

**THE DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE  
DEMONSTRATION PROJECT**

**FACILITATORS' FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL  
FOR  
DEMONSTRATION GROUP SUPERVISORS**

*Winter 1998*



**ALTERNATIVE PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT SYSTEM  
FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL  
DEMONSTRATION GROUP, SUPERVISORS**

**I. INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND**

➤ **Welcome and overview of session**

*Hello everybody. My name is (facilitator) and this is (co-facilitator). We are from Booz-Allen & Hamilton, a management consulting firm in McLean, VA. We will be leading today's discussion of Human Resource Practices, but before we start let's find out who we are talking with.*

➤ **Focus group participant/facilitator introductions**

*If you would, please tell us your name, what department you currently work in and how long you've been with DoC. That will give (co-facilitator) and I an idea of who you are.*

➤ **Minority/Gender Groups**

*You may have noticed as we went around the room that our group is a rather homogenous sample. In fact, this is by design. As part of our evaluation we are going to record the impact of current human resource policies on minority/female employees. Our discussion today will be included as part of our overall data collection efforts but will also be used to compare the perceptions of minority/female employees versus the perceptions of the overall employee population.*

➤ **Explanation and background of the Demonstration project and project initiatives**

*Next, I want to give you an idea of why we are here and the reason for the focus group, but before I do I want to make sure everyone is in the right group (check to make sure all participants are in the appropriate group (make sure all participants are supervisors).*

➤ **All Attendees:**

*Today's focus group will last approximately 1 ½ - 2 hours in length. You have been selected for two reasons:*

- *You are our best source of information regarding how Human Resource Strategies impact DoC employees.*
- *You work unit has been identified as one of the major occupational areas within the Commerce Department's Alternative Personnel Management Demonstration Project, which we will refer to as the "Demonstration Project".*

➤ **Purpose of the Focus Group:**

*The intent of this focus group is to gain an understanding of specific Human Resource Practices within the Department of Commerce from the perspective of DoC employees. We would like to identify how these practices impact employees and their work units. Also we would like to hear from you about any past successes and/or possible future improvements to human resource practices. Information from this focus group will be combined with the information collected from other focus groups taking place in several locations across the country. BAH will then use all the focus group data, plus information from surveys, interviews, and other sources, to evaluate the Demonstration Project.*

➤ **Confidentiality:**

*Any information you share with us today will be held confidential. We will be aggregating results from all interviews and focus groups (held across the nation) and will not be attributing any findings to any individuals.*

➤ **Demonstration Project Background:**

*The evaluation we are conducting compares Human Resource Practices in two groups. The first group is made up of those work units within Commerce that are participating in the Alternative Personnel Management Demonstration Project. This group has recently changed many of its Human Resource Practices. We will be comparing the information we receive from this group to our second group, the comparison group. Our comparison group consists of DoC work units similar to those participating in the Demonstration Project but who have maintained their traditional Human Resource Practices.*

*This group is a Demonstration group. Our discussion will include issues such as:*

- *Training*
- *Compensation,*
- *New Hire Recruitment/Selection, and*
- *Employee Retention*

➤ **Roles:**

*Booz-Allen's role in the Demonstration Project is as an objective, third party evaluator. Booz-Allen was **not** involved in the design of the Demonstration Project's new human resources practices. The Department of Commerce has been responsible for implementing the new practices, with oversight provided by the Office of Personnel Management. Booz-Allen's job is to collect information and act as an impartial evaluator of how the new human resources practices are working.*

*Are there any questions before we get started with the focus group?*

***Address any issues or concerns of the participants***

## II. DISCUSSION

### A. Training

1. How did you first hear about the Demonstration Project and its changes in Human Resource policies?  
**Probes – ask only if these topics are not addressed by the previous question**
  - a. Was there a formal presentation on the Demonstration project? Who conducted this training?
  - b. Was there an opportunity to ask question about the demonstration project?
  - c. Do you feel that all of your questions about the Demonstration Project were answered?
2. Do you feel that you were well informed about how the Demonstration project would impact you and your work unit?
  - a. If no, what could have been explained better?

### B. Career Progression

1. How are occupations grouped in your operating unit?
2. Are these groupings appropriate for the work of this unit?
3. Does the current method of grouping occupations allow flexibility and the opportunity to progress in your career as you would like?

#### **Probes – Ask only if these topics are not addressed by the first two questions.**

- a. One of the first steps in transitioning to a "pay for performance" system was to "broad band" occupations into four different career paths.
  - 1) Are the career paths that are in place here appropriate for this organization?
  - 2) Is the broad band system easy for employees to understand?
  - 3) Do the bands put any undesirable limits on career progression?
3. How is Job Classification done at your work site?
  - a. Who does job classification at your work unit?  
**If one or more focus group members classifies jobs:**
  - b. Do you feel that you have enough information to classify jobs accurately?
  - c. Have you used the automated job classification system?  
**If yes,**
    - 1.). Do you find the automated classification system easy to use?  
**If no, Why not?**  
**If yes, Why?**
      - a.) As time went on during the NIST project, fewer managers reported that they found the job

classification system easy to use. Do you think the system will remain easy to use here?

- d. Do you get many complaints about job classification from employees?
- e. What could be done to ensure greater accuracy in job classification?

### C. Performance Appraisal

- 1. What is your work unit's current system for conducting performance appraisals?
  - a. Do you feel that the performance appraisal instrument is an accurate tool for measuring employee performance?
  - b. Is the current performance appraisal system a good way to provide employees with feedback on their job performance?
  - c. Does the appraisal system effectively communicate to employees how they are performing relative to their peers?
    - 1.) Should it?
  - d. Does the system foster effective two-way communication between employees and supervisors?
  - e. Does the system make it clear what the consequences of poor performance are for employees?
  - f. Does the system make it clear what the rewards for good performance are?
  - g. Does this system devalue the work of high performers?
  - h. Does this system inflate the work/contributions of marginal employees?
- 2. The pay for performance system is designed to encourage good job performance through timely and consistent rewards. Unlike the old system, changes in base pay are linked to performance rather than time spent within grade.
  - a. In practice, are increases in base pay linked to performance in this work unit?
  - b. Are larger pay raises generally given to people who perform better?
  - c. Do you feel that pay is a strong indicator of performance in this organization?
  - d. In general, is the pay system linked to performance exclusively, with no role for favoritism or other non-performance factors, such as race, gender, or veteran status?
  - e. Have you found that the pay for performance system, as used here, is effective in *improving* employee performance?
    - 1.) Are there instances where it fails to reward desirable behaviors **or** rewards undesirable or expected behaviors
  - f. How could the pay for performance system be improved?

3. Supervisory Performance Pay
  - a. How does this organization retain and motivate high performing supervisors?
    - 1.) Do you think this is an effective strategy? Why/Why not?

**Probe – Ask only if this topic is not addressed by the preceding question**

- b. Does this organization use supervisory performance pay?
      - 1.) Do you think this is an effective strategy? Why/Why not?
      - If no,**
      - 2.) Do you think this would be an effective strategy if it were used? Why/Why not?
4. Performance Bonuses
  - a. Does your work unit offer performance bonuses?
 

**If Yes,**

    - 1.) How do you use them?
    - 2.) Do you think bonuses are generally given out consistently to reward good work?
    - 3.) In general, would you say that performance bonuses are distributed fairly (in other words, bonuses are linked exclusively to performance, with no role for favoritism or other non-performance factors)?
    - 4.) Are minorities, women, or veterans at any disadvantage in the distribution of performance bonuses?
    - 5.) Are bonuses distributed accurately?
      - a.) Are there instances where it fails to reward desirable behaviors **or** rewards undesirable or expected behaviors?

**D. Employee Retention**

1. What system does your work unit have in place to retain quality employees?
2. When you promote employees, has increased flexibility in pay increases helped you retain high performers?
3. Has this flexibility helped you retain high performing minority employees? Women? Veterans?
4. Do you feel that you have enough information about local labor market conditions to manage pay effectively?
5. Do you feel that you have the authority to grant retention payments to employees with critical skills?
6. Have you used these retention payments?
 

**If yes,**

  - a. Do you think these payments are more effective in retaining employees in some positions than others?
  - b. Have retention payments helped retain high performing minority employees? Women? Veterans?

**(BREAK: 5-15 MIN)**

**E. Hiring/Recruitment Interventions**

1. What methods are used by hiring officials in your department to recruit and select new candidates?
2. Have recent new hires been more qualified or as qualified as past new hires?  
**Probe, if needed:** Would you say that the fit between job requirements and the skills of recent new hires is the same as in the past, is better, or is worse?
3. Would you say that your chances of attracting good minority candidates are the same as in the past, are better, or are worse? Women? Veterans?
4. What strategies does your work unit employ to attract high quality candidates?
5. How could your work unit better attract high quality candidates?

**Probe – Ask only if broad banding is not addressed by questions E1 - E5:**

6. Broad Banding
  - a. Does broad banding help you offer individuals more competitive salaries?
  - b. Does it make it you more competitive in attracting good minority candidates? Women? Veterans?

**Probe – Ask only if flexible paid advertising is not addressed by questions E1 - E5:**

7. Flexible Paid Advertising
  - a. Are you able to make better use of paid advertising under the demonstration project?
  - b. Are you able to expand the scope of your recruiting efforts and reach specialized sources?

**Probe – Ask only if direct examination is not addressed by questions E1 - E5:**

8. Direct Examination. The purpose of direct examination is to allow hiring officials to hire good candidates for "hard-to-fill" positions as they find them, avoiding the loss of well-qualified individuals through delays.
  - a. For what positions has direct hiring been most useful?
  - b. During the NIST demonstration project, direct examination was successful especially for scientists, engineers and support staff. Is a direct hire approach more appropriate or effective for certain positions?
  - c. Does direct examination allow hiring officials to focus on more relevant recruiting sources and avoid losing candidates who grow impatient with long hiring processes?
  - d. Has there been a change in the time it takes to hire someone? Why/Why not?
  - e. What would make the hiring process more efficient?



**Probe – Ask only if recruitment bonuses are not addressed by questions E1 - E5:**

9. Recruitment Bonuses
  - a. Does your work unit utilize recruitment bonuses during the hiring process?
  - b. How effective do you believe recruitment bonuses are in attracting high quality candidates?
  - c. For what positions have these bonuses been most effective?

**E. Quality of Workforce**

1. How would you rate the quality of this organization's workforce?
2. What organizational factors or policies do you think contribute to that level of quality within your unit?

**Probes – Ask only if this topic is not addressed by the preceding question**

- a. So far, do you think the pay for performance system has helped improve the quality of this organization's workforce?
- b. What about recruitment and retention interventions, such as flexibility in setting performance pay increases and bonuses. Have they helped? If so, how?
3. What are some things that your work unit might do to develop a high quality workforce?

**F. Probationary Periods**

1. Do you use any type of probationary period for ZP employees performing R&D work?  
**If yes, how long is it? Is this too long or too short?**
2. Does the probationary period help to identify employees who will be capable of the full range of R&D activities?
3. Have you officially separated any employees during the probationary period? How many?
4. Have you encouraged any ZP employees to leave voluntarily during the probationary period? How many?

**G. Employee Turnover**

1. Is there a high rate of turnover within your work unit?  
**If yes, what do you think contributes to the turnover rate?**
2. What impact do you think the interventions have had on turnover?
  - a. Is the impact on turnover different for different career paths?
3. Has turnover mostly been restricted to low performers or are high performers just as likely to leave?

**H. Extent of Regulation**

1. Do you feel restricted by unnecessary personnel rules? How? To what extent?

**I. Organizational Excellence and Workforce Diversity** (*pass out merit principle and prohibited practices sheets*)

1. Are the nine merit principles listed here being followed in this organization?
  - a. If no, has there been any change regarding these principles since the demonstration project began? If yes, has the change been positive or negative?
2. Does this organization abide by the ten prohibited practices?
  - a. If no, has there been any change regarding these prohibited practices since the demonstration project began? If yes, has the change been positive or negative?
3. Has the implementation of the demonstration project had any effect on the diversity of this organization's workforce as regards minorities, women, and veterans? Are any future impacts likely?

**J. Minority/Gender Issues**

1. Do you feel any of the Human Resource practices we have discussed have a negative impact on minority/women employees?  
**If yes, How?**
2. Do you feel any of the Human Resource practices we have discussed have a positive impact on minority/women employees?  
**If yes, how?**

**K. Assessment of Overall Implementation of Demonstration Project**

1. In general, how well has the demonstration project been implemented in this organization?

**L. Check for outstanding issues**

1. Before we end today, do you have any issues regarding the new personnel system that we have not covered?

**III. CLOSING**

**A. Closing Comments/next steps**

1. Thank participants for their participation and remind them of the confidentiality of their comments.
2. Inform them that the aggregated results will be included in the Implementation report to be delivered to Commerce/OPM in **September 1999**.