

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 public executives need

A Few Priority Measures—Plus More

To drive government's performance, public managers need to focus their organization's attention on only **a very few performance measures**. Unfortunately, there is **a danger in using only a few performance measures**. For by focusing on just a few measures, managers may distort human and organizational behavior.

So what are beleaguered public managers to do? Should they choose a few priority measures, focus on them, and live with the inevitable distortions? Or should they give up and accept that the benefits of focusing on a few measures are not worth the costs—including the costs of criticism from those whose measures are not among the selected few?

There is no universally perfect solution to this dilemma. In every circumstance, the leadership team of the organization will need to resolve the dilemma in a way that reflects its unique political pressures, distinctive organizational dynamics, particular stakeholder demands, formal statutory mandate, specific operational competences, and significant **performance deficits**. Obviously, in selecting both the number and type of measures it will employ, the leadership team needs to take into account a large number of factors.

Still, this list does suggest where the members of the leadership team might start: with one of their major **performance deficits**. Where along their value chain or logic model—from inputs, to activities and processes, to outputs, to outcomes—do they most need to make improvement? Where is their organization doing an inadequate job? Where along their value chain could they, by eliminating a significant performance deficit, produce a big jump in performance?

When they choose a priority measure that reflects one of their major performance deficits, the members of the organization's leadership team are providing focus. They are telling everyone in the organization: Concentrate on this. Make progress on this

priority measure. This is what we need to do to improve the outcomes for which we are responsible.

Unfortunately, there will frequently exist a disconnect between the performance deficit (and its associated measure) and the organization's outcomes. The two will not move perfectly in sync. Reducing one of the performance deficits earlier in the value chain does not guarantee an improvement in the desired outcomes.

Thus, the members of the leadership team need an **operational theory** that links a reduction in the performance deficit to a subsequent improvement in outcomes. They need a cause-and-effect theory that explains why, if the organization eliminates or reduces this specific performance deficit, it will, as a consequence, produce better results.

A few, high-priority performance measures provide the focus that can drive an organization to produce better results. But they can also encourage "honest cheating." To check for this, public managers need a wide variety of other performance indicators.

Still, this theoretical link will never be perfect. Indeed, it will usually be possible to mitigate or even eliminate the performance deficit without making any significant improvement in the desired outcomes. Consequently, the leadership team needs to be alert to this possibility. In particular, it needs to be alert to the possibility of "honest cheating."

I coined this phrase after reading the wisdom of that great American philosopher (and Tammany Hall ward boss) **George Washington Plunkitt**. Plunkitt distinguished between "**dishonest graft**," which was illegal and could get you sent to jail, and "**honest graft**," which was perfectly legal though everyone knew it was graft. Since Plunkitt's time, new laws have

converted many of the old honest-graft practices into dishonest graft.

Still, honest graft lives. Today, its most common form is campaign contributions. They are perfectly legal; still everyone knows that they provide campaign contributors with privileged access to government officials.

Similarly, for public employees, "dishonest cheating" is . . . well . . . dishonest and often illegal. For doing it, you could lose your job. In contrast, "honest cheating" is perfectly legal. It involves improving on a performance measure without doing anything to produce better outcomes. It consists of achieving a performance target without really contributing to the organization's mission.

In elementary and secondary education, one form of dishonest cheating is doctoring the test results. In contrast, honest cheating is "teaching to the test." The teachers may be improving the test scores of their students. But they may not be contributing to the real educational purposes underlying the testing.

To catch dishonest cheating, we have auditors. They take a sample from the data, and check to see if these data are, indeed, accurate.

To catch honest cheating, however, the leadership team needs to check a wide variety of other indicators including activity measures, output measures, and outcome measures. If the priority measure is moving in the desired direction, but the others are not, some people may well be engaged in honest cheating.

Public managers need a few priority measures to drive performance plus a lot of other measures to check for honest cheating. **B**

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