

# 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 ludicrous search for:

## The Magical Performance System

The search is on. Public officials everywhere—in national, state, and provincial capitols—are looking for the best performance system. For once they find this system, they will (they believe) have *solved* their performance problems. And public officials everywhere are desperately trying to *solve* their performance problems. That is why they keep searching for the ultimate performance system.

They won't find it.

Why? Because it isn't there. The magical performance *system* doesn't exist. Even a good performance *system* doesn't exist. Systems don't improve performance; leaders do.

Still, the concept of a performance "system" is deceptively seductive. The system does the work. That's why any system is so alluring. A system is like an engine. You push the start button, and the system does the work.

Thus, to many, the challenge of improving the performance of public agencies (and non-profit and for-profit organizations, too) is to find the right system—the perfect system. Sure, this system might be elusive. It might be hard to find. Indeed, it might be difficult to comprehend when first sighted. It might not stand out like a mountain.

But it's there. It's got to be. Someone has already discovered it. Someone has already

perfected it. We just have to find this clever someone, this magical system.

Then, all we need do is import this system into our organization, set it up, and push the start button. Once the system is going, we can move on to something else.

Sorry. It doesn't work that way. There is no system; there is no start button.

If you want to improve the performance of any organization—in the public, private, or third sector—you have to give performance your constant attention. You have to give it your personal attention at the operational level.

You can't just create a set of performance measures and look at them at the end of the fiscal year—or six months after the end of the fiscal year when the annual report comes out. You have to check personally on the measures on a monthly—or even weekly—basis.

I make a clear distinction between "performance systems" and "performance management." A performance system is a government-wide effort. One kind of performance system is performance measurement, another is performance budgeting. It is a system just like a procurement system or a personnel system. The Government Performance and Results Act is just one example of such a "system."



Like all systems, a performance system is based on rules. Like all systems, it requires public agencies and public managers to follow rules and regulations, to publish annual reports, and to leave paper trails that permit others to audit compliance with these rules and regulations.

This rule-driven approach is unlikely to prove very effective—let alone magical. Yes, it is possible for a legislature, a budget office, or a central administrative agency to force public employees to do things that—if they were done with genuine enthusiasm and subtle intelligence—could contribute to improved performance. In reality, however, those upon whom these requirements are imposed are most likely to view them as yet another addition to the multiplicity of administrative regulations with which they must comply rather than as coherent guidelines that if applied with intelligent discretion to the unique circumstances of their organization might actually help. The rules of any system (for performance or anything else) are not designed to elicit discernment and adaptation. They are created to impose obedience and conformity.

Performance management is not a system. Rather, performance management is the active, conscious efforts of the leadership of a public agency to motivate people—both employees and collaborators—to produce more, or better, or more consequential results that are valued by citizens. In both the academic and political worlds, however, the phrase “performance management” often means little more than a performance system.

Are Compstat and CitiStat performance systems? They are certainly government-wide (or, at least, agency-wide) efforts to require different units to do specific things. But, the public leaders who created these efforts hardly thought of them as systems that, once cre-

ated, would continue to function on automatic pilot. Instead, Commissioner William Bratton of the New York City Police Department and Mayor Martin O'Malley of Baltimore both recognized that to make their approach work to improve performance required the constant attention of top leadership. If the leaders of the department send their deputies to run the meetings, everyone else will send their deputies. Soon the only people at the meetings will be the deputies of deputies—people with no authority to commit to anything.

*The concept of a performance “system” is deceptively seductive. The system is like an engine. You push the start button, and the system does all of the work. Sorry. It doesn’t work that way. There is no system, no start button.*

Finding the magical performance system may appear to be difficult. But it appears to be less difficult than the alternative: performance leadership. For performance leadership comes with no start button. It comes with no promise that, once you get it running, you can move on to other things. In fact, performance leadership comes with precisely

the opposite promise. It comes with the promise that, once you have started it, you have to keep doing it. You can't stop. To improve performance, you have to keep working at it.

If we are going to improve the performance of public agencies, we can't do it with performance systems. We can only do it through performance leadership. **B**

---

Robert D. Behn is the author of *Performance Leadership: 11 Better Practices That Can Ratchet Up Performance* and a lecturer at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

As a member of the team of Kennedy School faculty who lead executive-education programs for the public sector, Bob chairs “Driving Government Performance: Leadership Strategies that Produce Results.” He also conducts custom-designed executive programs for public agencies, most recently in Lisbon.