

Bob Behn's Public Management Report

An occasional (and maybe insightful) examination of the issues, dilemmas, challenges, and opportunities in leadership, governance, management, and performance in public agencies.

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On the value and seven different details of

Shining a Bright Light

Last spring, the **Taubman Center for State and Local Government** and the **Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston** sponsored a series of seminars on PerformanceStat—the leadership strategy, for which the most well-known examples are the New York Police Department's **CompStat** and Baltimore's **CitiStat**.

One of these seminars, on what we called “SocialServiceStat,” examined how Los Angeles and New York were using this strategy to motivate and to learn how to help local citizens find employment. The Los Angeles County Department of Social Services was represented by Karen Kent, director of **DPSSTATS**. The New York City Human Resources Administration was represented by Joseph DeMartino, deputy commissioner for Program Reporting Analysis and Accountability with responsibility for **JobStat**.

Later, a small group of scholars and public executives gathered over dinner to continue the conversation. As is almost always the case in these discussions of public-management strategies, the dominant issues were: “Why does this work?” “Why should this work?” “How can I make this work in my [obviously different] organization?” “What is the cause-and-effect theory behind this kind of effort to improve performance?”

Soon the discussion focused on one cause-and-effect theory: the value of “shining a bright light” on the performance of individual units. Indeed, that's what the PerformanceStat data, the PerformanceStat meetings, and the PerformanceStat follow-up all do. They shine a very bright light on the results that individual units are producing (or not producing). The PerformanceStat data provide this information—the light. Then, the meetings and the follow-up ensure that this light is, indeed, very bright.

Shining a light on the performance of different units can both motivate improved performance and generate experiments from which everyone can learn how to produce better results.

But how? For any PerformanceStat, the details do matter. They matter a lot. The leaders of any organization that seeks to use the light-shining approach needs to work out at least seven different details.

(1) “Who is doing the shining?” If the organization's leaders are doing the shining—if the members of the leadership team all know the details of the performance of the units on which they are shining the light—those units will pay attention.

(2) “On what is the light shining?” A flood light won't accomplish too much. If the organization's leadership is trying to light up every aspect of performance, the light's impact will be similarly diffuse. The leadership team needs to focus a spotlight on their organization's **performance deficits**.

What is the cause-and-effect theory behind PerformanceStat? This leadership strategy focuses a very bright light on the performance of individual units, thus motivating each unit to improve and generating experiments from which everyone can learn.

(3) “On whom is the light shining?” The leadership team needs to decide on exactly what level of the organization to focus the light. What units—and thus what managers'—performance does it want to illuminate?

(4) “On whom else is the same light shining?” Is the same light shining on a set of similar units with similar operational responsibilities? If so, this light will be implicitly (and perhaps very explicitly) comparing each unit's performance with that of other similar units. Moreover, this light will also be comparing the performance of these units' managers. Consequently, many (if not all) of these managers will seek to learn how to improve performance. Then, each manager will seek to motivate everyone in his or her unit to employ these innovations.

(5) “Who else will see on what and on whom the light is shining?” Will the people managing these similar units not only see how the light is illuminating their performance? Will they also see the light shining on every other unit's performance? If so, these managers will want to make sure that their peers do not think that they and their unit are slackers.

(6) “How often is the light turned on?” Are these light-shining happenings infrequent and episodic, something that can easily be ignored given more immediate (and perhaps conflicting) pressures? Or will the light—the same damn light—be shined on every manager next month, and the month after that, and the . . . ?

(7) “How long will the light shine?” Is this light-shining thing simply the latest management fad, soon to be replaced by performance dieting or results therapy? Or has all of this light shining become a permanent part of the organization's performance strategy that, because it is proving so effective, will even be continued by the next administration?

PerformanceStat is not the only strategy that public executives can use to ratchet up the results produced by their agencies. To be successful, however, any such strategy has to shine a very bright light on the performance of individual units.

Shining a light on the performance of such units can motivate the people in these units to improve performance using existing, well-established practices and foster experiments to learn new, more effective approaches. Still, thinking through how exactly to shine this light is essential to its illuminative effectiveness. **B**

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