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WHITE PAPER

To: Rep. Derek Kilmer, Chair, *Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress*
Cc: Avi Green and Mallika Rangan, *Scholars Strategy Network*
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Title: Organizational Considerations for Congressional Modernization and Reform

The purpose of this report is to inform Committee members on the state of the science regarding improving rules and procedures, leadership development, staff recruitment and diversity, and technology and innovation. This paper considers the complexities of modern-day organizing and provides suggestions intended to help Committee members make an informed decision as you pursue congressional reform.

As my area of expertise is in the realm of organizational behavior, the focal topics of interest to the Committee that I am best suited to discuss involve processes governing and general opportunities and challenges associated with leading and managing people in the organization. The following points are organized into two levels of analysis: team functions and organizational considerations.

Team Processes and Functions

Evidence-based scientific approaches to team meetings. Diagnostic considerations, preparation, and feedback-seeking to reach peak team performance.

Why do productive people complain about meetings and remain disengaged? Evidence shows that we typically convene too often in meetings where just a few people dominate¹ and we fail to develop meeting environments that encourage engagement in critical thinking and conversation centered on task-oriented grappling with ideas^{2,3,4}. Well-coordinated meetings – characterized by cooperation, resilience, member self-direction, and ultimately consensus – are achievable. Steven Rogelberg and his colleagues provide recommendations for team policies and practices, including:

- *Train meeting leaders.* Few facilitators receive training in how to conduct or participate meetings.
- *Focus on assessment and preparation for improvement.* Hold a pre-meeting pre-mortem: visualize potential meeting failure and plan out how to mitigate or avoid those problems. During post meeting reflection: provide opportunities for robust feedback.
- *Facilitate improved practices.* Encourage robust and in-depth conversation with diverse participation; encouraging devil's advocacy is useful here. Set aside both meeting and non-meeting days. Encourage policies that empower leaders to bring in innovative new meeting practices.
- *Carefully consider who should be included in meetings.*

Cues from nursing practice and other stressful occupations. Employers pay close attention to attracting and retaining high-demand workers into stressful, critical jobs that too often result in burnout and high turnover.

Organizations that institute '*best place to work*' practices and have strong agreement among members regarding their understanding of the task(s) to be achieved are rewarded with internal benefits such as lower turnover⁵ and, when supported by leadership, experience improved team performance⁶. However, evidence further suggests

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that these practices also promote macro benefits, including organizational resiliency and external stakeholder outcomes, especially in times of crisis⁷ and in stressful/demanding situations^{8,9,10}. Best practices include:

- *Development of knowledge sharing processes.* Shared mental models (SMM) and strong team transactive memory (TTM) systems ensure that all members are on the same page with regard to the task, the work to be completed, and knowing *who knows what* on the team, allowing for both improved team efficiencies and the capacity for individual members to focus on their own unique area(s) of specialization¹¹.
- *Embrace technologies used by virtual teams* to improve SMM and TTM and ultimately, team results^{12,13}.
- *Empowerment within small groups.* Retain individual autonomy and encourage egalitarian conversation, paradoxically bound within a process where the talking ultimately stops and decisions are made. These notions have been researched across the spectrum in not only organizational studies, but those related to educational governance¹⁴, evolutionary biology¹⁵, and constructionist enablement of play^{16,17}.

Organizational Considerations

Open, diverse, and creative solutions require cultivation at the organizational level. Here, I will turn the focus briefly to aspects of communication, voice opportunities, and inclusivity that drive such solutions:

- *Explore and utilize contemporary communication channels that engage productive dialogue.* This becomes especially important as congressional members turn to virtual meetings to continue their collaborative work from their respective home-state offices. In addition to promoting the discovery of open and diverse solutions^{18,19}, these channels will also initiate the infrastructure necessary to not only make informed policy decisions but also effectively communicate these decisions across stakeholder groups²⁰.
- *Consideration of volubility.* While volubility (time spent talking) is relevant to team processes discussed earlier, owing to its inseparable relationship with power structures²¹, I include this here as it is of utmost importance to create a pervasive organizational culture and policies designed to *eliminate potential backlash* – an issue that has become problematic especially for women, minorities, and others who too often are reasonably concerned about or have experienced systematized normative resentment (i.e., backlash) as a result of ‘talking too much’ and exhibition of other agentic behaviors^{22,23,24}.
- *Leading diversity.* Each of these considerations are couched within the important and timely notion of diversity leadership and gendered leadership challenges and opportunities that have come to the forefront of organizational scholarship²⁵. This consideration is especially pertinent as congressional membership is so highly diversified across various aspects of the surface- and deep-level diversity spectrums.

Succession planning. While this one is trickier than in organizations where the next-generation leaders are selected by incumbents, there remain lessons to take away from organizational succession planning concepts:

- *Knowledge transfer and knowledge management strategies.* Inability to maintain intellectual capital across member exits and shifting leadership and committee membership can be highly disruptive²⁶. Implementations of structural and technical systems aimed at preserving the organization’s institutional memory and talent development such as leadership capacity building are suggested^{27,28}.
- *Leadership continuity.* Contemporary research highlights the importance of trust when managing top-level succession while outlining the effects that incumbents and other leaders have on the succession process and cautioning about the negative effects that narcissistic leaders have on a fair and principled succession process^{29,30}.

Conclusion

Reform of long-standing policies and procedures takes commitment to systemic integration of processes that incorporate people (and their perceptions) with state-of-the-science approaches and technologies. While I have outlined several considerations in this document pertinent to the Committee’s commission, these are not designed to serve as an exhaustive or exclusive account, but rather as one piece of a robust synthesis of applicable scientific discovery. It is my sincere hope that these considerations become a useful part of an integrated congressional agenda.

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