

# 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.

On the delusion of:

## Cookbook Management

If you have \$45 to burn, buy a copy of *Implementing Global Performance Measurement Systems* by Ferdinand Tesoro and Jack Tootson. It isn't a terrible book. It offers some useful insights into the challenge of performance measurement.

I do object, however, to the book's subtitle: "A Cookbook Approach." For indeed, the authors do promise a performance-measurement cookbook. They provide "a four-stage performance-measurement process"; "a simple, easy-to-follow linear approach"; 15 different "tools" including both a "cost-benefit analysis spreadsheet" and a "technology checklist for measurement reporting"; plus numerous "templates" to "make it easy for you to fill in the gaps."

For any public executive who has struggled with the challenge of creating and using performance measures, a "cookbook" that costs a mere \$45 is certainly a bargain.

Unfortunately, this cookbook is written for the private-sector cook. One of the early templates is for calculating a return on investment—in dollars. Most public executives can't make this calculation. Unless they run an internal services organization (such as an IT unit that sells its services to line units) or a public utility (such as a municipal water authority), they can't fill in this template.

My objection to this book is, however, more fundamental. For the implication behind the word "cookbook" is that any idiot can use it. You don't need any technical knowledge. You don't need any real understanding of why what works. Just follow the instructions, stupid.



How much do you have to know about cooking to follow the instructions in the *Joy of Cooking*? Not much. You do have to know how to boil water and turn on the oven. How much equipment do you need? Again, not much. You do need a few pots and pans. You need a measuring cup and measuring spoons, and

you need to know what they measure. You need to be able to read your watch.

By the time you are a teenager, you have mastered these few prerequisites. For each dish, the cookbook lists the exact ingredients that you need and provides a series of very linear steps. Assemble the ingredients, follow the steps, and voila. It may not be a masterpiece, but it is certainly edible.

Even if you set your oven to 325° rather than 350°, the cake will come out okay. Even if you cooked it for 30 minutes rather than 35 minutes, it will come out okay. After all, you can use a simple tool, the toothpick, to perform a rudimentary test to determine whether the cake is done and your work is finished.

Unfortunately, the simple, easy-to-follow, linear steps for leading a public agency cannot be found in any cookbook. They don't exist. Your kitchen is a controlled environment. You get to choose the ingredients; no one else tells you what you get to use—and what you don't get to use. You get to choose the utensils. You get to choose when you will do your cooking. And if the kids are making too much noise, you can yell back: "Get out of my kitchen."

Imagine being instructed to bake a cake from scratch. But imagine being denied the opportunity to use sugar or a cake pan. Imagine being told that you couldn't turn the oven above 150 degrees. Imagine being instructed to do this at 3:00 in the morning, while numerous people give you conflicting instructions. To bake a credible cake under such conditions, you need more than a cookbook. You need to understand the culinary principles behind any effort to combine flour, milk, eggs, sugar, baking powder, etc.

To learn how to lead a public agency, you have to go to culinary school. You have to understand why you beat the egg whites for 30 seconds not 50 seconds. You have to understand why you cook some cakes at 325° and some at 350°. Only when you understand all of these underlying principles can you respond creatively to a new set of circumstances not covered in any of the cookbooks.

Today, at all levels of government, we search for the performance-measurement *system*. We don't use the phrase "performance measurement cookbook." But that's what we want. We want a single system that will function on automatic pilot under all circumstances serving up performance measures that will somehow—miraculously—ratchet up performance. How? We don't know. We don't have the foggiest idea. We simply assume that if we create a performance-measurement

cookbook, and if we require all public agencies to use the one, single recipe in this cookbook, performance will pop out of the oven, done precisely to everyone's liking.

Cookbooks are seductive. They promise that we can produce something without much thinking. They promise that we can accomplish something significant if we just follow the idiot-proof instructions. They promise that we can accomplish something significant even though we don't understand the underlying principles behind these instructions.

*We search for a single performance-measurement system that will function on automatic pilot under all circumstances serving up performance measures that will somehow—miraculously—ratchet up performance.*

Yes, each chapter in the *Joy of Cooking* begins with some discussion of some general points that apply, for example, to all cakes. But you don't have to read that part. Yes, the authors of *Implementing Global Performance Measurement Systems* do examine how you might customize one of their tools. Yes, they do offer some in-

sights into the principles behind their tools.

Still, they don't merely use the word "cookbook" as a metaphor. The authors propose a "system" and permit readers to infer that if they will just follow this system the performance measures will pop out of the oven done to perfection. They are literally selling a performance-measurement cookbook.

Sorry. There isn't any such thing. **B**

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