FOUNDATIONAL PAPER NO. 3 · MENTORSHIP

The Mentorship Gap in Public Service

The federal government replaces positions, not knowledge. Every unmentored retirement forces the taxpayer to repurchase, through error and delay, judgment the government already owned.

CENTER FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

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What does a contracting officer with thirty years of service actually know? Her position description lists duties any qualified replacement could perform. What it cannot list is the rest: which program offices write requirements that survive protest and which do not, which vendor claims deserve skepticism, what the last three attempts to fix the same problem taught, who to call when the system says no and the mission says now. None of it is written down, because the kind of knowledge that takes thirty years to acquire is precisely the kind that resists documentation. When she retires, the government will fill her position in an average of 101 days.[1] It will not fill her judgment for a decade, and only then if someone is deliberately built to receive it.

Multiply her by the demographic facts and the scale of the problem emerges. Federal employees aged 55 and older make up 28.1 percent of the workforce; those under 30 make up fewer than nine percent.[2] By 2024 the share of federal workers in their sixties had nearly doubled over two decades, to 14.8 percent, while the share in their twenties fell to 7.8 percent.[3] More than a hundred thousand federal employees retire in an ordinary year, and the deferred-resignation and restructuring wave of 2025 removed experienced staff at a pace no ordinary year approaches.[4] Behind the cohort walking out the door stands the thinnest pipeline in the government's modern history. This is the cliff, and the government is approaching it while replacing positions, not knowledge.

I. What Disappears When Expertise Retires Unmentored

Institutional knowledge comes in two forms, and personnel systems only see one. Explicit knowledge lives in regulations, manuals, and files; it survives any departure. Tacit knowledge lives in people: pattern recognition built from cases, calibrated judgment about risk, the unwritten map of how the institution actually works as opposed to how the org chart says it works. Tacit knowledge is the difference between a new claims examiner and a great one, and it transfers exactly one way, through sustained working proximity between someone who has it and someone who does not. That transfer has a name older than government: apprenticeship.

When tacit knowledge retires untransferred, the loss is invisible on every ledger and real in every outcome. The successor relearns by error what the predecessor knew by experience, and each error has a cost: the protest sustained, the claim wrongly denied and appealed, the negotiation entered without memory of the last one. The taxpayer purchased that judgment once, over thirty years of salary. An institution that lets it walk out undocumented and untaught obligates the taxpayer to purchase it again, at retail, through delay and mistake. Succession by hope is not a plan. It is a decision to buy the same expertise twice.

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II. The State of Federal Mentorship

An honest inventory of what exists is brief. Federal law has encouraged mentoring for decades; 5 U.S.C. § 4103 obligates agencies to establish training programs, OPM guidance urges mentoring as a development tool, and most large agencies can point to a formal program, a voluntary pairing system, or a leadership-development course with a mentoring module. Nearly all of it shares three traits: participation is voluntary and marginal, the mentor's time is uncompensated and unweighted in her own performance evaluation, and no one measures whether knowledge actually moved. Which is to say the government treats its most valuable transfer of assets as an extracurricular activity. The Government Accountability Office has kept strategic human capital management on its High-Risk List since 2001, citing exactly this: mission-critical skills gaps that agencies can describe but have not built the machinery to close.[5]

III. The Institution That Does This Well

One American institution proves deliberate development works at scale, and it happens to be the one the public trusts most. The United States military treats leader development as a core mission rather than a benefit. A second lieutenant is never merely hired; he enters a pipeline that runs from commissioning through captains career courses, command and staff colleges, and war colleges, in which every officer of rank is formally responsible for developing subordinates, evaluated on that responsibility, and was himself developed the same way. Professional military education is codified in statute and doctrine; mentorship is embedded in the rating chain itself.[6] The result is an institution that can lose any individual, at any rank, without losing its competence, because the knowledge was never allowed to live in only one head.

Nothing about this model is mysterious, and nothing about it requires a uniform. Its elements are ordinary: development is mandatory, mentorship is a rated duty, progression is sequenced, and the institution plans succession decades out because it knows every general started as a lieutenant. The military simply takes seriously what civilian agencies treat as ornamental. The deepest conservative insight about institutions explains why this works. Edmund Burke described society as a partnership "between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born."[7] An institution is a vessel for accumulated wisdom, and each generation holds it in trust for the next. Tradition, in Chesterton's phrase, is the democracy of the dead. A personnel system that lets each generation's judgment die with its tenure has broken the contract Burke described, and it has done so as a matter of administrative default rather than decision.

IV. The Strongest Objection

The serious objection to a mentorship agenda is economic, and it deserves full weight. Structured mentorship consumes the scarcest resource the government has: the working hours of its best senior people. Every hour a top contracting officer spends developing a successor is an hour not spent on the backlog, and the backlog is measured in citizens waiting. Worse, the return is speculative. The protege may leave for the private sector, taking the investment with him; federal attrition among early-career employees makes this outcome common, and a rational agency head facing this year's workload might reasonably conclude that mentorship is a luxury purchased with other people's queues.

The objection correctly prices the cost and misprices the alternative. The comparison is never between mentorship and a free status quo; the status quo bill arrives later, as the relearning cost documented above, plus the recruitment cost of replacing early-career employees who leave precisely because no one invested in them. Development is among the most consistently cited retention factors in the government's own workforce surveys; the investment the objection fears losing is the investment that prevents the loss. As for the backlog, the military faces operational demands more absolute than any queue and develops leaders anyway, because it has learned over two centuries that skipping development to serve the present crisis manufactures the next one. The objection is an argument for designing mentorship efficiently, with real caseload relief for mentors and accountability for outcomes. It cannot be an argument for the current arrangement, in which the government makes the largest uninsured knowledge bet in the American economy every single year.

V. The Architecture of Succession

A functioning mentorship and succession architecture has five elements, each adapted from institutions that already prove it works.

Identify the knowledge, not just the position. Every agency maintains a register of mission-critical roles where tacit knowledge is concentrated and single-threaded, with retirement eligibility mapped against it. The unit of succession planning is expertise.

Make mentorship a rated duty. For designated senior experts, developing a successor appears in the performance plan and the appraisal, with workload adjusted to make the duty real. What the institution refuses to rate, it has decided not to require.

Sequence the transfer. Structured overlap between incumbent and successor in the final years before expected retirement: shared casework, documented decision reviews, and a deliberate handoff rather than a farewell sheet cake and an empty desk.

Build the receiving pipeline. Deliberate early-career cohorts, rotational assignments that build the cross-functional pattern library tacit expertise requires, and progression tied to demonstrated growth. A companion proposal in this institute's Backgrounder series, the Federal Scholars Program, develops the specific institution; this paper states the requirement it answers.

Measure the transfer. Succession readiness reported annually: what share of mission-critical roles have an identified, developing successor. One number, published, per agency. Institutions manage what leadership must sign.

The federal government is among the oldest large workforces in the American economy, and it is aging out of its own expertise on a schedule everyone can read.[2] The demographic cliff is not a surprise; it is an appointment. The only question is whether the government arrives at it having built the apprenticeship machinery that every durable institution, from the guilds to the officer corps, has always used to outlive its members. Stewardship is the obligation the present owes the future. The retirement wave will collect on that obligation either way, in transferred judgment or in repurchased error.

NOTES

1. U.S. Office of Personnel Management, Merit Hiring Plan (May 29, 2025), reporting average government-wide time-to-hire of 101 days for fiscal year 2024.
2. OPM workforce data as cited in the Merit Hiring Plan (May 29, 2025): 28.1 percent of federal workers aged 55 and older; fewer than nine percent under 30.
3. OPM FedScope federal workforce data, age distribution, 2005 to 2024: employees in their sixties rose from 8.1 to 14.8 percent of the workforce; employees in their twenties fell from a comparable share to 7.8 percent.
4. OPM, Retirement Statistics, Annuity Roll Processing System, annual retirement additions; Congressional Research Service, Federal Employees' Retirement System: Summary of Recent Trends (reporting average federal retirement age of 62.3 in fiscal year 2022 and more than 108,000 processed retirements between September 2022 and September 2023).
5. U.S. Government Accountability Office, High-Risk Series: strategic human capital management, designated high risk since 2001.
6. 10 U.S.C. ch. 107 (professional military education); Department of Defense officer professional development framework, including Joint Professional Military Education requirements under the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, Pub. L. No. 99-433.
7. Edmund Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790).

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