

■ PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT IS HERE TO STAY

For some time I have been looking for an adequate response to the public's negative perception of government; that is, government's seemingly subjective policies, decision making, and personnel performance reviews. I investigated various concepts of quantitative methods and accountability. Back in the mid-1990s, I followed the progress of various community indicators. I read about and studied metrics and Six Sigma. I then discovered the material ICMA offers on performance measures.

As a new city administrator, I was made almost euphoric by ICMA's performance measurement material. I gobbled up any and all performance measurement information I could find. I became convinced that measuring quality, cycle time, customer satisfaction, and costs through comparables would be an objective tool to help make better decisions, manage, and conduct fairer evaluations. My question, however, was, "How does a small-town administrator implement performance measures?"

My small community in Minnesota had a population of 5,700, with a weak mayor, strong council statutory government structure. The director-level staff at the time comprised the finance director, clerk/planner, public works director, library director, volunteer fire chief, and the contracted police department, sewer department, and building inspections. The budget was tight and became even tighter because of reduced subsidies from the state.

Each of the department heads had already put in place a reporting system to the council. Most reports consisted of workload data. Some departments made efforts to compare current workload data with previous years' data. During preparation of the annual budget, some community-to-community comparables of overall tax levies were reviewed. Beyond this, there were few other comparables, and comparables are a key element in performance measures.

I recognized that "buy-in" was important for getting support for performance measures. I began having conversations with staff on improving our reports, and I mentioned my intentions to councilmembers by memo. This created some suspicion among the staff and councilmembers, but I continued, slowly, to pursue working toward performance measures.

BUY-IN WASN'T THERE

As a result of budget conditions, there was no buy-in by council to the proposal of participating in ICMA's performance measure consortium that we were trying to put together in Minnesota. Working through the consortium would have been my preference, but I couldn't get the council to agree. So I tried working through staff to reach an agreement.

The initial introductions of the concept of performance measurement to staff involved meeting with department heads one-on-one, sharing with them my research, and providing them with materials to read. I met with each department head to discuss and agree to a limited number of performance measures that department heads could control. Department heads already maintained some of this information.

We focused on what was done, not what was spent. I believed that this approach would allow us to focus on service-level discussions. In addition, obtaining and comparing financial data from various communities can be unreliable. We discussed how these data would eventually be collected and worked into the monthly reports provided to council. Over time, it was my hope that staff and council could refer to the reports for policy discussion.

I then took some preliminary performance measures to a regional management meeting to obtain feedback from my contemporaries. Comparables to other cities in the region were going to be important. As the chair of a state regional management association, I led discussions on performance measures and indicated my interest in working with others to begin building a com-

parables database. The group showed some interest, but more work would be needed to educate ourselves on performance measures. It was apparent that buy-in still was required, and this was going to take some time.

One of the first performance measures we adopted as a staff and included in our weekly staff meetings was a complaint report. This mechanism got right to the heart of service and allowed all staff to monitor complaints, response times, and the recurrence of similar complaints. The measure of complaints was reported to council, and councilmembers too felt this tool would prove useful over time.

After some performance measures had been discussed by staff, we began discussing them with committees. Staff members felt that a good approach to introducing performance measures in the decision-making process would be through committees to get their buy-in. They knew that council was cold to the concept, but they felt that if they could educate committees and the councilmembers of each committee, we might achieve better results. If, over time, committees used the information, then performance measures would eventually work themselves into the council decision-making process.

TIMING WASN'T GOOD

Just as staff were beginning to accept the performance measures we had identified and as we were having some initial success with a few committees, my contract was terminated. This was an unfortunate time for me, to be sure, and the only comment regarding my performance was the councilmembers' disinterest in performance measures themselves. It was a devastating blow in my young career, but I have tried to put it into perspective. The councilmembers were under a great deal of political pressure because they were dealing with some large projects, and the timing of introducing performance measures wasn't ideal.

I now believe that the idea of performance measures in a small community can sound ominous. In some ways, small towns are perhaps more about re-

relationships than about businesslike operations. In small towns, performance measures may connote bureaucratic nonsense and, quite honestly, may insult both the employees and the elected officials, who can quite simply ask how things are going to obtain their sense of performance.

Also important is the structural arrangement of a small town with a strong council, a weak mayor, and an administrator form of government. The administrator for all intents and purposes does not have the authority to achieve results through staff as does a manager in a council-manager structure. An administrator has to play a form of politics with both staff and council to achieve change.

Strong support and a complete understanding of the purpose of performance measurement would be required before it could be implemented. Each member of the council represents an additional variable of complexity in an already complicated process.

NEGATIVE CONNOTATIONS

Finally, the term “performance measures” seems to have negative connotations. People fear that strict punishment or revealing information that might embarrass would be delivered to anyone who doesn’t meet the performance measures. Shifting the burden of performance on how things are managed—by using the words “performance management”—might be more appropriate.

The perspective of the management team would then be focused on the data necessary for proper management and control. Performance management may suggest more strongly an effort to focus on results while performance measurement implies a multitude of details that may not necessarily be management worthy. In essence, “introducing” another management effort can roll the eyes of many a tenured public servant, but I believe performance management is here to stay.

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