



PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE



THE VOLCKER ALLIANCE
Working for Effective Government



SENIOR
EXECUTIVES
ASSOCIATION

SES Joint Policy Agenda

The Partnership for Public Service, the Volcker Alliance and Senior Executives Association have worked to identify solutions to strengthen the federal civil service, including at the leadership levels. By joining together, our organizations hope to build momentum to improve the government's senior level talent management system and propel the civil service modernization conversation forward. We will pursue this agenda in Congress and with the Office of Personnel Management, the Office of Management and Budget and federal agencies.

We believe it is time to take stock of the incredible accomplishments of our nation's dedicated senior executives as well explore ways to modernize and strengthen the Senior Executive Service so that it can better meet the challenges faced by our government. The changes we propose fall into three primary areas: setting executives up for success, improving senior-level talent management and strengthening the link between political and career leadership. Some of these matters are fully within the purview of the administration to address, while others will require congressional action. All are essential to the continued health and effectiveness of the career SES and the overall senior leadership corps.

Setting Executives Up for Success

- **Strengthen Executive Onboarding.** Early and sustained success as a senior executive starts with effective onboarding, but many agencies fall short in familiarizing new senior executives with their roles and responsibilities. To improve the quality of executive onboarding across government, OPM should build on the requirements of Executive Order 13714, “Strengthening the Senior Executive Service,” and press each agency to create a robust onboarding program. The program should include introduction to the agency’s strategic plan and priorities, important intra-agency and stakeholder relationships, development opportunities and performance expectations.
- **Re-examine and Update the ECQs.** The executive core qualifications—the set of demonstrated competencies required for entry into the SES—were last revised more than a decade ago. The current qualifications should be revisited to ensure they reflect the most current thinking on the skills federal executives need to be successful. OPM should ensure regular re-evaluation of the ECQs and revise the current qualifications to promote enterprise-wide leadership and the use of skills-based assessments.
- **Strengthen SES Performance Management.** Performance planning is essential to ensuring the success of senior executives. The current performance management system is implemented inconsistently across agencies, is process rather than outcome focused, and is poorly aligned to agency priorities and goals. OPM should strengthen SES performance management by encouraging agencies to link performance plans to mission, by assessing candidates against leadership-oriented skills in addition to technical competencies, and by requiring that performance appraisals be transparent, timely and linked to the executive’s development plan.

Improving Senior-Level Talent Management

- **Better Identify and Use Senior Level/Senior Technical Positions.** The SES was originally envisioned as a corps of generalist leaders, but it is also critical that individuals with valuable technical expertise have access to advancement opportunities that do not force them to take on significant management responsibilities for which they may not be suited. To ensure that such opportunities are more widely available, Congress should create a separate promotional track for individuals deemed to be technical experts and grant agencies more flexibility in identifying and distinguishing between individuals in Senior Level and Senior Technical positions versus SES positions. OPM also should require agencies to review SES positions regularly to determine whether any should be converted to Senior Level or Senior Technical and develop a process to realign them.
- **Use ERBs as a Management Tool for Senior Leadership.** Executive Review Boards are often used for the very narrow purpose of overseeing the initial selection of candidates into the SES. They are run inconsistently and do not operate under a set of reliable and transparent business practices. Given the importance of career leadership to agency operations, the review boards should be used to oversee effective talent management of agency career leadership, including those in the leadership pipeline. Additionally, the review boards should operate in a professional and politically neutral manner to ensure strong management practices across agencies.
- **Provide Enterprise Experience for Aspiring SES.** Rotation programs, joint duty assignments and cross-sector collaborations are valuable strategies for developing leaders with a broad perspective and an enterprise-wide view of government. The administration should do more to promote such assignments by requiring SES candidates to demonstrate experience in another agency or sector before joining the SES. Congress can support this effort by authorizing the use of public-private rotations in addition to current authorities available under existing authorities such as the Intergovernmental Personnel Act.

- **Develop Talent Assessment Models and Strengthen Succession Planning.** By 2022, 65 percent of current senior executives will be eligible to retire, making it vitally important that agencies maintain strong talent pipelines into the SES. OPM should develop and provide agencies with leadership and skill assessments for incoming and aspiring executives that reflect government's current talent needs and private sector best practices. OPM also should press agencies to strengthen succession planning and make developmental opportunities more widely available to GS-11 through GS-15 employees.

Strengthening the Link Between Political and Career Leadership

- **Designate Senior Mission Support Positions as Career Reserved.** Strengthening mission support and reducing waste, fraud, abuse and duplication require sustained attention to management issues that career senior executives are best positioned to provide. Toward that end, Congress should designate C-suite positions with responsibilities for management rather than policy as career, not political appointments.
- **Reduce the Number of Political Appointees at Agencies.** Senior executives provide agencies with steady leadership and continuity, while high numbers of politically-appointed executives can risk turning an agency into a repository for political favors. To better promote the selection of individuals who are well matched to their roles, the administration should seek to keep the number of non-career executive appointments at each agency below the existing cap of 25 percent and work with Congress in pursuit of statutory change to lower the cap.
- **Develop and Require Onboarding for Political Appointees.** Many political appointees are new to government and lack detailed knowledge of government-wide and agency-specific laws, rules and practices that would allow them to hit the ground running at the beginning of their tenure. The administration should require agencies to provide consistent, in-person or virtual onboarding to new political appointees that covers agency mission and structure, key management processes, ethics guidance, and congressional, White House and career-political relations.
- **Ensure Mission Outcomes by Requiring Performance Plans for Political Appointees.** Political leaders play a critical role in the successful management of federal agencies and should be held accountable for their contributions. To establish this sense of accountability and alignment with an agency's mission, Congress should require that all political appointees have performance plans that conform to OPM and agency standards and which align to agency performance goals developed as part of the Government Performance and Results Modernization Act of 2010.

As the complexity and scope of the challenges our government faces continue to increase, the need for robust senior career leadership will only grow. Our organizations urge the administration and Congress to make the SES a priority as they consider changes to the broader civil service system, and we stand ready to assist in advancing and implementing these important reforms.

Questions about these proposals may be directed to Troy Cribb and Andrew Lobel at the Partnership for Public Service (tcribb@ourpublicservice.org and alobel@ourpublicservice.org), Bill Valdez and Jason Briefel at the Senior Executives Association (bill.valdez@seniorexecs.org and briefel@seniorexecs.org) and Maggie Mello and Peter Morrissey (mmello@volckeralliance.org and pmorrissey@volckeralliance.org) at the Volcker Alliance.