

# 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 relevance to public managers of:

## The Anna Karenina Principle

"Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." With this dramatic sentence, Leo Tolstoy begins his famous novel *Anna Karenina* about the struggles of multiple, interconnected families to find happiness.

To be happy, suggests Tolstoy, a family has to solve a large number of complex problems: How does the family deal with money, with children? How does it divide up the family's responsibilities? How does it manage the pressures of employment? And, of course, how do Tolstoy's families cope with adultery? If a family fails to handle any one of the many problems that all families must inherently face, it will be unhappy.

The only way a family becomes happy is by solving *all* of these problems. Unfortunately, the family cannot solve these problems individually—one at a time. All of these problems are interconnected. Thus, if the family fails to solve any one of them, it will provoke other problems and thus unhappiness.

The same principle applies to government agencies: Effective public agencies are all alike; every ineffective public agency is ineffective in its own way. After all, like a family, a public agency faces a very large number of inherent and interconnected problems. Thus, to be effective, an agency's leadership team has to solve every one of them.

Here is an abridged list of just ten of the many problems that challenge the leadership team of any public agency:

The Macro-Purpose Problem: What is our agency's mission? What will be the long-run public purposes that our agency will seek to achieve?

The Strategy Problem: How will we pursue this purpose? What exactly should we do to accomplish our mission?

The Theory Problem: How will this strategy work? How will the activities and actions specified in our strategy contribute to the achievement of our purposes?

The Measurement Problem: How will we know whether we are doing a good job? What indicators will help us measure how much progress we are making?

The Target Problem: What specific level of these indicators will we attempt to reach this year, this quarter, this month, this week? (To solve this problem, the agency's leaders need another theory—an operational theory that connects progress on the chosen indicators to progress on achieving the agency's macro purpose or mission.)

The Communication Problem: How will we convince employees, stakeholders, elected



officials, and citizens that our mission, strategy, theory, measurement, and targets make sense?

The Resources Problem: How will we obtain the funds, authority, and flexibility necessary to achieve our targets and thus our purposes?

The Motivation Problem: How do we persuade our employees, partners, and stakeholders to implement our strategy with energy and intelligence?

The Learning Problem: How can we figure out how to improve? What must we do this year so that we can modify our strategy to get even better next year?

The Credibility Problem: How do we establish in the minds of citizens, stakeholders, and elected officials that we are achieving our purposes and making a significant contribution to society?

These ten problems are certainly not the only ones that the leadership team of a public agency needs to solve. Any public executive can—with little effort—quickly add another ten items to the list. The true, unabridged list is very long indeed. And, unfortunately, if an agency's leaders fail to solve any single one of these problems, they are condemning the agency to ineffectiveness.

Moreover, all of these problems are interconnected. The agency's leaders cannot solve one problem without simultaneously solving numerous others. An agency's leaders cannot solve their strategy problem without also solving their theory problem. They cannot solve their credibility and resources problems without solving their communication problem. And they cannot solve their communication problem without solving their mission, measurement, and target problems.

This interconnectiveness among the multiple problems that confront the leaders of any

public agency helps to explain why their job is so challenging. Moreover, an agency's leadership team has to resolve these multiple problems while dealing with numerous and conflicting outside pressures.

Sure, the family has to cope with the outside pressures from relatives and friends. Indeed, the web of families and friends that Tolstoy weaves dramatizes not only the interconnectiveness of their problems but also the interconnectiveness of the relationships that shape these problems.

*The Anna Karenina Principle applies to government: Effective public agencies are all alike; every ineffective agency is ineffective in its own way. Thus, to be effective, a public agency has to solve every one of its problems.*

Still, the number of people who believe that they have the right to tell a family what to do is notably smaller than the number of people who believe that they have the right—indeed the civic obligation—to tell a public agency what it should do.

No wonder that many public agencies are ineffective and thus unhappy. Each of these ineffective and unhappy agencies is, of course, unique—ineffective in its own, distinctive way. And there are many, many ways in which a public agency can be ineffective.

To create a truly effective public agency—one that not only performs well this year but also performs even better next year—its leaders have to solve every one of the many management challenges that they confront. **E**

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