Testimony of

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Chair Kilmer, Vice-Chair Timmons, and committee members, thank you for inviting me to speak with you today.

I was asked to focus my testimony on how members of Congress (members) can maintain a positive work environment for themselves and their staff when work conditions are often difficult, and even toxic at times.

Before addressing this focal question, it is important to first answer the question, "Is Congress, as an institution, so unique that the science and best practices from research on other types of organizations will not apply?" Congress is undoubtedly a unique context, but at its core, it is comprised of humans—humans working with humans, humans being organized by humans, and humans being led by humans. While solutions likely need to be tailored to the specific context of Congress, which I will discuss today, the fundamental science and learnings around individual, team, and organizational health, well-being, and effectiveness still apply.

With this in mind and going back to our focal question, I want to discuss three primary strategies for creating a positive work environment despite difficult circumstances.

1. Strategies focused on the member – Leading self

2. Strategies focused on the team – Leading others

3. Strategies focused on the broader ecosystem – Leading institution

Let's start with leading self.

Members should seek to view success in realistic terms to better engender motivation, a sense of accomplishment, and fulfillment for them and their staff. I encourage members to embrace

the concept of small wins rather than defining success through highly elusive legislative homeruns. Examples of small wins could be:

- Helping a constituent
- Getting your amendment considered in committee/on the floor
- Getting a committee to hold a hearing on a topic you care about
- Developing your staff
- Seeing your ideas incorporated into legislation even if you don't get credit for it.
- Improving your constituent mail turnaround time and casework numbers

Small wins are typically more under your control, thus achievable, and can provide a sense of great accomplishment. Furthermore, over time and across people, small wins may accumulate into great wins. With that said, while these wins certainly matter, the process and journey matter too and can be celebrated by members and the team along the way to promote that sense of forward movement and achievement.

Part of a new and productive success lens is genuinely internalizing what it means to be a member of congress. You have the incredible honor of representing your entire district to better lives. You have the incredible honor of being a steward of our democracy. At the core of these honors is service to others, including those that did not vote for you, and our country. Let's contrast this focus with a focus on getting re-elected. A re-election focus is not about helping others. A re-election focus becomes about the member and their future, and not the future of their district or democracy. This matters as a) it is not aligned with the true essence of being a member thus creating a values conflict and b) it puts service and helping others as a secondary focus. The latter is just so critical as helping of others is a key predictor of life satisfaction, one of the most robust predictors in fact. Furthermore, a helping focus can become incredibly motivating and a source of great fulfilment for your staff. I recognize that this is all easier said than done. But the research is clear, service to others is arguably the greatest path to happiness when fully embraced, elevating self is not.

Next, strategies focused on the team – Leading others

A member's staff is the engine of their success. An engaged staff performs better, helps each other more, is more committed, more collaborative, more innovative, and less likely to turnover. Let me share a few key lessons from the research on promoting employee engagement that a member, working in close conjunction with their chief of staff, can do to promote a positive work environment. To have the greatest effect, however, the member cannot delegate all of this work to their chief of staff. The member also has an important visible role to play.

First, set the stage with vision. Communicate the small wins strategy, and service to others perspective, with passion and energy. Emphasize that success is about elevating lives, and not your personal future as a member.

Second, reflect on your within-office processes that are under your control. Are you as efficient and streamlined as possible? Identify and remove barriers as this promotes a sense of accomplishment which is foundational to engagement. Meetings are also a target of opportunity. Try to eliminate unneeded meetings or at the very least, dial back the time in each meeting given Parkinson's law—the idea that work expands to fill whatever time is allotted to it. So, if a meeting is scheduled for one hour, it will take one hour. But we can use this to our advantage. Don't hesitate to make your meetings 20 or 25 minutes, you will get the work done more times than not. And, importantly, you are returning time to your staff by doing this.

Third, working with your chief of staff, lead people well. Let me share some evidence-based practices of importance.

1. **Be a supportive leader.** Treat people with respect, care, and fairness. Stand up for your staff. Take an active interest in their growth and development.
2. **Communicate readily and transparently.** Leverage 1:1 meetings with your staff to help make connections, build relationships, and sustain alignment. As part of communication, provide ongoing feedback. Praise publicly, criticize privately. Catch staff doing things right. Express gratitude frequently. Encourage two-way communication and voice. Reward people for identifying problems and encourage them to propose solutions.
3. **Help ensure the work itself is meaningful, for the most part.** Also, empower your staff to make decisions. Provide them with tools and resources needed for success.
4. **Help build a bond among team members.** Encourage helping. Bring joy where you can. Make your "house" as positive as it can be. Address conflicts that emerge so they don't undermine the team. If staff are acting competitively with one another in a counterproductive manner, address it actively and stress how much you value collaboration.
5. **Be authentic and kind.** Don't hesitate to apologize, if appropriate.
6. **Hold periodic team debriefs sessions with your team to discuss how they are working together.** Ask them to describe what is working well and any obstacles they face. Identify one or two adjustments you or they can make immediately.

Actively leading and growing your staff takes time. Time you may think you don't have. But, it is truly an investment that pays dividends in terms of collective performance, your success, and retention of talented staffers in the long run.

Last, let's look at strategies focused on the broader ecosystem – Leading institution

I recognize that this committee is in many ways charged with changing the broader congressional ecosystem so that success can better be realized. I would like to share with you a process I have used in my client work that could be useful to your efforts. It is a process to identify key pain points to be solved. A pain point is something procedural or operational that stalls effectiveness and engenders great frustration. To facilitate the identification of pain points, a multiple cohort approach can be taken. A cohort can be a bi-partisan group of junior

members or senior members. And/or a cohort can be identity based, a cohort of women members for example. Forming small bi-partisan groups to identify key pain points can be exciting and bonding for members (it also can service as a form of social support to a member which is a key buffer against burnout). After identification of common, pressing, and overlapping key pain points, I encourage you, however, to only work to solve a couple of pain points at a time so the task is more manageable—this enables you to build momentum. Solutions to pain points can come from cohorts themselves, from others, or through benchmarking with other legislative entities. However, and this is key, it is easy to overthink solutions and as a result do nothing as we look for the "perfect" solution. I encourage Congress to avoid paralysis by addressing pain points with a set of time-limited pilot experiments. Time-limited experiments, trying something for say 3 months, increase the chances of action. And, if the experiment does not work, then reflect why, learn, and plan your next time-limited experiment until some reasonable success is found. This process can be part of a long-term strategy, a routine of sorts, to stay efficient as an organization. Obviously, a person will need to own and champion this process (akin to a managing partner in a law firm) to be sure it is executed effectively.

I want to wind down my remarks by sharing two training interventions, fairly common in other organizations, that could be excellent additions to your Leadership Training Academy, if not already present. I won't discuss these now but would be happy to do so later if interested.

1. A training on working with difficult people and relationship building

2. A training on interest-based versus position-based negotiation as a way of getting disparate parties to find win-win solutions.

Overall, in any workplace there are things we can readily control and things we cannot. How we lead ourselves, we can control. How we lead others, we can control. For institutional pain points, we can also have control to some extent by identifying the most pressing issues, taking reasonable bets, doing experiments, and moving forward. Each of these approaches helps, ultimately, in achieving success and feelings of fulfillment in a challenging environment.