

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 why, to improve performance,

Measurement is Rarely Enough

“Performance management” means different things to different people.

In the HR world, performance management is performance appraisal. The emphasis is on getting the *right* assessment of individuals by using the *right* evaluation forms, plus compensation policies that link the individual's pay to his or her performance. The task is to get these systems properly aligned. The implicit assumption is that, if your HR systems can sort and reward individuals by their individual performance, you will get better performance.

In another world, performance management is performance *measurement*. Here the emphasis is on getting the *right* measures by collecting the *right* facts. The task is to determine what should be measured and how to collect these data—and, perhaps, to decide who should see what components of these data. The implicit assumption here is that, if you measure it, you will get more of it.

This version of performance management—that performance *measurement* is performance *management*—is driven by the well known aphorism: “What gets measured gets done.”

Underlying these five words, however, are three critical assumptions.

Assumption #1: We can measure precisely what we want.

Assumption #2: We can collect current data frequently enough to provide useful feedback.

Assumption #3: Employing this feedback, people can get done what we are measuring.

If, however, any of these three assumptions isn't quite true, performance measurement will not actually cause the desired performance.

Unfortunately, in the public sector, it is usually difficult—often impossible—to measure precisely what we want. After all, what we really want are outcomes, and outcomes are notoriously difficult to measure. We want our public health department to produce healthy citizens. We want our national parks to provide easy access

to the scenic beauty of nature without a lot of crowds. How do you measure these outcomes?

Moreover, we often can't get useful data for years. We want our education departments to produce students who grow up to be productive employees and responsible citizens. Even if we had widely accepted measures for these outcomes, they would not be available in time to provide operationally valuable feedback.

Thus we resort to readily available surrogates. But none of these surrogate measures will be precisely what we want. All will have flaws. Consequently, when people try to make these not-quite-right measures move in the desired direction, they may (or may not) produce the outcome we truly desire.

Performance management is more than performance measurement. To produce real results requires performance leadership. Such leaders do need measures. But they also need strategies for motivating teams to close their performance deficit.

This can happen even if we can frequently collect current data on a measure that captures precisely the outcome we seek. For the third assumption—that people have the capacity to move the measure in the desired direction—may not hold.

Do we know how to make the citizenry healthier? Sure. Stop smoking. Eat fruits and vegetables. Exercise frequently. Lose weight. The basic list is well established and well known.

Unfortunately, your local health department can't make these healthy behaviors happen. The department might have very accurate measures about how many people in the jurisdiction are overweight. It might even have data on which individuals are overweight and by how much. But giving the health department these

measures doesn't mean that the staff will be able to do anything to cause these people to lose weight.

It is the individual, not the department, who gets the weight-losing done. Yet, one useful component of an individual's weight-loss strategy is, in fact, measurement. A number of researchers, including Rena Wing of the Brown University Medical School and Jennifer Linde of the University of Minnesota School of Public Health, have concluded that people who weigh themselves daily are more likely to lose weight.

Why? Perhaps it is because, for this performance task, the three assumptions are, indeed, met.

First, what is being measured is precisely what you want. The overweight dieters are seeking (presumably) to lose weight. And, in this case, the scale measures weight directly.

Second, these people can obtain these current data frequently. Indeed, the research suggests that *daily* weighing really works. After all, daily data provide feedback that can guide the dieter's actions.

Third, these people do have the ability to get done what is being measured. They don't have to, of course. But, at least, the people who are receiving these measurement data are the ones who can get it done.

Performance *management* is more than performance *measurement*. To produce real results in any organization—public or private—requires **performance leadership**. These leaders do need some measures to provide useful, timely feedback. In addition, however, they need strategies for motivating teams to experiment with ways to close their **performance deficit**. **B**

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