The successful transformation of USDA's culture requires feedback from its most valuable resource: its employees. So, what will a culturally transformed USDA look like? According to the Transformation Taskforce and the Food and Agriculture Council, a transformed USDA is responsive, collaborative, transparent, highly effective in implementing its many missions, and completely respectful in embracing diversity with respect to its own workforce and the constituents that it serves. A transformed USDA has a highly engaged workforce that is motivated, empowered to succeed, and trained to meet future challenges.

Leadership

Secretary Vilsack feels that every employee is in essence a leader who contributes to the mission of USDA. Developing leadership capacity and capabilities is very important to the future of USDA, as having a workplace where people are respected and valued.

Repetitive recommendations across all or most of the sessions.

Training

Allocate training dollars and make it mandatory that leadership receive on going training to learn about all USDA programs, develop positive leadership traits, manage conflict, and learn how to supervise a diverse pool of employees.

Leadership Selection

Create more transparency in the leadership selection process to ensure that hiring decisions are based on selecting leaders with a successful track record of managing employees and that they represent diversity in terms of race, gender, disability, age and sexual orientation.

Leadership Accountability

Establish a system that holds leadership accountable for employee and customer mistreatment, conducting performance appraisals in a fair and equitable manner; providing appropriate resources for successful job performance; managing conflicts to minimize Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) complaints; rewarding and recognizing top performers; disciplining and removing poor performers; complying with regulations, program requirements, best practices; using Individual Development Plans (IDP) to aid



in career development; assessing workload distribution; and helping employees manage workload issues.

Communication

Employees want to engage in collaborative planning and problem solving with leadership on important initiatives and feel that they can do so without fear of retribution.

Workload Demands and Distribution

Leadership should spend more time in the field offices to better understand the work of field personnel. Leadership should assess the workload demands to understand the impact on field employees, then identify ways to provide additional support, balance the distribution of assignments, and reduce the number of emergency project requests by establishing realistic due dates.

Recommendations more specific to the listening session locations.

Washington, D.C.

Employee and Customer Relations

Establish an ombudsman program at the Department level to resolve customer and workplace issues before they escalate to EEO complaints.

Davis, California

Communication

Field office personnel want greater collaboration with leadership when it comes to planning what is best for them and the customers they serve.

Blue Springs, Missouri

Leadership Opportunities

Create more leadership opportunities in the field so that employees who are involved in their communities or have strong family ties will not have to relocate to obtain a leadership position. Do not promote technicians to management positions just because they are highly skilled technicians or highly favored. This is a big problem in the Farm Service Agency.



Lakewood, Colorado

Employee Treatment

Provide employees with an anonymous way to report situations involving leadership retaliation, acts of racism, unethical hiring, sexual harassment, and other types of mistreatment.

Raleigh, North Carolina

Leadership Accountability and Employee Terminations

Hold leaders accountable for spending an appropriate number of hours in the office to provide adequate guidance to staff. Lack of leadership presence allows low-performing employees to work without guidance whenever and however they want to without being subject to disciplinary action.

Communications

Leadership can improve communications with employees by engaging them in their job function, encouraging participatory feedback on improving the efficiency of the Department, and keeping them up to date regarding program changes and other initiatives.

Amherst, Massachusetts

Leadership Accountability and Employee Terminations

Leadership must be held accountable for taking effective disciplinary actions against low-performers and problematic employees instead of offering details and promotions as options for removal.

Union Representatives, Washington, D.C.

Collaboration

Union representatives want greater collaboration with leadership to communicate more effectively with employees in the field, planning to meet targets, pre-decisional involvement and implementation of the transformation process, and to change the negative perception managers have of the Union and its employees.



Employee Development

USDA employees contribute in a significant way to this country's future. Secretary Vilsack wants every employee to know he or she is valued and can have a career at USDA.

Repetitive recommendations across all or most of the sessions.

Training

Allocate training dollars that not only enhance the employee's ability to perform well on his or her job, but also prepares the employee for promotional opportunities – technical and/or managerial. Allocate funds for tuition reimbursement and allow more training involving personal interaction versus AgLearn experiences. Introduce rotational assignments across agencies and opportunities for job shadowing with highly proficient employees. Encourage participation by all employees.

Individual Development Plans (IDPs)

Individual Development Plans should be required for employees at all grade levels. Require supervisors to collaborate with employees to create IDPs that chart career paths, identify training requirements, provide growth opportunities, identify skills and interests, participate in future projects, and receive rotational assignments.

Mentor-Protégé Program

Establish a formal mentor-protégé program that will expose employees to multiple aspects of the Department and allow them to gain knowledge that qualifies them for different positions. The program can be used to link new recruits and existing employees with employees that are eligible for retirement. The program can be used to prepare employees for entry into the County Office Trainee (COT) Program and prepare Program Technicians (PT) for a County Executive Director (CED) position. The program can also be used to train and support the procurement staff in the field.

Field Opportunities

Employee development opportunities should be available in the field where employees work instead of requiring employees to travel to headquarters. When employees develop themselves, leadership should look within the agencies for



likely job candidates where employees live, especially during this period of staff shortages and pending retirements.

Rotational Details

Utilize details to help employees obtain on-the-job experience; work on taskforces, committees, and high visibility projects; and to better understand the mission, vision, and goals of the Department. Rotational details can be used to identify problem areas, evaluate the workflow process, formulate alternatives to improve field office efficiency, and reduce administrative workload. Expand the pool of eligible employees who can participate in rotational details normally reserved for GS-14 and 15 levels. Details should not be used to remove problem employees from one area to another.

Recommendations more specific to the listening session locations.

Washington, D.C.

Telework

Implement telework work practices throughout the Department. Provide telework as a reward for outstanding performance and responsible completion of duties. For telework to be effective, the right technology has to be in place.

Davis, California

Targeted Employee Development

Target development on an employee's current and target positions up the career path. Develop employees' interests and talents within the mission of the agency and develop the skills that will increase productivity. Employees should only be allowed to develop in areas that are required for their position or one that benefits the Department.

Blue Springs, Missouri

Training - Toastmasters

Reinstate Toastmasters and provide administrative leave for employees to participate. Employees pay their own dues and it is a way to develop skills in communication, leadership, and public speaking without the Department having to pay for the training directly. Members discover where their strengths and weaknesses are in regard to communication and leadership and then work toward building their strengths and overcoming their weaknesses. Toastmaster clubs also boost abilities to organize and run efficient meetings. Employees not only learn to communicate more clearly and concisely, but they also learn to do it with confidence. Confident employees are far more likely to communicate their ideas during meetings. The skills they are learning also help to develop better future leaders. Employees feel that allowing an occasional hour of duty time to participate in a Toastmaster club is more than a fair trade for a single meeting that ends on time. Leadership can provide some passive support by letting the club use the facilities for its lunch-time meetings.

Lakewood, Colorado

Training – Specialized Positions

Training should be mandatory for specialized positions, such as appraisers, architects, and nutritionists, to ensure they remain current to maintain any licenses, certificates, special knowledge, or continuing education for keeping their jobs.

Raleigh, North Carolina

Training – AgLearn

AgLearn is considered a useful tool that could use some updates. Some of the hardware in USDA does not support AgLearn. Employees are booted out of the system in the

middle of training and must take the same course numerous times for a successful completion. Using AgLearn in the field is challenging due to incoming phone calls and customer visits. AgLearn is great for routine items, like security awareness, but it is not very good for actually improving or learning new skills.

Amherst, Massachusetts

Training – Workload

Employees receive many training opportunities, but are tasked with doing more with less. There is no time to take the preferred courses. They turned to training courses via live meeting and conference calls, but find them less effective because many people are performing other tasks rather than concentrating on what is being said during the training session.

New Employee Orientation

The State and area offices need a new employee orientation program that will educate new employees about all programs associated with their position.

Union Representatives - Washington, D.C.

Training

Provide employees with upward mobility and on going training to obtain the knowledge and develop skills to perform their jobs.



Talent Management

It is important for USDA to identify employees with particular talents and to ensure that they are in the right positions to utilize those talents.

Repetitive recommendations across all or most of the sessions.

Recognize and Reward Talent

Identify creative and cost-efficient ways to recognize and reward talent. Allocate resources to reward and distribute cash awards fairly among employees based on performance contribution and remove the secrecy surrounding award recipients. Offer flexible schedules, telework, and/or pay for performance as rewards for outstanding performance and change the rating system.

Talent Database

Develop a database that lists the knowledge, skills, abilities, and special talents of employees. The database should be used to select talented employees for rotational details, special project assignments, training new and existing employees, leadership development, and promotional opportunities.

Hiring Process

Establish a fair selection process for all managerial and supervisory positions based on performance, experience, and qualifications, rather than personal relationships. Provide feedback to candidates who were not selected.

Recommendations more specific to the listening session locations.

Washington, D.C.

Upward Mobility

Establish more jobs with a career ladder so that an employee can achieve upward mobility, such as starting at a GS-6 or 7 and moving up to a GS-13 in essentially the same job with ever-increasing responsibility. Opportunity for advancement is a prime motivator.

Davis, California

Field Promotion Opportunities

Eliminate the requirements for employees to move to another State or headquarters in order to be promoted, as it

prevents the field office from maintaining the knowledge of experienced staff. Talented staff members who are unwilling or unable to move out of California become ineligible for supervisory positions, and the organization suffers.

Blue Springs, Missouri

Outsourcing

Employees feel that too many contractors are hired to provide services in areas where employees can perform the work. The Department has a lot of talent that it is not tapping into and should look within before outsourcing the work.

Lakewood, Colorado

Performance Evaluations

Change the performance evaluation system so that more than one individual is providing feedback regarding an employee's performance. Employees want to participate by sharing their opinions regarding how well their leaders are servicing the customers and treating the employees.

Raleigh, North Carolina

Employee Accountability

Talented employees want effective tools for holding non-performers and problematic employees accountable for performing their share of the workload.

Amherst, Massachusetts

Promotion Opportunities

Talented employees want more opportunities for advancement and promotion. Recognize their advanced education, assign corresponding challenging work, and minimize routine tasks.

Union Representatives, Washington, D.C.

Talent Database - Lower Grade Levels

Identify talented employees at the GS-4 through GS-7 grade levels to ensure that they are in the correct positions to effectively utilize their talent and further develop their skills.



Recruitment and Retention

USDA will undertake an extraordinary effort to try to send a message out to people across the country, to colleges, universities, community colleges, and high schools that USDA is a fascinating and interesting place to work.

Repetitive recommendations across all or most of the sessions.

Marketing Campaign

Develop and implement an aggressive marketing campaign that clearly explains the various missions, programs, activities, and employee benefits, and how USDA impacts industries and consumers around the world.

Recruitment & Retention Strategy

Develop a formal recruitment and retention strategy for all of USDA that identifies the critical positions to recruit for and where to focus recruitment efforts to identify a diverse pool of candidates who could potentially fill vacant positions and address the retirement issues.

Identify Critical Positions:

Recruitment and retention should be centered on identifying and filling the gaps that will be created by employees eligible for retirement.

Colleges and Universities:

Require recruitment at colleges and universities with strong agricultural programs. Provide a more robust screening process for employees recruited from 1890s and land-grant institutions so they are fully aware of the position and the commitment they are making. Allow USDA employees, young professionals, and recent college graduates to visit universities and utilize social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, as a channel to reach prospective employees. Provide students with internship opportunities.

High Schools:

Expose students to careers in the USDA by enlisting them to work in internships, offer tours to students and faculty and visit schools to make classroom presentations about USDA. Enlist employees to participate in science fairs and other events at local junior and high schools.

Professional Organizations:

Utilize professional organizations to post job openings and disseminate information about careers at USDA.

Employee Promotions:

The recruitment effort should include looking within USDA to identify and assess the skills of existing employees to determine eligibility for promotion or detail assignment. Use online job databases to locate employees with highly technical backgrounds, especially for candidates with post-doctoral backgrounds.



Hiring Process

Simplify the hiring process to make the job applications more user-friendly and reduce the time it takes from making the job offer to the actual start date. Train managers how to use the Schedule A hiring authority to shorten the hiring process for people with disabilities. Eliminate the requirement that a position must be vacant before a job announcement can post.

Retain new hires by developing a standardized employee orientation program that educates new employees about all of USDA and matches them with a talented existing employee for a period of time to provide support and mentorship.

Diversity

Recruit a diverse workforce that is representative of America's demographics. Encourage field offices to select a minority-serving institution to adopt and build a long-term relationship.

Retain existing talent by providing leadership training and promotional opportunities to minorities and employees with disabilities.

Field Opportunities

Recruit new hires and retain existing talent by providing promotions and rotational details in the field for people who do not want to relocate due to family or vcommunity commitments.

Rewards, Recognition, and Benefits

Identify creative, innovative ways to retain existing talent and to attract new employees. Some ideas include telework, student loan repayment, tuition reimbursement for advanced degrees, childcare support stipend, pay for performance, wellness program, compensatory time off work, flexible work schedules, credit hours, and cash awards.

Improve Working Conditions

Assess current working conditions and make some immediate changes to improve employee morale and job satisfaction. Ensure that employees are not working in a hostile environment. Provide adequate equipment and sufficient work space to successfully perform their jobs.

Examine employee workloads in areas that have experienced significant resource reductions to determine where there is a critical need to fund new positions or redistribute the workload.

Recommendations more specific to the listening session locations.

Washington, D.C.

Age Discrimination

The recruitment effort should include looking within USDA to identify and assess the skills of senior employees (40+ years of age) to see if they qualify for the vacant positions and avoid complaints of age discrimination.

Davis, California

Working Conditions

Improve the technology (computers and software) to keep them from crashing and provide more resources for supplies so that employees will not have to pay for paper, chairs and other supplies out of their own pockets.

Blue Springs, Missouri

On Boarding Program

Improve recruitment and retention through the “On Boarding” program for students and veterans.

Lakewood, Colorado

Workload

Hold non-performing and problematic employees accountable for their share of the workload and take timely and appropriate disciplinary action to improve morale and retain the hardworking and talented employees.

Raleigh, North Carolina

Recruitment Strategy

Many employees report satisfaction with their jobs and want leadership to first recruit from within USDA by rewarding the talented employees with advancement opportunities, job-shadowing, and rotational details as a strategy to address the retirement issue.

Amherst, Massachusetts

Working Conditions

USDA can retain quality employees if it treats them with respect, makes them feel like they are part of the team, rewards competence and hard work, and promotes from within.

Recruitment Strategy

USDA can improve recruitment by increasing funding, simplifying the hiring process, developing a marketing campaign, and becoming more competitive with other Federal Departments.

Union Representatives, Washington, D.C.

Recruitment Strategy

USDA should retain high-performance seasonal and temporary employees by offering career positions and streamlining the hiring process that will allow recruiters to bring new recruits in faster.



Customer Focus and Community Outreach

USDA wants to do a better job of communicating with the wide diversity of people it serves by assessing their needs and promoting the programs and services that can be of help and assistance

Repetitive recommendations across all or most of the sessions.

Marketing Campaign

Develop and implement an aggressive marketing campaign that clearly explains the various missions, programs, activities, employee benefits, and how USDA affects industries and consumers around the world. Produce a newsletter and video that highlights USDA's vast service delivery system and mission areas.

Allow staff to conduct outreach at non-traditional events such as parades, sporting events, community fairs, etc., to inform the public about USDA programs and services. Also, maintain a presence at traditional events, such as State fairs and 4-H State and national events.

Program Assessments

Streamline programs so they are more user-friendly and less time consuming. Review certification requirements, develop new programs for the traditionally underserved and limited- resource farmers, and implement programs in the field only after producing the administrative handbooks and fully testing the software.

Training

Provide customer service training to staff so they understand the cultural distinctions among the people they serve. Provide training and rotational assignments so employees can learn about all of the programs, understand issues relevant to State and county offices, and learn how to engage with and improve service delivery to producers.

Information Technology

Thoroughly test program software and equipment prior to implementation to ensure that it is working properly and has sufficient memory and capabilities. Revamp the USDA Web site to make it easier to access program information



and locate agency contacts. Ensure that all USDA Web sites, including AgLearn, are Section 508 compatible.

Communications

Utilize social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter to build relationships with field staff and customers. Provide detailed information about USDA programs on partner Web sites so customers have multiple opportunities to access information. Distinguish between which customers can be reached effectively via e-mail versus those who are more dependent on the U.S. Postal Service or face-to-face contacts.

Workload

Approve budgets to hire additional staff in county offices that are short staffed so employees can manage increasing workloads, as well as perform public outreach. Consistently high work demands make it very difficult to perform exemplary levels of customer service and participate in outreach activities.

Recommendations more specific to the listening session locations.

Washington, D.C.

Provide short-term details for headquarters staff to work in the field to learn about program delivery to the customer and better understand the challenges in the field that do not exist at headquarters.



Davis, California

Reinvigorate special emphasis programs to ensure that all protected groups have a platform for sharing concerns.

Blue Springs, Missouri

Provide a directory of programs and agency contact numbers to help customers find answers to a wide range of questions and topics. Customers get very confused when they try to navigate through the Web site or the complex menu structure on the telephone system.

Lakewood, Colorado

Correct public perception that farm programs are a “hand-out” for farmers and ranchers. Taxpayers need to know that farmers and ranchers are participating in programs that help them protect our valuable resources of clean water, air quality, soil conservation, and other environmental benefits.

Raleigh, North Carolina

Recognize that it is very difficult to generate minority participation in farm programs when there are fewer minorities who farm. Minority program participation will probably never match the agricultural statistical data demographics for the counties served.

Amherst, Massachusetts

Modify program requirements to reflect the smaller farm size prevalent in the Northeast (5 acres) versus the larger farm sizes in other rural areas.

Union Representatives, Washington, D.C.

Technology is impersonal, which is not the lifestyle of rural America. USDA should develop an outreach strategy that specifically targets customers who lack access to computers or the Internet. USDA should utilize employees in the field and the Union to more aggressively publicize USDA’s work.



APPENDIX A

Cultural Transformation Taskforce Members

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APPENDIX B

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