



SPEAKING OUT

Six Simple Proposals to Improve Efficiency and Morale

BY HOLLIS SUMMERS

The American Foreign Service Association's leaders have always been good at discussing big-picture problems. I'm confident the new Governing Board will continue to press for important AFSA goals — overseas comparability pay occupying the top of the list — that require congressional action, and that its leadership will ably perform the essential tasks of meeting with senior officials at the State Department and the other foreign affairs agencies, testifying before Congress and correcting the press when it maligns the Foreign Service.

But AFSA should also pursue several internal changes that State management could effect in a few weeks or months, significantly improving the workplace for the association's members. Each of the six proposals below would improve efficiency and morale by substituting common-sense measures for existing cumbersome and self-flagellating procedures. AFSA is capable of both insisting on all these changes at the same time it pursues broader issues like overseas comparability pay.

Give All Personnel Access to Assignment Information

Right now, only the bureaus and Human Resources personnel have access to the assignment panel agendas on State's intranet. Those most affected, the bidders, are in the dark. Making agendas available to all FS personnel would enable bidders to know when panels will consider jobs they seek and let them request panel

AFSA is capable of insisting on all these changes at the same time that it pursues broader issues.



items be acted on or deferred. Currently, job seekers can know what positions will be considered only if they somehow find out what the agendas contain, a service extremely busy career development officers cannot provide for all their clients.

Equally importantly, giving bidders access to panel agendas and to lists of panel decisions would let them know when jobs they seek have been assigned. Currently, only public diplomacy cone personnel learn what jobs have already been assigned: PD officers rightly consider this vital information. When panel agendas shifted to an electronic format, many in HR argued unsuccessfully that all bidders should have been given access. The result of withholding this important information has been to allow bureaus, which do have access to those agendas, to delay paneling positions until only their candidates remain and to manipulate panels in other ways to attain bureau goals, to the detriment of individual bidders.

Speed Up Tenuring Decisions

The department should accord those entering the Civil Service and

the Foreign Service similar treatment in the matter of permanent hiring. Both groups are treated the same in some ways: this year, for example, both have been required to do a mandatory stint of passport adjudication. However, Presidential Management Fellows (<https://www.pmf.opm.gov/ProgramPolicy.aspx>) are fully vested in just two years, and can be hired at that point at grades up to the GS-12 level. The department also tends to give them real responsibility early, in part to entice them to stay at State.

In contrast, those in the Foreign Service, who often have much better qualifications than PMFs, often are not tenured at their first review, which takes place over three years after they enter. Decisions on those deferred at first review are not made until after an additional year, and sometimes a third review is required six months after the second. As I observed during my three years as a career counselor, the process of selecting which candidates are tenured on first review is haphazard and unfair. Though eventually almost everyone gets tenure, supervisors, perhaps fearful of making mistakes or of taking responsibility, often write evaluations that result in fully qualified candidates having to undergo a second review.

The flaws of the few who don't get tenure usually become obvious in the orientation course, and certainly should be apparent at the end of their first two rating periods. If it takes just two years to identify which PMFs should be vested, management should be able to tenure almost all FS



employees after over three years, at their first review. HR should change its policy and automatically tenure all on first review except the very few whose evaluations demonstrate real performance problems. Supervisors should be required to document such performance problems before the first tenure review, removing the temptation for them to take the easy path of letting someone else counsel and deal with those very few whose performance will not eventually result in tenure.

Implement Family-Friendly Policies for All Bureaus and Posts

Many recognize that the workaholic culture of the State Department needs to change, and management, which now is instituting welcome measures to make unaccompanied tours more palatable, provides many programs that enable workers to pay attention to their families and personal lives as well as to their work requirements. The State Department has in place excellent policies that allow employees to initiate flexible working schedules, to have two employees share a single job and, when feasible, to telecommute. Some bureaus have successfully instituted these policies; others adhere to them only occasionally. AFSA should urge management to ensure that in all bureaus these family-friendly programs are actually available to anyone who wants to use them.

AFSA should also undertake the difficult job of figuring out which bureaus actually encourage employees to use these benefits and annually publicize their efforts in the *Foreign Service Journal* and via the AFSA.net listserv. Specifically, it should let members know how many job shares each bureau offers and list how many FS personnel have had flexible schedules approved in each bureau and post. It should also provide a page on

its Web site that would enable people to find others interested in job-sharing. And it should publicize which overseas missions provide the best services to members of household.

Ensure Low-Ranking Decisions Have a Factual Basis

AFSA has always supported the low-ranking and selection-out of people who are unable to do their jobs adequately, on the basis of documented employee evaluations. Those individuals who are low-ranked twice in five years by different supervisors are then referred to the Performance Standards Board.

At the same time, in its engagement with management AFSA should push for immediate termination of the requirement that at least 5 percent of each competition group must be low-ranked. All promotion board members I've talked to agree that it's impossible to find 5 percent who truly deserve that dubious distinction. Most boards find that only about 2 percent of competition groups clearly qualify for referral to the Performance Standards Board, so they then invent reasons to low-rank the remaining 3 percent.

The department suffers because boards have to complete the very difficult task of low-ranking people whose performance has been good, and perform the administrative tasks necessary to refer some of them to the board, which has in the past refused to separate many of the individuals brought before it. (In 2005, the most recent year for which AFSA has statistics, 189 people were low-ranked, but only 14 were designated for separation by the PSB.)

Adding insult to injury, conscientious employees with good evaluations receive the surprising news that they've been low-ranked just before Christmas. They then have to undertake the laborious task of contesting

that designation, often with the help of AFSA's labor-management counselors, who are already helping many members.

AFSA's legal staff notes that while HR has sometimes claimed there is a legislative mandate that 5 percent of evaluated employees be low-ranked, there actually is no such requirement. Another reason given for management's continuing insistence on that quota is that congressional staff has insisted on it. But even if that were ever true, with a different party in control of Congress and numerous staff changes, it is no longer the case.

HR defends the current policy by pointing to the fact that few employees are low-ranked two years in a row; indeed, some are actually promoted the next year. Nevertheless, policies that arbitrarily inflict unjustifiable judgments and burdens on employees should be eliminated.

Should management stand fast on perpetuating the quota, AFSA should at least insist that the low-ranked be notified when promotions are announced, rather than just before the holidays.

Make Security Enforcement Positive Instead of Punitive

All who work in a classified environment know that only the exceptionally lucky avoid committing security infractions, no matter how faithfully they follow good security procedures. Just as 18th-century England didn't stop crime by making sheep-stealing and about 200 other infractions capital offenses, the institution of draconian penalties for security violations hasn't stopped them, and won't. It has, however, made it difficult for some good officers to gain promotion, and the burdens of these policies fall disproportionately on those cones that deal most with classified material.

In overseas missions, of course,



only State employees play the security violation game by State's rules: the Foreign Agricultural Service and other overseas agencies don't participate. State should learn from these other agencies and adopt more positive methods of dealing with violations that take place in alarmed controlled-access areas, accessible after hours only to armed guards and authorized employees. It should also strive to implement policies that are uniform for all agencies represented in each mission.

Specifically, State should use methods that treat lapses in these areas as opportunities to strengthen security procedures and educate employees to use better practices, instead of using violations to punish and deny promotion for offenses that by definition do "not result in actual or possible compromise of the information" (12 FAM 551.2). Withholding promotion and inflicting other penalties because of infractions that occur within the confines of CAAs is cruel and unusual punishment and should be abandoned.

State also should make other security requirements clearer and make uniform and speedy decisions on whether employees should maintain security clearances (see "Left in Limbo: Two First-Person Accounts of Problems with DS," *FSJ*, September 2005; www.afsa.org/fsj/sept05/honley2.pdf).

Extend the Fair-Share Requirement to All

While most Foreign Service personnel follow bidding rules and dutifully go to Baghdad, Kabul and other high-differential posts, some don't. New employees learn in orientation courses that service requirements come first and that they must go where the department needs them, not where they prefer to be assigned. That's true for the first two tours, but then the requirements for worldwide

availability to meet service needs no longer apply to everyone. People find it easy to get around the fair-share requirement that bidders who have not served in a differential post of at least 15 percent in the eight years prior to their transfer must maintain three fair-share bids.

Management's recent efforts to improve the situation have this year included requiring unaccompanied posts to be staffed before other assignments are made, retroactively changing the differential requirements that determine who's a fair-share bidder, and instituting the gimmick of linked tours (serve in Baghdad and get a guaranteed tour in Accra, Dhaka or other posts). All these measures are desperate attempts to fix a fundamentally flawed system. AFSA should work to establish a fairer, more comprehensive approach that extends to all employees, including those in the Senior Foreign Service.

Because of the gigantic loophole of allowing fair-share candidates to bid on Washington jobs instead of serving in hardship posts, the fair-share system, despite its name, has never fulfilled the purpose of providing adequate staffing to high-differential and hard-to-fill positions. The need to fill one-year accompanied tours at high-differential posts has made this long-standing problem even more obvious.

There are no statistics or other evidence indicating that this situation will be improved by any of this year's improvised attempts to fix the system that AFSA acquiesced to, including the change allowing people to remain in Washington only five years instead of six (a return to the policy before State decided USIA's six-year limit was a best practice and adopted it). What's needed instead is a radical change in the way HR approaches fair share.

If filling unaccompanied positions abroad is HR's greatest priority, then all HR policies should reflect that fact.

AFSA should support even-handed, fair assignment policies that eliminate non-medical exemptions to the fair-share requirement for employees at all grades. But as long as the rules requiring service at hardship posts don't apply to many, the assignment system fails the fairness test, and AFSA should oppose it.

All fair-share candidates who choose to bid on Washington positions should be required to bid only on hard-to-fill Washington jobs. In that way, fair-share candidates who choose to come back to Washington, including those whose medical status or other circumstances preclude service at hardship posts, would be able to help the department meet its most pressing needs, even though they opt not to go abroad or cannot serve there. Only when all those jobs have been filled should fair-share candidates and those precluded from service at hardship posts be allowed to seek other Washington positions.

This policy would have the salutary effect of providing those who have served in high-differential posts with a greater choice of Washington jobs, and of providing lots more candidates for hard-to-fill domestic positions.

There are many AFSA members with specific knowledge of other changes similar to these that could be made quickly. I hope the new Governing Board will solicit their suggestions for improvements and energetically urge management to take action on them, following the association's long tradition of working on behalf of the membership and the department. ■

Hollis Summers, an FSO since 1986, is a former chairman of the Foreign Service Journal Editorial Board. Most recently, he was refugee coordinator in Pakistan from 2005 to 2006 and currently works in the Avian Influenza Action Group.