On Why All Public Executives Need to Remember that Picking Measures is Leadership's Job

By Robert D. Behn

The phone call was not unusual. I'd received such calls before. I'll receive them again.

> Analysts should not be asked to decide what better performance means. Picking performance measures is a leadership responsibility.

The callers were from the analytical shop of a large public agency. The agency director needed some performance measures and these analysts had been charged with producing them. Thus, they were seeking some advice, a few suggestions, a little help thinking through what measures to recommend: What characteristics should their measures have? How many should they offer?

Isn't this weird? I had little more than a newspaper reader's knowledge of the agency. What kind of useful guidance could I offer?

The agency, of course, had data. Lots of data. It had data on internal processes. It had data from the organizations to which it distributed funds through grants and contracts.

Indeed, the analysts described their agency as "data rich." The agency had created almost a thousand measures that subunit managers could use. Yet, the agency collected data for only a few of these measures. It used even fewer.

Indeed, although the agency had created performance measures, it had not created an integrated effort to use the data. No one used the data to set policy. No one used the data to drive performance. As far as I could tell, no one (save for a few wonks) even looked at the data.

(I confess: I'm a data wonk. In fact, I am eagerly awaiting the 2011 baseball season's first box score.)

Rather, the principal purpose of collecting all of these data was the need to keep an overhead agency happy. Today, every governmental jurisdiction — as required by the background radiation now arriving at earth from the big bang — has an overhead agency that demands all of the line agencies produce performance measures. (Do such overhead agency's have their own performance measures?)

Naturally, the line agencies respond by creating analytical units with the specific task of feeding data to the overhead agency. (You, of course, have seen this behavior in action.)

But using these data to actually measure performance — to create an understanding of how well the agency (plus those organizations with which it collaborates through contracts and grants) is doing — is not straightforward. Even more challenging is the task of actually using such data to motivate and produce better results.

A prerequisite for improving performance is a determination of what

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better performance would look like. Someone (or some group) needs to decide what kind of improvement the agency needs to make next and how it will know when it has made some progress. A public agency can't use data to tell whether or not it has improved until it has decided along what specific dimensions it wants to improve.

Because this involves data, it looks like an analytical task. It is not. It cannot be delegated to the wonks.

Picking performance measures is a leadership responsibility. As always, they must start with purpose.

If the agency's leadership team wants to improve performance, it needs to decide what kind of better performance it wants to produce. It needs to decide on which of the multiple aspects of the agency's performance it should focus next. It needs to consider all of its performance deficits and decide which ones to tackle first. It needs to decide what better results it will produce by when. The leadership team (not the analysts) needs to establish the agency's performance targets.

And then, it needs to make a personal — and thus organizational — commitment to these specific targets that, when achieved, will eliminate or significantly mitigate one or more of these important performance deficits.

This responsibility cannot be delegated to the analytical shop. The analysts can help, of course. From their examination of the existing data, they can suggest an abundance of performance deficits that the leadership team could think about tackling. They can suggest which ones might be eliminated easily and quickly. They can suggest which ones would be difficult to mitigate even over years or decades. And they can project the potential impact on outputs and outcomes of eliminating or mitigating each such performance deficit.

The analysts, however, should not be put in the position of deciding what better performance means. They should not be asked to commit the entire organization to a given set of performance targets.

A prerequisite for improving performance is a determination of what better performance would look like.

Analysts can help the leadership team make these kind of choices. Still, these are strategic choices — not analytical ones. They need to be made by the organization's leadership team.

When the top officials in any governmental jurisdiction or public agency delegate to their analysts the task of selecting the organization's key performance measures, they are ducking their leadership responsibility. ▮

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