

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 every evaluation begins with the question:

“Compared with What?”

“All Bolivia can’t look like this,” observes Robert Leroy Parker.

“How do you know?” responds Harry Longbaugh. “This might be the garden spot of the whole country. People may travel hundreds of miles just to get to this spot where we’re standing now. This might be the Atlantic City, New Jersey of all Bolivia for all you know.”

Devoted cinema fans will immediately recognize this exchange between Paul Newman as Butch Cassidy and Robert Redford as the Sundance Kid. Chased by an aggressive posse, the two outlaws have escaped from the American West to Bolivia, only to be surprised by where they land.

Comparing the village with places he has known, Butch immediately assumes that Bolivia has to have better villages. But Sundance isn’t so sure. Maybe when you compare this spot with the rest of Bolivia, it will be the nation’s Atlantic City.

Butch and Sundance both evaluate the village. But they reach opposite conclusions. Why? Because, each is making a different comparison.

All evaluations involve a comparison. Whether you are evaluating a village or a public agency, you do so by making a comparison. If you decide that a village or an agency is outstanding, you do so because it is better than your basis of comparison.

That’s why every evaluation has to begin with the key question: “Compared with what?”

Indeed, any analysis begins with this question. As you try to understand implications of some data, you are always making a comparison.

Is the number 2,000 big or small? In the abstract, this is a meaningless question. If 2,000 is the population of a city, it is small. If 2,000 is the number of murders in the city, it is large. You can decide whether the 2,000 is big or small only after you select a standard with which to compare it.

Is a public agency performing well? Again, you cannot answer this question until you have selected a basis of

comparison. Indeed, to do any evaluation, you must make two choices.

First, you have to choose the *what* that will be compared—the performance measure. For example, how should you measure the performance of a city’s health department? The number of citizens who got sick last year? The number of people who got sick from food poisoning in the city’s restaurants? The number of health-code violations that city inspectors issued to restaurants? The number of innovative regulations that the health commissioner issued for newly-proven health problems that have yet to be creatively checked?

In the abstract, the choice is not obvious. It depends upon the city’s circumstances. If a large number of citizens—is 2,000 a large number

The evaluation of a public agency involves a comparison. If you decide that an agency is outstanding, you do so because it is better than your basis of comparison. Thus, every evaluation begins with the key question: “Compared with what?”

here?—contracted food poisoning from the city’s restaurants, the health commissioner may need to focus on this **performance deficit**. Alternatively, if all organizations are complying with the city’s entire health code, maybe the commissioner should seek to make people healthier by improving personal behaviors that the city cannot regulate but only encourage.

If the commissioner fails to choose a specific purpose to be achieved—along with an accompanying performance measure—others will certainly do so. Evaluation will happen—on terms set either by the commissioner or by others.

The evaluation will necessarily focus on the purpose to be achieved. This is **why public executives have the responsibility to craft purposes**.

Having chosen the purpose and measure of its achievement, the second choice concerns the basis of comparison: With what will this year’s achievements be compared?

Will they be compared with the achievements of other similar agencies in other similar jurisdictions? Yet, these agencies will never be identical. Moreover, they may have started from a higher or lower base. If, last year, other health departments had many fewer cases of food poisoning from restaurants, do they provide a meaningful basis of comparison?

Maybe this year’s achievements should be compared with last year’s. If the department reduced the cases of food poisoning by 5 percent, is this a success? Is this meaningful?

A third basis of comparison is the commissioner’s **performance target**. If, because food poisoning is a serious problem, the commissioner decided to make reducing these illnesses a key purpose, the commissioner needs to do more than deliver a speech proclaiming that “we will vigorously attack the immoral restaurant owners and close them down.” The commissioner also needs to set a target.

Such a performance target will give citizen’s an answer to the compared-with-what? question. It will also create a cause with which to mobilize resources and motivate people.

For evaluating a public agency, there are many possible standards. For citizens, however, the most useful standard may be the agency’s own. Citizens should establish a norm—not a rule, but an expectation—that public executives will answer the compared-with-what? question by creating performance targets. **B**

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