

Leadership 201 Action Learning Scenario

Rewarding Risk-taking and Innovation at the USGS

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Issue/Challenges: As a science organization, one of the most important things the USGS does is push the boundaries of understanding on Earth's resources and processes by asking bold questions and taking risks to find new answers.

However, as a government agency, some of the most common aspects of our work and funding process are caution, risk-aversion, and a desire to continue doing what we've always done in order to stay in a safe and stable position.

The issue with that line of thinking is that it 1.) is the antithesis to scientific discovery, and 2.) doesn't offer the opportunity for significant growth. In fact, even a flat growth curve year after year is ultimately a declining curve when inflation is taken into account.

The challenge of encouraging bold and risky thinking here is ensuring we give people enough freedom and encouragement to engage in that sort of inquiry while also protecting the stability we already have.

The other issue at play at the USGS is both the perception and the reality of a rift between science and science support functions. While we are most certainly a scientific enterprise, innovation is not exclusively the domain of science. In fact, the more that scientists and support staff engage in problem-solving together, the faster and more effectively new solutions can be applied across the organization.

So how do you nurture a bold and innovative culture across job functions and reward risk-taking and innovation when the obstacles for doing so are directly tied to our livelihood as a bureau?

Background Material/Resources:

- Ten Years of Best Places to Work Rankings: How Six Federal Agencies Improved
(Note in particular the correlation between employee engagement in problem solving and delivery of mission)
- 2014 Best Places to Work in the Federal Government Analysis: Innovation
- See printed materials included with this scenario.

Expectations: We hope that this scenario yields ideas on how to:

- encourage risk-taking for the sake of progress
- reward innovation in a conservative fiscal environment
- cultivate a real partnership between science and science support