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 driving performance requires a focus on:

Only a Very Few Priority Measures

How many performance measures does your agency have? Two? Twenty? 200? 2,000?

If your agency has two performance measures, you know what is important. If your agency has just a few measures, you understand on what you, your team, and your unit should concentrate your efforts. It may not be obvious what you should do to make one of these measures go in the right direction. Still, you have a basis on which to judge the success or failure of any experiment that seeks to produce an improvement.

If, however, your agency has 200 or 2,000 measures—or even if it has just twenty—it is not at all obvious what you should do? What is your priority? How should you spend your most valuable resource: your time?

Actually, multiple performance measures can make your managerial life relatively easy. During the next reporting period—be that a month, or a quarter, or a year—some measures are bound to get better. Naturally, you will claim that it is your brilliant strategy and hard work that produced this improvement. Of course, during the same reporting period, some of your measures will get worse. But that's okay. You can point to outside factors—economic conditions, budget cuts, uncooperative partners, disruptive stakeholders, sun spots—that caused this drop in performance.

And, at the meeting during which your performance is reviewed, what will happen? If you have twenty measures to be discussed in a two-hour meeting, only six minutes are available to cover each of these measures.

(Hint: If you can control the agenda for the meeting, start with the measures for which performance improved. By the time you get to the measures on which your agency has not performed well, you will inevitably have less than six minutes for each.)

Of course, there is a reason why the number of measures for any public agency grows. Indeed the process of creating performance measures is like an irreversible reaction in chemistry. If you burn gasoline, it combines with oxygen to produce water and carbon dioxide. But you can't make this reaction go in the other direction; there is no way to put water and carbon dioxide together so that they will create gasoline and oxygen.

If a public agency has some performance measures but is not paying much attention to them (and no one else is paying much attention either), the number of measures can remain constant. But once the measures become important—once someone starts publishing the measures, or posting them in the cafeteria, or holding meetings to discuss agency progress on them—people will want their own measures on the list.

> If an agency has too many measures, it has no measures. Thus public executives need to work diligently to suppress the inevitable measurement march by creating two classes of measures: with the agency's focus on the very few "priority measures."

Within the agency, each unit will want its own measures—for such measures symbolize that its work is important. Stakeholders will want measures that reflect their objectives. And academic researchers will want bench-marking measures so that they can compare the performance of similar agencies in different jurisdictions.

No one asks government to discard a measure. But everyone can explain why the current set of measures fails to capture an aspect of performance that although subtle is absolutely essential. Thus an agency with two performance measures can quickly find itself with twenty. An agency with twenty measures will have—before it knows it—200. Government's traditional resistance to measurement has, it appears, been replaced by a proliferation of measures.

As a result, the agency loses focus. Managers and employees within various units can look at the expanding list and choose those one or two measures that they find professionally prestigious, or personally glamorous, or directly influenceable. Then, they can work on these, while ignoring the others. After all, they can hardly be expected to produce real progress on 200 or even 20 measures.

Thus, public executives need to work diligently to suppress the forces behind the inevitable measurement march. For every proposal for every new measure comes with a perfectly legitimate—even irresistible—reason. And once the executive agrees to add two or three new measures, he or she can hardly deny the next request which comes with, perhaps, an even more compelling justification.

One solution to this conundrum is to create two classes of measures: a very few "priority measures" combined with a large (and expandable) number of clearly important (but not quite top-priority) measures. Then, the manager can put the priority measures on the top of any chart, in the front of any report, at the beginning of each meeting's agenda. All of the measures will be on the chart, in the report, and discussed at the end of some (but not all) meetings.

This, of course, requires the agency manager to choose—and to convince employees, stakeholders, executive-branch superiors, and legislators that this choice makes sense. Convincing disparate individuals with disparate interests to go along with priorities that aren't quite their own is always difficult. Yet, if the agency has too many measures, it has—in reality—no measures. B

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