A Year-End Funding Investment in Federal Manager Leader Development is Needed

By Robert Tobias, Executive-In-Residence, Key Executive Leadership Programs

The $1.8T American Rescue Plan signed on March 11 and the anticipated $1.0 Infrastructure Plan and $3.5T Budget Reconciliation Plan, significantly expand existing federal programs and create new programs that President Biden describes as an investment in our future.

We need a parallel investment in federal manager leader development using unspent year-end travel funds to ensure the prompt, effective implementation of Congressional intent.

The circus atmosphere associated with birthing public policy, conducted in the white-hot spotlight of newspaper editorials with commentators like Rachel Maddow and Tucker Carlson as well as various social media platforms, is over.

The question is whether the legislative promises to the public will be implemented by federal sector leaders. Can the public policy child be supported and development into a fully functioning adult?

For example, existing program regulations must be modified to address program expansion implementation. Regulations must be issued for new programs: how to apply, criteria for evaluation and selection, and how to appeal non-selection. New resource needs must be identified: determine the number of new employees needed, hire, and deploy them; determine where they will be housed; and how they will be supplied and provided skill training. Finally, a determination of the number existing employees reassigned to new jobs must be made.

The challenge is clear: we need to equip federal managers with the personal development they need to be successful leaders during this challenging time.
The research shows a direct link between federal employee viewpoint scores and agency productivity. Some leaders have the natural talent to increase employee engagement scores, some have the perseverance to learn through trial and error. All benefit from the opportunity to learn how to think consciously and proactively on increasing the employee engagement that is necessary to implement new legislation.

We need leadership development programs where federal managers create the capacity to connect emotionally and intellectually with those they lead, so the followers can choose to give their discretionary energy to the leader. The result is more inspiration, creativity, and productivity.

It requires unlearning old ineffective leadership behavior, learning new effective behavior, practicing that new behavior in a safe environment while supported during the two steps forward and one step back that inevitably occurs with new learning.

Many federal agencies have year-end money because so little budgeted travel money was spent during COVID. This money can be used to make an investment in federal manager leader development. It will make a difference in the implementation of the new legislation Congress has created now and will be creating in the future.

About the Author:
Robert Tobias teaches courses in public sector leadership in the Key Executive Leadership Programs. He also teaches facilitation and team development, conflict management and alternative dispute resolution, and managing labor management relations. Finally, he is the Director of the Institute for the Study of Public Policy Implementation which brings together members of Congress, political appointees, career federal executives, union leaders, consultants, and academics for the purpose of resolving difficult public policy implementation issues. President Clinton nominated and the Senate confirmed him for a five-year term as a member of the Internal Revenue Service Oversight Board.