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## Perceptions and Experiences of Federal Employees Following the Dissolution of DEIA Initiatives

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# Walden University

College of Health Sciences and Public Policy

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Angela Silva

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University  
2026

Abstract

Perceptions and Experiences of Federal Employees Following the Dissolution of DEIA

Initiatives

by

Angela Silva

MA, Siena Heights University, 2010

BS, Siena Heights University, 2001

Professional Administrative Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Public Administration

Walden University

May 2026

## Abstract

The federal government faces the ongoing challenge of sustaining a workforce that represents the diversity of the American public while navigating through policy changes that eliminated diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility initiatives. The federal government is public serving and is one of the largest employers in the United States. The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of government employees navigating the termination of all diversity and inclusion programs through the lens of the antecedents and outcomes of inclusions model, which showed that inclusive leadership, climate and practices contribute to positive employee and organizational outcomes. The research question was: What are the perceptions and experiences of federal employees with the implementation of Executive Order 14151? Data were collected through semi structured interviews from lower- to mid-level employees within the federal government. Braun and Clarke's procedures for inductive thematic analysis were used and eight themes emerged. Findings from the coding and thematic analysis indicated opportunities for strengthening employee engagement, communication and professionalism, and were provided in a recommendation report. Administrators may use the findings to promote positive social change through organizational stability and supporting their employees.

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## Dedication

This study is dedicated to all hardworking leaders, especially women, who believe they cannot find the time to invest in their own development. Balancing full-time work, family responsibilities and personal aspirations is undeniably challenging. Yet despite the many barriers that exist, it is important not to become one of them. Growth requires intention, courage, and the willingness to take that extra step. May this work serve as a reminder that your advancement is both possible and worth pursuing.

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## Section 1: Introduction

### **Introduction**

This study aimed to examine employees' perceptions of the now-defunct diversity and inclusion programs within the federal government to glean a better understanding of the impact of Executive Order 14151. The study was essential to understanding the current workforce dynamics and how inclusion previously factored into the diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) programs. The study also examined the current Executive Order 14151 and previous diversity and inclusion programs, combined with the employees' perceptions and experiences, and provided insight into the impact of ending all aspects of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

In June 2011, President Obama signed Executive Order 13583, Establishing a Coordinated Government-wide Initiative to Promote Diversity and Inclusion in the Federal Workforce. Advancing diversity and inclusion in the federal government would provide a workforce representative of the people it serves. The federal government is one of the nation's largest employers and, therefore, has an excellent opportunity to set an example for DEIA. According to Kellough (1990), the federal government consists of about two million employees. Having a diverse workforce will improve and even enhance customer service. The workforce will have a better understanding of the public it serves because they are representative of the community (Wyatt-Nichol & Antwi-Boasiako, 2012).

President Biden signed Executive Order 14035 on June 25, 2021, to continue strengthening DEIA, highlighting the development of a workforce that draws on the

nation's diversity. The federal government must be a model of DEIA by recruiting, retaining, and sustaining a workforce representative of the people (Jennings & Nagel, 2021). The federal government continues to increase diversity.

The Federal Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) is an annual survey that is available to all federal employees. This survey is used to track the current views of the workplace environment, policies, and initiatives such as DEIA, and address any concerns of the workforce. In 2022, DEIA was introduced as an index in the FEVS. According to FedViews, the data from FEVS 2022 showed that 69% of the respondents had a positive view of the DEIA initiatives. However, managing a diversified workforce can cause some barriers to surface when trying to sustain diversity and inclusion (Choi, 2009).

Sustaining DEIA programs is of the utmost importance to clearly represent a workforce of the people. However, the current administration's focus is equity and dignity to all based on individual skills and performance without the support of any DEI initiatives. Leadership plays a crucial role within the workforce in following the current executive orders. For this study, I applied a qualitative research methodology, which consisted of semi structured interviews with federal employees to explore perspectives of the workforce with the cessation of all DEIA programs.

### **Background and Problem Statement**

The federal government is one of the nation's largest employers (Jennings & Nagel, 2021). Over time, federal agencies have evolved to become more diverse, reflecting the broader population in alignment with Executive Orders 13583 and 14035. Recently, the current administration has revoked these Executive Orders and introduced

Executive Order 14151, which discontinues all DEI policies and programs, emphasizing merit-based and performance-based promotions. (Hellman, 2025). This shift raises critical questions regarding the efficiency, accountability, and representation within the federal workforce that genuinely reflects the diversity of the American populace in light of these policy changes.

### **Problem Statement**

In 2008, the Majority Staff of the Committee of Homeland Security prepared the report *Department of Homeland Security: Minority and Gender Diversity in the Workforce and Career Senior Service*, which laid out the demographics of the Department of Homeland Security (Committee on Homeland Security, 2008). This report revealed the imbalance of diversity and recognized the need for change within the federal workforce. Diversity initiatives have been implemented to address the issue and increase diversity in the past. However, the problem is sustaining a federal workforce representative of all Americans while navigating the impact of Executive Order 14151.

### **The Administrative Problem**

The *Minority and Gender Diversity in the Workforce and Career Senior Service Executive Service Report* revealed the imbalance of diversity and recognized the need for change within the federal workforce (Committee on Homeland Security, 2008). President Obama signed Executive Order 13583 as part of the change initiatives to promote widespread diversity and inclusion in the federal government (Borry et al., 2021). The federal government sought to be a model of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. Despite progress, sustaining a robust culture of diversity, equity, and inclusion presents

significant challenges, particularly in light of the recent mandate for federal agencies to comply with Executive Order 14151. The decline in employee morale amongst officers and mid-level management due to the employees not feeling a sense of belonging or equity can contribute to job dissatisfaction and people leaving the agency. Leadership involvement, negative or positive, is part of the problem associated with developing the federal workforce. Maintaining an inclusive environment that continues to draw on all employees' strengths will contribute to the strategic goals and overall mission (Jennings & Nagel, 2021).

### **Deliverable Addressing the Client Problem**

A recommendation report was made available to the agency and provided insight into the perceptions of the past DEIA initiatives within the agency. It also provided recommendations and guidance on transitioning to current policies within the workforce by analyzing the problem, presenting multiple solutions, and providing a path forward for the workforce.

The recommendation report consisted of an executive summary. The executive summary provided an overview of the document, outlining its purpose. Following the executive summary, a problem statement presented background information on the challenges associated with transitioning away from DEIA, highlighting the significance of addressing these issues.

The report compared and presented various solutions for barriers and challenges within the federal government, ultimately concluding with final recommendations. The

goal of this recommendation report is to provide guidance on addressing the challenges related to Executive Order 14151.

### **Problem Statement Summarized**

The problem is sustaining a federal workforce that is representative of the American people while aligning with current executive orders. If the problem is not addressed, employee morale will decline, and it will be challenging to retain the workforce. The problem could also cost the agency millions of dollars and ultimately affect the passengers who travel through the airport.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine employees' perceptions and experiences in the federal workforce with the termination of DEI initiatives while aligning with the current Executive Order 14151. This study's participants include 10 current federal employees.

### **How Results of Study Provide Client New Knowledge**

This study aims to examine employees' perceptions and experiences of the now defunct DEI policies and programs within the federal workforce. The results and suggestions were available to enhance workplace culture. Although previous studies on diversity and inclusion exist, few have focused on the challenges of transitioning from defunct DEIA initiatives to policies based on merit within the federal government. With the implementation of Executive Order 14151, all DEI programs and initiatives have been rescinded. This study aims to offer a new perspective on the challenges of

maintaining a workforce that represents the diversity of the American and aligns with the current Executive Order.

### **Practice-Focused Research Question**

RQ: What are the perceptions and experiences of federal employees with the implementation of Executive Order 14151?

### **How Results of Study Address the Administrative Problem**

President Obama emphasized the importance of having a workforce that reflects the communities it serves to better understand and meet customer needs. Following in this direction, President Biden signed Executive Order 14035 in June 2021 to further enhance diversity and inclusion. The study's results shed light on the challenges and obstacles to maintaining a workforce representative of the people it serves in light of the current Executive Order 14151. Ultimately, the results provide insight supporting the past implementation of Executive Order 13583, a comprehensive government initiative aimed at advancing diversity and inclusion, as well as Executive Order 14035. The research also provided insight into the federal workforce's positioning under Executive Order 14151.

### **Summary of Data Sources and Analysis**

In this study, I employed a qualitative research design that consisted of semi structured interviews with government employees.

### **Sources of Data**

I interviewed employees from multiple levels of the government workforce to gather their perceptions and experiences of the now-defunct DEIA programs and identify the collective challenges faced by federal employees under Executive Order 14151. A

generic qualitative approach is the best choice as the study describes the perceptions and experiences of federal employees using the generic qualitative approach (Ellis & Hart, 2023). This study examined the real-life experiences of the study participants and proposed improvements for sustaining a robust workforce within the federal government. Semi structured interviews were conducted with government employees using open-ended questions (see Appendix A) to gather employees' understanding and concerns about the challenges in the workforce with the termination of DEIA initiatives. I used purposeful sampling, identifying 10 federal employees from different levels to garner a full scope of their perceptions. The open-ended questions allowed the participants to tell their stories in their own words.

### **Approach to Analysis of the Data**

The data gathered through the interview process were analyzed thematically. The recordings of the interviews were transcribed using the same platform that was used for conducting the interviews. Themes were identified and systematically organized into groups, following the procedures outlined by Braun and Clark (2024). This analysis progressed through six distinct phases of organization. First, I familiarized myself with the collected data by reviewing the interview content. The second phase involved initial coding, where keywords were identified. The third phase consisted of compiling a list of these key words, which served as codes, and placing them into broader themes. In the fourth phase, the data were reviewed and refined to identify key themes. During the fifth phase, the themes were precisely defined. Finally, in the sixth phase, the results of the

data collection were compiled into a comprehensive report that included recommendations and guidance (Braun & Clarke, 2024).

### **How Purpose Connects to the Deliverable**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore employees' perceptions and experiences of the federal workforce. The federal government is challenged by the current Executive Order 14151. In response to the findings of the study, a recommendation report was made available. The recommendation report provided recommendations for sustaining a fully represented workforce while adhering to Executive Order 14151.

The goal was to identify barriers with the cessation of DEI initiatives. The agency faces challenges in maintaining an effective workforce. Based on the study's findings, a recommendation report was prepared that offers actionable strategies to enhance the sustainability of a represented workforce.

### **Definitions**

*Workplace diversity*: Defined as the variety of characteristics of a social unit, such as gender, religious beliefs, race, demographics, disabilities, etc. The differences that make a person unique within the group (Patrick & Kumar, 2012).

*Diversity*: Encompasses the differences of demographics in the workforce such as race, gender, ethnicity, marital status and veterans (Ashikali et al., 2021).

*Equity*: Defined as the equal or just, and impartial treatment of all (Morton-Huddleston & Thompson, 2021).

*Federal employee:* A person employed by the federal government and is paid by federal funds (Wang & Brower 2019).

*Inclusion:* The employee's perception that they feel they belong to the organization, combined with their perception of satisfaction of the treatment they have experienced with team members (Shore et al., 2018).

*Inclusive leadership:* The art of creating a work environment in which a diverse group feels included as part of the mainstream workforce and part of the decision-making process (Shore & Chung, 2022).

*Mentor:* An individual who uses their past experiences and current knowledge to help others enhance and/or advance their careers (Office of Human Capital, 2017).

### **Significance**

This study is significant because it evaluates federal employees' perceptions of the federal workforce and identifies areas for improvement, ensuring the sustainability of federal workers. It reviews past Executive Orders 13583 and 14035, which were designed to promote and strengthen DEIA initiatives within the federal workforce. The current Executive Order 14151 wipes out any DEIA initiatives. The qualitative research includes semi structured interviews with federal employees to understand challenges and best practices for federal employees.

Despite past efforts to enhance DEIA, the study highlights persistent issues such as insufficient leadership engagement and declining employee morale. The study aims to provide actionable recommendations for improving workplace morale and maintaining current initiatives by analyzing existing programs and employee feedback. The findings

of this study may lead to new training or the implementation of new policies. The findings of the study could also have a positive impact on social change due to the positive interactions between the workforce and the public. Addressing these challenges is essential for the federal workforce to better represent and serve the public, ultimately enhancing job satisfaction and morale.

### **Significance to Practice**

This study is significant as it addressed the current challenge of sustaining a workforce that is representative of all Americans while implementing Executive Order 14151. The findings from this research may also influence other federal agencies. Employees who are dissatisfied with the workplace culture or do not feel included are more likely to leave the agency. The results of this study can be utilized to improve the quality of life for employees in their work environment.

### **Significance to the Public or Nonprofit Sector**

Diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility were crucial elements within the federal government's workforce, ensuring that it accurately reflects the diverse population it serves. The insights from this study can be leveraged in the public sector to foster a culture of inclusivity while aligning with Executive Order 14151. By recognizing and valuing the unique contributions of each employee, agencies can cultivate trust and support their development. This approach will lead to enhanced morale, improved retention rates and increased productivity within the workforce.

**Significance to Social Change**

The study's findings could significantly contribute to positive social change. A workforce that reflects a diverse population and serves the public is likely to have a deeper understanding of community needs, thereby enhancing customer service through positive interactions. By reviewing both past DEIA programs and the current Executive Order 14151 within the federal government, agencies can build public trust, demonstrating their commitment to representation for all citizens. Addressing the barriers and challenges associated with the federal workforce more effectively, ultimately leading to increased job satisfaction and morale.

**Summary**

The purpose of this study is to assist the agency in sustaining a workforce that represents all Americans. In this study, I applied a qualitative research approach to understand the barriers and challenges of past DEI initiatives and Executive Order 14151 through the words of the employees. The next section will address the conceptual framework and relevant literature.

## Section 2: Conceptual Framework and Relevant Literature

### **Introduction**

This study investigated the perceptions and experiences of government workers in the now-defunct DEIA program as they transitioned to current policies. The problem is sustaining the federal workforce. By examining past DEI initiatives within the agency, the current Executive Order 14151, and combining them with the employee's perspective, opportunities were identified to develop an actionable plan. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine employees' perceptions and experiences of defunct DEI programs and the implementation of Executive Order 14151 within the federal government to identify challenges in the federal workforce.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The purpose of this generic qualitative research study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of government employees. The transition from diversity and inclusion programs to current policies. Professional and academic literature on the topic of DEIA provides the foundation for the review. The research was conducted using several academic resources. The literature search included academic libraries, the Homeland Security Digital Library, Google Scholar, websites and databases. The main keywords used to search the databases were *diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility, the federal government and diversity management*. The Office of Personnel Management website was used to access public information regarding the FEVS, specifically for the year 2022. The index markers for DEIA were introduced in 2022. The study reviews the

literature and will combine the data collected to make recommendations to navigate through these unprecedented times within the federal government.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In this section, I explain key concepts of the framework used in this study.

#### **The Antecedents and Outcomes of Inclusion Model**

As a guide for this study, I used a conceptual framework of the antecedents and outcomes of inclusion (Shore et al., 2018). This model explores the factors that contributed to an inclusive work environment and the connection to the positive outcomes with an inclusive environment and draws on an earlier model of the inclusion and diversity work group model (Shore et al., 2011; see Figure 1). The 2011 model served as a basis for inclusion and exclusion and divides the employees into 4 groups depending on their uniqueness and belonging to the group. Both of these concepts are deeply rooted from the optimal distinctiveness theory. The model suggested that people have both a need to feel included and unique (Brewer, 2010). The antecedents and outcomes of inclusion model (Shore et al., 2018; see Figure 2) helped to explain the perceptions and experiences of the participants for this study. The model highlighted an inclusive climate, leadership, and practices which were all components of a healthy, productive, inclusive workforce (Shore et al., 2018).

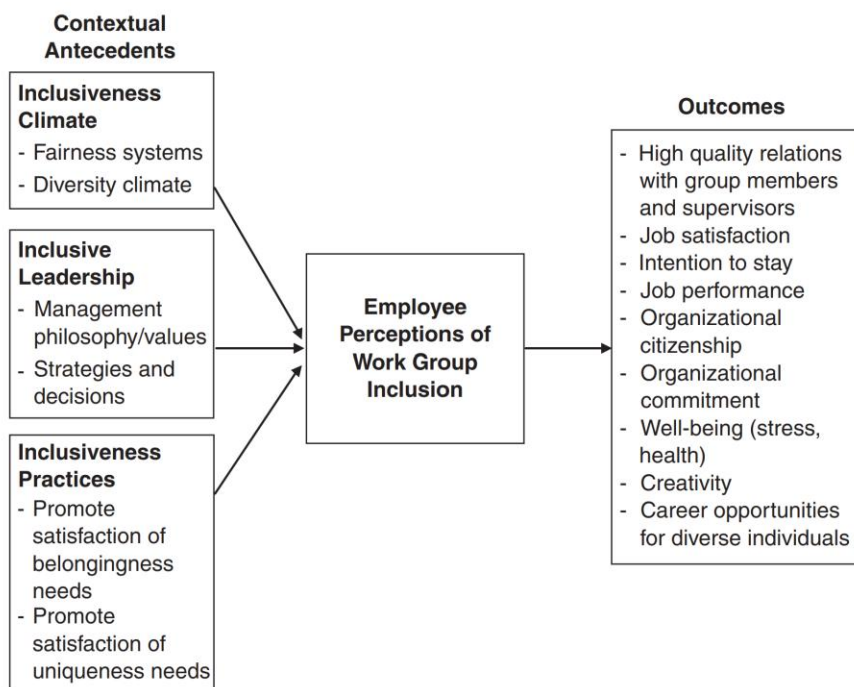
**Figure 1**

*Inclusion and Diversity in Work Group Model (Shore et al., 2011)*

	Low Belongingness	High Belongingness
Low Value in Uniqueness	<p><b>Exclusion</b></p> <p>Individual is not treated as an organizational insider with unique value in the work group but there are other employees or groups who are insiders.</p>	<p><b>Assimilation</b></p> <p>Individual is treated as an insider in the work group when they conform to organizational/dominant culture norms and downplay uniqueness.</p>
High Value in Uniqueness	<p><b>Differentiation</b></p> <p>Individual is not treated as an organizational insider in the work group but their unique characteristics are seen as valuable and required for group/ organization success.</p>	<p><b>Inclusion</b></p> <p>Individual is treated as an insider and also allowed/encouraged to retain uniqueness within the work group.</p>

**Figure 2**

*Antecedents and Outcomes of Inclusion (Shore et al., 2018)*



### **Key Concepts in the Study**

Although studies have been done on diversity, few have connected the importance of leadership in diversity and inclusion. The employees' perceptions of their work group inclusion status were studied, leading to the identification of opportunities for improvement, which contributed to the primary outcome, a cultural change plan. It is crucial to consider the perspectives of employees, as they play a significant role in fostering positive outcomes, such as job retention, satisfaction, and enhanced communication among the workforce and stakeholders. Based on the findings of the study, a comprehensive plan for cultural change was formulated and executed. The plan encompassed specific measures to promote sustainability within the federal workforce. The recommendations were tailored to address the current policy requirements of the organization and its workforce while examining the past Executive Orders 13583 and 14035 (Borry et al., 2021).

### **Rationale for Using This Framework**

The main research question in this study is as follows: What are the perceptions and experiences of federal employees with the implementation of Executive Order 14151? The rationale for using this framework was to gain insight into the perceptions and experiences of the workforce to have a better understanding of the challenges that existed with the cessation of DEIA (Barak & Daya, 2014).

### **Literature Review for the Study**

The problem addressed in this study is sustaining a federal workforce representative of all Americans while aligning with Executive Order 14151. This study

focused on how leadership practices promote and sustain fairness, equity, and inclusion within the federal workforce. In this section, I presented a review of literature focusing on diversity, leadership, and inclusion and the new Executive Order 14151.

### **History of the Context of the Problem: Diversity and Inclusive Culture**

Ashikali et al. (2021) argued that as the population of the United States evolved into a more diverse society, requests for the public sector to transform the workforce into a more diverse one have increased. The federal government is the nation's largest employer and should be representative of the people it serves (Borry et al, 2021). President Obama signed Executive Order 13583 in August 2011, establishing a government-wide initiative to promote diversity and inclusion in the federal government.

Executive Order 13583 compelled the federal government to consolidate compliance efforts of previous executive orders. These orders addressed the recruitment of Hispanics, Veterans, and people with disabilities. The Executive Order also mandated government agencies to develop a strategic plan within 90 days, focusing on diversity and inclusion programs by continuing to recruit, hire, and promote diversity and inclusion programs by continuing to recruit, hire, and promote a diverse workforce (Borry et al., 2021).

According to Thompson and Siciliano (2021), agencies that strategically prioritize creating a diverse and inclusive workforce experience increased retention, productivity, job satisfaction, and customer service. Shore et al. (2018) stated that managing diversity and inclusion is necessary to sustain a successful DEIA program, but changing the culture to provide a more inclusive environment can be somewhat challenging.

Recent studies have shown that improving diversity itself is not enough. For an agency to fully reap the benefits of diversity and inclusion, there needs to be a greater focus on inclusion. Barak and Daya (2014) noted that employees want to be heard and feel a sense of belonging to an organization by being represented at all workforce levels, including decision-making positions. Shore et al. (2023) noted that inclusion allows members of all groups to be fully engaged at all levels of the agency. Ashikali et al. (2021) stated that diversity and inclusion integrated to enhance the workforce is a newer concept in public administration, but it was necessary to receive the outcomes of DEIA benefits.

### **Sustaining a Workforce Through Employee Engagement**

Sustaining a workforce representative of the people it serves is challenging. Engaging leadership at all levels is necessary to provide a culture of inclusiveness and aligns with Executive Order 13583. Bakker et al. (2011) linked leadership and employee engagement with organizational performance and positive workplace culture. Chua et al. (2023) mentioned that leadership can have a direct effect by supporting employees and promoting inclusion through engagement.

When engaging with employees, leaders must embrace cultural differences to benefit employees and the organization. Shore et al. (2018) discussed the impact of leader inclusion and exclusion within the workgroup. Leaders have the opportunity to lead through positivity and to be agents of change regarding diversity and inclusion. Sabharwal (2014) found that commitment and engagement from leadership is key to influencing organizational performance.

## **Impact of Leadership on DEIA**

Shore et al. (2018) noted that social movements such as the #MeToo movement, LGBTQ rights, and Black Lives Matter have influenced global culture toward social change. With the growth of organizational diversity, these social and cultural movements influence and guide employees' workplace expectations.

According to Shore and Chung (2023), leadership commitment significantly impacts a diversity program's success. Shore et al. (2011) discussed the roles of leaders in the work environment and how leaders at all workforce levels can significantly impact the organization's culture. In Shore et al. (2011), the inclusion and diversity work group model links leadership behavior and style with the workforce through leadership quadrants of supporting through inclusion or discouraging through exclusion. Ashikali et al. (2021) suggested that few public management studies have been conducted on different leadership styles and the effect the styles have on inclusion in the workforce.

Employees' expectations of the workplace are much higher. Chua et al. (2023) mentioned that leadership is expected to evolve and embrace diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility to manage diversity successfully. To have a sustainably inclusive culture, leadership must be engaged at all levels of the organization and balance the agency's needs with the needs of the workforce. Chua et al. (2023) discussed the need for high leadership accountability, which is demonstrated by the leader's involvement and commitment to doing the right thing and leading while showing concern for the workforce.

### **Studies Related to Current State of Practice**

As the agency grows diversity management will be crucial for sustaining a workgroup that is fully represented and aligns with Executive Order 14151. Research over the past decades has shown that workgroups perceiving a high rate of inclusion are linked to positive outcomes such as increased job satisfaction, productivity and higher retention of workers. Shore et al. (2018) emphasized the importance of uniqueness and a sense of belonging in inclusion. Previous authors have identified three attributes of inclusion perception: belongingness to the group, respect, and recognition of uniqueness, and the ability to participate without barriers (Matz et al., 2012). This concept builds upon the work of Shore et al. (2011). Sustaining a fully represented workforce depends not only on the perceptions of the employees but the workgroup as a whole. Inclusion involves the culture of the work environment, leadership styles, and leadership practices.

### **Literature Supporting the Deliverable Approach**

There are various types of memorandums, including memos, recommendation reports, and report memos (McGrath, 2021). A recommendation report is designed to offer insight and guidance to the reader by presenting relevant information, including critical issues and recommendations (McGrath, 2021). This type of report typically begins with an executive summary, which outlines the document's purpose and provides an overview. Following the executive summary, the report will include a problem statement that presents background information along with the recommendations (McGrath, 2021). Given the concise nature, recommendation reports are particularly well-suited for presentation to senior-level executives.

## **Summary**

In researching the best approaches to enhancing the sustainability of a program within the federal government, I applied the antecedents and outcomes of inclusion model (Shore et al., 2018). This model emphasized employees' perceptions and experiences of belongingness to the organization. Creating an inclusive climate, fostering strong leadership, and implementing inclusive practices can result in positive outcomes such as increased job satisfaction and improved job performance (Shore et al., 2018). For this study, a generic qualitative design was most suitable, as it allowed the employees to express themselves in their own words within a descriptive design. The following section will delve into the data collection and review process.

### Section 3: Data Collection Process and Analysis

#### **Introduction**

This study aimed to investigate the perceptions and experiences of government workers in a now-defunct DEIA program. The problem was sustaining a workforce representing all Americans while aligning with the current Executive Order 14151. By examining past DEIA initiatives within the federal government, Executive Order 14151 and combining them with the employees' perspective, opportunities were identified to develop an actionable improvement plan. A review of the literature, combined with interviews with 10 employees within the federal government, explored their perceptions and experiences, providing insight into the challenges and concerns of the workforce.

#### **Practice-Focused Research Question and Research Design**

RQ: What are the perceptions and experiences of federal employees with the implementation of Executive Order 14151?

Semi structured interviews were conducted with government employees using 10 open-ended questions (see Appendix A). A generic qualitative approach was used to collect employees' understanding of the challenges they face when transitioning to new policies following the cessation of all DEIA programs. Generic qualitative research has gained popularity in many academic fields due to its valuable framework for studying human experiences and its flexibility (Ellis & Hart, 2023). A generic qualitative approach is not bound and retains the flexibility needed to explore the subject of this study (Kahlke, 2014). This study involves a broad idea, making the generic qualitative methodology the most suitable approach, as it explored the perceptions and experiences

of federal employees. According to Ellis and Hart (2023), many researchers find the generic qualitative methodology appealing because of its focus on participants' subjective beliefs and opinions regarding their experiences, which are integral to their everyday lives.

I employed purposeful sampling, selecting 10 federal employees from different levels to gather a comprehensive collection of their perceptions. The sampling strategy focused on lower-level and mid-level employees. Open-ended questions allowed them to share their stories. Targeting the different workforce levels will allow for a broader perspective of the overall challenges in the federal workforce.

Generic qualitative research rarely identifies sample size; variations of qualitative methods still suggest that small samples are necessary despite empirical misunderstandings. For instance, generic qualitative analyses typically use small, rich sample sizes when the focus is narrow (Ellis & Hart, 2023).

### **How the Deliverable Addresses the Research Question**

I expect the results of this study to be informative not only for the local government agency but also could be used across the nation. This study draws on the perceptions of the core workforce. By revealing the challenges, agencies can use the knowledge to unite the team, motivate the workforce, and improve morale and job satisfaction. The findings of the study resulted in a recommendation report. The recommendation report would consist of an executive summary, which would provide a synopsis of the report. The problem statement included the challenges in workforce sustainment with the cessation of all DEIA policies and programs within the federal

government. Solutions were provided, compared, and evaluated, and final recommendations were made. The report was available to the senior levels of management within the field location.

### **Nature of the Study**

A generic qualitative study was conducted to collect employees' perspectives and understand the barriers and challenges related to past DEIA initiatives and current Executive Orders. Unlike quantitative research, which typically focuses on the questions of how many, what, and why, qualitative research aims to explore and understand people's experiences. Specifically, inductive studies are more concerned with exploring "what" and "why" questions (Tuffour, 2017).

According to Ellis and Hart (2023), generic qualitative research has become a popular methodology in qualitative research across various academic disciplines. This approach emphasizes real-world experiences in detail. In recent years, generic qualitative research has gained popularity for its effectiveness in studying human experiences. Additionally, this research approach aligns with the conceptual frameworks of the antecedents and outcomes of inclusion model and the inclusion and diversity work group model, which have been selected for this study. These frameworks will help explain participants' perceptions and experiences including aspects of inclusive climates, leadership, and organization practices (Shore et al., 2011, 2018).

Researchers should reflect on their philosophical stance before choosing a research methodology (Neubauer et al., 2019). There is a wide range of qualitative traditions a researcher can choose from. Generic qualitative methodology offers the most

detailed examination of a human experience by focusing on participants' individual experiences and perceptions of events. The generic qualitative approach therefore best suits this study.

### **Roles of the Researcher and Client Organization**

For the past 15 years, I have worked for the federal government. I have worked my way up through the ranks working in middle management for the past seven years and was recently promoted to a position as a human resource specialist focusing on labor relations. Working as a manager has allowed me to see the workplace culture and how DEIA affects the organizational culture from a different perspective. I understand the effects of engaging with leaders with different leadership styles, ranging from enthusiastic to unenthusiastic, and observing the leaders' impact on the workforce's culture. I have no supervisory role, nor am I currently in the chain of command of any participants in this study. This study and data collection were completed outside of the scope of my employment.

A potential bias during this research could be my own experiences involving leadership engagement and the effect on my team. This bias was addressed through the interview process, which was recorded and transcribed. The stories are those of the participants. I am not one of the participants being interviewed, so my story was not part of the data collection.

### **Methodology**

In this study, I analyzed data collected from interviews to answer the research question and provided a deliverable for review. Using a generic qualitative research

approach and purposeful sampling, I conducted semi structured interviews to capture federal employees' perceptions and experiences regarding past DEIA initiatives in the workforce while transitioning to current policies.

### **Sources of Data**

The data were collected through 10 interviews, organized through a step-by-step process, and categorized into themes. The focus of the research was to understand the participants' experience with past DEIA programs and current Executive Orders. The results from the data collection were compiled to provide guidance on sustaining the workforce.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

#### ***Participants***

This qualitative study required the participants to be employed by the federal government and at least 18 years old. The 10 participants were volunteers from lower- to mid-level leadership. I identified participants through the Walden Research Participant Pool. I obtained the potential participants' email addresses to send the formal documents, which consisted of an overview of the study, the consent form, and the confidentiality agreement. Pseudonyms masked the participants' names (see Appendix B). The qualitative research approach was appropriate for this study as it aims to explore the employees' perceptions regarding the federal workforce (Rossiter, 2008).

#### ***Procedures***

The interview process was completed through a virtual platform. I offered the participants the choice of virtual platform. The interviews were conducted remotely using

the virtual platform Microsoft Teams. This provided participants with the flexibility needed to accommodate their schedules to participate in the study. I worked with participants to schedule a convenient time for the interview via their preferred online/virtual platform.

An introductory email with an overview of the study and a consent form was sent to the participant's email address. The participant could immediately review and reply.

All interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams. This allowed the volunteer more flexibility in choosing the time and location of the interview. The 10 interviews were recorded and transcribed.

### **Strategy for Data Analysis**

The data collected through the interview process were analyzed thematically. The themes were identified and systematically organized into groups (Braun & Clarke, 2024). Similar to the data analysis procedures provided by Braun and Clarke (2024), I moved through six different phases of organization. First, I familiarized myself with the data collected by reviewing the interview content. Second, involved the initial coding by identifying key words. The third phase involved creating a list of the key words that will be identified and act as codes. These codes were placed into larger themes. The fourth phase involved reviewing the data and refining the themes. The fifth phase of coding is where the themes were defined. In the sixth and final phase, the data collection results were compiled into a report in which recommendations and guidance were provided (Braun & Clarke, 2024).

## **Summary of the Deliverable**

The recommendation report provided insight into barriers within the agency. It also provided recommendations on overcoming the barriers and sustaining representation within the workforce by analyzing the problem, presenting multiple solutions, and providing a path forward to sustaining a workforce that represents all Americans.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

The scientific integrity of qualitative research is fundamentally grounded in establishing trustworthiness, which encompassed four critical dimensions: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Adler, 2022). These interrelated elements collectively contributed to the interpretive value of research findings within the academic community (Stahl & King, 2020). The present exploration adhered to these principles, enhancing its conclusion's validity and reliability.

#### **Credibility**

Credibility referred to the faithfulness with which the study's findings represented the participants lived experiences (Stahl & King, 2020). This study's credibility was increased through engagement with the data and the researcher. As the researcher, I devoted substantial time for data review, conducting multiple iterations of close reading. Furthermore, a comprehensive record of personal perspectives and potential biases that could influence data collection, analysis, and interpretation was identified.

#### **Transferability**

Transferability pertained to the extent to which research findings could apply across diverse populations and contexts (Adler, 2022). To support transferability, I

provided detailed descriptions of the research process and participant characteristics (Stahl & King, 2020). Demographic information will be documented to facilitate interpreting participant experiences. Additionally, I provided comprehensive documentation of research procedures through an audit trail.

### **Dependability**

Dependability referred to the degree of documentation and reliability of research procedures (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). To ensure dependability, I used multiple sources of evidence, including complete transcripts and detailed documentation of data collection protocols. An audit trail was maintained, chronicling the entire research process from conception, including participant recruitment, interview process, data analysis, and data management procedures.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability, the final element of trustworthiness, pertained to the objectivity and replicability of research findings (Adler, 2022). I enhanced confirmability by using clearly defined codes derived from the data. Throughout the analytical process, I engaged in reflexivity by examining personal assumptions and life experiences that could influence the analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). Reflective notes were maintained before and during data analysis to acknowledge and mitigate potential biases.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Certification was conducted through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process. Meetings were held with the Doctor of Public Administration professional administrative study committee chair to provide insight and guidance. The protocol and

strategies for protecting the participants' confidentiality were critical to this study (Alter & Gonzalez, 2018) The participants' voluntary participation was secured in this study, and information on the subject matter and nature of the conducted research was supplied.

The consent to share their demographic information and other data was acquired through secure means in the interview process, and the participant's confirmation of the study's purpose was secured. The participants' identification was kept confidential and was fundamental to the data collection, and identities were masked. The participants' protection of their well-being was also considered because the distribution of materials to collect data was done through secure measures, and the participants were informed of the risks and benefits of participating in this study. The participants of the study can opt out at any time. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants, so they had a complete understanding of the importance of the interviews.

### **Treatment of Human Participants**

I adhered to the highest protocols to protect the ethical standards and the confidentiality of the participants' identities. The participants have been disclosed to me. However, I will uphold the highest ethical standards to ensure the confidentiality of the participant's identities (Alter & Gonzalez, 2018). The identities of the participants were not disclosed unethically, and the participants were assigned pseudonyms for anonymity.

### **Institutional Permissions**

IRB Approval #06-17-25-1106848 was obtained through Walden University. Data collection began after IRB approval was received.

**Recruitment**

Participant recruitment was conducted through Walden's Research Participant Pool and via personal contacts. No financial incentives were provided in exchange for the participants' involvement in the study.

**Informed Consent**

Participant cap was reached through personal contacts before I received any responses from Walden's Research Participant Pool, during which their personal email addresses were obtained. Before they agreed to participate in the study, potential participants received an informed consent form via email. This form provided detailed information regarding the study's topic and its rationale. It outlined the risks and benefits of participation, making it clear that involvement is entirely voluntary. Additionally, the consent document included my contact information, including phone number and email, for any questions the participants may have.

**Data Collection**

Researchers have a duty to safeguard the identities of their research participants, and upholding this promise is crucial. According to Alter and Gonzalez (2018), responsible data sharing is fundamental to ensuring participant protection. In this study, participants will be referred to by pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

**Treatment of Data**

The names of the government agency and the participants were masked in the study. I stored the data in accordance with the guidelines in the DPA PAS Student Guidebook, 2021. Upon the completion of the professional administrative study, the data

will be retained for a period of 5 years. These data encompassed, but are not limited to, interview recordings, spreadsheets, and consent forms. To ensure security, data were stored securely in two separate locations: electronic data were kept on a password-protected laptop, whereas hard copies were secured in a locked fireproof container. After the 5-year retention period, I will ensure all data are properly destroyed.

### **Other Ethical Issues**

The participants in this study were 18 years or older and employed by a federal agency for a minimum of one year. I hold a position that does not involve supervision and is not part of the chain of command for any of the participants. Data collection for this study was conducted outside the scope of my employment, ensuring compliance with guidelines that separate the pursuit of a doctoral degree from my role in the federal government.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions and experiences of government employees in a now-defunct DEIA program. This section focused on generic qualitative research methodology and design, ethical procedures for the data collection process, and protecting the confidentiality of the participants. IRB approval and consent by the participants were received before the actual data collection, which are addressed in the next section.

## Section 4: Results and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The primary focus of this study was to examine employees' perceptions and experiences in the federal workforce. Previous DEIA initiatives were suddenly terminated by Executive Order 14151, prompting the federal workforce to quickly adapt to new policies. Additionally, the study aimed to identify key themes that emerged from the analysis. During this important phase of research, I conducted a thorough evaluation and analyzed the valuable data collected for this qualitative study.

The research question used to guide this study was as follows: What are the perceptions and experiences of federal employees with the implementation of Executive Order 14151?

The description below presented information about the data collection procedures. This section also describes the data analysis process.

Due to the nature of this topic, as well as the need to ensure participant safety and confidentiality, the study followed ethical procedures aligned with the guidelines from the Walden University IRB. Participants received detailed information through an informational email, sample interview questions, and consent forms. The voluntary nature of participation was emphasized, and participants were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions. The data collection primarily involved interviews with federal employees, who were considered key informants due to their knowledge and willingness to share insights on the perception of changes resulting from the cessation of DEIA and the current Executive Order 14151.

The interviews included open-ended questions designed to elicit a variety of responses and perspectives from employees navigating policy changes. By engaging with this demographic, my aim was to gather first-hand accounts and opinions on the transition.

### **Data Collection**

The data collection process was carried out using a semi structured approach after receiving approval from the Walden University IRB. I created an Excel spreadsheet to document the data collection process and notes thoroughly. The spreadsheet documented dates of the interviews, keywords, phrases, and themes. Through casual conversation, participants provided their personal email addresses. Information regarding the study and consent forms was emailed to the participants, who agreed to participate in the study by responding to the initial email. I employed purposive sampling to select 10 volunteer participants for interviews, chosen based on their employment with the federal government. These participants were current federal government employees who agreed to the interviews by responding to the initial informational email. The interviews were conducted via the Microsoft Teams platform, allowing participants to choose the location and time for their sessions. Although participants had a choice of virtual platforms to select from, Microsoft Teams was the only platform that the participants selected to use. The interviews took place from July 18 through September 9, 2025. Each interview was scheduled for 30 minutes and was audio recorded. The sixth interview exceeded the scheduled time frame lasting 40 minutes and 41 seconds. The recordings were then transcribed and reviewed. There were no deviations from the original data collection plan outlined in the proposal.

## Data Analysis

Transcriptions of the audio-recorded interviews were exported into a Word document. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2024) procedure for inductive thematic analysis.

The initial step of the data analysis was to conduct the data collection and transcribe the interviews. Each participant interview was identified by a pseudonym. The participants were given the opportunity to review their transcript, clarify the data and make any corrections.

The first interview was conducted on July 18, 2025, and was immediately transcribed for review. I familiarized myself with the data by reading the transcription and began to generate a codebook. The second and third interviews were conducted shortly after the first interview. The process continued by reading the interviews and re-reading the initial interview. During the process, I substantially analyzed the data to gain a comprehensive understanding of the employees' experiences. The fourth, fifth, and sixth interviews were conducted in August, in which I read the latest transcripts and re-read the first three transcripts. I began to highlight keywords that were used in all of the transcripts. The seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth were conducted. The last interview was on September 9, 2025. Member checks were conducted after the interviews were transcribed. I continued to dissect the transcriptions line by line, generating codes by highlighting keywords, such as mission, inclusion, respect, diversity, fairness, collaboration, engagement, trust, distrust, coaching, mentoring, and barriers, and documented the keywords into the Excel spreadsheet. The key words were then grouped

together to form the initial themes. An additional review was conducted to finalize the development of the three main themes. For the final step the data analysis was completed.

### **Findings**

This generic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions and the experiences of federal employees' transitioning through Executive Order 14151. Based on the analysis of the data collected, eight themes emerged from the thematic analysis: Theme 1: Perceptions of past DEIA Initiatives, Theme 2: Overcoming the Challenges in Policy Transition, Theme 3: Barriers of Policy Transition, Theme 4: Strengths in Policy Transition, Theme 5: Best Practices for Promoting and Facilitating Inclusivity amongst Staff, Theme 6: Characteristics of a Successful Work Environment, Theme 7: Leadership Evaluates Success. Theme 8: Aspirations of Workplace Culture

The federal employees transitioned from policies that strengthened the diversity of the workforce by including DEIA policies to policies that eliminated DEIA. The implications for each theme are discussed.

#### **Theme 1: Perceptions of Past DEIA Initiatives**

Overall, the perception of past DEIA Initiatives was encouraging. Six out of the 10 participants had positive views. Natasha stated, "I thought they were great structures put in place to keep people's morale up." Diana asserted, "It was trying to make equality for everybody, treat everybody with fairness." Timothy noted, "I felt like people really felt like they had a voice and they were able to share an experience or a thought that they had that I may never have come in contact with because I might not have the same lifestyle." Vera said, "I thought it was good. I saw value in it and it just made you

understand a person more and, you know, appreciate what each individual person's background brought to the agency." Peter stated, "it's important to have a very inclusive culture when you're working with any group, so that way all. Perspectives and experiences can be included in the workforce to better create a cohesive environment." Ramonda said, "it brought a lot of open-minded discussion to the agency and presented opportunities for more communication across all shifts, all terminals. I think it was a great way to bring us together."

Three participants expressed positive views but expressed concerns. Kirk attested that "I thought it was a good program in trying to get everybody together to bond a lot better to understand different thought processes or views. However, I really wasn't engaged a whole lot with it." Lala stated,

I think at the very beginning it seemed like it was like checking the box type of thing, after a few months and seeing the why behind it and really trying to get people more involved and just using it as an educational tool.

Nick asserted, "I thought that it was beneficial just to promote different ethnicities, but I think that there was a lot of like pressure on us to change and to be more knowledgeable."

Another participant stated, "I feel that most of the initiatives seemed forced."

The findings of this study indicated that most of the participants perceived the DEIA initiatives contributed to a positive workforce and endorsed the value of the initiatives. with increased communication amongst the employees. The participants emphasized the value of DEIA initiatives. They highlighted the increased appreciation of their colleague's background and the structural benefits of cross shift communication

Employees felt included and shared their perspectives and ideas because they felt as though their voice mattered.

A few of the participants acknowledged the DEIA initiative's potential benefits while simultaneously articulating reservations. Their concerns center on limited engagement, perceptions of performativity (i.e., "check the box"), and feelings of pressure or obligation. These responses suggest that while the initiatives were well-received, their implementation may not have consistently fostered authentic participation due to lack of engagement from leadership.

## **Theme 2: Overcoming the Challenges in Policy Transition**

There were a variety of perceptions when overcoming the challenges in policy transition. Of the 10 participants one person felt fearful, tense and stressed. Vera noted "How do I deal? Honestly, by coming in every day and doing my job." Nick had a similar view and noted "you just try to focus on doing the best you can. It's a fast-paced environment. There are so many competing interests throughout the day that change at moment's notice." Tony stated, "following up with the team like leadership management, following up with their teams to kind of keep a finger on the pulse." Kirk stressed following the directives. While Peter's focus was on understanding the policies and initiatives first to be able to communicate the policy changes to the team.

Two participants focused on performance. Diana's said, "If you do a good job, you get rewarded." Lala stated, "If you are truly judging them based on their performance, then it is going to come naturally." Timothy stated,

I say it's about respect, it's about professionals, it's about caring for people, I'm not really removing anything. Nothing has changed for me. It's all still the same, with the exception of the government is not providing funds and time to push initiatives that are DEIA.

Ramonda said, "being with my agency for as long as I have, there really wasn't too many challenges."

This theme explored how the participants navigated the challenges of transitioning policies. There was a wide variety of emotional and behavioral responses ranging from uncertainty to confidence. Several participants described the transition as emotionally demanding expressing feelings of fear and stress. Others emphasized coping strategies based on routine, adaptability and professionalism, suggesting that maintaining focus on daily responsibilities and the mission served as a stabilizing method for a rapidly changing environment.

A few of the participants highlighted the importance of communication and leadership engagement with the workforce. Their responses underscore the perceived value of managerial follow through, clarity of the directives and a solid understanding of policy content to guide their teams through the transition.

Some participants looked at the challenges from a meritocratic view, emphasizing that a strong performance leads to a positive outcome which aligns with Executive Order 14151. Other participants had more of an emotional response and were concerned about respect, professionalism and caring for their team.

Overall, the responses demonstrate that the participant's responses are molded by their experiences, coping strategies, performance expectations, leadership skillset and tenure with their agency.

### **Theme 3: Barriers of Policy Transition**

Most of the participants identified barriers that were not supportive of policy change. Natasha stated, "I think it's hindered the Morale of people working as a team." Tony remarked, "they adopted it as far as that's the norm and that's how we do business and some like easily adopted it. But now that that is gone, they're maybe resistant or not accepting of the fact." Vera stated,

It'll just make it extremely difficult for a person that doesn't fit with what and how they want them to look. It makes it difficult for the person who may not look how they want them to look, but they're actually. A person that is skilled and qualified, but you know they'll be overlooked.

Diana asserted, "Oh, the females aren't going to have a job." Peter said, "I think a big barrier for that is that people aren't going to be as open as they would be if there were DEIA." Timothy said, "The failure of rating officials to be able to observe and act upon somebody's performance that is meritable." Kirk stated, "Some of the barriers I see is people that I think are qualified or ready for certain position that this Executive Order may hinder that." Nick asserted "I think that the initiation allowed us to focus more on the task at hand for the agency." Ramonda remarked "Well, from what I see right now that it is excluding certain people from the decision-making process or just being in the room to have a voice at this point in time." Lala stated, "The barrier is everything, the

barrier is that the Executive Order is trying to erase things. It dismantled a lot of different things.”

The participants revealed several barriers that impeded policy transition. These barriers traversed interpersonal, cultural, organizational and procedural aspects. Several participants revealed declining moral, the loss of inclusivity and the lack of openness. Their comments implied that the removal of DEIA initiatives created uncertainty in the workforce and fear that exclusionary practices would return, which sparked concerns of fairness and equity.

#### **Theme 4: Strengths in Policy Transition**

Participants expressed a range of perspectives regarding strengths in policy transition. Three of the 10 participants were displeased with the policy transition that eliminated DEIA. Vera said, “so I’m really not a supporter. I didn’t see the value in it cause I know that Executive Order focused on cutting down or basically eliminating DEIA initiatives.” Timothy stated, “I wasn’t very happy with the initial changeover. However, I don’t believe that you can erase somebody’s previous experience without them allowing you to do so.” Lala stated,

I followed the directions that I had that was put in for me as far as I comply with changing my e-mail signature and that’s pretty much all I did to support that. I’m going to still be me. Outside of that and be respectful and professional as best as I can, but I don’t personally agree with the order.

Three participants-maintained focus on inclusivity. Natasha said, “I’ve always treated people fairly and been very inclusive.” Ramonda stated, “my biggest strength

would be just bringing a diverse group of people together, no matter, you know, male, female, background, ages. You bring those people together to discuss a topic and get a multitude of viewpoints.” Peter explained, “Be open to listening to people’s experiences and opinions and thoughts, but I also have to make sure that it’s not getting in the way of our Mission and values that we have.”

One participant’s focus was on equality. Diana affirmed “We’re not allowed to talk about it. We had to take all of it out of our speech and everything else. I treat everybody the same.”

Three participants focused on the adhering to the current policies. For example, Kirk stated,

well, my biggest strength is to follow the presidential order, the mandate and my agency’s support of that. How am I trying to say, that initiative or that executive order? Roll it out or adhere to using my network is a big thing and what little bit I do get to read on it occasionally.

Tony said, “I judged individuals based upon merits and performance. Nick established, “just adhere to the agency’s core values and then just be professional, be respectful regardless of somebody’s stance or opinion.”

The participants voiced a variety of strengths, some of them expressed clear dissatisfaction with change, describing the policy transition as a rollback with policies that conflicted with their values. Their responses reflected ethical disagreement, however, despite their personal convictions, participants did comply with the new expectations.

Some of the participants highlighted their continued commitment to inclusivity despite there being a policy shift. These participants outlined inclusive behavior as personal, and ethically professional. Inclusivity highlighted fairness, and value engaging with individuals from different backgrounds. There was an openness to diverse viewpoints with inclusivity in the workplace.

One participant voiced a focus on equality, emphasizing uniform treatment amongst the workforce. This shows a different perception of inclusivity.

Three participants responses focused on adherence to the agency directives. These participants valued merit-based evaluation, alignment with agency values and Executive Orders. The responses outlined compliance as an essential responsibility and means of maintaining stability during policy transition.

These perspectives illustrate the multiple ways the participants interpret and navigate through policy change, in this case, removal of DEIA initiatives. Their perspectives are shaped by personal values, professionalism and the understanding of fairness within the organization.

#### **Theme 5: Best Practices for Promoting and Facilitating Inclusivity Amongst Staff**

The perceptions of the participants varied. Most of the participants focused on engagement. Natasha declared, “Again, I treat people fairly, so I’m a positive person and that’s how I like to lead and I like to keep up the morale and include everybody.” Vera revealed, “the practices that I used is just trying to support all of the DEIA initiatives and I think that was the best.” Peter stated,

So, as a leader, I have that trust within my employees and my co-workers always have an open door policy where people can come and talk to me not only about work things, but things outside of work, because I feel that it builds a better work environment.

Timothy articulated her perception as follows:

I try to incorporate an opportunity for each employee to provide or engage the team with their ideas and suggestions. You know. Regardless to really see who's of, you know their culture, background, if they're brand new 3 months in, they're looking at something completely different than the way we are and just because they're only there 3 months doesn't mean they don't have something good to say.

Ramonda stated,

I personally try to build a rapport with everyone, a rapport to have trust with others in order to really see who they are as a person down to the base of who they are, So in doing that, I feel like them letting me in, I get to see maybe you know their flaws, their strengths, and try to help them build upon those things whether it's moving up or just learning.

Lala said,

I still just try to get their buy in and like if I'm struggling with something like I'm trying to find an active solution to it, I'm going to, you know, pull some people in like just like I would normally in the past. Just because that's what we should be doing and it should just because we have that order doesn't mean we can't include

people in our brainstorming sessions if you will, so I just don't change how I see people and view people.

Three participants highlighted the importance of individuality through engagement. Tony articulated,

So, in general, you know, everybody has a diverse background and in one way or another everybody can bring value based upon perspective gained over the course of their life or even cultural so by looking at the individual, or I should say how the individual conducts themselves, maybe methodologies that they do potentially based upon whatever background knowledge, whether they went to college or completed high school.

Diana expressed,

I look at the person who's in front of me. Are you doing a good job? Are you? You know, do you need help with anything? Let me help you, Do you? Are you doing your job correctly? I'll give you praise. If not, I'm going to point out your mistakes.

Two participants focused on equality amongst the employees. Kirk asserted the following:

I try to make sure that all my people are heard equally that they are treated equally and that they treat each other equally. I think that's a big part of having cohesive work environment when we're not doing those things, I think it leads to disgruntlement in the work environment and a lot of negative issues.

Nick stated,

You know emphasizing the fact that you know it's no matter if you're in a leadership role or you have a brand new individual that just joined our agency that everybody is to be treated equally, everybody has different strengths and weaknesses and emphasize on the fact that we're all the same.

The responses from the participants varied. A majority of the participants highlighted employee engagement as the primary driver for inclusivity. The employees cultivated trust through practices such as open-door policies, encouraging dialogue with employees and sustaining positive morale. This underscored the importance of an employee's voice and participation. Participants articulated devotion to understanding employees by focusing on their unique strengths and professional goals. By engaging in and building that rapport, leaders were able to tailor to support employee growth by individualizing their approach and providing constructive feedback.

Some participants framed inclusivity as equality and fairness. These participants stressed the importance of treating people equally despite their tenure, rank or role in the organization. Equal treatment was essential to a harmonious work environment.

Together the findings suggest the best practices for promoting and facilitating inclusivity amongst the workforce is multidimensional and supported by leadership behaviors. This approach values both individuality and collective fairness, promoting an environment in which employees feel respected, heard and empowered to contribute

#### **Theme 6: Characteristics of a Successful Work Environment.**

There was a mixture of responses from the participants. Five of the participants favored team orientation and collaboration. Tony expressed the following:

A successful work environment is a team that collaborates and although it may have conflict, I would like to call it like a healthy conflict where something comes out of the debate or disagreement where ultimately a productive decision could be made.

Vera stated,

It would have to be an environment where people are accepting of everybody and wanting to work together and be collaborative and being understanding and not working in an environment where it's a dictatorship. You know leadership, leadership would have to open to changes and value their employees' opinions and you know want to challenge them to do better and you know, I will want to be in an environment where my leadership wouldn't want to hinder my success, but would want to promote success from within.

Kirk said,

Getting along, people treating each other with dignity and respect no matter, you know, their views are, we have to take everyone's views into account, right, wrong or indifference and at that point, you know them at that point we can come to, you know hopefully a medium of you know that includes everybody in the decision making and the job, and things like that.

Lala described,

It's definitely team oriented and nobody, no matter how high up you are, is not afraid to get their hands dirty, and don't ever forget how you got there. You know, I would like to see for me, myself included, to be out there with the employees

and working with them or working with you know, whether I'm doing an event with food or whatever. I want to be there. I want to see the boss doing some stuff too.

Ramonda suggested,

A successful work environment utilizes their people in a way that they get to speak and be heard and they're able to put their knowledge to the test and try different avenues of completing a task to get goals. It includes brainstorming with others and just looking at different perspectives in order to reach a goal.

Three of the participants' determined communication was important in having a successful work environment. Peter stated,

Well, going back to having that open door policy, that trust and communication and being able to share and express my opinions and allow others to open up and feel comfortable being in the workplace and not expecting my coworkers or my subordinates to do something that I wouldn't do myself.

Tim expressed,

Active listening from the top to the bottom and the bottom to the top. If there's somebody that is above me and I have an opinion it should be important. If there's somebody below me and they have an opinion, it should be important because at the end of the day all the opinions ultimately impact the team, so I would say that would be #1.

Nick said, "Communication, trust, professionalism."

Two participants deemed equality is a best practice of a successful work environment. Natasha said, “I think to keep the morale up and when people feel included again, it boosts morale,” whereas Diana said,

I make sure that everybody gets an equal share of everything, you know, time upstairs, time, you know to do whatever they got to do. I don't pick and choose. I make sure everybody's done equal. If you make everybody equal, then you can't have a problem. You won't make people feel like they're not part of it.

The participants' perceptions of the characteristics of a successful work environment reveal a multidimensional understanding of workplace success, with the foundation being open and respectful communication and team collaboration. Participants highlighted the value of collective problem solving where different perspectives were encouraged. Ideas were refined through collaboration and productive decisions emerged.

Several participants rejected the authoritarian style of leadership in favor of the participatory approach which invites employee input and collaboration. Participants expressed the importance of leaders working with the employees and engaging with frontline tasks. This action perceived to support solidarity and a shared commitment to organizational goals.

In addition to collaboration, effective communication surfaced as an important characteristic. Participants emphasized open-door policies, active listening and bidirectional communication equally important across the ranks as it values everyone. Open communication promoted transparency and strengthening interpersonal skills. This contributed to a stable and respectful workplace culture.

A few of the participants emphasized equality and inclusion as detrimental to workplace success. Equal treatment encompasses access, opportunities and recognition. Participants noted when employees feel included moral improves maintaining cohesion within the workforce. Overall workplace success is achieved through leadership practices that value employee participation, equity and fairness, and a shared purpose.

**Theme 7: Leadership Evaluates Success.**

Seven of the participants expressed success evaluated through performance. Natasha stated, “by having a god work ethic, going above and beyond your job description.” Vera described her response as, “They look at what you do overall, and I think they just measure it against what the job description is.” Peter expressed, “there is a program that we utilize for measuring an officer’s performance and there’s certain categories that they have to meet in order to obtain that performance goal.” Timothy asserted,

Well, the criteria itself, there’s several different things. So like if I was to use a couple of examples, I might say like you know, maybe prohibited item recognition, performance on the job, handling of a situation that required immediate response, maybe something along the lines of utilizing a professional skill set that improves the rest of the team.

Diana stated, “So when the officers to a great job, you want to make sure they get the recognition. Even if you know you can’t get the big guys to do it.” Nick said, “Customer service is another big thing that our agency is really measuring a lot, and that gets recognized as well.”

Lala articulated, “I don’t really think it is the best way, but they do have a performance plan for each person. Every year they go through and have mid-year evaluations and then a final one.”

Two of the participants are concerned about how leadership evaluates success.

Kirk articulated, “I don’t necessarily think that all the right people get recognized properly. I feel sometimes it’s biased on who the individual is and what the position they hold.” Tony stated,

The leadership with some of the selection, it’s hard to tell. The transparency isn’t necessarily there as far as the decision making based upon hard work or what has been done. The criteria isn’t really necessarily clear on how decisions are made for, whether it be assignments, promotions, whatever it may be.

Ramonda believes, “that my leadership relies on metrics, the number of people or items being processed and what timeframe. That’s how my success is measured.”

The perceptions of how leadership evaluates success reveal a dominant emphasis on performance-based metrics. Although there are concerns regarding fairness, transparency and employee recognition. Performance management system included a structured program to monitor employee effectiveness. Employee assessments were described as being aligned with job descriptions, including organizational benchmarks and policy. Participants disclosed that a strong work ethic, and consistently meeting or exceeding goals would lead to success. When an individual demonstrated exceptional performance, it would positively impact the team and the formal recognition process would reinforce motivation.

Some participants expressed concerns regarding bias and lack of transparency. These participants questioned whether success was consistent and fair across the ranks and personnel. Perceptions of favoritism, bias and unclear decision making highlighted the challenges. The lack of transparency and consistent standards for recognition could diminish confidence and undermine the trust in leadership.

One participant emphasized performance success as metric driven in which leadership relies on quantitative outputs which is in contrast to a more holistic approach of performance management.

These insights propose that leadership evaluation of success is primarily in performance metrics, formal appraisals with measurable outcomes. Structure performance appraisals provide clarity and consistency. However, there are critical concerns related to transparency, equity and recognition. The effectiveness may be limited to the perceptions of the employees and emphasize the importance of balancing objective performance measures with transparent, equitable and complete evaluation practices to ensure leadership credibility and trust.

#### **Theme 8: Aspirations of Workplace Culture.**

This theme included the ideas that the participants felt was important moving forward in their work environment. Vera stated, “I mean the only thing, I would just mention that really being inclusive and being diverse in your workforce. I feel like, is very needed and when you take away, you know things that promote success.” Diana asserted,

Well, frankly, they need to look at some of the people above us that are high up there, that are men, woman haters, but um they got a couple of those, I mean frankly, I don't think anybody, we can't say the words, we can't do anything, but we still treat everybody the same as long as we can, we're allowed to do that.

Kirk stated, "As a whole we all need to start being inclusive of everyone. I think it's very important." Peter responded,

I think it's important for teams to get to know one another because oftentimes we just come into work and we're here for 8 hours...I think it's important to get to know your team and better understand how your team works, so that way it creates a sense of belonging and willingness to come to work and want to be there versus having to be there.

Timothy said, "Leadership should be taking time out to meet with employees." Lala responded,

I just think we need to be a little bit more and I say meaning the whole United States. Really, at this point, I think we need to just change up how we're looking at things, I don't know if you remember those toys when we were little. It was like those little kaleidoscopes when you look in and it was all those different colors and stuff. And I think that's the way we need to view things, and just put each person in one of those colors and you know, bring them in and say, hey, we're gonna have a brainstorming session and then really that's like your DEIA from back in the day, like trying to get to know you or something like that.

Tony expressed concern about the actual change:

What I would say is people are resistant to change and the best way to implement practices is, in my opinion, gradually, not immediately overnight. Hey, this is what we're doing from here on out. This is who you are, and this is how we're doing it as a culture of the work group. I think that's not a good way to implement any policy or practice. Definitely you do have to push the practice. A little bit, you know, where people are going to not necessarily enjoy the change, but not overwhelmingly like where the whole world changes overnight. I don't think that's a good way of rolling out any initiative or change.

Nick responded, "The key elements that make it to be successful as far as like, what you would like the desired practices or vision as in a leadership role for an agency" Natasha and Ramonda declined to comment on this topic.

Participants reflect their perspective on what they believe is essential for improving the work environment. Leadership engagement, stronger interpersonal connections amongst the workforce and inclusivity predominantly emerged in this theme. Many of the participants articulated the importance of inclusivity and workforce diversity. A shared belief was that inclusivity and diversity are key to organizational success and are essential in supporting employee engagement. Several participants expressed concern that eliminating DEIA practices would undermine inclusivity and limit the potential of the organization. There was a perceived frustration of individuals towards discriminatory attitudes of leadership regarding gender bias. Some responses reflected annoyance over policies that eliminated DEIA as it may limit open discussion and confrontation of these issues. The dynamics indicate that it negatively impacts the work

environment and there is a disconnect between organizational values and the lived experiences, suggesting the need for accountability at higher leadership levels.

Participants expressed the importance of leaders developing an interpersonal understanding of their employees to foster inclusivity and improve morale. Participants implied that the employees would feel connected and understood by leadership, work becomes more meaningful and productive. Which implied the need for increased leadership presence and engagement, particularly through direct employee interaction. Taking the time to listen to the employees' concerns and understanding their experiences was viewed as an essential leadership responsibility. Such engagement is necessary for building trust with the workforce and demonstrates a level of respect.

Several participants encouraged leaders to adopt a comprehensive way to view individuals and their contribution to the organization. This suggests an understanding of diversity as an enhancement to collective problem solving. Some participants also expressed concern regarding the implementation of the policies. Participants expressed the need for change to be implemented gradually. Abrupt changes may lead to resistance and were perceived to be counterproductive. Incremental implementation of new policies balances progress with employee adaptations and is necessary for efficient progression in the workforce. Two participants chose not to comment, which may reflect disengagement, uncertainty, or they were reluctant to articulate views on organizational change. This further emphasizes the sensitivity and complexity of policies associated with cultural transformation. Theme 8 underscores the collective desire, moving forward, for a more inclusive, and connected workforce. Priorities include increasing leadership

engagement, strengthening inclusion through leadership engagement, and communicating and implementing change in a gradual and purposeful manner. Combined, these insights suggest meaningful progress requires coordinated commitment and a cultural transformation compelled by inclusivity and responsive leadership.

### **Deliverables and Recommendations**

The findings of this generic qualitative study addressed the problem of sustaining a workforce representative of the American people while navigating the impact of Executive Order 14151. As a result of the findings a recommendation report (see Appendix C) was developed.

Following the completion of the study, the head of the local agency received the recommendation report, which included the findings and recommendations to assist the agency in retaining a broad-based workforce. The information presented in the recommendation report included an executive summary, key findings, and recommendations. The recommendations for change are that the agency revisit training on the topic of professionalism, to include strengthening the skills and behaviors of the employees throughout the ranks. Training refreshers would focus on the Merit System Principles, and scenario-based training linking everyday behavior to the scenarios. This would afford the employees a clear understanding of the policy change from DEIA to policies based on merit system principles and mission values. In addition to training to support the mission values, the agency can provide a space where employees can input their concerns and receive feedback. Lastly, there needs to be a consistent coaching and

mentoring program throughout the government workforce. This initiative would provide oversight of policies, build leadership skills, and foster much needed engagement.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings in this study can lead to opportunities for additional research for government agencies. The objective of this study was to uncover the perceptions and experiences of employees in the federal workforce. Currently, there is limited research on the perceptions and experiences of employees in the federal workforce. While few quantitative studies have been conducted, such as a satisfaction survey of federal employees, more in-depth research is necessary to gain a better understanding of the federal workforce.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, Multiple strategies were implemented to ensure the credibility, and transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the data. The participants were given pseudonyms to safeguard confidentiality. The interviews were conducted through Microsoft Teams and transcribed through the platform. Member checking was completed to verify the accuracy of their responses and enhance credibility. Transferability was supported by the design of the study. I ensured that the findings were relevant and transferable to both the public and private sectors and could be applied to other subjects and thereby contributing to broader social change. Dependability was addressed by using consistency in data collection. The interview questions were the same for all of the participants and designed to collect data from employees within the federal government. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and reviewed. The transcripts

were reviewed, with member checking conducted to ensure the validity and reliability of the data. Confirmability was strengthened through reflective notes that were maintained before and during data analysis to mitigate any potential bias. Member checking that was conducted after the interview process further supported confirmability. Thematic coding was derived from the participant's own words to ensure that the findings authentically represented their perspectives.

### **Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

The strength of the study was the importance of the perspectives and experiences of the federal employees to the agencies. This qualitative study utilized semi structured interviews to gain a real-life perspective from the employees. The limitations were conducting the interviews on schedule and the accuracy in which the participants' perceptions were expressed. There were challenges due to last-minute schedule changes, which prolonged the data collection period. I overcame this challenge by maintaining a positive attitude and engaging with the participant. The participants expressed remorse for having to reschedule. This engagement with the participants and understanding of the schedule changes provided an environment where the participant felt central to the study and wanted to continue volunteering at a later date. Member checking was also completed to clarify any responses and to ensure the participants' perceptions and experiences were accurately presented.

### **Summary**

Section 4 included detailed information about the data collection methods and analysis in which interviews were conducted and transcribed. Thematic analysis was

employed to identify and develop themes, which were summarized based on the interviews. Section 4 included my recommendations and the limitations of the study and how the limitations were overcome. Section 5 will provide a dissemination plan and conclusion.

## Section 5: Dissemination Plan and Conclusion

### **Dissemination Plan**

The research and findings of this study discovered there was a shortfall of employee engagement, communication, and professionalism within the federal workforce. I will be presenting the results of this study with leadership at the field office for a federal agency. The results will be detailed in a recommendation report. Recommendations for cultural change will also be included in the recommendation report.

### **Conclusions**

This qualitative study aimed to explore the perceptions and experiences of employees in the federal workplace. Federal policies transitioned from an inclusive work environment supporting DEIA to the complete elimination of DEIA initiatives. It was viable to gain a better understanding of the transition of policies from the employees. This study's findings exposed opportunities for growth and improvement regarding engagement, communication, and professionalism within federal agencies.

### **Summary**

This study provided data regarding the perceptions and experiences of employees in the federal workforce. The thematic analysis of participant interviews showed that employees wrestle with professionalism, communication, and engagement. The results of this research can assist federal agency's work. Additionally, private organizations will be able to utilize the findings and recommendations to foster cultural change.

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What past DEIA initiatives were in place at the agency?
2. What was your perception of the past DEIA initiatives?
3. As a leader, what is your biggest strength in supporting Executive Order 14151 initiatives?
4. As a leader, what barriers do you see in the progression of Executive Order 14151 initiatives?
5. What are your best practices for promoting and facilitating the inclusion of diverse employees?
6. How did you deal with and/or overcome the challenges of transitioning to the policies that focus on skills, performance, individual initiative, and hard work?
7. How would you describe the characteristics of a successful work environment?
8. Could these elements be measured and tracked to ensure the sustainability of an inclusive work environment?
9. What criteria does your leadership prioritize when evaluating the success of rewarding individual initiative, skills, performance, and hard work?
10. Is there anything else that you would like to share about implementing workplace practices that you think would be relevant to this study?

## Appendix B: Sample Audit Trail

Pseudonyms	Interview date
Tim	8/26/2025
Diana	8/8/2025
Tony	8/6/2025
Peter	8/26/2025
Ramonda	9/9/2025
Natasha	7/18/2025
Kirk	9/6/2025
Nick	9/6/2025
Vera	8/6/2025
Lala	9/9/2025
Pseudonyms	Member checked approved (face to face)
Tim	8/30/2025
Diana	8/10/2025
Tony	8/10/2025
Peter	8/30/2025
Ramonda	9/10/2025
Natasha	7/26/2025
Kirk	9/12/2025
Nick	9/13/2025
Vera	8/11/2025
Lala	9/15/2025

Sample Key Words			Sample Themes		
engagement	Engagement	Leadership	Professional Values	Team Dynamics	Leadership and development
fairness	Coaching	Professional	Professional	Morale	Engagement
Inclusion	mentoring	respectful	Respectful	Teambuilding	Coaching
trust	collaboration	Teambuilding	Fairness	Collaboration	Mentoring
distrust			Trust	inclusion	Communication
human	Fairness			Distrust	
professional	Trust		ethical values	Diversity	
respectful	Distrust		Humanistic values	Inclusion	
morale	morale				
change	Inclusion				
teambuilding	human				
collaboration	change				
leadership					
coaching					
mentoring					

## Appendix C: Recommendation Report

### **Recommendation Report: Increasing Employee Engagement and Training in Professionalism with Emphasis on Merit System Principles**

**Date: February 13, 2026**

**Prepared by: Angela Silva**

**For: Leaders of Government Agencies**

#### **Executive Summary**

This report evaluates current employee engagement levels and professionalism within the federal government and provides actionable recommendations to enhance both, with a focus on aligning with Merit System Principles. Increasing engagement and professionalism while adhering to these principles will improve organizational performance, employee satisfaction and public trust.

#### **Background**

Employee engagement and professionalism are critical to the mission and effectiveness of the federal government. Surveys and feedback indicate opportunities for improvement in these areas, impacting morale, productivity, and the quality of customer service. Integrating the Merit System Principles into these efforts ensures that all personnel actions are fair, equitable and based on merit.

#### **Merit System Principles Overview**

The Merit System Principles, established in 5 U.S.C. § 2301, outline the core values guiding federal personnel management.

- The principles emphasize fair and open competition in hiring and advancement, equitable treatment of all employees and applicants, and equal pay for work of equal value.
- They highlight the importance of integrity, effective and efficient use of the workforce, and performance-based retention.
- They call for providing employees with appropriate training and development opportunities, protecting them from arbitrary actions, favoritism, and political coercion, and safeguarding individuals who disclose wrongdoing through lawful whistleblowing.

Together, these principles serve as the ethical and operational foundation for maintaining a competent, fair, and accountable federal workforce.

## Current Challenges

- **Low engagement:** Employees report limited involvement in decision-making and recognition.
- **Professionalism Gap:** Inconsistent training programs do not sufficiently address professionalism or soft skills.
- **Lack of Training:** Existing training programs do not sufficiently address professionalism or soft skills.
- **Alignment with Merit Principles:** Opportunities exist to more fully align engagement and training efforts with the Merit System Principles, particularly in areas of fair treatment, recognition, and training.

## Recommendations

### 1. Enhance Employee Engagement

- **Regular Feedback Mechanisms:** Implement quarterly surveys and feedback sessions to gather employee input and act on suggestion, ensuring all voices are heard and considered in accordance with fair and open competition
- **Recognition Programs:** Establish consistent recognition for outstanding performance and contributions.
- **Involvement in Decision Making:** Create cross-functional teams to involve employees in process improvements, promoting fair and equitable treatment and efficient use of the workforce

### 2. Expanded Training in Professionalism

- **Mandatory Workshops:** Develop and require annual training focused on workplace etiquette, communication, and conflict resolution, reinforcing high standards of integrity and conduct
- **Mentorship Programs:** Pair new employees with experienced mentors to model professional behavior and support career development, in line with the principle of providing effective education and training.
- **Ongoing Learning Opportunities:** Offer webinars and micro-learning modules on topics such as customer service, ethics and teamwork, ensuring employees are prepared for advancement and high performance.

### 3. Monitor and Evaluate Progress

- **Performance Metrics:** Track engagement and professionalism through regular assessments and adjusting programs as needed, ensuring retention and advancement are based on performance.

- **Leadership Accountability:** Hold supervisors accountable for fostering an engaged and professional work environment, and for upholding the Merit System principles in all personnel actions.

#### **4. Reinforce Merit System Principles**

- **Awareness Campaigns:** Conduct periodic briefings and distribute materials to educate employees and supervisors about the Merit System Principles and their application in daily work.
- **Safeguards:** establish clear procedures for reporting and addressing violations of the Merit System Principles, including protection against arbitrary action, favoritism, and reprisal.

#### **Conclusion**

By implementing these recommendations and aligning them with the Merit System Principles, agencies can foster a more engaged, professional and principled workforce. This approach will lead to increased morale, improved performance, and excellent customer service, while ensuring all personnel actions are fair, equitable and merit based.