

# WHAT WORKS

An Effective Practice  
Case Study from the ICMA  
Center for Performance  
Measurement

**Featuring**

The City of Decatur,  
Georgia



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# Making *What Works* Work for You: Decatur Adapts Long Beach's Staff Engagement Strategy

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An old saying suggests, “Don’t reinvent the wheel.” In this spirit, the ICMA Center for Performance Measurement began researching, writing, and sharing effective practice information through its *What Works* series in 2001. Since *What Works*’ inception, CPM has published three case study collections featuring almost 200 stories of performance measurement and management success—and is now releasing new case studies on a monthly basis through the online ICMA Knowledge Network.

The goals of each 2–3 page story are to:

- Describe a practice proven effective in a real-world local government situation
- Offer enough information to enable another organization to decide whether to try it—as well as how to learn more, if needed
- Keep the story short enough that it can be skimmed in a few minutes, but include contact information for ease of follow-up.

Meeting all three goals in each story is sometimes a challenge, but the results have been well-received. Respondents to CPM’s 2009 customer survey rated *What Works* as CPM’s most useful report for decisionmaking. CPM is eager to learn and share more about favorable results derived from *What Works*.

## Newer Participant, Decatur, Scans *What Works* for Inspiration from Veterans

One story of success derived from *What Works*’ 2008 edition comes from Decatur, Georgia. Assistant to the city manager Meredith Roark has enjoyed excellent results from adapting a staff engagement practice she gleaned from one of the case studies featuring Long Beach, California.

While Decatur—a small, landlocked jurisdiction near Atlanta’s urban center—and Long Beach—a large, port city in Southern California—may have little in common in terms of population size, square mileage, geographic region, or other demographic characteristics, both sought ways to engage and retain staff interest in their respective performance measurement programs. Long Beach is a founding participant in CPM, having participated since 1994, and Decatur joined in 2006—excited to learn from and capitalize on the experience of fellow participants.

### Case Profile

**Population:**

19,168

**Square miles**

4.2

**Median household income**

\$47,395

**Form of government**

Council-manager



For additional information about the practices described in this case study, please contact Decatur’s assistant to the city manager Meredith Roark, at [meredith.roark@decaturga.com](mailto:meredith.roark@decaturga.com), or 404-370-4102.

### Long Beach's "Measure of the Month" Strategy Stands Out

As reported in Long Beach's 2008 case study, the city established a number of activities to engage staff in its performance measurement efforts. Among them is a monthly newsletter, *Performance News*, that is circulated to approximately 100 employees who are directly involved in the city's performance measurement work.

The newsletter opens each month with a message from the city manager supporting Long Beach's performance measurement efforts. It includes:

- Discussion of priorities and principles of good management
- Examples of how performance data is used every day to drive strategy
- Goals for the current month.

A number of CPM jurisdictions have noted that such concrete, out-front support from the chief administrator is essential to building and maintaining staff engagement in performance measurement.

The newsletter also includes a "Measure of the Month" column that features information about one of the city's key performance measures, including:

- A review of the relevant department's past performance on the measure
- Strategies implemented to maintain or improve performance
- Data demonstrating maintenance or improvement in performance.

Long Beach features a different department each month. By highlighting the good work and successful management practices of different departments, the manager's office builds support for the city's performance measurement activities and demonstrates the positive impact of performance measurement across the organization.

### Decatur Adapts Long Beach's "Measure of the Month" Technique

Decatur city manager Peggy Merriss had already established a citywide performance measurement team, as in Long Beach, and selected the assistant to the city manager to lead it. The Decatur team consists of 1-2 early or mid-career professionals from each department who serve as leaders and champions for performance measurement activities within their units. Service on the team is positioned by the city manager and other leaders as a management-track professional development opportunity—and it is sought by the best in the city.

### Frequent, Brief Meetings Are Essential—and Fun Helps!

As team leader, the assistant to the city manager was charged with developing a strategy to encourage understanding and commitment to the city's performance measurement program among members of the team—and by extension, the entire city staff. To achieve this goal, Roark developed a set of monthly meetings for the team, inspired by Long Beach's "measure of the month" newsletter feature. Key components of the meeting include:

- A one-hour time limit—to demonstrate respect for team members' other commitments and minimize risk of overwhelming members with too much information
- 30 minutes to review and discuss key deadlines and requirements for city-specific performance measurement activities, as well as CPM activities
- 30 minutes to examine a key measure or set of measures from a single city department, usually supported by slides and other written material
- In addition to the regular representatives from the department, the department head and assistant city manager for the featured department are invited to attend.

The second 30-minute segment is the one specifically inspired by the Long Beach case study—and the one which Roark also tries to make the most fun. Each month, she works with the performance

measurement team member(s) for the featured department to select measures and data that she uses to develop a light-hearted quiz or game intended to boost fellow team members' understanding of the department's performance and performance measurement in general. While the atmosphere is casual, the information shared is relevant and meaningful.

### **Decatur Emphasizes the Power of Story in Communicating Performance Information**

Roark also has a staff assistant who visits, takes photographs, interviews staff, and writes a story about the featured department to round out the picture presented at the meeting. Decatur strongly emphasizes the value of story in effectively communicating performance data and other complex information. Based on the number of city departments, each department is featured about once every 18 months.

As mentioned previously, the meeting is also frequently attended by the assistant city manager and head of the featured department. The city manager holds assistant city managers directly responsible for the performance of their assigned departments, and many use information from the monthly meetings in their performance reports to the manager and elected officials.

Team members themselves are also encouraged to discuss highlights from the meetings in department staff meetings and other forums in order to keep fellow staff members informed and engaged in the city's performance measurement activities.

CPM participants and ICMA members can download the full text of the 2008 Long Beach case study and other *What Works* stories from the ICMA Knowledge Network. Non-members may purchase downloadable chapters or the print version of the book from ICMA's online bookstore. (The Long Beach story appears in the "High Performance Management Practices" downloadable chapter and on pages 10-11 in the print book.)