

# 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.

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On the managerial challenge of setting:

## Service-Delivery Completion Targets

Many public agencies set targets for how long it will take them to complete a service-delivery task. Yet what kind of targets should managers set?

For example, the manager of a state division of motor vehicles might want to complete a driver's license transaction within 30 minutes of when a citizen walks in the door. A city's director of public works might want to complete every request to fill a pothole within 48 hours of when a citizen calls in the request.

These managers have a very clear expectation for operational performance. They know what they want the agency's employees to accomplish. Still, this clear expectation does not automatically translate into a specific target.

Should DPW attempt to fill 90% of the potholes within 48 hours? Or should its target be 100% within 48 hours? Should the DMV aim to complete 80% of its transactions within 30 minutes. Or should it strive to achieve this 100% of the time?

The difference is not trivial. Each type of target creates its own standards of success and its own incentives for employees.

The advantage of creating a target that is less than 100% is obvious. Although the tasks may be routine, there are always a few weird cases.

Potholes are not born uniformly throughout the year. The pothole stork delivers them in swarms, requiring DPW to organize itself to cope with the winter-time sieges.

To fill potholes, DPW needs more personnel and equipment in January than in July. DPW need not have special staff whose only skill is filling potholes; it can train them to do other tasks in July. Still, does DPW want to purchase enough equipment, some of which will be idle in July, to ensure that it can hit the 100% target in January? If not, DPW might not want to promise to fill *every* January pothole within 48 hours.

At the DMV, a 100% target creates a different problem. Again, the trans-

action is usually routine. The citizen presents the paperwork, the employee performs the necessary checks, the citizen pays the required fee, and the employee prints out the appropriate document. Very routine.

Except when it isn't. For example, what happens when a driver has numerous outstanding parking tickets (though the driver will claim to have paid them all)?

This may be a routine problem. It happens frequently enough that the DMV has created specific routines that employees follow to resolve this recurring problem. Still, if the citizen is uncooperative, this transaction can take well over 30 minutes. Meanwhile, other citizens are waiting—maybe more than their 30 minutes.

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Establishing that the agency's target for a particular service is to complete *every* citizen's service request within a specific time looks like suicide. It can't happen. The agency will inevitably miss the target in particular situations—in several particularly annoying situations.

At the same time, setting the target at less than 100% lets people off the hook. Indeed, the agency can achieve its target with a little triage: Don't worry about how long the unusual cases take. The agency can hit its 80% target whether the uncooperative citizen gets out the door in 31 minutes or in three hours and 31 minutes. Both count as a miss.

Moreover, an 80% target can easily lead to significant citizen dissatisfaction. When citizens learn that the DMV has a target of completing 80%

of its transactions within 30 minutes, what do they hear? "I'll be in and out in 30 minutes." Yet the DMV can hit its target and still disappoint 20% of these citizens. To send 20% of the people away unhappy is not a formula for creating citizen satisfaction.

Yes, many of these people will get out the door in 32 minutes. Yet for a target to affect employee behavior, it needs to be visible. By making a target very public, agency managers can convince their employees that it is real. Yet, the more visible the target is, the more likely citizens are to carefully check their watches when they walk in the door. Although the DMV's 30-minute clock doesn't start until the agency gives a citizen a number, citizens will start their clocks earlier, perhaps many minutes earlier.

Service-delivery targets also need to include a quality measure. Did the filled pothole last two years, or two hours? Was a habitual drunk driver given a driver's license? Auditors can answer these quality questions. Official auditors can thoroughly check a selection of cases. Citizen auditors can report potholes that quickly reappear. And journalistic auditors can use official records to catch the driver whose license should not have been renewed. From government, citizens want high-quality services.

They also want speedy services. And a public manager may choose to **fix this dissatisfier** (which can be objectively measured) before trying to fix service quality (which means different things to different people).

Still, the kind of target to choose is not obvious. The choice has important implications both for how agency employees behave and how citizens evaluate the agency's competence. **B**

Robert D. Behn is the author of *Performance Leadership: 11 Better Practices That Can Ratchet Up Performance*. He 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."