

Building Regional Success on Citizen-Centered Performance Measurement

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Regions around the country are struggling with economic globalization, massive demographic shifts, and ever-more dispersed urban development. Responses to these challenges have ranged from reinvigorating neighborhoods and sharing tax base regionally to building innovative partnerships among different segments of society. Which of these approaches work? Even before regions can answer that question, they have to know what it is that citizens want and what results are actually being achieved that address citizen priorities.

For the past decade, there has been a mounting effort to respond to demands for public accountability. In the past, evaluating the quality of public services—answering the question: “How are we doing?”—was mainly an inside job. Public managers and elected officials usually talked to each other, while citizens were given precious little opportunity to say what they thought about the services bought and paid for with their tax dollars.

That pattern is beginning to change, and for good reasons. First, citizens now expect from public programs the same quality of service to which they have grown accustomed from banks, retailers, and countless other consumer businesses. Government officials ignore citizen consumers at their peril.

Second, governments are increasingly concerned not only about the pragmatics of water service, fire protection, and the like, but about broader, “softer” concerns that determine the quality of life in their community. As companies make decisions about national expansion locations, these “softer” concerns have come to have greater influence on their location decisions.

Third, the field of performance management is providing a powerful toolkit to address regional concerns. As defined by the Alliance for Redesigning Government, performance management is the process of defining a mission and desired outcomes, setting performance standards, linking budget to performance, reporting results, and holding public officials accountable for results. When applied to the challenges facing regions, this toolkit can aid in building a vision of desirable futures, informing citizens on progress, and providing additional motivation for innovation.

Elected officials can determine easily enough how well their fire department is performing by looking at objective data. But for public services that deal with quality-of-life concerns—the perception of safety, for example, or the appeal of the recreational opportunities—it’s much more difficult to define and measure good performance objectively, let alone figure out how to improve it.

For quality-of-life concerns (“Is downtown a pleasant place to be?”), it’s essential for citizens to be involved in setting the direction for public services and evaluating their performance in their regions, counties, and cities.

Ask and Find Out

Over the past several decades, the private sector has boosted dramatically its attention to what customers want. Businesses today know that they can’t assume what people like, they have to ask—systematically and often. The market research tools businesses use, such as focus group interviews, surveys, and even informal listening by salespeople, have become increasingly sophisticated.

Public sector leaders should take a lesson from businesses and use similar techniques to get to know citizens in their roles as customers of public services. For instance, public service leaders can use interviews and surveys to evaluate the quality of the so-called “moments of truth,” when citizens come face-to-face with a public service. Knowing—not guessing—what customers notice, like, and dislike in their brief interactions with public services can give important clues to how service could be improved.

Case in point: Managers of one agency spent a great deal of money upgrading its computer system in order to reduce by a few seconds the computer response time at public service desks. Had they asked, they might have discovered that customers were satisfied enough with the wait times but were confused by the building layout and put off by the harried staff. The managers might have seen a bigger improvement in customer satisfaction—and at far less cost than the computer upgrade—had they recruited a volunteer or two to greet customers with smile, a cookie, and helpful directions. It is all too easy to be “sold” on technology solutions by employees or ven-

dors, for example, rather than by what customers most prize.

Leaders also should ask users or potential users of services beforehand what they would want in a new or expanded service. Consider the cautionary tale of one parks department that had developed a very large and ambitious capital improvement plan. The price tag—for interpretive centers, wave pools, and many other amenities—totaled several hundred million dollars. When the parks commission invited groups of citizens to look at the models of the project and respond to detailed questions about what the citizens valued about parks, the message was unexpected. People said plainly what they wanted: clean restrooms and better signs on park sites. They showed little interest in the costly capital projects.

Had this park board decided on its own to make the capital improvements, it might well have found no improvement in public satisfaction with the parks. After an expenditure of several hundred million dollars, such a result would have been embarrassing, to say the least. The lesson: It makes good sense to ask citizens to define value in public services, particularly before making major proposed investments.

Citizens aren’t just consumers of public services, however. Citizens can and should play an active role in delivering important services—by “adopting a highway” or tutoring a child, for instance—that make communities pleasant, attractive, and healthy places to be. When it comes to improving a community’s quality of life, government cannot go it alone; productively engaging volunteers and self-help movements as partners with government are crucial to successful improvement efforts.

Citizens also can be partners in the performance measurement task itself. With appropriate training, citizens can help evaluate the quality of services as diverse as street maintenance and libraries. Tapping

volunteers in this way helps to control the costs of evaluation. But there is an added benefit: Engaging citizens in performance measurement reinforces an ethic of citizenship and educates the public about how their government is working to improve service quality.

Reweaving the Social Fabric

That leads to the other, more compelling reason to get citizens involved in performance measurement as we go about the task of strengthening our metropolitan regions: Doing so can help rebuild citizens' deeply-eroded trust and confidence in government and cultivate the good habits of citizenship.

Citizens trust government when they believe that government is doing the right things most of the time, and doing those things right. When it comes to quality-of-life concerns, especially, citizens are more likely to believe that government is "on track" if they have helped decide what government ought to do in their community. Involving citizens in defining the standards of good public service, and in evaluating whether the services are measuring up to those standards, is a concrete activity with visible results. When public officials respond to citizens' feedback by making the suggested improvements, they send the public a message: government can be trusted.

A key starting point is to hear from citizens what is important to them, and what they think a desirable future for their community should look like. Public discussions that clarify citizens' values, develop a shared vision of the community's future, and help forge a consensus about top-priority actions for government provide a sound foundation for quality-of-life improvement efforts. The vision and priorities can help guide public-sector budget decisions.

Here in Minnesota, the Minnesota Milestones process has involved more than

10,000 citizens in identifying goals and setting priorities to enhance and maintain the state's quality of life. While the Milestones report has been used to guide state department budgets submitted to the legislature, it has not been picked up as a goals framework by local governments or the nonprofit sector.

Public agencies should use public discussions like these as a starting point for a performance measurement system based on citizen concerns and interests around which to build a sound regional agenda. And the results of these evaluations must be communicated to citizens in clear, meaningful terms: How does the quality of the public service stack up against what the community said it wanted, and against past measures? How does performance compare with the promises government made? How does the cost of these results compare with the costs in other communities? Is the community moving closer to the vision of its desired quality of life? Such comparisons not only reveal where change is needed to improve service delivery, they also can help citizens to set reasonable expectations for services.

Some performance measurement information will be more meaningful to citizens when it is reported for small local communities or neighborhoods. For instance, the City of Portland, Oregon reports on quality-of-life measures at the neighborhood level. Our Citizens League has often recommended here in Minnesota that each school provide a "value for spending" report to the parents of children at each school.

When citizens see how public service efforts directly affect their own lives, they are better able to judge whether they are getting value for their tax dollars.

Involving citizens in performance measurement can help rebuild citizens' sense of responsibility for their communities. Asking citizens for consumer feedback about the quality of public services can be an attrac-

tive “hook” to get people connected with their local government initially. But public sector officials must view citizens as more than just consumers. And citizens must view government as more than a purveyor of convenient services. That’s why it’s important ultimately to engage citizens in the difficult work of defining the public interest and helping—personally—to achieve it.

Citizen-Centered Performance Management

Building strong citizen involvement into an energetic performance management process offers one significant avenue for addressing significant regional challenges around the country. Over the past decade, many regions of the country have done sound work on elements of the strategy of active citizen involvement in a performance management. The following are but examples of many such efforts around the country.

Community vision-building efforts around goals, already underway now in a majority of the 50 states, have been done in regions as diverse as Multnomah in Oregon and Chattanooga, Tennessee. Regional goals have been set and progress in the community has been tracked over time in Jacksonville, Florida. Economic and social goals have been identified and benchmarked

against similar communities around the country in Cleveland, Ohio and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania—in one case by the regional Citizens League and in the other by a local newspaper. Progress reports have been put on the web to readily inform citizens in the Seattle area. There is, in short, growing experience with many of the key ingredients of a citizen-based performance management strategy to address regional challenges.

Clearly the specific recipe of involving citizens will vary by region. The issues—leadership, capacities, and interests in the various regions of the country surely differ and require different responses. There should be little doubt, though, that as we move into the 21st century—when the economic, social, and environmental success of metropolitan regions must be a key national concern—citizens should be the center around which we build regional agendas, mobilize action, and measure how well we are doing. ■

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