On why every [effective] public manager faces

The Challenge of Causal Reasoning

Every effective public manager has accumulated a repertoire of strategies. And each of these strategies includes a number of tactics. As every effective public manager has learned: "We Can Never Do Merely One Thing."

Every improvement in performance derives from how the manager's macro strategy and associated tactics affect the work of the organization's staff, the cooperation of collaborating agencies, and the behavior of citizens.

As every effective public manager has learned: "Better results never have a Single Cause." Moreover their strategic effectiveness raises an operation and analytical question: *"What caused the improvement?"*

The answer can affect future results. For if the manager does not know how what actions contributed to those improved results, he or she cannot learn from this success.

To further ratchet up performance, the manager and the leadership team need to build on past improvements. If, however, they can't distinguish the actions that had a big impact from those that had little or none, how can they adapt a previously successful strategy to accomplish a different purpose in different circumstances?

Answer: They can't!

Thus effective public managers face the challenge of causal reasoning: "What (do I think) caused what?"

If the manager had taken a number of isolated actions each of which had an isolated impact on a separate and identifiable improvement in results, the task of causal reasoning would be straightforward.

Unfortunately, to be effective, public managers have to take multiple actions. Moreover, these actions are rarely independent. Indeed, effective managers consciously design each tactic to reenforce the others. For the various components of this macro strategy to work in concert, the manager needs to create causal connections from multiple strategies to multiple results. These connections are quite complex. No wonder that, for effective public managers, this causal reasoning is both a big and significant challenge.

The core question—"What caused what?"—does not itself appear too complicated. Yet the abundance of possible causes—which necessarily includes the actions of people who are not part of the leadership team—creates a multi-dimensional cause-and-effect maze.

Yes, the members of the leadership team were able to find their way through this maze. But that does not mean they knew—from the beginning, or even at any step—exactly what they were doing. Most likely, they were simply practicing "Management by Groping Along."

Yet, to add the lessons from this success to their management repertoire, they need to trace through the causal connections from what they (and others) did to the results these actions produced (or, at least, to which they contributed).

> *Better results never have a single cause. Thus, every effective public manager faces the challenge of causal reasoning: What (do I think) caused what? And mapping the multiple causal connections is a complex task requiring answers to many important questions.*

This is no easy task. No individual action has just one causal consequence. Each action could have had multiple consequences. And each consequence could have had multiple causes.

Mapping such causal connections helps to answer a variety of important, complex questions:

❖ *How* did what tactics of the strategy establish the purpose to be achieved?

❖ *How* did what tactics specify the result to be produced next—and by when?

❖ *How* did what tactics motivate individual staff to pursue this result with diligence and creativity?

❖ *How* did what tactics motivate agency teams to pursue this result with diligence and creativity?

❖ *How* did what tactics motivate people and teams in other public agencies and non-governmental organizations to assist in producing this result?

❖ *How* did what tactics motivate individual citizens to assist in producing this result?

These are not strictly one-to-one connections. No one tactic of any strategy produces precisely one single output. For a public agency to produce an important result, it needs a strategy with multiple tactics that synergistically contribute to the result. Indeed, the leadership team could have designed each micro tactic of its macro strategy not to have a mere individual impact on one minor result but to have an overall, collective impact on macro performance.

The more complex the strategy—the more synergistically interacting tactics—the more sophisticated must be the causal reasoning: Given all of the tactics the leadership team employed to improve performance, which ones had an impact? On what result? And what was its causal connection?

None of this is easy. As Charlie Lave and Jim March, wrote in the *Introduction to Models in the Social Sciences,* "God has chosen to give the easy problems to the physicists." **B**

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