

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 why public executives need:

Operational Theories

Chief Michael Scagnelli has a theory. Actually, he has a lot of theories. Indeed, he needs lots of theories.

Scagnelli is chief of transportation for the New York City Police Department. His job is to (1) keep traffic moving, (2) prevent accidents, and (3) prevent accidents that cause injury and death. As a result, he needs at least three theories—with each having, perhaps, a number of sub-theories. Scagnelli needs theories about what keeps traffic moving. He needs theories about what prevents accidents. He needs theories about what prevents accidents that cause injury and death.

Some of Scagnelli's theories are simple and supported by lots of evidence. For example, Scagnelli believes that when police officers wear seatbelts, they are less likely, if they do get in an accident, to be injured. Thus, he is on a campaign to get all of the police officers in the department to wear their seatbelts.

Not an easy task. Many police officers don't like to wear their seatbelts. Some strap them behind the seat and put the clip in the socket, to incapacitate the annoying, automatic buzz.

Every Wednesday, Scagnelli chairs TrafficStat, the equivalent of **Compstat** for the Transportation Bureau. At these sessions, he asks precinct commanders what they are

doing to get all of their officers to wear their seatbelts. Moreover, Scagnelli has a unit that randomly checks to see if officers are wearing their belts. Within his own command, he grounds for six months any officer who is caught not wearing a seatbelt. And he pushes the city's 76 precinct commanders to do the same: "You, as commanders, are going to be personally accountable that the seatbelts aren't disabled."

There exists lots of evidence for Scagnelli's theory about the relationship between seatbelt use and injuries avoided and lives saved. But it is statistical.

And to most humans, anecdotal evidence is more powerful. Thus, Scagnelli reminds precinct commanders of an NYPD officer who, because he failed to wear a seatbelt, was paralyzed in an accident. He also tells about the two officers who, when their car rolled over, walked away from the accident because they had been wearing their seatbelts.

Public managers need theories, operational theories, theories that connect the actions that they and their organizations take to the public purposes that they seek to achieve. After all public managers achieve public purposes only indirectly—usually through the actions of others. One of Scagnelli's purposes is to save police officers' lives; and he has a theory about one action that these officers can take that will have a major impact on that purpose.



Unfortunately, he can't save officers' lives directly. Sure, Chief Scagnelli could order every police officer in New York City to wear his or her seatbelt. Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly or Mayor Michael Bloomberg could do the same thing. In any organization, however, unless the person giving an order makes it a priority, there is no guarantee that all subordinates will carry it out. So Scagnelli needs a second theory linking his own actions to the seatbelt-wearing behavior of police officers. Indeed, he has such a theory: If failure to follow a clear order is punished sufficiently, people will follow it.

Scagnelli cannot, however, order citizens to change their individual, personal behavior. Thus, to move traffic and to reduce accidents, injuries, and deaths, Scagnelli doesn't need just one theory. To achieve the purposes of his Transportation Bureau, he needs multiple, interconnected theories. He needs theories about what changes in human behavior will achieve his bureau's purposes. And he needs theories about how his actions can affect those behaviors.

For example, Scagnelli has a set of theories about double-parking. His first theory is that double-parking both impedes the flow of traffic and causes accidents as cars and buses swerve around double-parked vehicles. Thus, he is attempting to get police officers to issue more tickets for double-parking. Indeed, he wants precinct commanders to tow away cars that are double-parked, and to do so in a visible way that sends a message to those watching: If you double-park, your car will be towed away too. Scagnelli's second theory is that if drivers learn that they may suffer serious consequences for double-parking, they will do so less frequently. The result will be fewer accidents.

This is, of course, just a theory. No one has conducted the controlled experiment to see if

aggressive enforcement against double-parkers on 124th Street caused a statistically significant reduction in accidents or a statistically significant increase in traffic flow compared with what happened on 126th where double-parking enforcement was unchanged. This would not be a particularly complicated experiment to undertake. Indeed, many scholars who specialize in program evaluation would argue that doing so is important—indeed, essential. Yet, with the other challenges facing the NYPD—for example, crime—the department is not likely to devote many

resources to such an experiment. And the department is certainly unlikely to devote the resources necessary to conducting such an experiment for each of the multiple theories that the multiple members of its leadership team possess and use.

Still, Scagnelli—like all public managers—needs theories, operational theories.

He needs theories that link his actions to the behavior of public employees and citizens; and he needs theories that link such behavior to the public purposes he is seeking to achieve. Moreover, he needs to articulate these theories clearly to every NYPD employee so that they all understand why he is so insistent that police officers should wear their seatbelts and should ticket double-parked cars. **B**

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