

Carol Waller Pope

Chairman

Federal Labor Relations Authority

By Michael J. Keegan

Improving Labor-Management Relations in the Federal Government



“The FLRA is the sole agency responsible for federal-sector labor/management relations,” explains FLRA Chairman Carol Waller Pope. FLRA is an independent, administrative federal agency created by Title VII of the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978. The statute allows federal employees to organize, bargain collectively, and participate through labor organizations of their choice in decisions affecting their working lives. It

defines and lists the rights of employees, labor organizations, and agencies. “Prior to this,” explains Pope, “some of our functions—not all—were performed under executive orders dating back to President Kennedy in 1962.”

She characterizes the agency as small but mighty, with about 130 employees and a budget of just under \$25 million. According to Pope, the FLRA carries out five primary statutory responsibilities. These include resolving complaints of unfair labor practice, determining the appropriateness of labor organization representation, adjudicating exceptions to arbitrators’ awards, adjudicating legal issues relating to the duty to bargain, and resolving impasses during negotiations. “We take our mission seriously, recognizing if there are unhealthy labor management relations in the federal sector it affects the government meeting its mission.” FLRA has three distinct components, including the Authority, the Office of the General Counsel, and the Federal Service Impasses Panel. “The political leadership of the agency is a total of five presidential appointees, three members, a general counsel, and a chairman of the Federal Service Impasses Panel, as well as six additional members of the panel.” Pope became chairman in 2009. She has served as a member

of the authority since November 2000 (nominated by both Presidents Clinton and Bush) and is the first FLRA career employee to serve as chairman and member. “My role is at least twofold. As Chairman and CEO, I have overall administrative, fiscal, and policymaking responsibility. As a member, I have no greater authority than the other two members with respect to the case adjudicatory function,” notes Pope.

She views challenges as opportunities. “I inherited the agency at the lowest point in its 30-year history, so building employee morale was a challenge.” She took over when the agency ranked last in the *Best Places to Work* rankings for federal small agencies. “We had nowhere to go but up,” exclaims Pope. “I had been there during those years marked by low employee morale. I knew that you don’t turn around a culture or improve morale overnight.” The adverse changes that compromised the agency’s performance happened over time. She admits that during that period, FLRA’s fiscal management was somewhat ineffective. “We didn’t fill positions even though we had money, and as a result, after three years, Congress rescinded \$3 million from our budget. You don’t get that money back or rebuild your budget resources overnight,” she says. Pope recognized that to bring it back would take both time and commitment. “I had to be clear about my expectations and communicate that to employees.”

As she took the reins, Pope sought to open a new chapter in the book of federal sector labor-management relations and the FLRA. Her vision for the future focuses on revitalization, reinvention, and re-engagement. “We all know that success breeds success. Employees feel good about their workplace if it’s thriving and accomplishing its mission. We were not doing that, so revitalization, reinvention, and re-engagement seemed to fit not only my vision, but what our shared priorities were for the agency,” says Pope.

A woman with dark hair, wearing a black pinstriped blazer over a black top, a gold chain necklace, a diamond earring, and a ring. She is smiling and gesturing with her hands as if speaking. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light blue and orange.

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FLRA’s low employee morale affected the agency’s performance, which in turn affected its customers. Timely case processing, training efforts, outreach, and offers of alternative dispute resolution services all suffered during this period. Revitalization meant addressing employee needs and changing the way FLRA does business. “We recognized that the needs of our parties had changed, the interests of our employees and their needs had changed, and so we needed to revitalize the agency first and foremost around our mission performance,” explains Pope. When she came onboard as chairman, FLRA had an inventory of 400 cases, 80% of which were over the productivity time goal. “We located the bottlenecks,” declares Pope. “We also recognized that increasing our staff load alone wasn’t the answer. We looked to increase training, development, and really focus on skills enhancement. We also looked at our technology and how we went about doing our business. We’ve dedicated resources to improving the technology supporting our employees as well as improving processes. We’re still more paper-driven than I’d prefer, but we’re looking to see how we could build the technology to support electronic filing of cases.”

Pope’s focus is on reinvention, not restoration. She is working to make the agency flexible and strategically poised to address the needs of this changing environment. “For example, we had an arcane, first-generation website. It was an embarrassment. It wasn’t user-friendly, so we dedicated resources to reinventing our website.” Pope also notes that, consistent with President Obama’s executive order on “Creating Labor-Management Forums to Improve Delivery of Government Services,” her agency is committed to providing training and services to assist parties in developing effective labor-management forums. “The executive order,” explains Pope, “requires the parties in a non-adversarial way to promote collaboration and consensus decision-making.” Labor-management forums are used to complement existing collective bargaining processes, to allow the parties to work collaboratively, and to allow management and union to discuss workplace issues and jointly develop solutions.

Under Pope, the FLRA has sought to reengage members of the labor/management community. “We had our own view about where we needed to improve, but we needed to hear from our employees, and as importantly, we needed to hear from our customers.” To that end, FLRA set up an e-mail, engagetheflra@flra.gov, and asked for input. It also offered alternative dispute resolution services to try to resolve some of its older cases, which was unprecedented. “I think that the way you become successful is to be about continuous self-improvement and learning,” declares Pope.

“When I became chairman,” says Pope, “I found that people just wanted to have their voices heard. We’re vital again as an agency. The best thing about the FLRA is that we’re promoting from within. We have employees who see there are promotion opportunities, opportunities to develop, and that we’re investing in them and their future.” In this year’s *Best Places to Work* rankings, the FLRA improved its score by a whopping 250.4 percent. “I recognize that you can’t rest on your laurels. We didn’t become number one in the small agency rankings and that’s really the goal. Yet, to move up out of the 34th spot of 34 agencies was a tremendous improvement that was exciting to everybody in the agency.” For Pope, “our challenge now is to look where we scored lowest and determine what actions we need to take to further improve.” ■

To learn more about the Federal Labor Relations Authority, go to www.flra.gov



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