

# 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 must be alert to the:

## Danger of Using Too Few Measures

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Using a **few priority performance measures** to drive the behavior of public agencies and public employees has a significant disadvantage: It concentrates people's attention.

This concentration can be a big plus. The few priority measures communicate to everyone what is important. They provide an explicit measure of success. They offer a clear basis for evaluating the current strategy for improving performance.

Yet this concentration can also be—if the public executive is not careful—a big minus. It can divert everyone's attention from other aspects of the organization's performance that, although secondary, are nevertheless quite important. Indeed, because the few priority measures can rarely capture the full purpose of an agency or program, they can distort human behavior in quite undesirable ways.

The management cliché is unambiguous: "What gets measured gets done." Unfortunately, in most situations in the public sector, you can't measure exactly what you want to get done. You might be able to measure something that is very close to what you want to get done. In this case you will get done something that is very close to what you want to get done. And very close might be very good.

The public-health task of preventing children from getting measles is a good example. What you would like to measure is your program's outcome. The percent of children who become immune to measles; or the percent of children who did not get measles who otherwise would have? Obtaining such data would be possible but time-consuming, difficult, and expensive.

What might you do? You could simply measure the percentage of children who have been vaccinated. This is only an **output measure**, not an outcome measure. Still, it is a very

good measure. For the vaccine for measles is very effective: 99% of the children who receive two doses (says the **U.S. Centers for Disease Control**) are immunized. For measles, what you can easily measure is very close to what you do want to get done.

In other circumstances, however, you might be able to measure something that is only sorta, kinda close to what you want to get done. Then, unfortunately, you will get done only something that is sorta, kinda close to what you wanted to get done.

Consider, for example, the challenge of measuring performance in elementary and secondary education. The public purpose is to help children grow up to be productive employees

The management law "What gets measured gets done" has a corollary. "What doesn't get measured doesn't get done." This is particularly true if other tasks are getting measured. If we measure performance in math but not history, history won't get done.

and responsible citizens.

Unfortunately, measuring the productivity of an adult employee is quite difficult. What measure would you use? Annual salary? What about people who have chosen to work for a small (but highly effective) non-profit agency? Then, how much of any adult's productivity (no matter how we might measure it) can we attribute to his or her formal education? Finally, if we can satisfactorily deal with these measurement and analytical problems, how might we feed back the results of this analysis to improve the performance of a school?

Moreover, no matter how difficult are the practical problems of measuring employee productivity and using these measures to drive performance, the challenge of doing this for citizen responsibility is even greater.

Thus, we resort to test scores.

In some cases, the scores on standardized tests can be very helpful. To grow up to be a productive employee or a responsible citizen, a child needs to learn to add, subtract, multiply, and divide. A child who can't do these core tasks will have a very difficult future. And a standardized test can do a good job at determining a child's ability to do arithmetic.

Unfortunately, what gets measured *does* get done. If arithmetic is on the test, teachers will get it done. They will teach to the test. No one should be surprised. No one can prevent it. Rather, as many have noted, the challenge in educational testing is designing a test worth teaching to.

The current educational tests focus educators attention on a few, core subjects. Indeed, even wealthy suburban school districts have narrowed their curriculum to ensure that not just 95% but 98% of their students pass the test. For the superintendent of such a district, anything less is failure. Last summer, the **Center on Education Policy** reported that, across the U.S., schools are cutting back on science, history, and art.

Again, no one should be surprised. What gets measured gets done. But there is a corollary: "What doesn't get measured doesn't get done." This is especially true if other tasks are getting measured. If performance is measured on reading and math, but not on science, history, and art, schools and districts will focus on reading and math. And because the school day is not infinitely long, they will—not because they want to but because they have to—spend less time on science, history, and art.

Using a few measures can both drive and distort performance. **B**

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