



On why all public officials—and all academics too—need to recognize

“What were they thinking?”  
Vol. 12, No. 1, September 2014

## What Performance Management Is and Is Not

At a recent academic conference a scholar was explaining his research in which he sought to determine whether performance management worked—whether it improved performance. He took a traditional approach (called “meta-analysis” by the cognoscenti) examining all of the different reports that analyzed this question seeking to draw conclusions from this entire collection of research.

Unfortunately, he had one problem. How to decide what counted as “performance management”? After all, many of the reports he analyzed offered no specific definition of “performance management.” Many simply used this two-word phrase as if its meaning was simple and obvious.

Moreover, many of these reports used the phrase “performance management” when all that anyone was doing was collecting some data that might (or might not) be related to performance—to some public purpose that the organization might (or might not) be trying to achieve.

No actual management was involved. No managers were doing any managing. They had some data. But how they were using their data was unclear. They might have been doing nothing more than storing them in a database. Maybe they were also posting their data on a web site.

Clearly, however, not all of the organizations that asserted they were doing “performance management” had developed a strategy for focusing staff and collaborators on the task of improving performance—on producing some specific results.

This revelation is not surprising. Long ago, I learned that many public officials—and many academics too—use the phrases “performance management” and “performance measurement” interchangeably, as if they are the same thing.

It's time to stop letting them off the hook. It's time to clarify what “performance management” is and what “performance measurement” is not.

(1) “Performance management” *requires* the members of the leadership team of a jurisdiction, agency, or collaborative to focus their efforts on achieving a **specific public purpose**. The leadership team of the agency, jurisdiction, or collaborative is engaged in “performance management” only if it articulates this purpose clearly, publicly, and vocally.

This purpose might be to reduce crime. It might be to help children grow up to be responsible citizens and productive employees. It might be to prepare a nation to cope effectively the next time a virulent virus jumps from an animal to a human. Whatever their purpose is, the managers have to make it clear to their staff, to their collaborators, and to citizens.

Many public officials assert that they are doing performance management, when all they are doing is collecting data that might be somehow related to performance. It's time to stop letting them off the hook. Performance management requires active leadership.

(2) “Performance management” *requires* the leadership team to focus everyone on the task of eliminating or mitigating one of the important **performance deficits** that is preventing them from achieving this purpose.

(3) “Performance management” *requires* the leadership team to define a **“performance target”**—a specific result to be produced by a specific date that, when achieved, will eliminate (or, at least mitigate) this key performance deficit.

(4) “Performance management” *requires* the leadership team to develop a performance strategy that will engage employees, collaborators, and citizens in helping to achieve this target.

(5) “Performance management” *requires* the leadership team to track,

regularly and frequently, data that reveal its progress towards achieving this target. (If the leadership team has no target for eliminating a performance deficit, how does it know what data to collect—what to measure?)

(6) “Performance management” *requires* the leadership team and staff to analyze these data to determine how much progress they are making towards achieving their target.

(7) “Performance management” *requires* the leadership team to learn from these data—to use its analysis of its data to make adjustments (or drastic revisions) to their strategy.

(8) “Performance management” *requires* the leadership team—after it has achieved its target—to select another performance deficit, and create another target plus another strategy for achieving this new target. In doing so, the leadership team will focus everyone on **ratcheting up** the achievement of their public purpose.

Real “performance management” requires active leadership. It is not a mere data-collecting chore that can be delegated to a few measurement wonks. If a leadership team is truly doing performance management, it needs to be actively engaged in performance leadership.

Perhaps you remember what Humpty Dumpty told Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*:

‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.’

Claiming that mere performance *measurement* is actually performance *management* is nothing more than Humpty Dumpty management. **B**

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