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Support for DoD Supervisors in Addressing Poor Employee Performance

A Holistic Approach

KEY FINDINGS

- The volume of training resources can overwhelm supervisors, and authoritative sources are not always clear.
- Specialized supervisory training is not always timely or sufficiently focused on the immediate area of concern.
- Desired training outcomes are not always clear, and outcome measures are limited.
- Supervisors neither consistently nor effectively use policies and procedures, such as probationary periods, Performance Improvement Plans, or legal authorities governing employee dismissals.
- Human resources (HR) professionals are not consistently involved in a timely manner, potentially because supervisors perceive HR resources as insufficient.
- New technology tools to support supervisors are on the rise and show promise.
- Some organizations are establishing supervision as a discipline, but this approach does not appear to be implemented fully across the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD).
- Supervisory probationary periods are an underutilized tool now receiving greater emphasis in some DoD demonstration projects.
- Measures related to managing poor performers do not appear to be consistently collected and are not clearly part of an overall evaluation strategy.

In April 2017, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) issued a memorandum outlining a comprehensive plan for reforming the federal government.¹ As part of this plan, federal agencies were instructed to develop long-term strategies for reducing the sizes of their workforces, as well as to engage in short-term actions to maximize employee performance. Their efforts were to include both rewards and recognition for high performers and sanctions or removal of poor performers. At the time of the memorandum's release, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) already had changes under way intended to maximize the performance of its civilian workforce, the largest civilian workforce in the federal government at approximately 732,000 appropriated employees² and, arguably, also one of the most diverse in terms of occupations. Specifically, in early 2016, DoD issued instructions to establish the Defense

Performance Management and Appraisal Program (DPMAP). DPMAP was established as a result of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year (FY) 2010 (codified in 5 U.S.C. § 9902), which provided the Secretary of Defense with the authority to promulgate agency rules and regulations providing for a new performance management program for DoD's General Schedule civilian workforce. DPMAP's goal is to establish "a culture of high performance through greater employee/supervisor communication and accountability, increased employee engagement, transparent processes, and improved capabilities in recruiting, developing, and rewarding" the DoD workforce.³ According to DoD, as of May 2017, more than 273,000 DoD employees were covered by DPMAP, and more than 630,000 employees will be evaluated under DPMAP policies and processes by the time the program is fully implemented in late 2018.⁴

In addition to DPMAP, DoD employees also operate under a range of other performance- or contribution-based personnel management systems, such as the Science and Technology Reinvention Laboratory Demonstration Project (also referred to as "Lab Demo") and the Civilian Acquisition Workforce Demonstration Project (AcqDemo). The combination and timing of these various performance management programs suggest that DoD is at a tipping point for moving toward a performance culture—a concept that the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) describes as an agency's "holistic approach to performance (i.e., ongoing, timely feedback; emphasis on continuous learning; strong employee engagement; inclusion and appreciation of a diverse workforce; and accountability for results)."⁵ However, like other federal agencies, DoD has faced challenges in how it handles poor-performing employees. As the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) noted in its 2015 report on substandard federal employee performance, this long-standing problem motivated the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978—and although improvements have been made since then, opportunities to better address poor performance still exist.⁶

Although there are no absolute benchmark measures to aid in data interpretation, recent survey results support the premise that there is room for improvement. Dismissal rates related to conduct or

performance issues are quite low—less than 0.5 percent for the military departments and DoD's Fourth Estate⁷ in 2017.⁸ Conversely, approximately 25 percent of DoD supervisors⁹ reported directly supervising at least one poor performer (i.e., an individual less than fully successful in at least one performance element), according to the Merit Systems Protection Board's (MSPB's) 2016 Merit Principles Survey. Still more—roughly 60 percent—of these supervisors agreed that a poor performer would negatively affect the ability of other subordinates to do their own jobs, and 90 percent believed that morale of other subordinates would be affected if a supervisor in their organization failed to address poor performance.

This body of evidence, coupled with OMB's 2017 instruction for federal agencies to better support supervisors in handling poor performance, motivated this study. Specifically, DoD tasked the RAND Corporation to (1) identify the most promising policies, procedures, and structures for maximizing employee performance, with emphasis on assisting supervisors of poor-performing personnel, and (2) develop recommendations on how best to provide assistance and guidance to supervisors responsible for managing the low-performing segment of civilian employees.

Study Approach

Our study results were informed by multiple data sources, most notably interviews with a diverse set of human resources (HR) practitioners¹⁰ and analysis of MSPB Merit Principles Survey responses from DoD supervisors.¹¹ To set the stage for our research, we first conducted a document review that included academic literature, business practitioner-oriented publications, and government reports to learn more about how the challenge of managing poor performers has been studied by scholars, assessed by government analysts, and addressed by industry. We also had formative discussions with five performance management subject-matter experts, including those recommended by our sponsor, to gain a sense of the current thinking on addressing poor performers within the federal government.

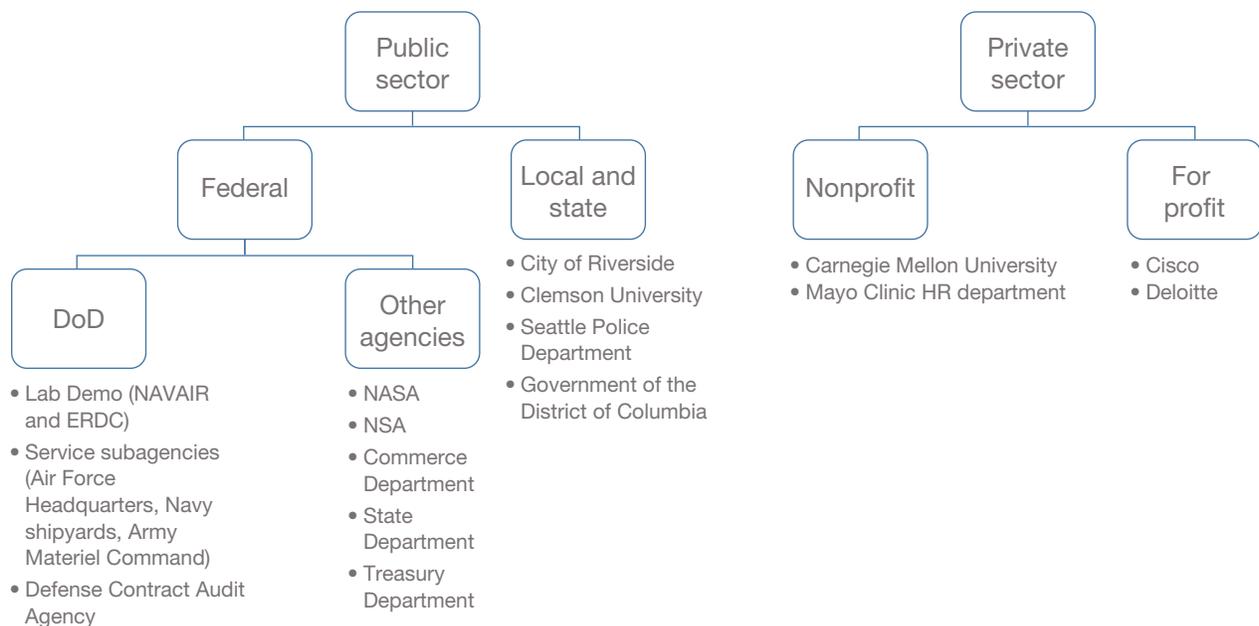
These efforts set the stage for our interviews with HR practitioners from 19 organizations that spanned the public and private sectors. Our strategy for selecting organizations to include in our sample was intended to help us gain an understanding of current concerns and practices within the federal government, which has personnel management approaches that differ significantly from the private sector (e.g., civil service with employment protections versus at-will employment) and identify promising practices that DoD could use to avoid or reduce the challenges that poor performers create for DoD supervisors.

Accordingly, we employed a purposive sampling process in which organizations were selected not randomly but rather to meet specific criteria. For example, we included organizations that resemble DoD in important ways, such as having a large workforce, public service mission, federal government context, and similar occupation range. Given our desire to identify innovative, promising practices for DoD, we also selected organizations that were recognized in some way as exemplary in their employee engagement or performance management practices. The ideal exemplars would be organizations with practices for addressing poor performers that

resulted in favorable organizational outcomes, but indicators of that nature were unavailable to support this effort and likely nonexistent. Instead, we relied on proxies related to performance management, such as selection for the Fortune 100 Best Places to Work list or higher-than-average OPM Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) scores on pertinent items. Availability to participate in an interview in our compressed study time frame (July through December 2017) was an additional consideration.

Our final sample included 19 organizations, as shown in Figure 1. Given the unique requirements of federal civil service employment, the bulk of our sample consisted of federal agencies, which were selected not only to cover a range of sources of innovation (e.g., Lab Demo, National Aeronautics and Space Administration [NASA]) but also to obtain perspectives from the three military service departments and DoD’s Fourth Estate. We also included additional public-sector organizations that hail from state and local governments and cover different occupational segments. All four private-sector organizations have been featured on Fortune 100 Best Places to Work lists and provide additional variation in terms of occupational diversity. Overall, we achieved

Figure 1.
Interview Sample by Organization Type



NOTE: ERDC = Engineer Research and Development Center; NAVAIR = Naval Air System Command; NSA = National Security Agency.

the desired level of variation in our sample, which was helpful in identifying cross-cutting themes, such as practices viewed as promising across different organizational contexts. However, it is important to note that our sample is not representative, which means that we cannot estimate the prevalence of these findings in organizations more generally. Also, as noted above, we were unable to select organizations based on specific evidence of successful management of poor performers. Hence, we refer to innovative approaches as promising practices rather than best practices.

We used a semistructured interview approach, meaning that we started with a common set of questions and then delved into additional lines of inquiry based on responses to that initial set. Interview topics included the following:

- organizational background (e.g., the extent to which poor employee performance has been an issue)
- the organization's overall approach to performance management
- the process for addressing poor employee performance
- supervisor training and support
- poor employee performance-related metrics
- tracking and evaluation processes.

All 19 interviews were conducted via telephone, audio-recorded, professionally transcribed, and subsequently coded using qualitative data analysis software that facilitates systematic, rigorous analysis of qualitative data by topic and other characteristics.¹² This process enabled us to categorize the nature of support for supervisors and to identify issues that cut across the interviews, such as challenges in addressing poor employee performance. For promising practices, we focused on the organizations in our sample that were regarded as exemplary in some way.

Interviews with DoD supervisors themselves were outside our project scope, but we had access to their perceptions through publicly available MSPB Merit Principles Survey data.¹³ As part of its statutory oversight responsibilities for the health of federal merit systems, MSPB periodically administers Merit Principles Surveys, in which federal agencies are required to participate. In 2016, there were three

distinct surveys, including one (the Path L survey) that was directed to supervisors only and covered the following topics related to poor performance:

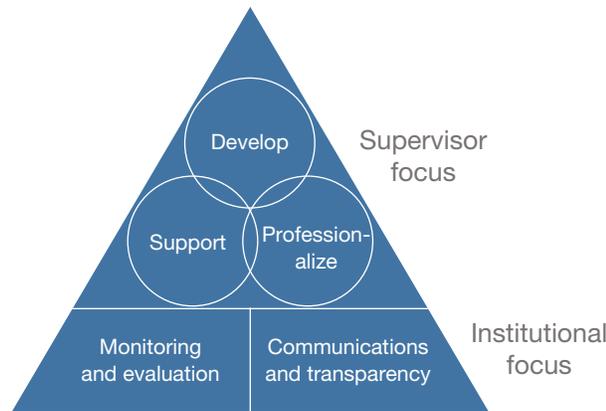
- supervisory experience with poor performers
- identifying poor performers
- reasons for poor performance
- consequences of poor performers
- training and support to deal with poor performers
- barriers to addressing poor performance.¹⁴

Survey samples were randomly selected using the Central Personnel Data File, a federal employee information repository managed by OPM. Later in the survey analysis process, response weights were developed and applied so that, unlike our interviews with HR practitioners, survey results could be generalized to the larger federal workforce population. The DoD portion of the Path L survey included 5,170 leaders, primarily those who self-identified as supervisors rather than managers or executives. This meant that we had an excellent source of supervisor perceptions to complement the HR perspective gained through our interviews, but we could not distinguish between first-line supervisors and those higher in the chain of command. The study team reviewed the Path L survey instrument and calculated item response frequencies for the DoD portion of the survey sample. We also calculated response items for a limited number of items from the Path 2 module open to the entire workforce—primarily the items about how the organization addressed poor performers.¹⁵

In this report, we discuss the themes that cut across our different data sources and have implications for DoD policy and practice. For example, both the interviews and survey included findings related to supervisors' reliance on HR personnel, and both the interviews and the results of our literature review highlight the value to the performance management process of technology-based enablers—something that our evidence suggests DoD has not yet fully realized.

For ease of presentation and to guide DoD actions motivated by this research, we developed the organizing framework depicted in Figure 2. This framework emanated from our literature review, survey analyses, and comprehensive examination

FIGURE 2
Organizing Framework: A Holistic Approach to Managing Poor Employee Performance



of our interview results, and it depicts a holistic approach to addressing poor employee performance. As shown in the figure, there are three elements of the performance management paradigm that focus on supervisors:

- **Develop:** practices that train and otherwise prepare supervisors to address poor performance, including giving constructive, continuous feedback to avoid future poor performance and documenting evidence of current poor performance issues
- **Support:** the processes and resources in place to help supervisors when poor performance happens, such as clear and appropriately targeted policies, responsive and skilled HR professionals, and technology-based tools
- **Professionalize:** efforts that intersect with and extend both development and support to establish supervision as a discipline that is distinct and equal to technical disciplines.

These supervisor-level framework components are supported by two institutional-level pillars:

- **Monitoring and evaluation:** metrics and processes used to track on an ongoing basis how poor performers are handled and to carry out “deep-dive” analyses of the effectiveness of specific aspects of the performance management process

- **Communications and transparency:** the approach to conveying to supervisors and the workforce overall processes and outcomes related to managing poor performers, including leadership responses to supervisor performance actions and how issues related to individual privacy are addressed.

Supervisor Focus

Develop

Our interviews and a high-level review of training websites, such as OPM’s HR University and DPMAP’s website, revealed an abundance of training materials available to prepare supervisors to prevent and otherwise address the problem of poor employee performance. Training covers numerous topics, ranging from such supervisory skills as difficult conversations and ongoing, constructive feedback to such procedural details as how to document poor performance and prepare a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP). Training is provided via different modalities (e.g., online libraries, videos, webcasts, classes, manuals) and by multiple authors; OPM, DoD, and the individual components are major sources but not the only ones. However, the plethora of diverse training materials can be overwhelming to supervisors, and when the same topic is covered in different training sources, the authoritative source is not always clear.

We also found that the timeliness of more-focused and specialized training was a concern. Through our interviews, we learned that there might be a long interval between a supervisor completing pertinent training and needing to apply it. As one interviewee explained:

The problem with the training is I could go and take training right now, but if I don’t need it for a year and a half, I’m not going to remember it. What’s needed is just-in-time training, like, “Hey, I’ve got a performance problem. Now I want to take that training on performance issues, because I have a case that I need to deal with.” I think part of it is just-in-time training versus, “Hey, we’re going to once a year put you through four days of everything HR and hope you remember it two years

later, when you need it.” (public-sector federal organization)¹⁶

Survey results indicate that DoD supervisors want more timely training for PIPs in particular. As shown in Figure 3, many supervisors disagreed that they received timely training to effectively implement a meaningful PIP.

Finally, the value of training materials is not readily apparent. There are questions about the necessary breadth, depth, and nature of knowledge to be conveyed via training, as well as how those attributes are measured. We did not ask about training goals expressly in our interviews, but we noted that some interviewees discussed training goals in terms of supervisors knowing how to do something, while others felt that the desired end result was knowing whom to call for help. As one interviewee told us, supervisors are “not going to remember everything [from training], but it’s like we want them to at least know, ‘I have a problem. Here’s who I call’” (private-sector organization). In addition, when we asked interviewees how they knew whether training was working as intended, they cited such measures

of usage as website hits and supervisor feedback obtained via surveys or interviews. While those data have value, they do not show a change in knowledge (e.g., greater familiarity with PIP documentation needs) or desired behavior (e.g., calling HR soon after a performance problem is observed), which would be true measures of training effectiveness.

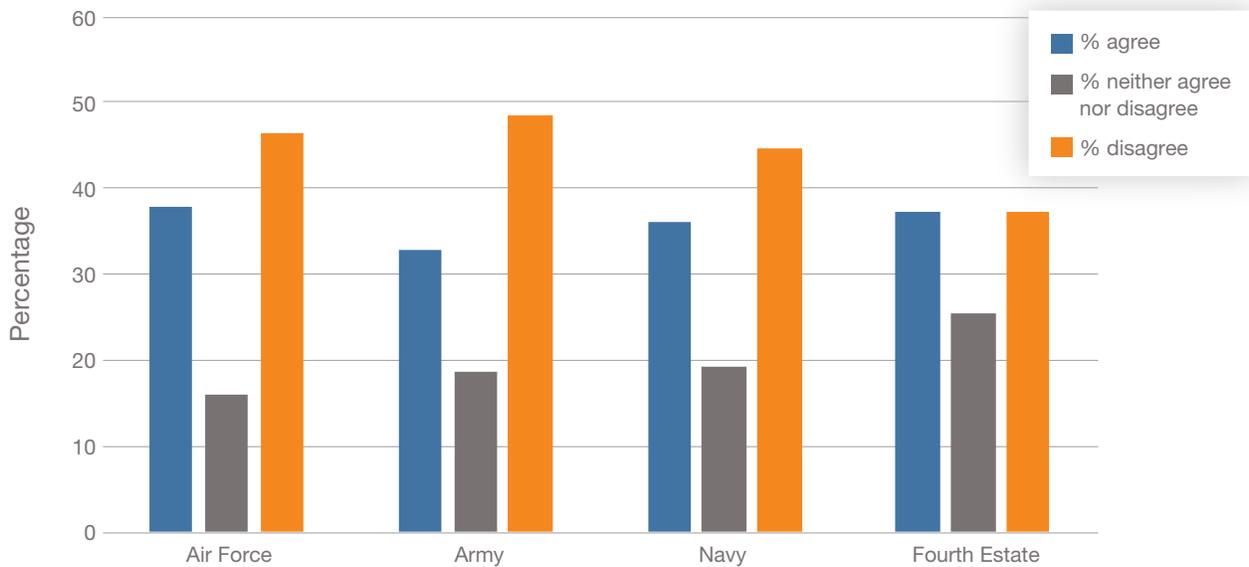
Support

Our analysis of support mechanisms encompassed policies and procedures, personnel, and technology-based tools. We discuss areas of concern and promising practices in the sections that follow.

Policies and Procedures

This set of support mechanisms includes HR policies and procedures, PIPs, probationary periods, and legal authorities. Survey results indicate that HR policies are a perceived barrier to effectively dealing with poor performers instead of a helpful source of support to supervisors. Specifically, more than 80 percent of DoD supervisors who took the 2016 Merit

FIGURE 3
DoD Supervisor Perceptions of Timely PIP Training



SOURCE: Merit Systems Protection Board, “Merit Principles Survey Data 2016,” webpage, last updated July 5, 2017. Specifically, see the Path L leadership module.

NOTE: Figure shows breakdown of DoD supervisor responses to the statement, “Supervisors receive timely training to help them effectively implement a meaningful PIP.”

Principles Survey said that they felt that the complexity and rigidity of HR policies caused difficulties for supervisors.

About 65 percent of DoD supervisors surveyed indicated that how well they understood the process posed a challenge (to at least some extent) in removing an employee for performance after a PIP. In a related vein, interviewees felt that PIP complexity and resource intensity dissuaded supervisors from acting. One discussed the PIP documentation requirements at length:

When you have working supervisors out there that do more than just supervise employees, the time involved to accomplish the documentation required to monitor and evaluate poor performers is probably one of our biggest challenges. So, folks just not taking the time to document, and that's what we continue to put on managers, basically, is if you have got a poor performer, you've got to document. Because when it comes time to remove an employee based on performance, you have to have the documentation, so we can defend ourselves when the employee files an appeal with either MSPB or EEO [Equal Employment Opportunity] or whoever, that they were unjustly removed. And if there's no documentation, it's going to be a hard sell, especially with the employees. (public-sector federal organization)

GAO analysis provides further evidence of the resource-intensive nature of the PIP process. The office reported that, across federal agencies, it frequently takes 50 to 110 days to complete steps associated with a PIP, and that is only the first part of an overall lengthy process, on average.¹⁷

An employee probationary period was consistently viewed by our interviewees as having value in effectively stemming poor performance issues, and it is the most commonly used basis for dismissing employees across the federal government because of performance concerns.¹⁸ Furthermore, the employee probationary period was identified in Executive Order 13839 of May 25, 2018, "Promoting Accountability and Streamlining Removal Procedures Consistent with Merit System Principles," as a "highly effective tool" that should be used as

The employee probationary period was consistently viewed as having value in effectively stemming poor performance issues, but it may not be used as much as it could be.

the final step in the new employee hiring process.¹⁹ However, the probationary period as a means to terminate unsuccessful employees may not be used as much as it could be. Through interviews, GAO learned that supervisors might not have sufficient time to adequately evaluate an employee's performance before his or her probationary period ends if the new employee spends much of the first year in training before beginning work; rotates through multiple offices within that first year of employment; or is in a position that entails project-based work, which means that one year is not enough time for a new employee to demonstrate all the skills his or her position requires.

To address these issues, GAO reported that some federal agencies are using tools, such as an automatic notification issued via email, to remind supervisors that an individual's probationary period is nearing its end and to take appropriate action. It was unclear from GAO's work whether DoD agencies are consistently using this tool—however, at the time of the report's publication in 2015,²⁰ many existing federal HR systems already had the capability to notify supervisors when an employee's probationary period was ending. However, supervisor data must be manually updated in the Defense Civilian Personnel

Data System (DCPDS), which means that this system does not always have accurate information regarding the supervisor who should receive the notification. Other agencies required the employee's supervisor (or another official) to deliberately opt into retaining an employee beyond the probationary period as opposed to retaining the employee by default. These practices make it salient to supervisors when an employee's probationary period is ending, thereby prompting them to deliberate his or her potential and whether the employment relationship should continue.

To give supervisors more opportunity to meaningfully review and, if needed, to dismiss employees during their probationary period, some demonstration projects, including AcqDemo and Lab Demo sites, have been using extended probationary periods up to three years in length for several years. In addition, the NDAA for FY 2016 established a two-year probationary period for many new employees hired during or after November 2015, and DoD confirmed this statute change in September 2016.²¹ While DoD interviewees felt that it was too soon to determine whether the NDAA-mandated two-year probationary period was helpful in identifying and dealing with poor performers, some of the demonstration projects already regard their extended three-year probationary periods as a success. One interviewee told us:

We extended probationary periods to three years for what we call our professional workforce . . . and there are two-year probationary periods for our clerical and technician-type workforce. We are seeing the use of those probationary periods spiking. In 2016, we saw . . . I think it was half a dozen terminations during probation, and in 2017, it doubled. It is hitting not only the technician and clerical workforce but very much hitting the professional workforce as well. So, the extended probationary period is paying off. We're seeing what we hoped to see, giving managers the time and the opportunity and the courage and the infrastructure around them with HR knowledge to pursue poor-performing new employees and ferret out whether they can or won't do a job. (public-sector federal organization)

Finally, we considered legal authorities as a form of procedural support for managers. After

an employee's probationary period has passed, if a supervisor wants to remove him or her because of poor performance, the supervisor must follow the procedural requirements under either 5 U.S.C. § 4303 (hereinafter "Chapter 43") or 5 U.S.C. § 7513 (hereinafter "Chapter 75"), which are summarized in OPM guidance available online to assist supervisors and HR professionals.²² These legal authorities share several common steps but differ in important ways. For example, under the Chapter 43 authority, a performance deficiency for a critical element must be documented, and the employee is entitled to a period for improvement before being dismissed. In contrast, under the Chapter 75 authority, neither proof of performance deficiency for a critical element nor a period for improvement is required. Either performance or conduct issues can be a basis for dismissal under Chapter 75. However, the burden of proof is higher under Chapter 75 than under Chapter 43; the desired action must be supported by a *preponderance of evidence* under Chapter 75, compared with *substantial evidence* under Chapter 43.²³ Although GAO found that federal agencies overall used Chapter 75 more frequently than Chapter 43 for performance dismissals (21 percent of dismissals in 2013 were processed under Chapter 75's provisions, compared with 8 percent under Chapter 43),²⁴ it is unclear whether this tendency is present within DoD.

Moreover, survey and interviews results show that supervisors found such authorities challenging based on their legal complexity, situations under which to best apply one approach versus the other, and differences in documentational standards. Approximately 75 percent of DoD supervisors responding to the 2016 Merit Principles Survey indicated that the level of proof required by law posed a challenge to removing an employee for performance after a PIP to at least some extent. In addition, the MSPB has repeatedly cited federal agency concerns that Chapter 43 has too many technicalities that can be mishandled by a supervisor and potentially lead to grounds for an employee appeal.²⁵ This also came up in our interviews. For example, one HR practitioner told us, "I would like to see them simplify the Performance Improvement Process, because even though it [Chapter 43] has a lower standard of proof, there's so many elements to it, any one of which

can fail before a third party” (public-sector federal organization). Overall, the evidence points to ongoing issues related to supervisors’ lack of use and the potential for misuse of these legal authorities.

Personnel

As the above discussion makes clear, supervisors need support navigating complex HR and legal processes. However, our interviews suggest that supervisors inconsistently contact and involve experts from HR in a timely manner:

At our location, it is very dependent on the supervisor to reach out to HR to receive guidance. And that’s where it varies across different areas of [ORGANIZATION] whether they reach out to us Some may be more equipped to train the employees or think it’s a training issue and invest more in that way. Some may be very quick to want to use discipline [instead]. So, it varies across our organization. (public-sector federal organization)

Reasons for this lack of HR involvement cut across a range of issues identified by DoD supervisors in the 2016 Merit Principles Survey. While the vast majority of supervisors expressed favorable views of HR professionals’ knowledge of performance management principles; knowledge of laws, rules, and regulations; and effectiveness, about half of them regarded a lack of customer service by HR staff as a difficulty for supervisors. In addition, about 75 percent of DoD supervisors felt that the quality of service provided by HR presented a challenge to removing an employee for performance post-PIP to some extent or a great extent.

These concerns about service quality may be due, at least in part, to the number of HR professionals available to help supervisors deal with performance management concerns. About 75 percent of DoD supervisors surveyed reported that a lack of sufficient staff resources in the HR office posed a challenge to removing a poor performer. Moreover, about half of DoD supervisors agreed that HR personnel who assist with performance-related issues are overworked. Some interviewees made comments such as the following, which imply that staffing reductions

may have led some DoD organizations to cut back on local-level HR personnel:

[I]n the Headquarters, we’ve taken tremendous cuts, so we’re not really resourced for that [local support]. It’s just a challenge and I think something we hear from our Commanders and from the managers across the Command is they feel like these more and more things are . . . falling on the first-line supervisors. . . . And again, it might be a matter of they’re doing their job they always were supposed to do but they had that local support there and now they don’t. (public-sector federal organization)

This lack of staff is also problematic because an HR professional’s lack of connection to a local unit can be a barrier: It may be harder for central HR staff to be involved in informal disciplinary actions (e.g., pre-PIP conversations) and to appreciate fully the organizational context in which a performance issue is happening (e.g., clauses related to performance management, conduct, and discipline in any applicable collective bargaining agreements). Researchers who identified these challenges noted that as a consequence, HR staff may want to follow formal policy to the letter, potentially at odds with a supervisor’s preferred approach.²⁶ Some organizations we interviewed, including those from DoD subagencies, recognize the importance of local HR support and have the structure in place to offer it. The following remarks convey how some organizations provide local HR support and the perceived advantages of doing so:

[W]e have one counselor for each directorate, for headquarters, and in our extended enterprise. The benefit of that is that you have one counselor who is dedicated to the organization, who gets to learn and understand some of the organizational trends, and that counselor works pretty closely with the senior leadership of each of those organizations. So, they develop working partnerships with their managers and senior managers to try to effect change across the organization. (public-sector federal organization)

Each [LOCAL LOCATION] has an HR partner that is assigned to them, and that HR partner better understands their business, their employees, the difficulties that they have. The supervisor will initially touch bases with that partner. That partner will coach them and help them with having those difficult conversations with the employees . . . So, the partners are out in those areas. That's the immediate and the first place where we tell them all to go. That's kind of a Tier 1/Tier 2 kind of approach. If it [the performance issue] gets more complicated, if they think that there's going to have to be very formalized—in other words, putting them on a PIP or a Warning Notice, that's when that [HR] partner and the supervisor will pull in that centralized team, which is that group of Employee Relations managers. (public-sector state/local organization)

From these two examples, it is apparent that some organizations can effectively provide local support even when resources are limited: They use local personnel for relationship-building and contextual awareness, to handle relatively simple HR issues, and to “triage” more-complex situations so that centralized expert support can assist. Such tiered and centralized expertise brings greater focused and highly qualified knowledge to a performance issue that exceeds the capabilities of local supervisors, managers, and general HR support:

If we take an adverse action—downgrading someone or removing them from federal service—these are the [centralized experts] who . . . are going to be defending those actions with our attorneys in front of MSPB or EEOC [the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission]. So, they are tried and experienced in dealing with third-party cases that essentially lead to litigation. They coach the generalist [HR] advisors. [Supervisors] have immediate access to our [centralized experts] on any case that is going to involve a performance improvement period or letters of deficiency or downgrades or removals. (public-sector federal organization)

The use of a central call center or customer service center may also be an alternative means for organizations to provide real-time support to managers, which the following remarks illustrate:

There's always going to be an issue for our sites that are not geographically located in the same area where we're [HR] located . . . Our HR customer service center is also another resource that has extended hours. So, they can help address some of those issues. But we have a 24-hour customer service philosophy, so that all questions or all inquiries that come into our office have to be at least handled or addressed or that person has to be contacted back within 24 hours. (public-sector federal organization)

They [supervisors] can call our HR call center. Someone there may be able to help them over the phone handle a situation. So, we have people that will handle what we call escalations, situations of certain types of corrective actions. Then if it continues to escalate, then I kind of call it the boots on the ground. At that point we may have HR individuals team up with that manager in helping them in more of the complex situations that may involve performance or may be part of an investigation that needs to be conducted and so on. So again, it gets back to having the tools and the resources available at the right time, no matter where they are in their process of looking at poor performance. (private-sector organization)

Another personnel-based source of support for supervisors that we explored is the notion of a Manager Support Board (MSB). In its 2017 memorandum on reforming the federal government and reducing the federal civilian workforce, OMB identified an MSB as a key real-time support mechanism for supervisors. It gave agencies discretion on whether and how to implement this structure, but it offered the following design recommendations: operating close to the regional/division level as feasible, including internal Employee Relations and Labor Relations experts in its membership, and checking in regularly with supervisors who have a poor performer case in progress. Currently, none of the organizations we interviewed had established an MSB that completely mirrors OMB's specifications. Interviewees shared concerns that the precise MSB structure highlighted by OMB could adversely affect ongoing or nascent efforts to provide real-time support to supervisors

and may also be redundant with established mechanisms. As one organization put it:

We tend to have fairly mature programs with experienced ER [Employee Relations]/LR [Labor Relations]/organizational development/performance management experts. Therefore, we chose not to implement the OMB model in a formal sense as we felt it could negatively impact the real-time [system] of contact between managers and HR experts that we currently have in place. Today, we have an “immediacy of contact” relationship where managers are encouraged to reach out to HR early and often, not just about performance issues but any time they have a question/concern. Many of the bullets are inherent to our program (e.g., operating locally, real-time assistance, check-ins during ER processes, etc.). And because this model works, we felt that putting in a more-formalized program or establishment of a “board” could be to the detriment of these relationships. (public-sector federal organization)

In addition, some organizations may have satisfied a few of the MSB’s intended purposes via their current HR organizational structure and processes. For example, the tiered approaches to HR personnel assignments and 24-hour capabilities discussed previously are ways to operate as close to the regional/division level as feasible and provide points of contact to whom supervisors can turn for prompt guidance. Yet, interviewees also saw the merits of an MSB and mentioned plans for formative discussions. One interviewee noted,

We like the idea of a non-HR manager as an active participant in the process where needed to assist with interpretation of technical work, but ultimately the employee’s immediate supervisor and higher-level managers will be the ones taking an adverse action and defending it in front of a third party (MSPB or EEOC). (public-sector federal organization)

One final type of person-based support that may hold promise for DoD is the ombudsman. An ombudsman was mentioned in interviews as a confidant for supervisors, a resource to whom they may be

more comfortable turning before HR. As an interviewee explained it:

That’s a resource for all employees, whether you’re a manager or an employee. Managers can go to the ombudsman, talk about things that are going on, get some guidance from an ombudsman. Employees can do the same thing . . . it’s considered like a safe ground for people who aren’t ready to take it to a more official formal step. Usually, it’s employees that go to the ombudsman, but some supervisors do, as well. (private-sector organization)

The ombudsman was regarded as neither an alternative to HR professionals nor an extra layer or process step for a supervisor to complete. Rather, he or she was viewed as a source of just-in-time support that ultimately might lead a supervisor to expert support from HR and, if needed, General Counsel.

Tools

Our literature review revealed that the use of high-tech solutions to provide closer-to-real-time support to managers and to facilitate documentation of performance issues (both good and poor performance) is on the rise.²⁷ We learned about examples of technology-based support mechanisms in our interviews as well. High-tech tools are used to capture and store information on an ongoing basis, guide supervisors through support options, and check in with them to see whether they have any poor performers at the moment.

High-tech companies in particular have developed apps that enable supervisors to give feedback anytime and to record it if desired. At General Electric, the PD@GE app (“PD” stands for “performance development”) enables supervisors to readily call up notes and materials from prior conversations and summarize that information. Employees can also use the app to ask for guidance when they need it. IBM has a similar app with an additional feature: It empowers employees to give feedback to peers and choose whether their colleague’s supervisor receives a copy. Amazon’s Anytime Feedback tool is similar, and private-sector organizations in our interview sample also described tools such as the following:

High-tech tools are used to capture and store employee performance information on an ongoing basis, guide supervisors through support options, and check in with them to see whether they have any poor performers at the moment.

[On PLATFORM] managers can do—we call it a performance snapshot, and they can do that whenever they wish . . . [PLATFORM] asks about four or five questions: Is this someone you would go to all the time, is this someone that if you could you would promote tomorrow, is this someone that you feel has a performance concern? So, they [managers] can do those snapshots, and then we have a cheat sheet for them to look at if they have a performance concern, to help them think through, is there something going in this person's life? Is there a new tool they're using? Are they on a new team? Just little things that the manager can go through. So, the manager can then open a case with us, and Employee Relations will connect with them and help them review it. So, for monitoring [employee performance], really the [PLATFORM] would be what was used, and managers are held accountable for making sure they do have high-performing teams. (private-sector organization)

The relevance of these tools for managing poor performers is that supervisors can easily review all of the documented discussion text when performance actions, good or bad, are required.²⁸ These tools can also be a bridge to connect supervisors with HR professionals when a poor performer is noted, as the above interview excerpt demonstrates. Another example comes from Juniper Systems: On a quarterly basis, the company asks supervisors to confirm formally that their subordinates are meeting performance expectations. HR is then brought in to as needed to help manage the small number of poor performers (about 3 percent of employees on average).²⁹

Our interviews also suggested an additional type of technology-based tool that holds promise: decision support tools. Two examples follow:

We are in the development stages for a managers' decision aid tool that is an online resource that managers can walk through . . . a problem online. Before they pick up the phone to call a counselor, they can work through the problem, try to problem-solve online first. That was one of the things, again, that came out of that survey data is that leaders wanted the ability to be able to have other ways of stepping through a problem, aside from just contacting the Employee Relations counselor. (public-sector federal organization)

We'll be putting it into play here in just a couple of months, when we go into our next cycle—is creating that Racetrack. It is a visual tool that supervisors can use and at their fingertips, right in front of them, will be all of the helpful information that they would want to see. So, any forms that are related would be just a link on this Racetrack that they would be able to click and easily get to. Any trainings would be a click, and then they could sign up and then it gets put on their calendar. Any quick reference guides, so FAQs [frequently asked questions], how to do XYZ, those are going to be there. (public-sector state/local organization)

These tools were under development at the time of our study, so evidence of their effectiveness was not yet available. Given the plethora of training

options discussed earlier in this report, a visual tool that resembles Racetrack may be one way to direct supervisors to the best training resources for their particular context.

Professionalize

Some of the organizations we interviewed are working to establish supervision as a discipline and to invest in their supervisor cadre in a holistic way. This includes efforts to shape organizational culture, offer a deliberately curated leadership-focused curriculum, provide a supervisory pay differential, and develop supervisor-focused standards against which to evaluate supervisors' performance. DoD has taken the last action even further by codifying the need for supervisor-focused standards within DoD Instruction 1400.25-V431, as follows:

All performance elements related to supervisory duties are critical elements. The number of supervisory performance elements on performance plans for supervisors will equal or exceed the number of non-supervisory (technical) performance elements.³⁰

Taken together, these practices equip supervisors to avoid the problem of poor performers via day-to-day management behaviors, empower them to address it effectively when it does arise, and provide their organizations with clear standards against which to judge their leadership skills (see Sidebar 1).

Some organizations also allow supervisors to gather in community-of-practice settings to raise, discuss, and brainstorm common operational issues, challenges, and possible solutions. This was regarded as a valuable complement to other efforts to treat supervision as a discipline, as the following interviewee explained:

Subjecting supervisors and managers to theory is not going to help them be better supervisors and managers. What helps the most, and what has helped us, is bringing groups of supervisors together, not only new supervisors but seasoned supervisors. We purposefully mix the groups to bring together supervisors and managers that are at different points in their career. And we have them discuss with one

another best practices, not just theory but what have they actually done? Confidential information aside, no name, no dates or anything like that. But how have you applied a skill in the workplace? And I think that has been the most helpful. (public-sector state/local organization)

These forums were generally for supervisors only, organized and led by supervisors, with outside support services only participating as requested. While this approach was favorably regarded by most of those who discussed it, we also heard about concerns, such as the following:

Performance issues are one thing that are covered by the Privacy Act, and there's a lot of potential privacy implications [related to a community of practice] and/or trying to just avoid groupthink. So, while there may be some benefits, we're still exploring what the right skill mix or communication mechanism might be for something like that. (public-sector state/local organization)

One last tool in the "professionalize" toolkit is the probationary period for employees who transition into a supervisory role. 5 CFR § 315.904 requires employees to serve a probationary period upon initial appointment to a supervisory and/or managerial position.³³ The length of the period is not mandated; 5 CFR § 315.905 gives agencies the authority to set the term length.³⁴ In 2016, MSPB sent a questionnaire to members of the Chief Human Capital Officers Council, and most respondents (18 of 22) stated that their probationary periods were one year.³⁵ To date, this option does not appear to have been used extensively. Evidence is limited; however, in a 2010 report, the MSPB asserted that leaders were not consistently using the supervisory probationary period as the last step in the selection process for first-level supervisors, noting that, in FY 2009, just one-half of 1 percent of new supervisors were reassigned or separated during their probationary period.³⁶

More recently, there appears to be renewed interest in promoting the use of supervisory probationary periods. In a January 2018 newsletter, MSPB reported in its lead article that federal agencies rarely used the supervisory probationary period to act against poor-performing supervisors. We also

Sidebar 1

Examples of Innovative Practices to Establish Supervision as a Discipline

Culture

“[We have decided] to support a culture that emphasizes ‘supervision as a discipline’—by strengthening supervisory roles, increasing accountability for supervisor competency, and improving the approach to selecting, hiring, and promoting supervisors across the organization. We aim to drive a culture that views supervision as a discipline equal in importance to technical disciplines.” (public-sector federal organization)

Curriculum

“Under the [new] performance improvement initiative, there will be a new management training curriculum that focuses solely on supervision and management of employees. New managers or new supervisors will have to take a supervision class before they can apply for a supervisory position. Then, in a year that they have in the new position, there are four additional management courses that they have to take. One is mandatory, and that is an overview of all of the various processes within the agency that a manager could potentially need to manage an employee. So, things like your General Counsel, Employee Relations, HR, so it’s a broad overview of the enabling functions within the agency. Then the manager would be able to take three elective courses from a large range of classes.” (public-sector federal organization)

“The training cadre that we’re putting folks through . . . [it’s a] 10-month program that has a combination of internal mentorship, external partnership with business, a program through a local university, and some internal trainings that all are designed to give managers those tools.” (public-sector state/local organization)

Pay Differentials Offered as Part of Federal Personnel Management Demonstration Projects

Department of Commerce Alternative Personnel System: “Supervisors in all career paths will be eligible for salaries up to six percent higher than the maximum rate of

their pay bands. The amount by which a supervisor’s pay exceeds the maximum rate of the band constitutes supervisory performance pay.” (*Department of Commerce Alternative Personnel System Operating Procedures Manual*³¹)

Science and Technology Reinvention Laboratory Demonstration Project: “A supervisory pay differential may be used by laboratory directors to provide an incentive to appropriately compensate SSTM [Senior Scientific Technical Manager] personnel. This pay differential is a pay incentive that may range up to 5 percent of base pay (excludes locality pay) for SSTM personnel. It is paid on a pay-period basis with a specified not-to-exceed date up to 1 year and may be renewed as appropriate. This pay differential is not included as part of base pay for any purpose.” (Science and Technology Reinvention Laboratory Demonstration Project, 79 FR 43722³²)

Supervisor-Focused Performance Standards

“We have two performance elements that are related to supervision. The first one is implementation of performance management. So, a supervisor has an element that states that he or she will conduct performance management requirements for his [or her] employees, in accordance with our policies and procedures. Then the second one is supervision, in general. That’s taking care of your people, above and beyond just performance management. But making sure that your folks are trained and that they’re developed and that they’re happy, engaged employees, as well as kind of the technical of dealing with [full-time equivalents] and things like that.” (public-sector state/federal organization)

learned about new initiatives through our interviews and document review. For example, one organization in our interview sample described plans to educate hiring officials on new hiring and probationary period requirements for supervisors and to develop an agencywide process for supervisory probationary period tracking and monitoring. The AcqDemo workforce demonstration project codified “Expanded Supervisory and/or Managerial Probationary Periods” in its extensive 2017 Federal Register Notice, stating that those who have not previously completed a civil service supervisory probationary period are required to complete a one-year probationary period for their first-time supervisor position, and an additional supervisory probationary period of one year may be required when an employee is officially assigned to a different supervisory position that constitutes a major change in supervisory responsibilities from previous supervisor role.³⁷ Both of these are notable efforts to bring this potentially overlooked tool to the forefront of managers’ minds and to publicly encourage its use. Because these actions transpired during the course of this study, data were not yet available to determine their effectiveness. It is also unclear how readily a poor-performing supervisor can be reassigned to a nonsupervisory position, which MSPB noted as a common perceived barrier.³⁸

As was the case in the “support” domain, organizations are using technology to help professionalize supervisors. Not only are some community-of-practice efforts supported by online platforms, but learning management systems are also being used to incorporate information that characterizes supervisors’ strengths and weaknesses, aid in the construction of individual development plans, recommend relevant training materials, and track progress. One public-sector federal agency has a collection of carefully selected learning resources—books, videos, online courses, and instructor-led courses—for supervisors and anyone interested in supervision. The curriculum is linked to an automated learning management system so that completed training is recorded and can be credited toward new or continuing supervisor learning requirements.

All in all, these efforts help to address the long-standing concern that, in the federal government, supervisors are selected more for their

technical competencies than for their leadership skills, which means that some are either unable or less inclined to effectively engage in day-to-day performance management activities that could limit the impact of poor employee performance.³⁹ Evidence from the 2016 Merit Principles Survey and our interviews suggests that these issues may persist in DoD. Specifically, the proportion of DoD survey respondents who agreed that their supervisor had good technical skills (71 percent to 75 percent, depending on the component) was significantly higher than the proportion who felt that their supervisor had good management skills (55 percent to 69 percent). As one of our interviewees explained:

As a manager, I was technically trained and selected based on that performance. I’m not necessarily trained to be a supervisor. So, I’ve been promoted into this position based upon my [technical] expertise and skills. I’ve been to a couple of supervisor and managerial courses, but it’s easier for me to ignore some issues than it is to deal with them. (private-sector organization)

Institutional Focus

Monitoring and Evaluation

In our interviews, we explored the nature and extent of organizations’ efforts to monitor and evaluate the processes in place to address poor performers. Evaluation literature distinguishes between two types of evaluation activities: impact studies, which involve a detailed assessment in order to understand the extent to which there is relationship between program or process activities and intended outcomes, and performance monitoring systems, which entail less of an in-depth look at outcomes but rather measure performance on a regular basis, such as monthly or quarterly.⁴⁰ Performance monitoring system metrics typically cover program outcomes, cost-effectiveness, outputs, efficiency, service quality, and customer satisfaction,⁴¹ and, therefore, they can complement and inform more-rigorous, deeper-dive impact studies that use more-sophisticated methods and professional standards.

We found that organizations varied in terms of the metrics they collected. Some interview participants described metrics that their organizations intentionally collected as process indicators, such as number of PIPs and number of disciplinary actions. We also learned about “naturally occurring” indicators collected for other purposes but potentially of value for evaluation purposes. These include feedback sessions and performance ratings, which are captured not only in DoD tools (such as DPMAP’s MyPerformance Tool, which “stores, organizes, and routes information regarding all aspects of the performance management process, including performance plans, progress reviews, and final performance appraisal discussions”⁴²) but also in other IT-based platforms:

We have Performance Management Tracking Sheets where we’re having supervisors certify that they’ve had these discussions, these three touchpoints throughout the performance year with employees. So, it’s documented on the performance plan, in addition to certifying to the department that you had these discussions. (public-sector federal organization)

We have a tool that we call [PLATFORM NAME], and employees do check-ins every week and they talk about their strengths And managers can also, in that tool, leave comments to the employee in response to those comments the employee has made. You can have that dialogue in there. . . . So, there are reports that can be run for the usage of [PLATFORM NAME]. (private-sector organization)

It was not clear the extent to which either the deliberately collected metrics or the naturally occurring ones were part of an overall metrics collection and usage strategy. Such a strategy is important because the right set of metrics can feed into a dashboard of indicators to monitor program implementation and process outcomes on a real-time, ongoing basis, as well as into more-systematic, comprehensive analysis efforts to address program improvements, analyze trends, and consider costs.

Another metrics-related challenge we heard in our interviews was the potential for metrics to mislead.

Interviewees discussed how some important aspects of the process, such as pre-PIP counseling, may be difficult to measure, and how other metrics readily tallied, such as PIPs themselves, might not tell the complete story. The remarks that follow exemplify such sentiments:

Nine times out of ten, the corrective action works, then we almost never hear about it. . . . The results will be a successful employee, so we won’t see it. (public-sector federal organization)

It’s not that we want to strive to remove people, but if they’re poor performers, yes. But I don’t know what the number would mean . . . “Hey, we removed this many people this year. We had this many on PIPs.” I’m not sure what it would tell us. (public-sector federal organization)

We also learned about using a diverse set of metrics to avoid relying a single, potentially misleading indicator:

I like to look at a lot of human capital data and look at them combined, because I believe that when you impact—there’s a cause and effect. So . . . when there are a lot of disciplinary actions or there is a lot of PIP, Performance Improvement Plan, you tend to get a lot of grievances. So, we may look at one metric of what’s happening with the grievance process. We might look at how many employees were put on a Performance Improvement Plan? How many employees were denied a within-grade increase? How many demotions did we have? How many disciplinary actions did we have where conduct was a factor? Then, of course, you’d look at your Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey. (public-sector federal organization)

In a related vein, some organizations collected both qualitative and quantitative metrics. Qualitative measures obtained through interviews or focus groups provided context and helped to explain quantitative metrics. The organizations we interviewed incorporated the metrics into myriad approaches to consider the efficiency or effectiveness of their processes related to poor performers. For example, interviewees discussed episodic use of audits, process

improvement efforts, trend analysis, benchmarking, root cause analysis, and cost analysis. Across our sample, the choice of evaluation methods varied greatly, and, based on what the interviewees told us, they did not typically seem to be part of a comprehensive evaluation plan.

According to DoD Instruction 1400.25-V431, DoD component heads are responsible for overseeing the implementation, application, and evaluation of performance management programs, including how poor performance is addressed. The Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Civilian Personnel Policy (DASD/CP) also has implementation monitoring responsibilities to ensure consistency across DoD. However, these senior leaders' abilities to provide such oversight may be impeded not only by the lack of metrics routinely collected across the DoD enterprise discussed earlier, but also by the decentralized, local nature of performance management-related tracking and evaluation. We found that for federal agencies, in particular, tracking is decentralized, with higher headquarters relying on local units to take appropriate actions and report upward as they deem best:

I think to look at how we're doing in some of these areas, we look to a variety of different factors. I would say that from a perspective of some of these programs and customer satisfaction and that sort of a thing, that is going to be probably evaluated more at the local level. So again, this is going to get back to how we're structured, where we have our [NUMBER] locations and a lot of these sorts of things, if they're tracked and looked at and to what degree, that's done locally. (public-sector federal organization)

I think most of the observation of process is done at the grassroots level, where those of us who sit here in the Executive Office, we have less visibility on this. And not that we're hiding from it, it's just that performance is addressed at the organizational level and it's generally corrected at the organizational level. There's not necessarily an established feedback mechanism that gets back to the enterprise level to examine the whole process. (public-sector federal organization)

Another limitation that impedes consistent reporting of outputs and outcomes up the chain of command is the manual nature of some data collection. The following comments illustrate this theme:

Well, the installations are supposed to track it and then, we as the [COMPONENT] manage the overall data. But, the IT piece behind it is more challenging, because a lot of this is done manually, basically. When you commit to a performance issue or a disciplinary issue, there's a lot of hard copy paperwork and everything. Things are not necessarily done in an automated system when you affect an action of some sort. . . . So, it makes things very difficult to track. (public-sector federal organization)

We don't track them through automation. We do track them, it's just manual, because it's a workload issue. We're working that particular case, so we're tracking it in that respect, but we do not have an automated system where I can plug in and say, "How many PIPs did I do or how many counselings did I do?" It's really a manual, tedious process sometimes in actually trying to find that. (public-sector federal organization)

A decentralized approach to tracking and evaluation, a lack of consistently collected metrics, and manual processes for inputting data not only can make it difficult to accomplish implementation and monitoring responsibilities but also can limit the ability to identify enterprisewide trends and other issues.

Communications and Transparency

Our study also revealed DoD supervisor concerns about their organizations that stem in part from a lack of transparency and communication. In the Merit Principles Survey, supervisors were asked to rate the extent to which different factors presented a challenge to removing an employee for performance after a PIP. Approximately three-fourths of DoD supervisors felt that their agency's culture regarding removing people for poor performance and the degree of support given by leadership above them posed a challenge to some or a great extent. Our interviews with HR practitioners provide additional insights regarding the perceived

lack of leadership support at higher levels and its association with culture:

[S]ome supervisors indicated that even if they were willing to take the time to go through the process, that employees have a lot of rights, as well, and that sometimes those decisions can be overturned by senior leaders within the ranks. (public-sector federal organization)

[I]n some instances, there is a first-line supervisor who is ready, willing and able to address a particular issue. And that, unfortunately, in some instances, is receiving pressure or feedback or something from a higher level to not go that way. . . . They're saying the culture is just kind of—just let [EMPLOYEE NAME] do whatever she is doing, it's fine. She's close to retirement or whatever it might be. There is outside pressure. (public-sector federal organization)

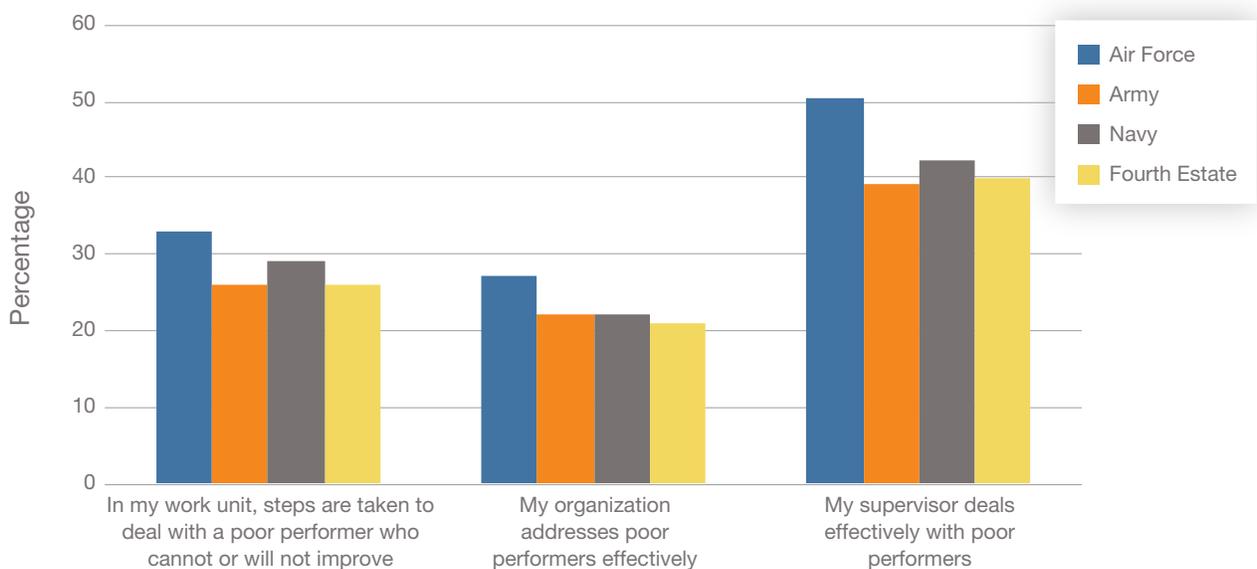
These findings are also consistent with previous GAO analysis. Specifically, GAO noted in its 2015 report on addressing poor performers that supervisors may be concerned about a lack of internal

support from their supervisors or other internal agency offices involved in the dismissal process.⁴³

Along the same line, employees tend to have negative views about how their work unit and organization handle poor performers. OPM FEVS results from recent years revealed that a minority of DoD employees (28 percent to 32 percent, depending on the survey year) agreed that, in their work units, steps were taken to deal with a poor performer who could not or would not improve. As the leftmost set of bars in Figure 4 shows, this was also true for DoD participants in the 2016 Merit Principles Survey. Moreover, only about one-fourth or fewer of DoD employees who took the survey agreed that their organization addressed poor performers effectively. In contrast, larger proportions of respondents—roughly 40 percent to 50 percent—agreed that their supervisor effectively dealt with them.

Although we were unable to explore directly with senior leaders, supervisors, or employees why these views exist, our work suggests one possible reason: a lack of transparency regarding poor performance-related actions. Our interviews indicated that actions taken for poor performers are

FIGURE 4
DoD Employee Perceptions Regarding Handling of Poor Performers



SOURCE: Merit Systems Protection Board, "Merit Principles Survey Data 2016," webpage, last updated July 5, 2017. Specifically, see the Path 2 module.

NOTE: Figure shows the percentage of employees who agreed with each statement.

sensitive and often not communicated. Instead, the tendency is to respect individual rights and privacy at the expense of greater community awareness. This is in stark contrast to well-publicized actions taken by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), which posts online a weekly Accountability Report that tallies suspensions that are longer than 14 days, demotions, and removals by position and VA region.⁴⁴ They are listed case by case, and although names are not provided, there does seem to be the possibility of identification via inference.

In our sample, some of the organizations tended to publicize information about the process of addressing poor performance as opposed to process outcomes (e.g., number of PIPs, breakdown of adverse actions). For example, one interviewee told us:

[W]e don't advertise we have this many people on a Performance Improvement Plan and let me tell you how successful we were [with improvements]. Because you can pretty quickly get into stepping over the line of protecting privacy or, really, belaboring a point that I'm not sure needs to be made all that public. So long as the process is made public . . . I think that's sufficient. (public-sector federal organization)

This was regarded as avoiding not only the issue of violating individual privacy but also the use of misleading metrics—those that do not accurately convey what has been done to address poor performers, as described in the following remark:

[Y]ou could be doing things to address a performance issue or conduct that don't result in a PIP and don't result in a removal. Also, you have to be careful about the information you provide, because it can provide a picture that isn't reflective of what is being done. . . . Because it didn't result in a specific action. . . . I mean, you've got the PIPs that are not completed and the person leaves, that they don't result in an action, but the person leaves of their own volition, whether it's retirement or resignation. But, yes, it's a struggle, I think, on how to convey that information in a way that is accurately depicting what's going on. (public-sector federal organization)

That stated, we did encounter examples of sharing process-related outcomes. In some cases, organizations were “semitransparent”: They did report outcomes, but only to leadership. This suggests that the capability to push out results is available. As one interviewee explained, “When we ran reports, we would separate terminations that were voluntary versus involuntary and report out on that to senior management, but not to [ORGANIZATION] as a whole” (private-sector organization). Other organizations that shared outcomes also did so with employees. They achieve sufficient aggregation and protection of confidentiality by disseminating at longer intervals or by combing cases of performance and misconduct. Organizations also shared information about the outcomes of a related process—the overall performance management system. As the following comments illustrate, these outcomes include the distribution of performance ratings, information about both awards and adverse actions, and attrition data:

We also have a mandate . . . to publicize outcomes of cases in an anonymous way, so it's actually a report that we publish semi-annually of all our disciplinary actions which include both performance and conduct. So, that increases that transparency with the workforce, so that they see that Employee Relations and managers and the corporation are actually not just identifying that the problems exist but also handling the problems when they happen, and the employees are able to see what the outcomes are. . . . [T]here will be a twice-per-year publication of achievement which will highlight the positive achievements. So, that will provide transparency to the workforce for who is receiving bonuses and awards and recognition and what they've received those recognitions for. Not by name, but it will be a publication of the types of behaviors that have been rewarded and that will come out twice per year. There's a heavy focus . . . on transparency and making data available to the workforce, so that they can see both the positive sides of things and, also, how we've handled problems when they've arisen. (public-sector federal organization)

We found examples of sharing performance-related actions that protected individual confidentiality by reporting results at longer intervals or by combining cases of performance and misconduct.

That’s actually something we’re talking about right now, in terms of, we like to protect the privacy of our workforce, but we are putting some communication together. Literally, we’re going through this most recent cycle which ended 30 September, and we’ve always done sort of a very simple, high-level ratings distribution where we share what percentage scored fives, fours, threes, and so on. Everybody looks at it and goes, “Okay, yes, it’s about the same as last year.” But recently, there’s an appetite for, “So, what are you doing with people who get ones and twos?” And so, we’re packaging the attrition data . . . the number of employees that we’ve terminated during probation and the number of employees that we’ve terminated with 15- and 25-year careers for performance. (public-sector federal organization)

The use of various means to communicate with the workforce is another practice that has the potential to increase transparency and potentially improve supervisor and employee views regarding the handling of poor performance. Some approaches were in person, such as town hall–style meetings with senior leadership, and others were high-tech, including a mix of informational push and pull approaches. One interviewee told us that employees receive an “Agency-All” email notification advising them when a report on performance management outcomes is available and providing the link to the report. The onus is then on the employee to click on that link if he or she is interested in learning more.

Recommendations

In this section, we present an integrated set of recommendations that span supervisors and institutional concerns. In many cases, a recommendation cuts across several areas, such as helping to both develop and support supervisors or enabling both institutional monitoring and communication efforts. We have grouped them into the following four overarching categories:

- Ensure that vital performance management principles are executed.
- Empower supervisors and HR professionals.
- Review and institutionalize policy guidance.
- Assess and communicate both processes and outcomes.

Strategic use of technology-based enablers can facilitate implementation of these recommendations, and we highlight examples of such opportunities throughout this section.

Ensure That Vital Performance Management Principles Are Executed

This first set of recommendations focuses on practices, procedures, and personnel to help supervisors carry out their performance management responsibilities specifically related to poor performers.

Emphasize, continue, and extend DPMAP requirements for frequent and regular performance feedback by supervisors. Business literature is rife with references to leading private-sector organizations moving away from annual performance reviews and instead relying on frequent, informal check-ins between supervisors and employees.⁴⁵

Moreover, academic research has demonstrated that continuous feedback, either formal or informal, is more likely to change employee behaviors.⁴⁶ This suggests that DoD has moved its performance management approach in the right direction with DPMAP, given its greater emphasis on ongoing performance monitoring in both its policies and its training materials to avoid surprises during the annual appraisal event and reduce reliance on that event as the key driver of employee performance.⁴⁷ DoD Instruction 1400.25-V431, calls for “verbal feedback sessions, regular one-on-one meetings, or impromptu recognition or acknowledgement of performance,” and training materials repeatedly advise supervisors that “[i]t’s not about the 365th day.”⁴⁸ In this regard, DoD is following promising practices based on both industry experiences and scientific research, and we recommend both continuing this approach and expanding it beyond the workforce currently covered by DPMAP. DoD should also evaluate the feasibility of developing a feedback app similar to ones mentioned earlier, such as the PD@GE app and Amazon’s Anytime Feedback tool, to facilitate an ongoing performance dialogue between DoD supervisors and their subordinates. Alternately, perhaps DPMAP’s MyPerformance Tool can be enhanced to accommodate and document more frequent performance check-ins.

Work with supervisors and HR professionals to identify and develop high-priority topic areas for just-in-time training and personalized support. This change would address views that critical specialized training is not always readily available to supervisors when needed. Standing up a working group that includes first-line supervisors, higher-level leadership, and HR personnel will help ensure that the results are especially pertinent, as well as facilitate supervisor buy-in and subsequent access.

Involve HR and other functional support personnel as a critical first step to guide supervisors through the difficult aspects of policy and process. Given the complexities and sensitivities of such steps as pre-PIP counseling, the importance of appropriate PIP documentation, and the legal intricacies associated with adverse performance action, DoD should encourage supervisor interactions with HR professionals and possibly other professionals (e.g., General

Counsel) as early in the process as possible. To facilitate this, DoD can employ its pulse survey capability to ask supervisors periodically whether they have anyone less than fully successful in any performance element. An affirmative response would trigger a response from HR to engage the supervisor and develop an action plan, and it should also be routed up the chain of command to the second-line supervisor and possibly senior management for their situational awareness and possible intervention. Equal responsibility for ensuring such engagement rests with the HR community. Steps should be taken to hold the HR community accountable for proactively and responsively interfacing with first-line supervisors and engaging with higher levels of leadership to obtain their input and consensus on the action plan.

Develop responsive intake capability for performance challenges to rapidly assess case specifics, assist, and, as needed, escalate. This would entail providing a way for supervisors to quickly and easily report a performance concern, as well as ensuring the availability of HR personnel to glean important details, determine the nature of support required, and either personally assist the supervisor or route the case to the appropriate centralized source of expertise. As our interviews suggest, this capability not only has the benefit of providing real-time support to a supervisor, but it also permits local HR professionals to spend time building relationships with supervisors and keeping tabs on the local context rather than being consumed with a single, complex performance case that others may be better qualified to adjudicate.

Exploit fully local HR capabilities to build trust and develop working relationships with supervisors. Given the importance of local HR personnel described by our interviewees and in business literature, DoD should ensure that local HR personnel are available to first-line supervisors across DoD. Possible limits on manning capabilities for DoD General Schedule 200-series HR personnel indicate that this may require tapping into the potential of local “shadow HR”—personnel in the General Schedule 300-series General Administrative, Clerical, and Office Services occupations who carry out HR responsibilities at their locations. In addition, because parts of the DoD enterprise are already making use of local HR personnel within current manning levels, there may be opportunities to

learn from those efforts and transfer those best practices to other DoD agencies and subcomponents. Local HR capabilities are key to the early supervisor-HR interactions and the rapid intake capability discussed earlier.

Review manning documents and resource levels associated with the HR workforce and development opportunities available to them.

Mixed evidence about the availability of HR personnel at the local level suggests a need for DoD to look at how the HR function is fulfilled across the department, including whether there are sufficient authorizations for HR professionals at lower levels, the extent to which those authorizations are filled by qualified HR professionals at the local level, and whether sufficient resources are available to develop their performance management expertise. This effort should include personnel in General Schedule 200-series HR Management occupations, as well as those in 300-series shadow HR. While it may not be feasible to increase authorizations for HR professionals, this review could help to ensure that HR-related resources—both staff and opportunities to develop them—are allocated as equitably and effectively as possible across DoD. Where 200-series manning levels seem low, for example, DoD leadership may wish to promote aggressively a model of local, rapid intake and escalation to a centralized servicing organization or to prioritize the development of 300-series shadow HR personnel so that they more effectively complement local or regional 200-series HR personnel.

Promote greater use of probationary periods and Chapter 75 legal authorities, as appropriate.

Extending the length of probationary periods for many new employees to two years was a constructive step in promoting greater use of this performance management tool, which GAO analysis indicates may not be used as much as it could be. In addition to employing multiple dissemination approaches to ensure that supervisors are aware of this change, we recommend DoD's expedition of plans to modify DCPDS to maintain more up-to-date information regarding supervisors. This move would promote the effective use the system's email notification capabilities to advise supervisors about the timing of their subordinates' probationary periods and required actions. DoD may also wish to consider not only having its supervisors opt in to keeping employees past

their probationary period but also requiring them to certify that the employees have met all relevant performance standards. Using an email reminder and making the retention of an employee past his or her probationary period a more active, deliberate step as opposed to a passive one should increase the likelihood that poor-performing employees are counseled or dismissed before their probationary period ends.

DoD should also consider whether it should be making greater use of the Chapter 75 legal authority when adverse performance actions become necessary.

It might benefit DoD to ensure that supervisors understand that Chapter 43 and 75 offer two different approaches and to promote greater flexibility in their use to address poor performance because, as the Merit Systems Protection Board noted, "Having both options available may increase the willingness of a supervisor to take an appropriate action by choosing the authority that best suits the particular situation."⁴⁹ This would also be in accordance with the aforementioned Executive Order 13839 on federal employee accountability and removals, which instructed federal agencies to use Chapter 75 procedures "in appropriate cases to address instances of unacceptable performance."⁵⁰ Given the legal complexities involved, DoD will need to carefully consider which organizations and circumstances are more or less appropriate contexts for this approach. Moreover, it is important to have well-qualified HR personnel, line management, and possibly General Counsel to ensure that this flexibility is mutually agreed upon and correctly implemented.

Offer ombudsmen as an optional resource for just-in-time support. Our interviews highlighted the potential of ombudsmen in the performance management context. DoD already makes use of the ombudsman role in different functions (e.g., acquisition, Inspector General, military family support), and it may be helpful to establish an ombudsman role with an HR focus. Piloting an HR ombudsman at select locations, potentially as an additional duty for either a supervisor or HR professional (the former may have more credibility with first-line supervisors), would enable DoD to determine whether it would be worthwhile to implement more broadly. Carrying out this recommendation would also entail developing a comprehensive ombudsman training plan and

publicizing the ombudsman as resource for just-in-time support for supervisors and managers.

Empower Supervisors and HR Professionals

These recommendations are intended to help DoD build a cadre of supervisors and HR professionals who are well equipped to manage poor performers, ideally by avoiding the problem through proactive activities, such as ongoing, constructive feedback, and by dealing with it quickly and effectively when it does occur.

Help aspiring supervisors learn what such positions entail. Supervisory developmental programs and temporary supervisor promotions (e.g., when covering a position for another employee on leave or assignment) would increase the likelihood that new supervisors bring realistic expectations to their positions in terms of the range of new responsibilities, additional duties, needed skills and abilities, increased workload, and upper-management expectations. These experiences might also deter some individuals from entering the supervisory track who are seeking career advancement but prefer technical work and, more generally, might help to address perceptions that supervisor leadership skills are not as strong as their technical skills.

Implement a “supervision as profession” construct. This should include some combination of the mechanisms that emerged from our interviews and document review: an intentionally developed, leadership-focused curriculum; supervisory pay differentials; and performance standards. Supervisor communities of practice and mentoring may be useful additions as well, but they should be pilot-tested to determine how to maximize their potential benefits with little to no negative consequences.

Extend and fully implement the requirement to include in performance plans supervision-related performance elements on par with technical performance elements. As noted earlier, the number of supervision-related evaluation criteria in DoD supervisor performance plans is required by policy to equal or exceed the number of technical evaluation criteria. DoD should specifically audit this requirement to ensure complete and consistent

implementation and expand its reach as needed to cover as much of DoD’s cadre of supervisors as possible—across agencies and across organizational levels.

Adopt a similar approach for HR professionals.

Many of the efforts intended to develop supervision as a discipline would be helpful for 200-series HR Management employees and, resources permitting, for employees in the 300-series General Administrative, Clerical, and Office Services who are performing HR functions. In addition to adapting the supervisor-focused strategies to suit the HR profession, a certification program to substantiate levels of HR expertise would be especially helpful for the rapid intake and escalation capability discussed earlier; it would facilitate routing more-complex issues to the right expertise. In addition, making the certification levels and types of HR expertise held by specific professionals known to supervisors could increase their confidence and trust in the HR professionals available to support them.

Review and Institutionalize Policy Guidance

The following group of recommendations covers opportunities to support supervisors and those tasked with oversight responsibilities by improving existing policies and developing additional guidance.

Review HR policies to ensure clarity and feasibility. This is related to performance management in general and PIPs in particular. Given supervisor perceptions of policy complexity, this should include ensuring that HR policies are written in layperson-friendly language and presenting examples in ways that help educate supervisors but avoid the potential problem of solutions that preclude HR involvement. Involvement of first-line supervisors in the policy review process will address concerns over ensuring feasible outcomes, as well as help obtain stronger results and greater compliance.

Develop policy on desired objectives and outcomes for an MSB construct. Earlier, we noted that none of the organizations we interviewed had yet established an MSB, and while views toward such a governance structure were favorable, interview participants raised questions about its purpose and ideal

design. Accordingly, we recommend that DoD first conduct a formal assessment of the need for and the viability of an MSB. This would entail also settling on the intended purpose and desired results for DoD’s version of an MSB. If the results of the assessment validate the creation of this support mechanism, its purpose and intended outcomes should be codified in policy. Designing MSB structure, processes, and procedures and determining manning needs in terms of quantity and expertise would then follow (see Sidebar 2).

Determine appropriate evaluation policy, to include necessary metrics. The policy should specify evaluation objectives; the types of evaluations to be conducted at different levels of the organization (e.g., field location, component, policy headquarters); and what types of metrics should be collected, retained, assessed, and disseminated to guide decisionmaking. These metrics likely should include those that DoD needs to address the adverse action reporting requirements enumerated in Executive Order 13839, such as the number of adverse personnel actions taken against civilian employees, the number of civilian employees reprimanded in writing, and the number of civilian employees in probationary status who were removed from service. DoD should consider also including in the policy exemplary analysis strategies for different types of evaluations (e.g., ongoing monitoring, periodic

process improvements). Finally, as part of this effort, DoD should clarify the roles and authorities of different stakeholders who have responsibility for program operations and oversight. HR and other functional advisory support professionals closest to program implementation may have different needs and uses for evaluation results than DoD component heads, who are responsible for evaluating performance management programs across many locations. A policy with these details would ensure that all DoD units have a basic plan for their overarching metrics collection and usage strategy that they could build on as appropriate for their mission needs. In addition, it should improve DoD’s ability to discern departmentwide patterns and issues, which at present may be hindered by the decentralized approach to tracking and evaluation that we learned about through our interviews.

Assess and Communicate Both Processes and Outcomes

Component-Level Actions

We offer three evaluation-oriented recommendations for DoD component leaders—those responsible for performance management program oversight in their military department or agency.

Sidebar 2

Manager Support Board Considerations

Initial Concept Formulation

- Determine magnitude, location, and design requirements by examining existing programs and considering future requirements.
- Emphasize initial standing capability to provide limited support (guidance, mentoring, integrated recommendations) to be scaled based on appropriate evaluation outcomes.

Core Capabilities

- Complement or extend other support resources—do not duplicate.
- Provide high-quality and timely responses.
- Surge as needed to meet supervisor needs.

Additional Possible MSB Functions

- Serve as a focal point for policy and efficiency reviews.
- Identify best practices for “supervision as profession.”
- Assist in continual professional development of supervisors.
- Maintain quality and currency of just-in-time and sustainment training materials.
- Identify, analyze, and communicate problems and trends.
- Review first-level supervisor decisions overturned by higher-level leadership.

Evaluate training materials and outcomes. Given the questions that our interviews raised about the perceived purpose and value of different training options, leaders should determine the intended outcomes of training and the acceptable standards for initial training, sustainment training, and just-in-time training. For example, an outcome of initial training might be awareness of whom to turn to for specific types of help, while an outcome of just-in-time training may be successfully carrying out an action, such as documenting evidence for a PIP. Once desired outcomes are established, the myriad training materials should be evaluated for their ability to support those outcomes. In-use measures, such as supervisor feedback on the perceived helpfulness of a training module, may be insightful, but, ideally, objective measures, such as changes in attitudes or behaviors (e.g., giving timely, constructive feedback), are stronger measures of training effectiveness. The results of an evaluation of training offerings can be used to consolidate and organize them along critical training dimensions that promote their use and reuse, maintenance of currency, and variety of delivery modalities. Ideally, this effort will include training materials beyond those developed by a specific component, such as content authored by DoD's Defense Civilian Personnel Advisory Service (DCPAS) and OPM's HR University.

There are several ways that technology can facilitate these efforts. First, DoD should consider developing and pilot-testing a user-based evaluation system for training. This could resemble web-based product ratings systems that supervisors are likely already familiar with, such as those used by Amazon and Yelp. To facilitate tracking of both training outputs (e.g., completions) and outcomes, DoD could implement learning management systems to capture individual development needs and training accomplishments. Ensuring that all feedback sessions are documented in current IT platforms would enable analysis of the relationship between supervisor training and providing feedback.

Develop and execute detailed plans to assess the impact of extended probationary periods for employees and supervisors. Leaders of demonstration projects have conducted some initial analysis and believe that the extended time frame has been worthwhile. Now that extended probationary periods are in place for personnel across DoD, it is important

that organizations determine whether the additional time is beneficial in terms of removing poor performers at an early stage. DoD has the capability in place for detailed analysis of probationary period removal actions on a quarterly basis. This includes analysis at the subcomponent level, with the ability to carry out analyses at specific geographic locations, by occupational series, and by pay plan. This functionality will not only be of immense value for internal use but also will help DoD to provide the probationary period-related removals data called for in Executive Order 13839. At the conclusion of our study, DoD had only one quarter of data to analyze, so it was too early to draw any conclusions about the usefulness of this option. Given some of the questions we heard about what to do with supervisors who do not perform well initially, analysis of the use of extended probationary periods for supervisors should also include a look at how individuals who do not perform well as supervisors are appropriately handled—through remediation, reassignment, or termination. Such information may help address a common barrier to using this tool.

Examine decisions that resulted in overturning supervisor recommendations for actions against poor performers. An independent check by someone outside the chain of command—possibly the MSB—will ensure that appropriate performance-related sanctions are upheld. For those decisions that were not approved, this check will ensure that the decisions were denied for valid reasons endorsed by management. The process of reviewing these decisions can also be an opportunity to look for patterns across them, such as whether second-line supervisors and senior management were involved in cases from their outset, and to identify possible topics for targeted training.

Policy Headquarters–Level Actions

Three evaluation-oriented recommendations are intended for organizations, such as DASD/CP, that have enterprisewide oversight responsibilities.

Ensure that new and clarified policies are widely disseminated, implemented, and monitored. Earlier, we identified both new policy needs, such as an evaluation and metrics policy, and opportunities to clarify existing policies, including those particularly confusing to supervisors. Here we underscore

the importance of communicating these changes across the different levels of leadership, checking that they are well understood, and verifying that they are truly institutionalized.

Develop ways for DASD/CPP to accomplish its oversight responsibilities. As with our recommendation to develop an evaluation and metrics policy, this recommendation is in response to evidence that DoD tracking and evaluation activities appear to be decentralized and that the same performance management metrics do not seem to be collected consistently across DoD. Standardization efforts could include, for example, developing a simple reporting template with metrics listed in a new policy for components to remit on a periodic basis (e.g., quarterly, annually). A multicomponent task force could be used to create the template, which would help ensure its feasibility and might also influence its endorsement. DASD/CPP should also explore the feasibility of periodically auditing different parts of the DoD enterprise both to assess process efficiency and effectiveness and to learn more about practices on the ground. We understand that the office is engaging in formative discussions about talent management audits, which appears to be consistent with our recommendation.

Some of the technology enablers mentioned above to support component-level actions can also be helpful here. For example, the use of learning management systems to track training needs and accomplishments and documentation of all feedback sessions in widely used platforms, such as DPMAP's MyPerformance Tool, can provide policy headquarters-level leadership with consistent metrics across the department. In addition, if DoD fully implements its existing Enterprise Human Resources Information Systems, that would facilitate enterprise-wide oversight via a move away from the decentralized approach to tracking and evaluation we heard about in interviews. For example, DoD HR and legal professionals have access to the Case Management Tracking System (CMTS), a DoD-wide system available to HR professionals and attorneys with all Labor Relations and Employee Relations case management information (e.g., actions related to Chapters 43 and 75). Internal analysis by DCPAS staff indicated that about 60 percent of adverse actions are tracked in CMTS—a relatively high figure,⁵¹ but the potential

for greater use and integration with other systems exists. Another benefit of fully implemented information systems, including their integration, would be the ability to track the career paths of poor performers across job assignments and locations.

Collect and disseminate best practices in managing poor performers, to include tracking and evaluation activities. Looking across DoD for implementation consistency and outcomes monitoring also provides the opportunity to identify best practices in managing poor performers and to share those practices across departments and agencies. DoD's demonstration projects are a good starting point for this effort, given initial indications of success with extended probationary periods. In addition, some demonstration projects, such as AcqDemo, have found that their practices are related to higher attrition rates for poor performers than for high performers⁵²—further evidence of the value of learning from these practices. We included only a small number of those projects in this effort; a more systematic look would cover them all (e.g., Lab Demo has 15 separate demonstration projects in place and two being implemented) and in greater depth.

Communication Actions

We identified several communication strategies that DoD could use more extensively to increase transparency around the handling of poor performers and, ideally, to minimize or avoid any negative attitudes within the workforce stemming from a perceived lack of action when poor performance occurs.

Ensure that processes for handling poor performers are well publicized and understood by the workforce. OPM FEVS and MSPB Merit Principles Survey data both indicate that employees tend to have negative opinions about how their work units and organizations handle poor performers. Because these views may be due (at least in part) to a lack of knowledge about how poor performers are handled, sharing information about the general process may positively affect employee perceptions. Efforts to carry out this recommendation should include portraying the processes as part of the overall performance management process, not as a separate disciplinary path. In other words, leadership should discuss how high

performers are rewarded in conjunction with how poor performers are addressed. It may also be helpful for DoD leadership to explain to the workforce the need for privacy in some cases of the latter and to explain that some actions, such as pre-PIP counseling, may not be measured in a proactive system.

We also suggest varying the methods used to disseminate information: Use both push mechanisms and pull mechanisms, as well as both interactive town hall–style meetings and reports or web postings, to disseminate information on performance management processes and results. Interactive sessions provide a way to gauge workforce understanding, as well as lingering concerns, while such pull mechanisms as a short “Agency-All” email with a link to more-detailed information help provide information to employees who want it without creating a “firehose” of information that may be disregarded.

Share more information about poor-performance actions with the workforce. Like the previous recommendation, this would be an attempt to positively influence employee sentiments through greater transparency—however, in this case, the focus is on outcomes. It is critical to disseminate poor performance–related actions in a way that portrays them as part of a broader system and has an appropriate periodicity for distribution and level of aggregation to protect poor performers’ confidentiality. Some organizations in our study have already made inroads on this. Rather than focus solely on dismissal rates, DoD should also include a breakdown of performance ratings to show the percentage of employees not performing at a satisfactory level, as well as the percentage of those who are. If available, DoD should share evidence demonstrating that those rated as low performers have higher attrition rates than those rated as high performers. Ideally, DoD will share information about both the processes used to address poor performers and the results of those processes, thereby promoting positive sentiments related to both *procedural justice* (the perceived fairness of the process through which an outcome was obtained) and *distributive justice* (the perceived fairness of the outcome itself). Research has frequently shown that both types of justice are related to employee attitudes and behaviors,⁵³ so employing even one of these communication strategies can be productive.

Communicate with supervisors the rationale for overturning their recommendation to remove a poor performer. Merit Principles Survey results indicate that DoD supervisors felt that their agency’s culture and leadership above them were barriers to removing poor-performing employees. To dispel or avoid such views, if a second-level supervisor or higher-level manager opts to overturn a first-line supervisor’s steps to remove a poor performer, he or she should engage the supervisor to affirm that his or her arguments were heard and to clearly and constructively explain why the reversal was necessary. For example, if documentation for poor performance was insufficient, the manager should describe its shortcomings and clarify what sufficient documentation looks like. Ideally, the leader who made the decision will initiate the dialogue, possibly with an HR professional facilitating. This will ensure that the interaction provides transparency and serves as a training opportunity as needed.

Conclusion

Our recommendations represent a holistic approach to addressing the areas of concern raised by OMB in its April 2017 memorandum on federal government reform and federal civilian workforce reduction; in Executive Order 13839 of May 25, 2018, on federal employee accountability and removal procedures; and elsewhere that could limit DoD’s ability to assist its supervisors in handling poor performers. These recommendations also are progressive with regard to increasing the department’s use of promising practices in performance management that could further support its supervisors. The recommendations vary in terms of their resource intensity, time horizon, and potential impact; some may offer quick wins, such as using existing pulse survey capabilities to query supervisors about poor performers, while others may require a larger investment, such as ensuring that all supervisor plans include supervision-related performance elements on par with technical ones. In some cases, pilot tests or a phased implementation may be the best approach.

We acknowledge that implementing all of our recommendations would be a major undertaking,

and, accordingly, we suggest that DoD employ collaborative governance structures to assess and prioritize them. DoD has two existing high-level cross-component oversight bodies (the Civilian Personnel Policy Council [CPPC] and the Civilian Personnel Advisory Group) that are well situated to consider and act on our recommendations. For example, according to its charter, the CPPC is DASD/CPP's primary executive-level forum for human capital management, and its members include senior HR professionals from across the DoD enterprise. These groups would need to consider whether adopting our recommendations would be in compliance with applicable collective bargaining agreements, and they should also be mindful of the extent to which recommendations build on—or conflict—with initiatives already under way. For example, as mentioned earlier, DoD already has capabilities in place to monitor the use of extended probationary periods for employees. In addition, currently, DoD was engaging in formative discussions about talent management audits. New initiatives inspired by our recommendations, coupled with ongoing efforts, such as extending DPMAP to more of DoD's workforce, will help DoD continue and even accelerate the transformation of its performance culture. To the extent that DoD's workforce and performance management approach systems resemble other federal agencies', our findings and recommendations may have implications beyond DoD.

Notes

¹ Office of Management and Budget, Executive Office of the President, "Comprehensive Plan for Reforming the Federal Government and Reducing the Federal Civilian Workforce," memorandum M-17-22, April 12, 2017.

² The appropriated workforce represents the bulk of DoD's civilian workforce. The figure for the number of employees comes from the Office of Personnel Management federal human sources data source (FedScope) for DoD aggregate, including the three military service departments and the Fourth Estate. See U.S. Office of Personnel Management, "FedScope," web page, undated-a.

³ Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, Personnel, and Readiness, "New Beginnings Phased Implementation of the Defense Performance Management and Appraisal Program Beginning April 2016," memorandum, February 4, 2016.

⁴ Figures based on RAND project team communications with U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Civilian Personnel Advisory Service staff, December 2017.

⁵ Office of Personnel Management, "Human Capital Management: Performance Culture," webpage, undated-b.

⁶ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Federal Workforce: Improved Supervision and Better Use of Probationary Periods Are Needed to Address Substandard Employee Performance*, Washington, D.C., Report to the Chairman, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate, GAO-15-191, 2015.

⁷ *The Fourth Estate* refers to the Office of the Secretary of Defense, defense agencies, and defense field activities outside of the three military departments and the unified combatant commands (see Kathleen J. McInnis, "Defense Primer: The Department of Defense," Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, December 13, 2016).

⁸ Based on DoD data from "FedScope" for dismissals due to performance or conduct for the three military departments and the Fourth Estate. See U.S. Office of Personnel Management, "IBM Cognos Connection: Public Folders," webpage, undated-c.

⁹ Path L of the 2016 Merit Principles Survey includes responses from team leaders, supervisors, managers, and executives. Although there are some differences between these groups, such as some managers not having supervisory responsibility, for parsimony, we refer to this group of leaders as "supervisors" throughout this report.

¹⁰ The individuals we interviewed served in different positions related to performance management and talent management. We collectively describe them as "HR practitioners," personnel who through training, experience, or promotion serve in leadership or policy roles related to the conduct of HR functions and responsibilities.

¹¹ This study completed all necessary RAND administrative processes related to human subjects protection and received the determination that it met DoD's "not human subjects research" definition.

¹² Interview notes were analyzed using QSR NVivo 11, a software package that enables its users to review, categorize, and analyze qualitative data, such as text, visual images, and audio recordings. Software like NVivo 11 permits analysts to assign codes to passages of text and then later retrieve passages of similarly coded text within and across documents. The authors of this report worked together to develop a "coding tree" to facilitate the tagging of relevant interview excerpts. A coding tree is a set of labels for assigning units of meaning to information compiled during a study. Codes are used in the data reduction process to retrieve and organize qualitative data by topic and other characteristics. We used a structural coding approach for this study; codes were based on our study goals and interview questions (e.g., practices used to avoid or address poor employee performance, supervisor training and support mechanisms, process tracking and evaluation) and were intended to help develop a set of major topics and themes (see Jessica T. DeCuir-Gunby, Patricia L. Marshall, and Allison W. McCulloch, "Developing and Using a Codebook for the Analysis of Interview Data: An Example from a Professional Development Research Project," *Field Methods*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 2011, pp. 136–155; and Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications, 2016).

¹³ Discussions of the survey methodology, survey instruments, and the public-use data files are available online at the Merit

Systems Protection Board website (see Merit Systems Protection Board, “Merit Principles Survey Data 2016,” webpage, last updated July 5, 2017; and Merit Systems Protection Board, “Merit Principles Survey 2016 Data and Methodology,” undated).

¹⁴ Merit Systems Protection Board, undated.

¹⁵ Merit Systems Protection Board, undated.

¹⁶ Because we assured participating organizations that we would not attribute findings to a specific organization, after each quotation, we indicate whether the participant represents a public-sector federal organization, a public-sector state or local organization, or a private-sector organization. As we prepared this report, following Guest, MacQueen, and Namey (2011), each participant was assigned a unique identifier that included both a number and his or her organization’s sector to ensure that we were not serially quoting any single individual. We omitted those numbers from the final report to avoid the possibility of identifying an organization via the intersection of several quotations; for some quotations, we also redacted potentially identifying details to protect participant confidentiality. For a discussion of this practice, see Greg Guest, Kathleen M. MacQueen, and Emily E. Namey, *Applied Thematic Analysis*, Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications, 2011, pp. 267–268.

¹⁷ U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2015.

¹⁸ U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2015.

¹⁹ See Donald J. Trump, “Promoting Accountability and Streamlining Removal Procedures Consistent with Merit System Principles,” Washington, D.C.: Executive Office of the President, Executive Order 13839, May 25, 2018.

²⁰ U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2015.

²¹ U.S. Department of Defense, “Probationary Period for New Employees,” memorandum, September 27, 2016.

²² See Office of Personnel Management, “Managing Federal Employees’ Performance Issues or Misconduct,” webpage, undated-d (in particular, the table on page 9 provides a high-level summary of the differences between addressing unacceptable performance under Chapter 43 versus Chapter 75); U.S. Code, Title 5, Section 4303, Actions Based on Unacceptable Performance, January 5, 2015; and U.S. Code, Title 5, Section 7513, Cause and Procedure, February 2010.

²³ Information for this section was obtained from Merit Systems Protection Board, *Addressing Poor Performers and the Law*, Washington, D.C., 2009; and U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2015.

²⁴ U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2015.

²⁵ See, for example, Merit Systems Protection Board, “Removing Poor Performers in the Federal Service,” Washington, D.C., issue paper, 1995; and Merit Systems Protection Board, 2009.

²⁶ Carol Jones and Richard Saundry, “The Practice of Discipline: Evaluating the Roles and Relationship Between Managers and HR Professionals,” *Human Resource Management Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 3, 2012, pp. 252–266.

²⁷ Greg Wright, “Employee Feedback Apps on the Rise,” Society for Human Resources Management, 2015.

²⁸ Industry examples are from Peter Cappelli, and Anna Tavis, “The Performance Management Revolution,” *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 94, No. 10, 2016, pp. 58–67.

²⁹ Cappelli and Tavis, 2016.

³⁰ Department of Defense Instruction 1400.25-V431, *DoD Civilian Personnel Management System: Performance Management and Appraisal Program*, February 4, 2016.

³¹ Office of Human Resources Management, U.S. Department of Commerce, *Department of Commerce Alternative Personnel System Operating Procedures Manual*, Washington, D.C., last updated May 28, 2010.

³² Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Civilian Personnel Policy, U.S. Department of Defense, “Department of Defense Science and Technology Reinvention Laboratory Personnel Management Demonstration Project Program,” *Federal Register*, Vol. 79, No. 144, July 28, 2014, pp. 43711–43727.

³³ Code of Federal Regulations, Title 5, Section 315.904, Basic Requirement, January 1, 2012.

³⁴ Code of Federal Regulations, Title 5, Section 315.905, Length of the Probationary Period, January 1, 2011.

³⁵ Merit Systems Protection Board, “Barriers to Effectively Using the Supervisory Probationary Period,” Washington, D.C., 2018.

³⁶ Merit Systems Protection Board, “A Call to Action: Improving First-Level Supervision of Federal Employees,” Washington, D.C.: Merit Systems Protection Board, 2010.

³⁷ Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, U.S. Department of Defense, “Civilian Acquisition Workforce Personnel Demonstration (AcqDemo) Project; Department of Defense (DoD),” *Federal Register*, Vol. 82, No. 216, November 9, 2017, pp. 52104–52172.

³⁸ Merit Systems Protection Board, 2018.

³⁹ Merit Systems Protection Board, 2010; and U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2015.

⁴⁰ Harry P. Hatry, Joseph S. Wholey, and Kathryn E. Newcomer, “Evaluation Challenges, Issues, and Trends,” in Joseph S. Wholey, Harry P. Hatry, and Kathryn E. Newcomer, eds., *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation*, San Francisco: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2010, pp. 668–679.

⁴¹ Theodore H. Poister, “Performance Measurement: Monitoring Program Outcomes,” in Joseph S. Wholey, Harry P. Hatry, and Kathryn E. Newcomer, eds., *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation*, San Francisco: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2010, pp. 100–124.

⁴² U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Civilian Personnel Advisory Service, *MyPerformance (DoD Performance Management and Appraisal Program) Employee User Guide*, March 7, 2016a.

⁴³ U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2015.

⁴⁴ These reports are publicly available online at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs website (see U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, “Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection,” webpage, undated).

⁴⁵ Ben Wigert and Jim Harter, “Re-Engineering Performance Management,” Gallup, Inc., 2017; Cappelli and Tavis, 2016.

⁴⁶ Nitya Chawla, Allison Gabriel, Jason Dahling, and Kajal Patel, “Feedback Dynamics Are Critical to Improving Performance Management Systems,” *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, Vol. 9, 2016, pp. 260–266; E. D. Pulakos, R. M. Hanson, S. Arad, and N. Moye, “Performance Management Can Be Fixed: An On-the-Job Experiential Learning Approach for Complex Behavior Change,” *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, Vol. 8, 2015, pp. 51–76.

⁴⁷ Notable ways that DPMAP differs from past DoD performance management approaches are summarized in Lisa McGlasson, *Managing Performance in DoD: Creating a Culture of High Performance*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Civilian Personnel Advisory Service, July 2016.

⁴⁸ See, for example, U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Civilian Personnel Advisory Service, “New Beginnings Participant Guide, Lesson 5: Monitoring Performance,” presentation, 2016b.

⁴⁹ Merit Systems Protection Board, 2009, p. iv.

⁵⁰ Trump, 2018.

⁵¹ Case Management Tracking System information and usage analysis provided during RAND project team communications with DoD Defense Civilian Personnel Advisory Service staff, March 2018.

⁵² Jennifer Lamping Lewis, Laura Werber, Cameron Wright, Irina Elena Danescu, Jessica Hwang, and Lindsay Daugherty, *2016 Assessment of the Civilian Acquisition Workforce Personnel Demonstration Project*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1783-OSD, 2017.

⁵³ Comprehensive reviews of procedural justice and distributive justice research (e.g., Y. Cohen-Charash and Paul E. Spector, “The Role of Justice in Organizations: A Meta-Analysis,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, Vol. 82, No. 2, 2001, pp. 278–321; and Mary A. Konovsky, “Understanding Procedural Justice and Its Impact on Business Organizations,” *Journal of Management*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2000, pp. 489–511) show that both types of justice—and, in some cases, procedural justice in particular—are related to job attitudes, such as pay satisfaction, organizational commitment, motivation, and turnover intentions, as well as work performance-related behaviors, including counterproductive work behaviors and organizational citizenship behavior (i.e., extra-role behaviors seen as going above and beyond role expectations).

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About This Report

The objectives of this research were to identify promising approaches for maximizing DoD employee performance while focusing on poor-performing employees and to develop recommendations on how best to support DoD leaders responsible for managing poor performers. This research was sponsored by the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Civilian Personnel Policy and conducted within the Forces and Resources Policy Center of the RAND National Defense Research Institute, a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the Unified Combatant Commands, the Navy, the Marine Corps, the defense agencies, and the defense Intelligence Community. For more information on the RAND Forces and Resources Policy Center, see www.rand.org/nsrd/ndri/centers/frp or contact the director (contact information is provided on the webpage).

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