

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.

Vol. 6, No. 6, February 2009

Copyright © 2009 by Robert D. Behn

On why public officials need to remember there is

No Perfect Performance Measure

Give me a performance measure and I can tell you what's wrong with it. I'm good at this. I may not be good at much else; I can't even hit a *minor-league* curve ball. But I can identify the flaws in a performance measure in my sleep.

I can tell you why it won't capture what you really want (or need) to capture. I can tell you why it will distort the behavior of people in undesirable—perhaps counterproductive—ways. I can tell you why it will encourage the budget folks to give you less money, not more. If you come up with a performance measure, I can identify at least one flaw—usually several.

Of all of the public-sector performance measures with which I am familiar, the best is the childhood immunization rate for measles. If this measure goes up, the world is a better place.

Why? Because the measles vaccine works to produce the very result you want. If you give a child the vaccine as the **U.S. Centers for Disease Control** recommends (two doses with the first given after the child is one-year old), the probability that the child is immune to the measles is 99 percent. That's impressive. Most of the things that we do in government do not have close to a 99-percent success rate.

An additional plus is the “herd effect.” If you give the vaccine (again, as recommended by the CDC) to 1,000 children in a neighborhood, even those few children for whom it doesn't work will be better off. These unimmunized children will be much less likely to come into contact with a child who has the measles and, thus, are less likely to get it. With a success rate so high, vaccinating lots of children helps even those few for whom the vaccine is ineffective (or who didn't get the vaccine).

Of course, to drive organizational behavior, we cannot use the *immunization rate*. This performance measure (for any governmental jurisdiction) is easy to understand. If you have mas-

tered long-division, you get it. But public health agencies and the people who work in them don't produce immunizations or immunization rates. They produce vaccinations.

For a government jurisdiction to get its immunization rate up, it will need to set a **service-delivery target** for vaccinations produced by its public health department. Then, the department will need to break that overall target down into targets for subregions, and then into targets for teams within those subregions.

The **operational theory** here isn't very complicated. If every team makes its production target for vaccinations, so will all of the subregions and thus the entire jurisdiction. And, if every jurisdiction makes its production target, it will improve its immunization rate to the desired level.

Don't go looking for the perfect performance measure. It doesn't exist. So, start with a good measure or two. Identify their flaws. Be alert for them. Can you live with them? Make some adjustments? Still, you'll never eliminate all of the flaws. Get over it.

But what is the consequence of assigning **performance targets** to subregions and teams? One of the purposes of such targets is to put pressure on the subregions and their teams to produce. And they will feel the pressure.

Indeed, once one subregion hits its target, the pressure is really on. Excuses (presented as explanations) won't work any more. One subregion has achieved its target. Why can't the others? “Aren't you as good as they are?” “How come you can't do it?”

How will the teams (and their members) respond to this pressure? They can react as desired, working harder and smarter. They can do whatever is necessary to achieve their target.

“Whatever is necessary.” Hmm. What might this include? Those who set the target thought working smarter and harder is the proper definition of “whatever is necessary.”

Suppose, however, the team is really feeling the pressure. Suppose it is already working harder. Suppose it can't figure out how to work smarter. What other options does it have?

Harder and smarter is not the only option. And a desperate team might resort to another one.

Even the immunization rate, this wonderful performance measure, may (under at least some circumstances) not be perfect.

So get over it. Don't go looking for the perfect performance measure. Don't spend countless meetings debating whose measure is without defects. Don't hire expensive consultants to create the penultimate measure. (I am sure, nevertheless, that some ingenious subscriber will report having invented a flawless measure.)

Instead, start with a good measure (or two). Not great, not perfect, just good. But from the beginning, try to identify its inadequacies. Recognize what problems the measure might create; then, as you implement your performance strategy, be alert for the emergence of such flaws.

Next, decide: Can you live with these flaws? Or must you make some adjustments? Perhaps some minor adjustments? Or maybe some major changes?

Then, if necessary, implement the improvements. But don't believe after this round of improvements—or the tenth round—that you will have eliminated all of the flaws. You won't. Get over it. **B**

Robert D. Behn is a lecturer at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government where he chairs the executive-education program “**Driving Government Performance: Leadership Strategies that Produce Results.**” His latest publication is: *What All Mayors Would Like to Know About Baltimore's CitiStat Performance Strategy.*

