



State of Federal Career Senior Leadership

First-of-its-kind survey reveals Federal leaders believe they lack support needed to improve performance and drive transformation

As Federal agencies are being asked to restructure and operate more like the private sector in response to Executive Orders and the OMB memo on reshaping and reforming the Federal Government¹, career senior leaders report a concerning lack of empowerment and ability to drive change.

A new survey by the Senior Executives Association (SEA) and Deloitte of Senior Executive Service (SES) members and those in equivalent positions reveals a number of concerns leaders have related to their leadership pipeline, executive readiness, and ability to transform government agencies. The data show an inconsistent “leadership experience” across the federal government, and the more than 750 survey respondents provided comments about what leaders will need to help drive innovation in the future.

The good news is that the survey results show that career senior leaders care deeply about the organizations they lead, clearly understand what they are accountable for, and are anxious to see key changes to help improve leadership selection, development, and empowerment.

The following sections highlight key findings and trends within the survey.

¹ Exec. Order No. M-17-22, Comprehensive Plan for Reforming the Federal Government and Reducing the Federal Civilian Workforce. (2017).

Leadership pipeline

Government is not attracting and retaining top talent...

...and agencies struggle to identify and promote high-potential leaders over employees with strong technical expertise.

22%

22 percent of respondents agreed that their agency is well prepared to retain top talent



27%

Only 27% agreed that their agency has a plan to attract talent from outside the Federal government

While 98% of respondents agreed that as a career senior leader, people management skills are as important as functional expertise...



98%

...only 57% responded that career senior leaders are selected based on leadership capability in addition to functional expertise

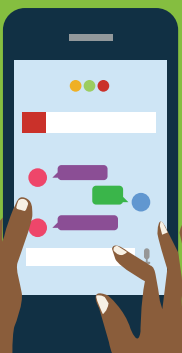
57%

Only 35% said that career senior leaders are selected based on their ability to inspire teams

35%



When asked what attributes and characteristics will be critical for future career senior leaders to drive innovation in the federal government, senior leaders responded:



"I believe the senior leaders of tomorrow will need to have more emotional intelligence. Too many times, we select the most 'technical' leader and expect them to be inspirational and a guide for others to follow. We do not spend enough time building our 'soft skills'. We must start to value the continual development of our existing executives if they are going to be able to lead this next generation successfully. Then we need to empower these leaders and get out of the way of the changes they want to see made!"



"Also, soft skills are critical to successful performance. This skill requirement is often ignored. If (our agency) does not fix its hiring protocol to provide for hiring in less than 120 days, it will never be able to routinely hire the best and brightest."

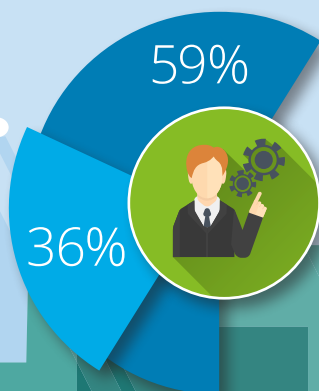
Executive readiness

Senior leaders express concern over leadership development opportunities...

59% of respondents indicated there are development opportunities to help build leadership capabilities...

...but only 36% said their development needs are taken into account when determining areas of responsibility.

Opportunities for development vary across agencies, ranging from 39% to 70% positive responses regarding access to developmental opportunities.



...and the root cause stems from a need for better infrastructure.

Only a quarter of respondents felt their agency identifies critical skills gaps amongst the career senior leadership cadre.

26%

Across all research objectives, infrastructure to support leader development was the lowest scoring dimension at 26%.

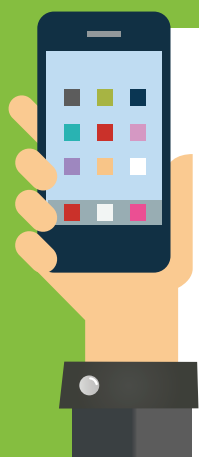
26%

44% agree that there is a strategy to develop future career senior leadership.

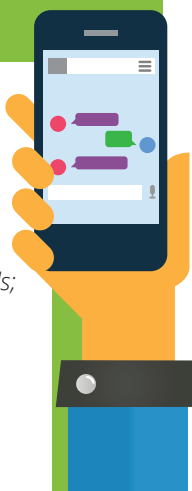
44%



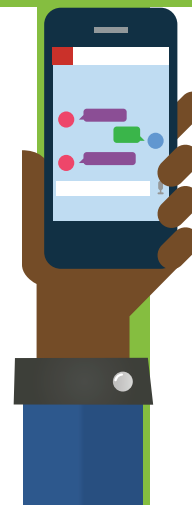
When asked what attributes and characteristics will be critical for future career senior leaders to drive innovation in the federal government, senior leaders responded:



"Senior leaders have to be lifetime learners. Too often they feel they have no need to go to training. Then leaders are not learning new or refining existing skills; they can't judge the value of training they procure for their personnel."



"We need more tinkerers striving for continuous improvement. We need strength of character to speak up even when others don't. Egoless. Ambition directed to advance the agency mission rather than personal career. Commitment to and appreciation of public service and stewardship are firmly rooted in their DNA. This isn't just a job."



"Three things are essential: (1) dedication to life-long learning; (2) ability to manage and leverage talent across generations; and (3) understanding and driving meaningful workplace change as more and more human labor is automated."

Transformational leadership

Agencies are not prepared for the future of work...

Only 46% of respondents believed that leaders are equipped with digital skills to enhance government.

46%



50%

50% of senior leaders believed their agency considers how future workforce trends impact their work.

...and even the most senior career leaders believe significant innovation and collaboration are discouraged by institutional or cultural barriers.

61% of senior career leaders felt empowered to implement meaningful change, but only 52% of respondents agreed they are able to restructure their areas of responsibility as needed to respond to new ideas.

61%

52%

96%

Although 96% believed they are accountable for promoting collaboration **within** their teams to achieve their mission, only 28% believe systems are in place to enable knowledge-sharing **across** career senior leaders in government.

28%

When asked what attributes and characteristics will be critical for future career senior leaders to drive innovation in the federal government, senior leaders responded:

"Leadership skills are needed to drive innovative problem solving, but technology at my agency is still stuck in the 1990s and early 2000s."

"It is time we take huge but calculated risks! Ask tons of curious questions of, rather than just directing staff. Find better smarter ways to do things easier and simpler. Increase risk appetite and don't punish people for trying something novel. Work yourself out of a job and then find a new one! We should be a smaller, leaner, more efficient and effective workforce."

"Leaders need increased technical/digital expertise, the ability to collaborate across functional areas, and understanding of how federal bureaucracy really works and how to maneuver through it."

Action step checklist



Improve the strength of the leadership pipeline

Individual Leaders

- Review exit interview data to understand and address issues driving low employee retention rates in your business unit
- Consider implementing 'stay interviews' to get ahead of turnover issues
- Serve as a mentor to high-performing employees at all levels that demonstrate leadership potential
- Provide shadowing opportunities to give emerging leaders exposure to the responsibilities of senior leaders

Agencies-at-large

- Implement targeted hiring strategies to identify and recruit top talent
- Use evidence-based assessments to identify high-potential individuals with leadership skills, not just technical expertise
- Design programs that build leadership capabilities through challenging experiences and frequent exposure to diverse leaders inside and outside the organization
- Focus on re-evaluating the work and the workforce of tomorrow in order to make hiring decisions, as opposed to just filling open needs

Promote executive readiness

Individual Leaders

- Augment knowledge gained in development programs by interacting with leaders outside your business unit and/or agency and seeking exposure to their leadership approach
- Build in development programs that focus on leadership skills
- Seek out ways to understand how digital trends and technologies impact the workforce, workers, and work itself

Agencies-at-large

- Offer targeted opportunities for leader networking and social exchange
- Add coaching and mentoring opportunities as ongoing aspects of leader development
- Provide knowledge-sharing opportunities to promote collaboration across your organization and agency
- Create or enhance programs tailored to helping leaders develop their ability to act, think, and make informed decisions in the digital world

Enable transformational leadership

Individual Leaders

- Coordinate or champion opportunities such as exchanges and temporary cross-business unit teams that collaborate on strategic initiatives
- Sense and explore trends that are happening in the public and private sectors and champion efforts to invest in new capabilities

Agencies-at-large

- Prepare an annual report for the agency that assesses leadership pipelines and succession plan
- Publicly recognize and reward leaders who implement innovative strategies to drive agency-wide change
- Take a proactive stance in understanding how work will be done in the future and how that shift impacts what the workforce should look like



State of SES Methodology Overview

The Deloitte Survey Research Center (SRC) collaborated with the Senior Executives Association (SEA) to design and distribute an online survey to explore the role of career senior leaders across government. The survey was distributed to career senior leaders in June 2017 via email communications from SEA and partner organizations.

The State of the SES survey included responses from 753 career senior leaders from 14 cabinet level agencies and 12 non-cabinet federal agencies. Respondents included SES and SES equivalents.

The survey examined four research objectives, including the role of leaders, to what extent the federal government fosters leadership and engagement in the SES cadre, to what extent the government provides developmental experiences to cultivate leadership, and identifying future trends in government-wide policy and programs.

The research compared perceptions by cabinet-level agency, as well as sub-agencies to determine meaningful differences.

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“Today, as never before,
organizations do not just
need more strong leaders,
they need a completely
different kind of leader.”

—Deloitte’s 2017 Global Human Capital Trends Report



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