

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 different perspectives on:

The Gotcha-Game Debate

It always comes up. In any discussion of any **PerformanceStat**—whether it is **CompStat** or **CitiStat**, or some other **AgencyStat** or **JurisdictionStat**—someone raises the gotcha question. “Isn’t this just a gotcha game?”

The question came up again last month in Baltimore, at the Maryland Stat Summit hosted by Mayor Sheila Dixon. Panelists included officials who worked with **Baltimore’s CitiStat**, **Maryland’s StateStat**, plus others including **Mayor Joseph Curtatone** of Somerville, Massachusetts, which has its own **SomerStat**.

This time, the gotcha question concerned who gets to see what before Baltimore’s biweekly CitiStat meetings: Why doesn’t the agency that is appearing before the mayor’s leadership team get to see the questions that it will be asked? If the agency knew the questions that it would be asked, it could prepare itself better. Doesn’t this prove that the mayor’s office is playing gotcha?

Some people in the room shared this concern. Others suggested that the approach taken by Baltimore and some other jurisdictions and agencies had a few advantages.

First, several people noted that the data that the CitiStat analyst used to identify problems and questions were not secret. The agencies had these data too. Often, these data came from the agency itself. For example, in a police department, the CompStat staff get their data from the department’s districts, which obviously have their data before the CompStat staff does.

Others noted a second advantage: If, before a PerformanceStat meeting, a subunit is told the few questions it will be asked, it will prepare to respond to only those issues. It will, quite naturally, ignore others.

Maybe, however, the PerformanceStat staff is focusing on trivial problems or asking the wrong questions. Maybe, the line agency with the responsibility for actually producing results understands its own problems better than a few analysts working

out of a centralized, far-off location. Maybe the agency, from its own, independent analysis of its data, will identify the key **performance deficit** on which it should focus next.

Thus, the “secrecy” of the memo prepared by PerformanceStat staff accomplishes something else: It encourages each subunit to continuously analyze its own data—all of its data. It motivates a second set of analytical eyes that can identify problems and suggest potential solutions.

Third, explained **Matt Gallagher**, now the director of Maryland’s StateStat, this process helps separate “the contenders from the pretenders.” Frequent PerformanceStat meetings can provide the chief executive with information about the leadership skills of people several layers down in the

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agency. In 1991, **Valentina Ukwuoma**, an immigrant from Nigeria, started work at Baltimore’s Department of Public Works as a recycling program inspector. Today, she is the director of the Bureau of Solid Waste.

How did this happen? Naturally, Ukwuoma’s career path took several turns. But one thing that kept her path going up was the city’s constant focus—at meeting after meeting—on performance. When middle managers are asked questions at a CitiStat meeting, some complain or mumble. Others, however, are prepared with an answer or a proposal; or they will simply say: “I don’t know today, but I will in two weeks.” After watching a PerformanceStat session or two, even an outsider can separate the pretend-ers from the contenders.



A final example came from Anthony Barksdale, Baltimore’s deputy police commissioner for operations who runs the city’s CompStat meetings. The police department had a suspect in a rape case, but lacked enough evidence to arrest him. But Barksdale and his staff discovered that this suspect had an outstanding warrant for his arrest on another crime. Asked Barksdale: How come “the colonel, major, lieutenant, sergeant, and detective” in the district couldn’t find this warrant but my staff could? Doesn’t this suggest some management shortcoming?

When creating their PerformanceStat, some jurisdictions and agencies have consciously tried to avoid playing gotcha. Before each meeting, they circulate all of the data, analyses, and questions to every subunit.

This has an obvious advantage. It reduces the anxiety of subunit managers. After all, a manager who must answer pointed questions about his or her unit’s performance in front of superiors, peers, and subordinates can find the experience quite intimidating. Making the questions public can reduce this anxiety.

This approach does, however, also come with some disadvantages. It does not motivate subunits to conduct their own analyses of their data. And it limits a chief executive’s ability to evaluate individual managers.

PerformanceStat isn’t a gotcha game. It’s a leadership strategy for producing results. Each agency or jurisdiction that seeks to employ the strategy needs to think carefully about how best to adapt the various aspects of the strategy to best improve government’s performance. **B**

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