

# 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.

On the executive responsibility to set:

## Performance Targets

A governor once told all of his department heads: “Never put a number and a date in the same sentence.”

Why? To any experienced public executive, the reason is obvious: Putting a number and a date in the same sentence is a commitment. If you merely hint—let alone guarantee—that your organization will produce results X by date Y, you will focus on you and your agency more attention than you can possibly desire.

Why invite scrutiny? Doesn't your organization get enough surveillance? Why convert yourself into an even more visible target, and then distribute free ammunition? Why would the head of an environmental agency commit to reducing nitrogen dioxide in a specific airshed to 50 micrograms per cubic meters within two years? Why would the head of a municipal police department commit to reducing the burglary rate by 50 percent in two years? To most public executives, putting a number and a date in the same sentence is only inviting trouble.

Moreover, the agency's detractors and enemies will not be the only ones carefully monitoring its progress towards producing the promised results. The agency's supporters will be watching too. And few of these observers will wait patiently until the date Y arrives. Instead, the original promise will create criti-

cisms such as: “The fiscal year is half over, and yet the Department of Public Performance is only a quarter of the way towards its goal. Obviously, the department needs a new strategy or new leadership—or both.”



Thus, to avoid inviting more scrutiny, many public executives have learned—without any gubernatorial guidance—to never put a number and a date in the same sentence.

Unfortunately, following this maxim creates its own problems. For if an organization's leaders have failed to establish an explicit performance target, how will their people know what they should do and whether they have been successful?

In contrast, if the leaders commit their organization—any organization: private, non-profit or public—to achieving a specific performance target by a specific date, everyone in the organization will know what they must collectively accomplish. Moreover, the more public the leaders are in their commitment to producing X by Y, the more that the people in the organization will understand that the performance targets are serious.

Performance targets—specific goals for the organization to achieve by a specific date—are essential to performance management. No leadership team—again, in any organization: private, nonprofit, or public—can ratchet up

performance without establishing such explicit targets.

A performance target provides an unambiguous definition of success. It signals what is important. It tells people what is expected. It focuses everyone's attention. A performance target is the moral equivalent of a crisis.

In a crisis, people can accomplish a lot in very little time. Whether the crisis is created by a hurricane, an epidemic, or a war, it creates a very visible problem. When faced with a crisis—which creates both a sense of urgency and a clear understanding of what must be done—people can accomplish amazing things. In a crisis, people ratchet up their individual and collective performance. That's the wisdom behind the old management aphorism: "If you don't have a crisis, create one."

*This is the dilemma of performance leadership: You can't motivate improved performance without setting performance targets; yet setting such targets is the easiest way to invite scrutiny and criticism.*

A crisis, of course, doesn't just happen. People create them. We humans convert events into crises; we decide what events are significant and make them very visible. Was monkeypox a crisis? Or did we humans, afraid of a world-wide epidemic of a deadly killer like the ebola virus, make it a crisis? Why isn't the annual flu epidemic a crisis? Each year, it kills many more people than SARS has.

Like a crisis, performance doesn't just happen. People create performance. Leaders decide what targets are significant, make them very visible, and thus mobilize people.

A crisis mobilizes people. So can performance targets. First, however, the organization's leaders have to make these targets real. They can't just send out the beginning-of-the-year memo listing a few targets and then move on to other things. They have to focus their own, personal energies on these targets. They have to establish a sense of urgency. They have to make these targets visible.

This is the dilemma of performance leadership: You can't motivate improved performance without setting performance targets; yet setting such targets is the easiest way to invite scrutiny and criticism. By ratcheting up the visibility of their performance targets, an agency's leaders simultaneously ratchet up both internal performance and external scrutiny.

Nevertheless, public executives can make their targets more visible internally than externally. Following the traditional political imperative, many public executives announce their plans first—often before they have developed a coherent strategy. This, however, is not required by the Constitution. An agency's leadership team can establish their performance targets for the year and make their personal commitment to achieving these targets very visible internally without announcing them to the outside world. Honest. It can be done. A press conference is not required. (If, however, the agency announces at the end of the year that it has indeed produced X, people will expect next year that it will produce at least 1.2 X.)

If you don't have a crisis, create a performance target. **E**

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