

Bob Behn's 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.

Accountability and the Public Sector: Twenty Lessons from the MCAS

- Lesson #1: No one is against accountability.
No one says we need less accountability
But everyone has his or her own, personal definition of what accountability means.
- Lesson #2: Accountability is often a polite codeword for punishment.
If you do something well, nothing happens.
If you screw up, all hell breaks loose.
- Lesson #3: Accountability is (usually, though only implicitly) a uni-directional concept.
One person is holding another person accountable.
Everyone wants to be the "accountability holder."
No one wants to be the "accountability holdee."
But we could also think of accountability among co-producers as mutual and collective.
- Lesson #4: Accountability requires expectations.
To create accountability, you have to be able to specify what you want to happen and what you don't want to happen.
- Lesson #5: In the public sector, we seek to establish accountability expectations for three purposes.
We seek to create accountability expectations for finances.
We seek to create accountability expectations for fairness.
We seek to create accountability expectations for performance.
- Lesson #6: To create accountability for finances and fairness, we rely on formal systems.
Rules and auditing can deter (too many) people from violating our expectations for doing bad things and catch many of those who do.
- Lesson #7: To create accountability for performance, systems are much less effective.
In fact, the rules of any system can inhibit the ability to improve performance.
Improving performance often requires flexibility, experimentation, and customization.
To get the individuals in an organization to improve their collective performance usually requires active leadership.
- Lesson #8: To create accountability for performance, you need some kind of targets.
Targets specify our expectations for the performance of individuals, teams, and organizations.
Targets provide an organization's leaders with a mechanism for focusing people's work.
- Lesson #9: Consequences make the targets real.
If achieving or not achieving the targets have clear implications for individuals, teams and organizations, they are much more apt to pursue these targets intelligently, creatively, and energetically.
- Lesson #10: Consequences ought to include not just penalties but also rewards.
If the only consequences are punishment for failure, people will exit (and not enter).
Motivating conscripts is easy. Motivating volunteers is challenging.
Teachers are not conscripts.

Lesson # 11: Rewards have to be more than mere money.

People who chose teaching as their profession are not seeking to maximize income.
The menu of rewards ought to include lots of “esteem opportunities.”

Lesson # 12: Most accountability systems label most people or organizations as losers.

Employ “criteria referenced” accountability. Avoid “norm referenced” accountability.
If the number of winners is fixed, people will not share their ideas and secrets.

Lesson # 13: The best performance targets are synergistic.

A synergistic target drives people, teams, and organizations to make a number of other, related improvements in performance.

Lesson # 14: It is difficult to use true outcome measures to improve educational performance.

The mission: Help children grow up to be productive employees and responsible citizens.
It is difficult to measure the achievement of this mission.
It is difficult to measure the how much education contributed to whatever is achieved.
It is impossible to feed back this measure to improve.

Lesson # 15: Output targets give people and organizations something concrete to accomplish.

Unfortunately, these outputs are usually not the important outcomes.
We need to repeatedly check our theory about the causal link of outputs to outcomes.

Lesson # 16: All performance measures have defects.

The measures never perfectly capture the mission.
In the public sector, it is often difficult or impossible to measure the true outcomes.

Lesson # 17: Before people will truly seek to achieve their targets, they need the operational capacity to do so.

Motivation isn't enough.
If people lack the knowledge about how to achieve their performance targets, they won't try.
If people lack the resources to achieve their performance targets, they won't try.

Lesson # 18: When given a performance target to achieve, people can always cheat.

People can engage in “dishonest cheating” (by falsifying the numbers).
People can engage in “honest cheating” (by teaching to the test).

Lesson # 19: These deficiencies cannot be an excuse for evading the performance challenge.

Public-sector organizations, officials, and employees can no longer say: “We're professionals. Give us the money, and leave us alone.”

Lesson # 20: If you don't establish the expectations for your performance, someone else will.

The challenge of accountability in the public sector is to create expectations and then to achieve them.

This is the bad news: You have to jump on accountability treadmill.

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