

Make an Impact, Not an Impression

Winning Public Trust through Performance Leadership

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Does Government Make a Difference?

Do you ever wonder why it is so fashionable to criticize government...why government has, in many ways, become the symbol of bureaucratic thinking, waste and inefficiency? Open any book in the library, turn on the nightly news, or flip through the local newspaper and you are bound to find a comment or story about the “Fleecing of America,” government spending run amok, or alleged scandal. What’s particularly disturbing about much of this commentary is the apparent absence of meaningful discourse. As government leaders, when we are criticized, our general tendency is to defend what we are doing, rather than to demonstrate what we are *accomplishing* in the lives of our citizens.

The Performance Dilemma

Performance management is not a new concept to government leaders. We’ve all read *Reinventing Government* and are aware of the Government Performance Results Modernization Act. For the most part, we understand and appreciate the need for performance metrics, and we encourage the collection of data. But have we truly changed the way we manage in government? Have we become performance-informed organizations, equipped with powerful stories of service improvement, policy enhancement, and citizen support? Or have we simply become performance reporting organizations – repositories of mountains of impressive data that tell us nothing about the difference we are making in the lives of our citizens and stakeholders?

This is an important question and not one to be taken lightly. On one hand, we are actively engaged in the performance process, looking at and exploring the meaning of our data and performance information. On the other, we are simply spectators to an ever-growing mountain of information, churning out questionable statistics that tell stories about *what* we are doing, rather than *how* we are doing. Does our public discourse reflect our management habits?

Finding the Difference

Performance Leadership is different than performance management. Government performance **leadership** is a journey – a continuous and iterative process that allows room for mistake and ongoing re-assessment. Performance leadership is not just about budgets and reporting. Performance leadership is not about impressive charts and data. Performance leadership has at its heart a commitment to service improvement by becoming a learning organization. Learning from our experience so that we can make a positive impact in the lives of our citizens and stakeholders is the ultimate and essential product of successful performance leadership. Success doesn’t occur overnight, but rather is the product of an ongoing commitment to inquiry and discovery.

Changing the Conversation

Anyone can collect data. It's what we do with our performance data that defines us as visionaries – true government leaders in a world of status quo. Today, as government leaders, if we cannot demonstrate compellingly and empirically that we know *what* we are doing, *why* we are doing it, and what the actual and expected *results* will be, we will certainly lose the fight for limited support and dwindling public trust, and we will continue to be the object of unwanted public criticism. To win the day, we need to change the conversation; we need to stop talking about ourselves and start demonstrating our *impact*. Government does make a difference. The question is: *Can we prove it?*