

Recommendations For Creating Effective Outcome-Oriented Performance Measurement Systems

As we formulated this list of recommendations for measuring program performance and broader outcomes, we relied heavily on the perspectives of community indicator project directors and directors of government-sponsored performance measurement programs. Their experiences with designing community indicator initiatives and generating reports provide useful insights for public managers interested in broadening the focus of performance measurement efforts.

Recommendations for Designing an Outcome-Oriented System

Recommendation One: Capture intermediate program outcomes when designing outcome-oriented systems. This is a first step in measuring program performance and broader outcomes. Government-sponsored efforts should look beyond the immediate program outcomes and community indicator projects should look toward program-specific indicators to determine what intermediate program outcomes influence the broader community outcomes they report on. Intermediate indicators have the potential to strengthen the relevance of both efforts. Management tools such as logic models can help connect the dots between broader agency goals and the impact of day-to-day operations in achieving them.

Recommendation Two: In designing an outcome oriented system, demonstrate the link between program-specific indicators and community indicators. Present data in such a way that you can see a clear link between the indicators. In doing this, public sector agencies and employees can see how their work contributes to something far bigger and more important than they might imagine, and folks who pay attention to community indicators can trace an

indicator back to specific programs and agencies. This has worked particularly well in Oregon where staff are described as having a sense of ownership and “are excited that their issues are elevated to the level of societal measures.” In King County, a key strategy for motivating staff involved reassurance that this enhanced line of reporting would not result in retribution. As a result, the staff was more likely to be motivated to take on and address new challenges rather than fear the unexpected.

Recommendations for Criteria for Selecting and Agreeing on Outcome Indicators

Recommendation Three: Actionable indicators are more important than measures and plans. Chantal Stevens, the former executive director of Sustainable Seattle, emphasizes that available data and indicators should be assessable, meaningful, and must hold the promise of actionable improvement, whether on the part of government, community organizations, or citizens. If the data are not relevant, or if there is not an identifiable solution, it is unlikely that the data will hold the attention of the viewing audience, nor will it inspire action among individuals or organized groups to address problems or community needs.

Recommendation Four: Select the most important indicators and avoid developing a cumbersome system. Originally, the Truckee Meadows Tomorrow system included as many as 100 indicators. However, they now focus on 30 indicators. Similarly, the Oregon Progress Board has reduced the number of benchmarks and emphasized the importance of “key” benchmarks to government personnel. While it may be tempting to share all the data you collect in performance reports as a way to promote transparency,

you should be careful to avoid a data dump. Too much data can actually diminish transparency and hide the facts.

Recommendation Five: Seek community input to determine, revise, or draft new indicators.

Sustainable Seattle and Truckee Meadows Tomorrow rely on extensive citizen input with the design or revision of community indicators, under the assumption that citizen involvement increases the likelihood of generating meaningful indicators. Working groups and an extensive network of volunteers can be used to facilitate more input by external stakeholders. GMAP holds community forums to determine what matters to citizens and provide feedback on government progress with meeting a previously identified need. King County recently held focus groups with members of the public on what should be included in a new 4-page performance dashboard.

Recommendations for Presenting and Reporting on Outcomes

Recommendation Six: Adopt a plain language policy in reporting outcome. Use language that is understandable to the general public. Plain language reports contain common words, rather than jargon, and they avoid acronyms or unnecessary legal language that can confuse and frustrate readers. Plain language reports can be read quickly and understood easily. When reporting on pavement conditions, for example, instead of reporting on the miles of bituminous wearing surface that was applied, report on the overall street conditions—rate the smoothness or bumpiness of the streets. Washington’s GMAP provides plain language guidelines for all employees which can be found at: <http://www.accountability.wa.gov/plaintalk/ptguidelines/default.asp>.

Recommendation Seven: Present data around themes or desired outcomes. Reporting around themes reinforces the interconnectedness of the sectors, the agencies, the programs, and people. Reporting outcomes and results by programs or agencies reinforces the silo mentality—reporting by themes and results serves to reinforce the collaboration that is needed to address community conditions and concerns. Affordable health care, public safety, quality education and a clean environment are not issues exclusive to one agency or one department.

Recommendation Eight: Highlight progress and let the data speak for itself. Karen Hruby, executive director of Truckee Meadows Tomorrow, emphasizes that operating at an arm’s length from government (while examining government-generated data) allows for objectivity on the part of data analysts. Likewise, citizens are reassured that the data and findings are an honest assessment of community or regional conditions. Government-sponsored initiatives can adopt the Oregon Progress Board’s “Yes, but...” and “No, but...” style of reporting on progress, where the extent of progress is discussed to highlight government efforts and strategies to address an indicator.

King County AIMs High highlights the factors that affect indicators, while outlining the role of and limitations of government. The result is a better understanding of what government can and cannot do. It becomes evident that while government often assumes the blame for the failure to improve community conditions, there is a shared responsibility among the sectors.

Recommendation Nine: Use performance reporting as an opportunity to reflect and learn. Reporting performance is more than simply making information available to staff, elected officials, and the public. Instead it can be used as a reflective practice that stimulates discussions of what is achieved, how service delivery can be improved, and what matters to the public. GMAP requires that managers and staff clearly articulate how the agency activities will lead to results for staff and the public. Performance reporting is considered an opportunity to help agencies “tell the story” of what they do, why they do it, and what results they are getting.

Recommendation Ten: Use the media to your advantage. Government is often the first to be criticized and last to be celebrated for its accomplishments. Some of the programs highlighted in this report do an exceptional job of telling their side of the story to the public through the media. Baltimore CitiStat is highly publicized in local newspapers, as well as national publications, and Maryland StateStat, in two short years, has received a similar level of media attention and promotion. Governor O’Malley recognizes the importance of getting the message out and making sure the public is aware of his management reforms.

Recommendation Eleven: Report on progress toward meeting community indicators approximately once a year or less frequently. Reporting on community indicators is often less frequent, and can be less costly as the data does not change much from year to year. Truckee Meadows Tomorrow reports on community indicators every two to three years. Off-report years can be used to report on key issues facing the region, such as the impact of subprime lending on the housing market and what it means for a region.

Community indicators, however, should have a consistent presence in performance reports and during the strategic planning process. While they may not change that often, assessing how program-specific indicators influence community indicators, or are responding to them, keeps the long view and the big picture in mind as government continuously works to coordinate efforts across departments and with community-based organizations.

Recommendation Twelve: Think about using the Web and other Web 2.0 capabilities. Virtually all of the government sponsored and community indicator directors interviewed for this report emphasized the long-term benefits of enhancing the web-based capabilities of their programs. This is in larger part due to the lower costs associated with managing web-based systems designed to store data and allow for multiple users to upload and interact with information. Sustainable Seattle is in the process of developing a Wiki-based system or data commons, where government, citizens, and other organizations will be able to enter and manipulate data.

Recommendations for Sustaining an Outcome Indicator System

Recommendation Thirteen: Build and sustain relationships with other service providers. Meaningful relationships within and across the sectors strengthens and reinforces the notion that improving community conditions is a collaborative endeavor. Real progress is rarely made in silos.

Recommendation Fourteen: Ensure that top leaders are meaningfully engaged. The leaders at the top (mayors, governors, and agency heads) should sleep, eat, and breathe performance management. They

must communicate up and down within the agency and far and wide outside of the agency. They must let the stakeholders know this is the way we do business; that they want to create an environment that encourages and supports productive, responsible and ethical behavior. As Rita Conrad told us, “If the leaders do it, it must be important.”

Recommendation Fifteen: Institutionalize the process, build it in bureaucratically. Establish a system that can be replicated and sustained to such a degree that it can withstand the turnover in administration, and the change in priorities. If the tools are in place and the benefits of the process are evident to those who use them the more likely they will survive. Think about an executive order (GMAP) or legislation (Oregon); both approaches provide staying power.

Recommendation Sixteen: Establish a professional home and identity for performance measurement, including communities of practice. We cannot stress enough the importance of regional and national meetings devoted exclusively to performance management. This can be done incrementally with the establishment of a permanent section or conference track with appropriate professional associations such as the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) or the International City and County Managers Association (ICMA). But ultimately, performance management needs its own home—a meeting place and space that would provide a dedicated opportunity to introduce public managers to new ideas and proven successes, as well as a place to meaningfully discuss the roadblocks and challenges they face in such a way that effective strategies to move the roadblocks can be discussed.