

# Results of the Government Leadership Survey

## A 1999 Survey of Federal Executives



Mark A. Abramson, PricewaterhouseCoopers  
Endowment for the Business of Government  
Steven A. Clyburn, PricewaterhouseCoopers  
Elizabeth Mercier, PricewaterhouseCoopers  
Survey Research Center

The PricewaterhouseCoopers Endowment for

## The Business of Government

Through grants for research, conferences, and sabbaticals, the PricewaterhouseCoopers Endowment for the Business of Government stimulates research and facilitates discussion on new approaches to improving the effectiveness of government at the federal, state, local, and international levels. All grants are competitive.

Founded in 1998 by PricewaterhouseCoopers, the Endowment is one of the ways that PricewaterhouseCoopers seeks to advance knowledge on how to improve public sector effectiveness. The PricewaterhouseCoopers Endowment focuses on the future of the operation and management of the public sector.

# **Results of the Government Leadership Survey**

## A 1999 Survey of Federal Executives

Mark A. Abramson, PricewaterhouseCoopers Endowment  
for the Business of Government

Steven A. Clyburn, PricewaterhouseCoopers

Elizabeth Mercier, PricewaterhouseCoopers Survey  
Research Center

June 1999

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Foreword</b> .....	3
<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	4
<b>Introduction</b>	
Survey Development and Conduct .....	5
Survey Demographic Profile .....	5
<b>Survey Findings</b>	
A New Vision for Leadership .....	6
Rewards and Challenges of Public Service.....	7
Clouds on the Horizon .....	8
Executives Say the System Needs to Change, But Are Doubtful That Major Change will Occur .....	9
<b>Conclusions</b> .....	10
<b>Appendices</b>	
A. Views of Noncareer Executives.....	11
B. Survey Methodology.....	12
<b>Key Contact Information</b> .....	Inside Back Cover

# Foreword

It is with great pleasure that we publish the first Special Report of The PricewaterhouseCoopers Endowment for the Business of Government. It is appropriate that our first Special Report focuses on the views of members of the federal Senior Executive Service (SES). We believe that a strong, vital, and vibrant SES is crucial to the success of government in the 21st century. The study stems from our concern about the government's ability to recruit and retain senior government leaders. We had heard concerns from government executives that recruitment and retention of SES members loomed as a future problem. We commissioned this study to find out whether this view is widely held among SES members. We also wanted to find out what leadership qualities SES members believe are required for present and future senior government leaders.

The study produced both comforting and disturbing news. On the positive side, we were pleased to learn that SES members have adopted a new, exciting vision of government leadership. No longer is technical expertise viewed as the key to successful leadership in government. Instead, adaptability, flexibility, accountability, and vision now rank as top skills needed for future government leaders. On the disturbing side, we found that over 80 percent of career SES members have considered leaving federal service and that nearly 50 percent of those surveyed believed that salary would be a significant obstacle in recruiting future government leaders. It is our hope that the results of this survey will be widely read and will contribute to the debate and discussion about the future of the federal career service and actions needed to enable government to continue to recruit and retain the highest caliber public servants.

Over the next several years, the Endowment will issue additional reports on federal human resource issues. We believe that this set of issues is crucial to the future of government. An organization can only be as effective as its people. As we enter the 21st century, we hope to see a lively and spirited discussion about the future of civil service.

Paul Lawrence  
Partner, PricewaterhouseCoopers  
Co-Chair, Endowment Advisory Board  
paul.lawrence@us.pwcglobal.com

Ian Littman  
Partner, PricewaterhouseCoopers  
Co-Chair, Endowment Advisory Board  
ian.littman@us.pwcglobal.com

# Executive Summary

Will the federal government be able to recruit and retain employees with the qualities needed for leadership in the future? To help answer that question, The PricewaterhouseCoopers Endowment for the Business of Government surveyed career and noncareer members of the federal Senior Executive Service (SES). The survey is one of several Endowment initiatives focusing on federal human resource issues and civil service reform.

Survey results showed that federal executives have a new vision of leadership and think that changes in current leadership systems will help make the vision a reality. However, they believe that some major obstacles must be overcome before success can be guaranteed.

## **A New Vision for Leadership**

Survey respondents have a new vision of what it will take to be a leader in the future. They say that the *most important leadership attributes in the future* will be adaptability and flexibility when faced with change, being accountable for results, and visionary and strategic thinking. This is in marked contrast to the notion that government career executives have traditionally obtained their positions through technical expertise. In the future, say respondents, technical expertise is the *least* important of ten leadership attributes listed in the survey.

## **Rewards and Challenges of Public Service**

When asked *why they have stayed in the public service*, career executives volunteered three main reasons: interesting and challenging work, the ability to make a difference, and public service.

However, four out of five career executives said they have thought, at one time or another, about leaving the government. The most-often mentioned *reason for thinking about leaving the public service* is salary.

## **Clouds on the Horizon**

Although senior executives enjoy their positions and have adopted a new vision of leadership, two clouds are on the horizon. The survey found concern that inadequate salaries would become a major obstacle to both recruiting and retaining senior career civil servants. The survey also found concern that increased public and political scrutiny, as well as a cumbersome appointment process, would make it difficult to recruit future political appointees.

## **Executives Say the System Needs to Change, But Are Doubtful that Major Change Will Occur**

Executives think that the *most helpful civil service reforms* are related to pay. These changes include offering executive salaries and compensation comparable to the private sector, creating a more flexible salary and compensation scale, and modifying performance review systems to reward leadership attributes. Most executives do not think that the government will take action on compensation issues, except for modifying performance reviews. Most think the government will invest more in leadership training and improve recruiting and marketing strategies, but do not see these activities as being as helpful as raising pay or creating more flexible pay systems.

# Introduction

## Survey Development and Conduct

During 1998-1999, the Endowment supported a Government Leadership Survey that looked at the characteristics, behavior, and styles of effective leaders in the public sector. Before the survey, the Endowment conducted a literature review of related surveys and convened a focus group of SES members to help develop the survey questionnaire. Post-survey activities will include a June 1999 conference on civil service reform.

From November 1998 through early January 1999, the Endowment surveyed a random sample of members of the SES about the attributes needed for future federal government leaders, the obstacles to recruiting and retaining staff with these attributes, and solutions to ensure successful leadership in future years. The telephone survey was carried out by the PricewaterhouseCoopers Survey Research Center in Bethesda, Maryland.

## Survey Demographic Profile

The survey's population was the 6,800 members of the Senior Executive Service. A 1996 survey of SES members indicated that the average SES member was then 52 years old and had 23 years of government service, and that about one in five executives were women. Ten percent of the SES consists of noncareer appointees. The Endowment's sample of SES members was comparable to this profile. In total, 347 interviews were conducted with SES members in 43 agencies across the country — a 6 percent sample of the total population.

**Table 1:** Survey Sample Demographic Profile

	Responses
Number of respondents	347
Career SES members	87%
Noncareer SES members	13%
Average age in years	53
Gender (male/female)	79%/21%
Average years in government	25
Average years in SES	8
Percentage with private sector experience	55%
Average years in private sector	6.5

# Survey Findings

## A New Vision for Leadership

Survey respondents were asked to indicate the importance of ten attributes of future government leaders. They gave top priority to the qualities of adaptability and flexibility when faced with change; holding oneself and one’s staff accountable for achieving desired results; and visionary and strategic thinking. These responses indicate that there has been a major change in perception about what it takes to be an effective government leader. For example, many people have traditionally held the notion that government careerists rise to the top primarily because of their technical expertise. Whether or not this is true, federal executives now rank technical expertise *lowest* among the list of ten leadership attributes.

Respondents were asked to rate each attribute presented in Table 2 according to its degree of importance for future leaders.

When asked to list additional leadership attributes not included in the list of ten, 220 executives provided responses that were coded into the following categories: integrity/honesty/ethical or moral standards (20 percent volunteered this attribute), communications skills (16 percent), and people skills/interpersonal skills/team building (13 percent).

**Table 2:** Critical Attributes for Future Career Senior Executives

Leadership Attributes	% Rating Attribute as Highly Important (9 or 10)
1. Adaptability/flexibility	72%
2. Accountability	69%
3. Vision and strategic thinking	64%
4. Customer orientation	58%
5. Commitment to public service	55%
6. Management of financial resources	44%
7. Ability to establish networks and alliances	41%
8. Value for cultural diversity	39%
9. Management of information technology	37%
10. Technical expertise	23%

N=347 respondents

## Everyone Agrees on the Vision

Civilian and defense agency executives, as well as career and noncareer executives, all agreed on the top three leadership attributes for the future. As shown in Table 3, most of the top-rated attributes are in line with the five SES Core Qualifications developed by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), which are Leading Change, Leading People, Results Driven, Business Acumen, and Building Coalitions and Communications.



**Table 3:** Comparison of SES Core Qualifications with Survey's Top Leadership Attributes

SES Core Qualification	Leadership Survey Attributes	% Rating Attribute as Highly Important (9 or 10)
Leading change	Adaptability/flexibility with change	72%
	Vision and strategic thinking	64%
Leading people	Value for cultural diversity	39%
	Integrity/honesty/ethical or moral standards*	20%
Results driven	Accountability	69%
Business acumen	Customer orientation	58%
	Management of financial resources	44%
	Management of information technology	37%
Building coalitions and communication	Ability to establish networks and alliances	44%

N=347

\*Volunteered response, N=220

## Rewards and Challenges of Public Service

Respondents also were asked a series of questions about whether the government will be able to recruit or retain leaders with the top-rated attributes. The survey asked executives about their experiences and perceptions of their careers in government. The responses indicate what might appeal to, or discourage, qualified future leaders.

### Reasons for Joining or Staying in Public Service

According to government executives, the rewards for a career in government service are primarily non-financial. Survey respondents were asked to say in their own words the reasons why they stayed in public service. The executives' verbatim responses were grouped into categories and are shown in Table 4. The most frequent reason given

**Table 4:** Reasons Career Executives Give for Staying In Public Service

Reasons	Responses*
Interesting/exciting/challenging work	60%
Job satisfaction	22%
Public service	19%
Ability to enact change/make a difference/affect policy	19%
Opportunity to work with good people	16%

N=292 respondents

\*Many respondents gave several answers, so results do not add up to 100 percent.

by career executives was that their government work was interesting, exciting, and challenging. One interpretation of these results is that, for a sustained career in government, the work itself has to be appealing.

### ***Comments by Survey Respondents on the Benefits of Their Public Service:***

*"I like the range of subjects and material that you get involved with, and the government has offered me greater authority than my counterparts have in the private sector."*

*"Every once in a while I am offered a job in the private sector, with more money. But that's not what rings my chime. I have a lot of friends in the private sector who make a lot of money, but who would love to get to do what I do."*

*"I feel that what I am doing is important for the country."*

*"Fascinating work. Tremendous work. Interesting and intellectually challenging work. Good people to work with."*

### Reasons for Wanting to Leave the Public Service

More than four out of five career executives said they have considered leaving the government at some point in their careers. As shown in Table 5, the primary reason was salary and compensation, a theme that recurred frequently during the survey. The second most frequently mentioned set of reasons was bureaucracy, inflexibility, and slowness — in other words, frustration with the systems of government.

**Table 5:** Reasons Career Executives Give for Considering Leaving Public Service

Reasons	Percent Giving Responses*
Salary/compensation	40%
Bureaucracy/inflexibility/slowness	31%
Political structure and political leadership	15%

N=244 respondents

(Note: The percentages above are based on those who have considered leaving public service — 83% of the career respondents.)

### Clouds on the Horizon

The survey also explored the obstacles to recruiting and retaining government senior executives.

#### Obstacles to Recruiting Future Career Leaders

Both career and noncareer SES members agree that salary and a negative perception of working for the government are obstacles to recruiting future leaders in their respective categories. As shown in Table 6, today's SES members say that the critical obstacles to recruiting tomorrow's career leaders are salary, inflexibility of selection and hiring procedures, and negative perception of working for government.

**Table 6:** Career Executives' Opinions on Obstacles to Recruiting Future Career Leaders

Obstacle	% Rating Obstacle as Highly Significant (9 or 10)
Salary	46%
Negative perception of working for government	31%
Inflexible selection/hiring procedures	31%
Ineffective recruiting/marketing	21%
Limited opportunity to hire mid-level staff	19%
Limited career advancement opportunities	16%

N=346

#### Comments by Survey Respondents on Reasons for Wanting to Leave the Public Service

*"The compensation does not equal the private sector. SES salaries are linked to Congressional raises, and the fact that the Congress is unwilling to give themselves raises means that our salaries are frozen."*

*"All of the bad press that the civil service gets."*

*"Salary; perception of public servants; political degrading of public service by Congress and the media; political influence and interference."*

*"Unfair performance evaluation process. Lack of compensation. Erratic management practices."*

*"Inferior compensation when compared to comparable jobs in the private sector. Insufficient distinction between SES and non-SES compensation for federal civilians."*

*"Rules regarding personnel are cumbersome and bureaucratic tolerance for individuals who are not necessarily competent."*

*"The bureaucracy, the politicized management structure, the continuing demand to do more with far less."*

### Obstacles to Recruiting Future Political Leaders

As shown in Table 7, current political appointees say the most formidable barrier to recruiting future appointees is public and political scrutiny. Related to this was the appointment process. Salary was less significant, but still ranked in the top three obstacles. (See Appendix A for more information on political appointees.)

**Table 7:** Appointee Executives' Opinions on Obstacles to Recruiting Future Political Leaders

Obstacle	% Rating Obstacle as Highly Significant (9 or 10)
Public and political scrutiny	46%
The appointment process	33%
Salary	28%
Negative perception of government	20%
Bureaucratic nature of the government	20%

N=46

### Obstacles to Retaining Future Career Leaders

Questions about retaining future leaders focused on the career SES. As shown in Table 8, all respondents, both career and political, rated obstacles to *retaining* career personnel who will have the desired leadership qualities in the future, and listed the top three as salary, poor management, and a negative perception of working for the government.

**Table 8:** Career and Noncareer Executives' Opinions on Obstacles to Retaining Future Career Leaders

Obstacle	% Rating Obstacle as Highly Significant (9 or 10)
Salary	49%
Poor management	21%
Negative perception of working for the government	17%
Lack of recognition	15%
Limited advancement opportunities	15%

N=346

### Executives Say the System Needs to Change, But Are Doubtful that Major Change Will Occur

Respondents were asked what the government might do to overcome the just-listed obstacles. The top three solutions involved salary and compensation levels and systems. As shown in Table 9, almost no respondents thought it highly likely that the government would offer salaries comparable to the private sector, which was rated as the most helpful solution. However, a majority thought it highly likely that the government would modify the Performance Review System and take other steps to recruit, retain, and develop future leaders.

**Table 9:** Career and Political Executives' Suggested Solutions to Recruiting and Retaining Career Government Leaders, and Their Opinion on the Likelihood that the Solutions Will Be Adopted

Solution	% Rating Solution as Very Helpful	% Who Think Government Will Adopt the Solution
Offer salaries/compensation comparable to private sector	72%	5%
Create a more flexible salary/compensation scale	52%	24%
Modify the Performance Review System	35%	55%
Make it easier to leave and then return to government	27%	25%
Further develop staff through training and the Candidate Development Program	24%	78%
Improve recruiting/marketing	20%	56%
Encourage movement of staff between agencies	17%	50%
Recruit more leaders from outside government	14%	44%

N=346 respondents

# Conclusions

During stable times, organizations can get by with sound management, good business practices, and technical expertise. During turbulent periods such as now, what they need most is effective leadership. Fortunately, federal executives agree on the most important attributes of leadership. Unfortunately, they think the government will face significant obstacles to recruiting and retaining future leaders.

Right now, there is a war for talent raging around the world. Will the federal government be able to compete for the most capable executives in the future? The only way to be sure is to begin to address some of the obstacles to future recruitment and retention identified in this survey. Future recruitment and retention success may require some fundamental changes in the federal executive personnel and pay systems. The Executive Branch and Congress now need to place this issue on the national agenda.

# Appendix A

## The Views of Noncareer Executives

This appendix provides responses of noncareer executives to the Government Leadership Survey not already covered in the main part of this report.

### Demographic Profile of Political Appointees

This survey was taken well into the second term of President Clinton’s administration, which is why the average political appointee had spent about five years in the SES. Most had considerable experience in the private sector and some had experience in the government before joining the SES.

**Table A-1:** Survey Demographic Profile of Political Appointees

	Profile
Number of respondents	47
Average age in years	48
Gender (male/female)	64%/36%
Percentage with private sector experience	75%
Average years in private sector	13
Average years in government	9
Average years in SES	5

### Reasons for Joining or Leaving the Public Service

Appointees rated the ability to enact change as their top reason for joining or staying in the public service, followed by public service itself.

**Table A-2:** Political Appointees’ Reasons for Joining or Staying In Public Service

Reasons	% Giving Reason
Ability to enact change/make a difference/affect policy	40%
Public service	31%
Interesting/exciting/challenging work	18%
Job satisfaction	4%
Opportunity to work with good people	7%

N=45

However, one in five considered leaving the public service at some point, for reasons related to bureaucracy, inflexibility, and slowness in getting things done. Salary was not a major reason given for leaving the public service.

**Table A-3:** Political Appointees’ Reasons for Wanting to Leave the Public Service

Reasons	% Giving Reason
Bureaucracy/inflexibility/slowness	40%
Salary/compensation	13%
Public and political scrutiny	9%
Never considered leaving the public service	20%

N=45

# Appendix B

## Survey Methodology

### Sponsorship and Purpose

The 1999 Government Leadership Survey was sponsored by The PricewaterhouseCoopers Endowment for the Business of Government. In its effort to support research on the federal government and how it runs, the Endowment engaged the PricewaterhouseCoopers Survey Research Center to conduct a study of the federal Senior Executive Service (SES). This survey was designed to assess whether the federal government will be able to recruit and retain employees with the attributes needed for leadership in the future. Specifically, the survey items were crafted to: (1) assess the importance of various attributes needed to ensure effective future government leaders; (2) explore the issues with recruiting and retaining such individuals, and; (3) investigate potential solutions that will ensure that the government has access to future leaders with the necessary attributes to be effective government leaders.

### Sample Design and Selection

Eligible respondents for this study consisted of current government leaders who are members of the SES. The SES is a corps of men and women who administer public programs at the top levels of the federal government.

SES members with career and noncareer appointments were included as eligible participants for

this study. Two strata were defined based on appointment type, that is, career and noncareer appointments. A disproportionate stratified sample was designed using the most recent list of SES members, provided by the Office of Executive Resources in the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM). This list consisted of more than 5,600 names of current SES members for which OPM had addresses. For this study, only those SES members with a career or a noncareer appointment were eligible to be sampled, yielding a sample frame of 5,563 potential respondents.

A total of 600 SES members holding a career appointment and 150 SES members holding non-career appointments were randomly selected. Thus, the study sample included 750 potential respondents. SES members with noncareer appointments were sampled at a higher rate of selection to ensure a sufficient level of precision in the resulting estimates. In addition, we also anticipated that the noncareer appointees would be less accessible or agreeable to participate in the survey interview, as compared with career appointees.

### For More Information

If you would like more information on the survey methodology and to review survey data, please visit the Endowment web site at [endowment.pwcglobal.com](http://endowment.pwcglobal.com).

# Key Contact Information

## To contact the co-author:

**Mark Abramson**

Executive Director

The PricewaterhouseCoopers Endowment for the Business of Government

1616 North Fort Myer Drive

Arlington, VA 22209

(703) 741-1733

e-mail: [mark.abramson@us.pwcglobal.com](mailto:mark.abramson@us.pwcglobal.com)

## About PricewaterhouseCoopers

PricewaterhouseCoopers ([www.pwcglobal.com](http://www.pwcglobal.com)) helps its clients develop and execute integrated solutions to build value, manage risk and improve their performance.

Drawing on the knowledge and skills of 150,000 people in 150 countries, we provide a full range of business advisory and consulting services to leading global, national and local companies and to public institutions. Our objective is to have measurable impact. Our goal is to work with clients to make the world a better place.

## For additional information, contact:

**Mark A. Abramson**

Executive Director

The PricewaterhouseCoopers Endowment for the  
Business of Government

1616 North Fort Myer Drive  
Arlington, VA 22209

(703) 741-1077

fax: (703) 741-1076

e-mail: [endowment@us.pwcglobal.com](mailto:endowment@us.pwcglobal.com)

web site: [endowment.pwcglobal.com](http://endowment.pwcglobal.com)

PRICEWATERHOUSECOOPERS 

The PricewaterhouseCoopers Endowment for

## The Business of Government

1616 North Fort Myer Drive  
Arlington, VA 22209-3195

Bulk Rate  
US Postage  
**PAID**  
Permit 1112  
Merrifield, VA