Government Finance Review

GOVERNMENT FINANCE OFFICERS ASSOCIATION

GFOA

A Leaner Public Sector

Engage Employees for Sustainable Success
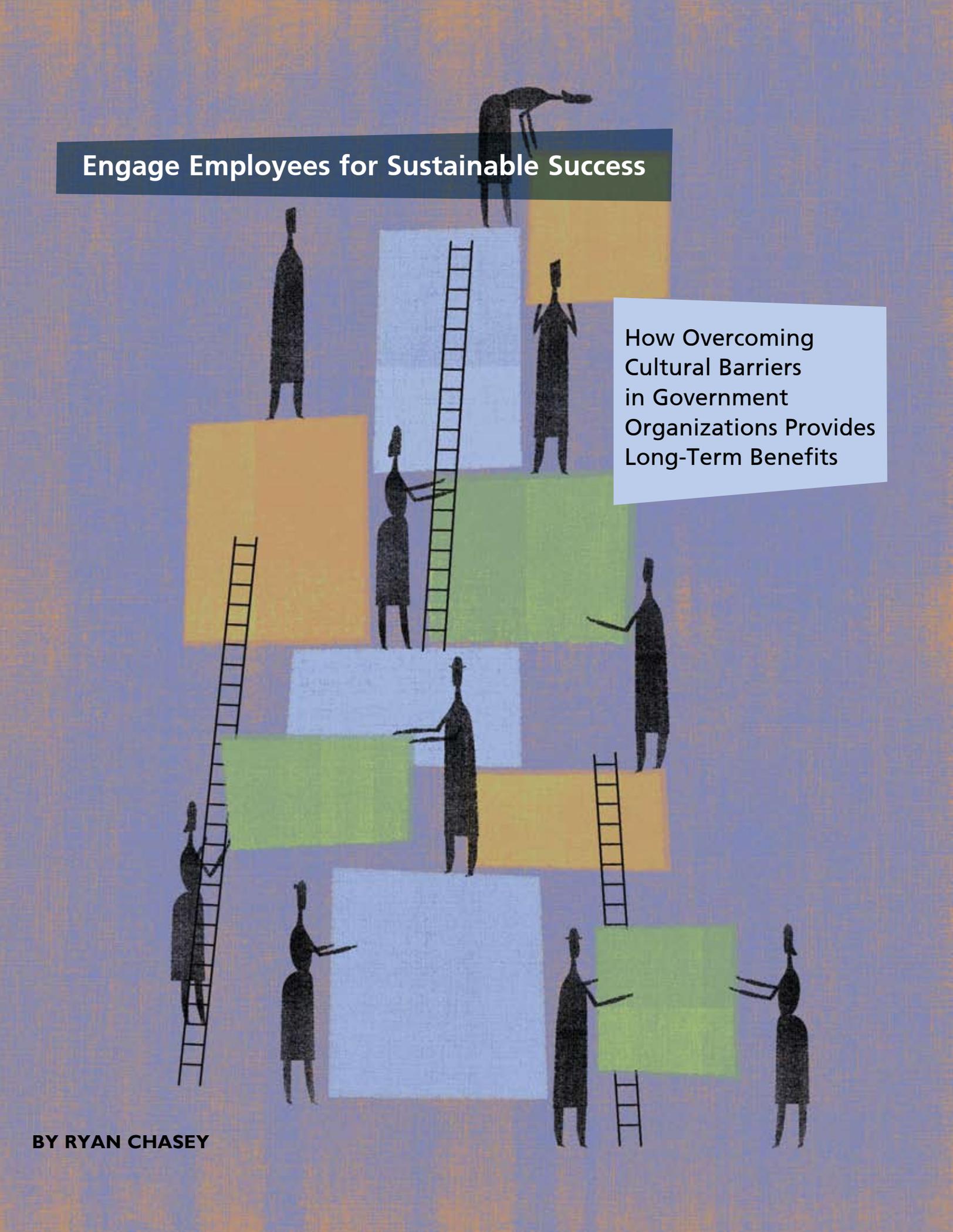
How Overcoming Cultural Barriers in Government Organizations Provides Long-Term Benefits

BY RYAN CHASEY

A fire chief in a small Indiana city was a reluctant participant in strategic planning efforts that were part of a larger continuous improvement program in his city. The chief attended meetings sporadically and did not include firefighters or staff from his department in the process. He thought sharing the plan with employees was a waste of time, saying: "I know my people and what they think. Everyone in our department is busy doing their jobs, and we have everything under control." Finally, under a direct order from the mayor, he sent an e-mail to his department about the goals and asked for input — and got a flood of responses. He then scheduled a meeting to discuss the goals, and nearly everyone in his department attended. He came away from the experience with not only a lot of good ideas to feed back to the strategic planning team, but also a new appreciation for how excited his staff was to be asked for their input.

Most public employees are like the firefighters and staff in this city's fire department: dedicated public servants who have good ideas, and people who want to participate in creating a better workplace and better outcomes for the public. They would like to be engaged in making their organizations better, but too often they are excluded from the process or have goals imposed on them without any input. But sustained improvements only occur when employees are fully engaged in defining and executing the changes needed to achieve higher performance.

> Sustained improvements only occur when employees are fully engaged in defining and executing the changes needed to achieve higher performance.

BARRIERS TO GREATER ENGAGEMENT

Some of the barriers standing in the way of greater engagement are unique to the public sector:

- **Employee Longevity.** Many government employees have traded the potential of a higher salary for greater job security. They have been in their positions for a long time and feel that they are experts in what they do. And while this is true, it can become warped into an attitude that discourages learning or improvement.

- **Public Punishments for Mistakes.** Too often, government employees have seen that people are more likely

to be singled out if an idea turns out badly than they are to be praised or acknowledged if it turns out well. They become risk-averse because nobody wants to see their names in the headlines in connection with a government failure, or get caught in a political crossfire.

- **Frequent Leadership Changes.** Government employees learn that elected leaders can change at least every four years, and their appointees (often the department and division directors) change even more frequently. To survive this turnover and the resulting turmoil, they develop a bunker mentality of "this too shall pass."

However, you can't let these barriers stand in the way. Employee engagement is a critical factor in ensuring sustainable results in any organization. If you don't address these challenges directly, any attempts at improvements will die out when your current leadership moves on. As experience has shown time and again, however, greater employee engagement is possible only if management changes its attitudes, behaviors, and practices.

4 ENGAGEMENT TACTICS

Following are four tactics for tackling employee engagement at a number of levels.

Collaborating around Strategic Plans. Have an organizational strategic plan with well-defined goals; this is critical for keeping the organization aligned to a common purpose. But the process of how that plan is developed is just as important as the outcome. Minimally, of course, the top leader of the organization needs to be involved (e.g., the mayor or city manager), along with the department heads. Their involvement sends the message that this work is important to the organization. If you don't have their active participation and buy-in, the process may be a waste of effort.

To make further use of this involvement, have the top leaders share ideas with and ask for input from their direct reports and other employees. That way, employees feel like they are truly part of the organization's strategic vision and they will be more committed to making it a reality.

Once the strategic plans are completed, let the process cascade down a level. The department heads can use the strategic plan as a starting point for engaging employees in identifying specific, measurable departmental goals that tie into the organization's strategic goals. This second level of planning serves a dual purpose: It provides another chance to invite employee participation, and it helps every employee understand how their departments and their jobs contribute to the organization's goals.

Tip: Have a Tangible Action Plan

Government employees are, by and large, very focused on doing. If a strategic plan is too complicated, the goals are not clearly linked to action, or the process is too drawn out, you will never gain their interest. To engage public-sector employees in driving your strategic goals — or any new initiative — make sure it's clear what people can start doing (or stop doing) to help support the plan, and what measurable goals you are trying to achieve.

These linkages between frontline jobs and the organization's goals are not always clear. That's why the fire chief from the small Indiana city resisted becoming involved in strategic planning. But when he shared the goals with the fire department staff, he saw that together, they came up with a lot of ideas for how they could contribute.

Upgrade Your Training. The first way employees learn about an organization's culture is by what happens during their orientation. They pay attention to what is said and what isn't, what topics are addressed or not addressed, and the language used or not used. Then they compare what they were taught to what actually happens in the workplace. Over time, they notice what kinds of education the organization invests in by offering additional opportunities for involvement or professional development.

If you want employees to start behaving in new ways — such as by adopting a continuous improvement mindset or always collecting data before making a decision —

> If you don't address these challenges head on, any attempts at improvements will die out when your current leadership moves on.

then you need to create a foundation. Specify the exact types of behaviors or attitudes that are expected from everyone and demonstrate your commitment to providing employees with the knowledge and tools they need to live up to these expectations. For example, update your orientation for new hires; this is where you will have the biggest impact in creating expectations. Also, offer ongoing training and professional development opportunities, in the form of training in specific skill sets or more general shared learning activities. For example, when the City of Fort Wayne, Indiana, began an improvement journey, it created the Mayor's Leadership

Development Roundtable. For four months in a row, an invited group of department heads and frontline staff would meet to talk about leadership and improvement themes. The roundtable worked on many different levels. Participants saw that the mayor was committed to their development and success. People from different departments connected with each other, which led to synergistic learning and improvement opportunities. People came away with both broader insights about how to make improvement work in a city environment and specific ideas they could apply immediately to their jobs.

Employee Review and Evaluation. "What gets measured gets done" is a well-known saying. If you are launching a Lean effort or anything similar without changing your performance evaluations, nothing is probably going to happen. Employees are more likely to believe the organization wants them to be engaged in making improvements if employee reviews are used to support learning and continuous improvement rather than an opportunity for them to be criticized by management.

To use this strategy effectively, your organization's performance evaluation system must be aligned with its strategic plan. That means, in part, involving employees in helping identify not only professional goals for them individually but also metrics that relate to contributions they can make that will help the department achieve its strategic goals. The focus should be on outcomes, not activities. It doesn't really matter if the employee has completed XYZ training

(completing an activity). What matters is whether they've used that training to be a valued member on one or more projects that generated a certain level of gain (achieving an outcome).

Embrace New Standards for Managers. People who achieve management positions at any level of government frequently get there because of their performance as an effective employee, not because they have the right management skills or knowledge. That means many managers in city, county, or state government are lacking in knowledge about continuous improvement, especially about how to create an environment that is going to encourage employee engagement in making improvements.

When embarking on any major process improvement effort, take a serious look at what you expect of your managers and supervisors now, and think about how those expectations will change after the initiative is implemented. Then you need to be willing to invest in filling the gaps you will surely find. Typically, you will need to work on areas such as:

- *Focusing on Outcomes.* New or untrained managers tend to lose their focus on the desired outcomes when they get inundated with the details of everyday work. For your managers to support employee engagement, they must be able to help employees focus on what they are responsible for — the outcomes they must be producing, not just the tasks they should be performing.

- *Finding the Balance between Control and Autonomy.* Another trap that new or untrained managers fall into is becoming too controlling of employees' behavior. People will not be engaged in improvement or any other activity if they feel that their input is not welcomed or if their ideas are dismissed.

- *Learning to Look at Data and Resist the Temptation to Blame an Individual for a Problem.* Yes, sometimes individual employees make mistakes. We all have at some point in our careers. But one of the key lessons from Lean and Six Sigma is that the blame often lies with the system or process, not a person. Making the switch from

> If you are launching a Lean effort or anything similar without changing your performance evaluations, nothing is probably going to happen.

thinking "you are at fault" to "let's look at the process and the data" is not easy.

One consequence of these issues is that improving employee engagement means the organization has to improve its managers' skills. That will often include training on interpersonal skills; how to provide regular, specific, constructive feedback (not just annual criticism); and how to identify the root causes of performance issues (look at the environment before assigning personal blame).

REAPING THE BENEFITS OF ENGAGEMENT

Looking at initiatives to introduce improvement methods into government organizations at all levels, one sees that the two types — the few efforts that have survived and those that lasted just one political cycle — and the difference often lies in whether employees were engaged. Too often, one sees a lot of hype up front, perhaps a few success stories right

after launch — and then nothing. Staff never really saw any personal benefit from becoming involved, and they resisted yet another effort to impose new methods on them from the top.

There couldn't be a stronger contrast between this and efforts where employees are involved in all aspects of the change or improvement. For example, frontline employees working for the City of Fort Wayne, Indiana, made it possible for the city to generate more than $29 million in savings and cost avoidance from Lean and Six Sigma projects over an eight-year period. And it wasn't just the city budget or the public that benefited. These employees gained critical thinking and problem-solving skills that benefit them to this day. A number of them gained leadership skills that have helped them advance in their careers.

> If you want employees to start behaving in new ways — such as by adopting a continuous improvement mindset or always collecting data before making a decision — then you need to create a foundation for those behaviors.

CONCLUSIONS

If you are involved in any kind of improvement efforts inside a government organization, you've likely thought about what kinds of training and skills people need in the improvement methods you're championing. But have you given equal emphasis to creating an environment where employee contributions are welcomed and where staff participates in shaping the future? This is one of the most critical elements to ensuring that improvements are sustained over time. ▌

RYAN CHASEY is the president of the non-profit High Performance Government Network, which is dedicated to cultivating thriving communities. The HPG Network strengthens communities by establishing a framework for collaboration, convening local resources, and equipping stakeholders.