

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 motivational impact of:

The List

How can the leaders of government agencies motivate public employees—and teams of employees—to produce real results? Current counsel says that you can't do it without performance pay: If you don't pay people for results, goes this logic, you can't motivate performance.

There is, however, a simpler and cheaper way to motivate. Call it *The List*.

Suppose the leaders of a state department of public health conclude that their immunization rate for measles, mumps, and rubella is too low. The national rate is approximately 91 percent, with state rates ranging from 83 to 96. In a state with an immunization rate of 86 percent, officials could easily decide to devote considerable time, energy, and resources over the next two years to driving up this key health indicator to 90 percent.

But, how can the state health commissioner convince public-health employees to take this performance target seriously? How can the commissioner motivate field staff to devote their energy and intelligence to improving the state-wide immunization rate?

First, the department's leaders have to allocate responsibility for achieving the target among various teams. For example, they could give each county team the task of ratcheting up its own immunization rate by two percentage points this year and by another two points

next year. Doerr County, with an immunization rate of 80 percent, could be given the target of 82 percent for FY 2004 and 84 percent for FY 2005, while Cronin County, with a rate of 88 percent could be assigned targets of 90 percent for the first year and 92 for the second. Moreover, these annual targets could be broken down into quarterly targets. For FY 2004, Cronin County would have four quarterly goals: 88.5, 89.0, 89.5, and 90.0 percent.



Why, however, would the public-health staff in Cronin County take these targets seriously? Why should they care? After all, they have a lot of pressing health problems. "We have to cope with drug abuse, and teen pregnancy, and AIDS," some staffers might respond. "Immunizing children is the parents' job." Thus, when the state health commissioner announces the targets, it might generate only indifference or contempt.

The commissioner can, however, use *The List* to engage people's egos. At the first quarterly meeting of the county health officers, the commissioner can hand out a single piece of paper with two columns. Column A lists all of the counties that made their quarterly target. Column B lists those counties that missed theirs. If Doerr County surpassed its quarterly goal of 80.5 percent, it would be in Column A. If Cronin fell short of its quarterly goal of 88.5 percent, it would be in Column B.

When the commissioner distributes The List, what will the county health directors do? First, each will look to see where his or her county is listed. Is it in Column A or B? Second, each will check whether neighboring counties are in Column A or B? Finally, they will all observe that everyone else is doing precisely the same thing.

The List contains three consequential pieces of information.

- (1) It tells every team how well it is doing.
- (2) It tells every team how well every other team is doing.
- (3) It tells every team that everyone else knows how well it is doing.

The List can be posted on a big billboard or on the agency's Intranet homepage. The only requirement is that it activates everybody's ego by providing the three key pieces of information.

The List can reveal more than which teams made their target and which did not; it can display each team's total performance during the last year or quarter. For example, the health commissioner could include every county's immunization rate. Indeed, The List could contain only one column, with the counties ranked by their immunization rate.

But suppose, during the first quarter, Cronin County's immunization rate slips from 88.0 to 87.5 percent, while Doerr County significantly improves from 80.0 to 80.5 percent. If the counties are merely listed according to their overall rate, Cronin would rank higher than Doerr. If the state health department wants to order the county's, it might want to do so by their progress.

Is this fair? That depends upon the equity of the original allocation of the state-wide performance target. It would not seem fair to

give every team the same 90-percent target. Is it reasonable to expect Doerr County to jump from 80 to 90 percent in just two years? And what about Cronin County? Does it also get two years to go from 88 to just 90 percent?

In allocating a performance target—whether its purpose is to improve the state's immunization rate or to bring a new computer system on line—the objective is not to create winners and losers, but to give every team a chance to be a winner. The state health department wants every county to improve its immunization rate;

thus, it needs to give every county the opportunity to earn a sense of accomplishment through significant improvement.

The List creates competition—but not the athletic kind of competition, when, at the end of the season, one team wins and all of the others lose. This competition is different. Every team can win.

The county teams are not competing against each other. Each county is competing against its own target. If a county makes its performance target, it wins. And when people see other teams making their targets—teams that are neither smarter nor more talented—their own egos can motivate them to do what is required to move from Column B to Column A. After all, everyone wants to be a winner. **B**

When The List is distributed, what does everyone do? First, they all check to see whether their team is listed among those that made their goal. Second, they check to see whether their friends' teams have made their goals.

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