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MEASURING AND IMPROVING GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE: LEARNING FROM RECENT US EXPERIENCE

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In late September 2009, about 10 months into President Barack Obama's first term, I started work as the Associate Director for Performance and Personnel Management in the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB). In this position, I was responsible for setting and implementing the Obama Administration's policy governing management practices that US federal government agencies (Cabinet departments, their components, and other organisations reporting to the President) would use to improve performance on their mission-focused objectives. I held this position until May 2013 when I left government to launch The Volcker Alliance, a new organisation dedicated to working for more effective and trusted government.¹

1 The Volcker Alliance was launched by former US Federal Reserve Chairman Paul A. Volcker in 2013 to rekindle intellectual, practical, political and academic interest in the implementation of policy—in the 'nuts and bolts' and, increasingly, the 'electrons' of government. The Alliance seeks to be a catalyst for change—encouraging public, private and educational institutions to give sustained attention to excellence in the execution of federal, state and local policies in the US and abroad. The author would like to thank Kaeleigh R. Forsyth and Peter D. Morrissey for assistance in writing this chapter.

The Obama Administration's performance objective was straightforward—help the federal government improve along multiple clearly identified dimensions. The ones on which my office focused were to increase the positive impact of government action on the outcomes that touch people's lives (mission-related objectives); improve return on spending and the quality of people's interaction with government; and strengthen accountability. To strengthen accountability, we aimed to improve transparency and public understanding of what government was trying to accomplish, why, how (strategies chosen to make progress on a goal and why those strategies were chosen), how well they were doing, and adjustments made to planned actions as experience was gained. Other management offices within OMB focused on improving performance relative to mission-support, including acquisition, financial management and information management.

This chapter explains the approach taken, why it was selected, what worked, and what issues were encountered. It also suggests next steps and identifies challenges that could threaten future progress. These lessons should be helpful for both national and sub-national governments in Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and elsewhere in the world. Further, this chapter will, it is hoped, spark ideas about opportunities for cross-government collaboration and co-investment and for cross-country research, education and learning, including benchmarking, to find ways to improve.

The remainder of the chapter is organised as follows. The next section describes the Obama Administration's approach to performance improvement and why this approach was chosen. A review of how the approach worked follows. The final section of this chapter offers recommendations for further improvement. An Appendix elaborates on the experiences and evidence that informed the approach with an in-depth look at two cases: crime reduction in New York City and water quality improvement in Massachusetts.

Blueprint for action

I was hired as the Associate Director for Performance and Personnel Management at the US Office of Management and Budget because of a report I had written, 'Performance Management Recommendations for the New Administration' (Metzenbaum 2009). This report, which reviewed past US federal government efforts using performance goals and measurement, recommended which past US federal governments' current performance practices to continue and which to change. It also looked at noteworthy developments around the world to identify new practices worth adopting. The report served as our blueprint for action.

The IBM Center for the Business of Government had asked me to write this report because of my prior work as executive director of the Harvard Kennedy School's Executive Session on Public Sector Performance Management and as the author of two Center-published studies on the subject (Metzenbaum 2006; Metzenbaum 2003). The Executive Session produced an Open Memorandum for New Executives on public sector performance management, 'Get Results through Performance Management' (Executive Session on Public Sector Performance Management n.d.), which had caught the attention of key leaders in the Bush Administration.

Drafts of my report were shared with the Obama campaign and transition team. Even before I joined the Administration, the Administration was moving some of the report's recommendations forward, such as the recommendation that Cabinet secretaries and other agency heads set priority targets.²

Resetting the mindset: Improvement, not punishment

Learning from the Clinton and Bush years, state and local governments, and other countries, the Obama Administration aimed to reset the performance³ mindset of US federal agencies. We wanted people across the US federal government focused on improving performance, not on getting higher ratings from budget examiners, attaining a higher percentage of targets met, or complying with reporting requirements for the sake of compliance.

Successful efforts to reduce crime in New York City and improve water quality in Massachusetts, as well as experience from the United Kingdom, New Zealand and multiple US state and local governments, all informed the Obama Administration's approach. Some of these experiences are described in greater detail in the Appendix.

US government agencies made progress setting outcome-focused goals and measuring performance during the Clinton and Bush Administrations, following passage of the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 which required all federal agencies to set goals and measure performance, starting in 1997.

2 President Obama was already moving fast to implement his priorities, most notably stabilising the financial system, resetting American policy in the Middle East, and healthcare reform.

3 After starting work in the federal government, I stopped using the term 'performance management' as the primary way of describing the work we did because it became apparent that, for most federal employees, the term 'performance management' brought to mind the employee appraisal system that affects annual awards, a system that is badly broken and needs fixing.

In compliance with the law, agencies set strategic and annual performance goals, and included them in strategic and annual plans. They also prepared annual performance reports.

Few agencies, however, used the goals and measurement in the reports to improve. They did not tap the power of ambitious, outcome-focused goals to motivate, inspire innovation and enlist goal allies—all demonstrated benefits of effective goal-setting (Metzenbaum 2006, 15–21). Nor did they use frequent analysis and data-rich discussions to find promising practices worth promoting for broader adoption, nor problematic practices in need of fixing.

One reason for this was the Bush Administration's adoption of the Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) as its primary means to motivate mission-focused improvement. OMB budget examiners used the 25-question rubric of the PART to score every government program with the intention of rating each program once every five years. While PART questions were by and large good questions and the rating effort was well-intentioned, PART reviews created numerous problems in practice. Reviewer bias was inevitable (Lavertu, Lewis and Moynihan 2013), for example, because a single reviewer rated each program, a problem that the Olympics and other scoring systems long ago recognised and addressed by using multiple reviewers. Additionally, the rating system penalised programs for problems beyond their control; no mechanism existed to encourage high-scoring programs to continue to improve; individual program ratings undermined cross-program management of problems needing cross-program attention; and a five-year review cycle for all but low-rated programs created a long-range planning mindset rather than an orientation toward immediate action based on experience. Perhaps most seriously, OMB's emphasis on PART caused agencies to devote their time to earning a good PART score rather than to finding ways to improve outcomes, return on spending, and the quality of people's interaction with government.⁴

Exacerbating problems associated with PART ratings, OMB had identified as a model a few agency performance reports summarising performance by using the percentage of targets met, which proved problematic. While focusing on target attainment rates can be useful for a manager intimately familiar with all of the targets and the reasons those targets were set, it does not work well as a public reporting mechanism. One report OMB spotlighted as a model, for example, showed an upward trend in the percentage of targets met, implying

4 During the Bush Administration, the Office of Management and Budget also issued a companion scorecard every quarter that graded agencies on their adoption of prescribed acquisition, information technology, financial management and human resource practices. Where the scorecard encouraged the adoption of practices backed by evidence of the value of those practices, it contributed to positive outcomes. In many cases, the scorecard suffered from problems similar to the PART; agencies report they learned how to game the system to 'get to green'.

that performance on the measured indicators was improving when, in fact, the underlying targets had become easier over time and actual performance was getting worse. Publicly reporting the percentage of targets met as an indicator of overall performance may tempt organisations to adopt timid targets that they know they can meet. Sometimes, it can also tempt them to add easy targets to the total number of targets reported so they offset those they are not likely to meet. A far better public reporting practice, also useful for internal reporting and management, is showing whether key indicators are trending in the right direction (US Department of Commerce 2011, 7; US Department of Commerce 2013, 9).⁵

To shift the emphasis from punishment to continuous (and sometimes breakthrough) improvement, the Obama Administration required federal government agencies to adopt several distinct but complementary performance measurement and improvement practices:

- **Priority outcome-focused goals with stretch targets selected by leaders.** Cabinet members and the heads of other large agencies were required to set outcome-focused goals, including a few ambitious, priority goals they would try to accomplish within two years without additional increments of funding or new legislation. We asked the 16 Cabinet members and heads of eight other large government organisations to set priority goals to make sure they thought about, communicated, and managed their delivery priorities.⁶ Goals were set in consultation with OMB and White House policy offices; agencies were also expected to consult with key stakeholders.
- **Leaders named for each goal.** Agency leaders were required to designate a single accountable official, the goal leader who would be responsible for managing progress on each priority goal and be identified on Performance.gov.
- **Frequent data-rich, constructive performance reviews.** No less than once a quarter, the Deputy Secretary (or equivalent) was expected to conduct data-rich constructive performance reviews, examining with each goal leader progress on each priority goal, opportunities for improvement and risks. These meetings were intended to keep the pressure on the goal leader,

⁵ Getting agencies to stop focusing on the percentage of targets met proved easier said than done. Several years into the Obama Administration, one Cabinet department, the Department of Commerce, summarised its progress for fiscal year 2011 using a chart that suggested steadily improving trends over time. A closer look at the chart revealed that what the agency was actually counting, which seemed to be trending steadily upward, was the number of key performance indicators. By FY2013, the Commerce Department corrected this confusion by showing indicators trending in the right direction and those trending in the wrong direction.

⁶ Leaders of other organisational units, such as the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation, were encouraged but not required to set priority goals initially, although they were expected to adopt priority goals in later years.

not function as ‘gotcha’ sessions.⁷ Rather, we urged data-rich discussions to find what worked and was worth continuing and possibly promoting for broader adoption, as well as what did not work and needed a ‘deeper dive’ to identify root causes. In addition, we urged brainstorming and field testing of new practices to accomplish more with available funds, inviting people inside and outside an agency working to accomplish the same or a similar goal to join the reviews, and allowing other agencies to attend reviews to learn from one another’s experience and coordinate on shared goals.

- **Quarterly public progress reporting.** Agencies were required to report progress on their priority goals every quarter to OMB and to the public via Performance.gov.
- **Complementary evaluation and measured trials.** Agencies were expected to complement ongoing performance measurement with occasional, appropriately rigorous retrospective evaluations to isolate the impact of agency action from other factors influencing trends of interest. They were also encouraged to run prospective evaluations—measured trials with a control group or other adequately rigorous benchmark—to test new ways to achieve unprecedented performance gains.
- **Single performance portal.** A new website, Performance.gov, was created: to communicate to people in the federal government; to facilitate public understanding of agency goals, strategies, and performance; and to motivate adoption of this new way of doing business. In addition, Performance.gov was designed to support cross-organisational cooperation on shared goals, as well as cross-agency learning, investment, transparency and accountability to the public.
- **Accountability for improvement and cogent strategies rather than target attainment.** Accountability expectations were changed from meeting targets and earning a high score from OMB budget examiners to using stretch targets to inspire and encourage innovation; knowing whether key performance indicators were trending in the right direction and, if not, why; having a plan to address trends heading in the wrong direction; using data, measured trials, and other evidence to find ways to improve; and communicating to the public why a goal and strategies were chosen, progress, problems, their causes and proposed next steps.

OMB budget examiners were no longer expected to give programs PART scores but were expected to ask questions and address concerns when they reviewed proposed budgets. Budget submissions were to be accompanied by proposed annual goals for the budget year and updated prior-year goals, plans

⁷ To explain this approach across the government and to the public, Performance.gov provided an example of one Agency’s approach to these data-rich constructive performance reviews. See HUDSTAT ca 2011.

for achieving the goals, proposed measurements to track progress and planned evaluations. Agencies also shared draft annual performance reports showing and discussing past trends. Every other year, agencies proposed a small set of goals with their budget submissions to be two-year implementation-focused priority goals. After the budget was finalised, budget examiners were also asked to review and assess that agencies' proposed action plans for implementing priority goals, quarterly progress updates, and planned next steps.

In addition, the Performance Improvement Council (PIC), composed of the Performance Improvement Officers of every federal agency and supported by a small staff, provided feedback on goals, how progress was being reported, and each agency's performance review and improvement process. The PIC reviews not only provided useful feedback to the agency being reviewed, but also helped those doing the goal-focused performance reviews to learn from other agencies' experiences. The PIC worked closely with OMB's Office of Performance and Personnel Management on these reviews.

We wanted outcomes. We wanted agencies, wherever possible, to measure, manage and improve the conditions and events affecting people's lives. Focusing on outcomes requires agencies to try to influence the actions of others, not just the actions of government. This requires agencies to choose indicators and other ways to gauge progress to achieve better outcomes and higher returns on spending, not default to indicators that are easy to measure.⁸

We also wanted agencies to track whether key performance indicators were trending in the right direction. When they were not improving or improving too slowly, we wanted them to analyse relevant data to find ways to improve, ferret out root causes of problems that could be prevented, and think more strategically about where to focus government efforts.

Similarly, we wanted people in government to communicate their organisational goals and explain why they were important to their workforce, other parts of government (including Congress), and the public. We wanted them to invite discussion about goal framing (were the goals understandable and 'actionable' and were they framed to encourage and inform action?) and goal appropriateness (was a goal sufficiently ambitious relative to prior and peer performance and did it make sense in the context of competing needs and limited resources?). We wanted agencies to communicate their strategies and why they were chosen to encourage suggestions about better options that might exist (did the strategies make sense in the context of evidence about relevant past experience,

⁸ It is not possible to gauge progress on all types of activities using performance indicators. For areas such as investment in basic research and development, agencies could propose alternative methods for gauging progress to inform future decisions and actions.

the operating environment, evolving technologies and other developments?). In addition, we wanted government officials to communicate their goals and share their data to enlist assistance and expertise from others with the potential to contribute to performance gains on specific goals.

The Obama Administration introduced these changes with the FY2011 budget (Office of Management and Budget 2010) and incorporated them into budget guidance (Metzenbaum 2010). The US Congress subsequently adopted the approach into law, the *Government Performance and Results Modernization Act* of 2010 (*Results Act*). The *Results Act* added a few additional requirements, including requiring the adoption of cross-agency priority goals and Congressional consultation.

Progress

This section briefly describes how this approach worked. It spotlights two of the five two-year, implementation-focused priority goals set by the Department of the Interior for FY2011: one to increase renewable energy and one to reduce violent crime on Indian reservations. A brief discussion of progress on other priority goals and the process follows, including a brief introduction to the US federal government's performance reporting website, Performance.gov.

US Department of the Interior renewable energy goal

The US Department of the Interior (DOI) manages one fifth of the landmass of the United States and 1.7 billion acres of the outer continental shelf. Leaders at DOI realised that with so much land under management, they could help America produce more energy at home, support a growing economy and job creation, reduce dependence on foreign oil and reduce greenhouse gas emissions (Department of the Interior 2013). Concurrent with the release of the President's Fiscal Year 2011 budget in early 2010 (along with the release of the priority goals of all major federal agencies), DOI announced that one of its two-year implementation-focused priority goals would be to:

Increase approved capacity for production of renewable (solar, wind, and geothermal) energy resources on Department of the Interior managed lands, while ensuring full environmental review, by at least 9,000 megawatts through 2011 (Office of Management and Budget 2010, 43–90).⁹

⁹ The first set of agency priority goals and the performance improvement approach was announced in the President's FY2011 budget, Chapter 7 of the Analytical Perspectives (Office of Management and Budget 2010, 43–90). DOI's goals can be found on printed p. 82. For progress on DOI's FY2011 performance goals see US Department of the Interior 2012.

DOI's goal was not to produce renewable energy itself, but to expedite permitting to facilitate private sector development. To appreciate how much of a stretch this target was, over the prior 20-year period, DOI had authorised capacity to produce 1,500 megawatts of renewable energy on Interior land.

To reach its stretch target, DOI had to move quickly down a steep learning curve to figure out how to approve requests more quickly without compromising environmental quality. Through the first year, DOI authorised less than 200 megawatts. By year two, though, it had clearly worked out the kinks in its review system and approved nearly 4,000-megawatt capacity (US Department of the Interior 2013, see the Data & Explanation button at the Indicator List tab).

DOI did not meet the 9,000-megawatt stretch target by the end of FY2011. It did, however, permit 6,064 megawatts of renewable production capacity, enough to power over 1 million homes.

OMB did not chastise DOI for failing to meet its target; the goal had clearly achieved its motivational intent. Instead, OMB celebrated the progress DOI made by spotlighting this goal as an example of success. We wanted to signal that OMB would not attack agencies that did not meet all of their ambitious targets if they were clearly making progress at a healthy pace and were aggressively trying new strategies, assessing their impact, and adjusting agency action quickly based on what they were learning. Further, OMB explicitly warned agencies that if they met all their targets all the time, it would prompt OMB to ask if the agency was setting sufficiently ambitious targets. OMB guidance explained that OMB review of agency progress would focus on whether performance was trending in the right direction at a strong pace, not whether the agency was meeting all of its targets (Office of Management and Budget 2013).

Despite its failure to meet its target by the end of FY2011, DOI did not get discouraged. In the President's FY2013 budget, DOI renewed its commitment to this goal by setting a new two-year implementation-focused goal of 11,000 megawatts (cumulative from 2009) by the end of FY2013 on 30 September 2013. Having figured out how to get the job done, DOI was able to beat this target, approving cumulative capacity of 12,573 megawatts. DOI again renewed its commitment to this target for FY2015, setting a goal of 16,500 megawatts of renewable energy permitted since 2009 (Kornze n.d.).

US Department of the Interior goal to reduce violent crime in Indian communities

Another DOI priority goal for FY2011 and FY2013 was reducing violent crime on four, and subsequently six, high-crime reservations in Indian country. While focusing on such a small number of reservations may seem like a timid

target considering the hundreds of tribal communities nationwide, it was in fact an ambitious goal because when it was set, DOI did not know how to reduce violent crime on even one reservation.

DOI began this crime reduction effort by building a better measurement system and teaching tribal members how to collect and report crime data. It then initiated weekly phone calls and data-driven reviews.

Double-digit crime reduction was accomplished, but not without some problems, as the goal leader reported on Performance.gov at the end of the goal period, 30 September 2013 (Washburn 2013):

- The strategy employed with this priority goal has been effective, achieving an overall 38 in violent crime incidents in four tribal communities with long-standing community policing programs, and a reduction of 8 per cent in one of two new communities. These experiences have been documented in a *Crime-Reduction Best Practices Handbook* (Bureau of Indian Affairs, Office of Justice Services 2012a), which has been distributed throughout Indian country. The members and officers of the Bureau of Indian Affairs' Office of Justice Services were using this handbook.
- Progress was hampered by limited housing resources available for officers.
- Progress was also impeded by an inability to secure full engagement in one of the new sites.

To help other federal managers learn from this experience, the US Office of Personnel Management created a training video in which the goal leader talks about the power of this priority goal for bringing about change (Bureau of Indian Affairs, Office of Justice Services 2012b). A retrospective review of the ups and downs involved with managing the crime reduction goal was nicely captured in an article written in late 2013 (Lunney 2013).

Progress on other priority goals

The experience of the US Department of the Interior was not unique. It was, in fact, more the rule than the exception. By the end of FY2013, US agencies made progress on most of the 117 agency and cross-agency implementation-focused priority goals for that period, documented in the archived section of Performance.gov ('Clear goals: Using goals to improve performance and accountability'). For example, exports increased ('Cross agency priority goals: Exports. FY2013 Q4 Status Update'), energy efficiency improved (Utech 2013), the patent application backlog and wait times declined (although the goal was not met) (Rea 2013), nearly 1.7 million homes were weatherised with projected savings of \$16.4 billion in energy costs and reduction in greenhouse gases of

85 million tons (Poticha 2013), and an additional 120,000 families were served in US government-supported affordable housing without additional funding, bringing to just over 5.4 million the total number of families served (Kolluri 2013). In addition, the US Department of Treasury reduced paper benefit payments from 131 million in 2010 to 39 million in 2013, getting money out to beneficiaries and into the economy faster, and raised electronic collections from 85 per cent of total collections in 2010 to 97 per cent in 2013 (Gregg 2013). Social security similarly increased online applications, with more than 2.2 million retirement and disability applications submitted online during FY2012, an increase of 55 per cent over FY2009 with 1.4 million online submissions (Snyder 2013). For both Treasury and the Social Security Administration, the rate of improvement (slope of the curve) accelerated after the priority goal was set.

Tentative yet promising progress was evident elsewhere as well. For example, the US Education Department (ED) aimed to turn around the 500 persistently lowest performing schools (Delisle 2013). This goal was very challenging because ED first had to determine how to define these schools, then identify effective turnaround practices, and, after that, successfully promote adoption of these practices in 500 schools—not a simple undertaking in the US system where local governments, not the federal government and not even the states, manage schools. Other goals that seem to be moving in the right direction, but where progress was not yet certain at the end of FY2013 because of reporting lag times, include goals to reduce foodborne illness (Wagner 2015)¹⁰ and hospital-acquired infections (Tavenner 2013).¹¹

There were, of course, goals where progress was not trending in the right direction or trending too slowly as of the end of September 2013. Performance.gov shows, for example, that the US Department of Defense was not doing well procuring a higher proportion of its energy from renewable sources (Sikes 2013), and that the US Department of Transportation was wrestling to find effective ways to bring down general aviation fatalities (Gillian 2013) and reverse a one-year uptick in roadway fatalities following a steady decline since 2005

10 For FY2015 goals, see Wagner 2015; and Almanza 2013.

11 See, for example, the Partnership for Patients led by the Department of Health and Human Services to reduce hospital-acquired infections and hospital readmission rates. See Tavenner 2013; 'A partnership to save thousands of lives and billions of dollars.' n.d. Since this is an archived site, some of the links are dead. For updated information as of November 2014, see Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services 2015.

(Friedman 2013).¹² Similarly, the Veteran's Administration was clearly struggling to bring down the backlog of disability and pension claims. While it was successful in improving the accuracy rate of determinations, it did not show progress in reducing average days for claims until the last two quarters of FY2013, following a steady rise in backlogged claims in prior quarters (Rubens 2013).

Progress on goal-setting and measurement

Many agencies struggled to frame their goals in meaningful ways. The US Department of Agriculture (USDA), for example, sought to protect water resources and wanted to measure the effectiveness of its conservation investments. In the first round of priority goal-setting for FY2011, the USDA set a goal of increasing the number of acres agreeing to adopt high impact targeted practices to improve water quality rather than a goal of improving water quality affected by those lands. But the USDA did not have a robust evidence base about the impact of the treatments it was promoting. To address this problem, for FY2013, it updated its priority goal to be the identification of a better way to measure the impact of the treatments it was promoting (Mills 2013).

The US Office of Personnel Management (OPM) similarly needed to find a better way to measure progress on one of its priority goals—reducing the large backlog of pending retirement claims from former federal employees. Wait times were so long that it provoked Congressional ire (Lapin 2012). Accordingly, the OPM set as one of its FY2013 priority goals: 'By July 31, 2013, Retirement Services will have reduced its case inventory so that 90 per cent of all claims will be adjudicated within 60 days' (Zawodny 2013a).

While this goal was sensibly framed as an outcome (the number of days each claimant would have to wait to get a claim amount determined and full payment started), OPM did not have an inventory management (ageing) system that allowed it to calculate the age of claims in the system at the time this goal was set. It therefore started by measuring what it could measure: claims received, claims processed, and claims pending in the system. By measuring and managing these indicators, and using overtime and other management tools, OPM was able to reduce the claims backlog from over 61,000 pending claims in January 2012

12 In 2012, as DOT reported on Performance.gov, 'An estimated 34,080 people died in roadway crashes. This represents an increase of about 5.3 per cent compared to the 32,367 fatalities that occurred in 2011. It is the first year with a year-to-year increase in fatalities since 2005. Traffic fatalities had declined steadily over the previous six years by about 26 per cent from 2005 to 2011. It is too soon to speculate on the contributing factors of any increase in deaths on our roadways, however the historic downward trend in traffic fatalities in the past several years means any comparison today will be to an unprecedented low baseline figure. This also fits the pattern of previous economic cycles, where as the economy improved, so did traffic fatalities, likely due in part to higher levels of discretionary and recreational travel' (Friedman 2013).

to 36,000 in January 2013 to 14,000 in October 2014 (Zawodny 2013a, 2013b, n.d.). By its own projection, however, OPM expected the backlog to start to rise again because of the normal January–February seasonal surge in incoming claims (Office of Personnel Management 2015).

OPM did not, however, have any way to manage progress on the goal itself—reducing claimant wait times. It fixed that problem in May 2014 when OPM started to measure the ‘age’ of pending claims, a better outcome indicator of progress than the numbers of claims pending because it captures the claimants’ experiences. In May 2014, OPM processed 76.6 per cent of all claims received within 60 days. Between then and October 2014, the number of pending claims processed within the target time frame steadily improved. As of October 2014, OPM improved the percentage of claims processed in 60 days to 83.2 per cent, short of its 90 per cent goal but moving in the right direction.

It is interesting to note that the key indicator OPM had previously used as its primary metric—claims pending—might show a worsening trend in months when the number of claims received surges. OPM needs to track claims received, processed and pending to help it anticipate and prepare for variations in the number of claims, but measuring and managing claimant’s wait times is a more appropriate key outcome indicator that captures the claimant’s experience.

Over time, OPM would be well-advised to complement this indicator, showing wait times for all claimants, with wait times for different claimant categories. More complicated claims, such as those for claimants who worked in multiple federal government personnel systems or those involved in contested divorces, tend to take longer to process. Sharing information about these distinctions would help claimants plan better and OPM manage better. In addition, to make sure claims older than 60 days do not get cast aside because they are already over target, the average and distribution of times for claims that missed the target should be tracked and managed as well.

The US Department of Justice (Justice) has similarly made progress, not just in developing more meaningful measures but also in setting more focus on goals. Still, it struggles to find more meaningful ways to measure progress on those goals. As with traffic fatalities, Justice often wants to prevent bad things from happening and keep their costs as low as possible when they do. However, the unwanted incidents Justice wants to reduce, such as drug trafficking, human trafficking and civil rights violations, are harder to count than traffic fatalities or fires because crime perpetrators work hard to hide the incidents they create. For its FY2011 goal, Justice started counting the size of its caseload in different areas and the percentage of cases resolved in targeted areas where it was using enforcement to try to deter crime. For FY2013, it added greater specificity about the categories of crimes it was pursuing (Gannon 2013). For FY2015, Justice

added a more outcomes-focused indicator for its effort to protect vulnerable people. In addition to counting the number of cases, it is tracking and trying to increase the percentage of children recovered within 72 hours of an (Amber) alert.

Progress on constructive performance reviews

Another area where progress was made is in the conduct of constructive performance reviews, which must occur at least once a quarter. As a way to promote this practice to other parts of the federal government, the promising approach used by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) was described in detail on Performance.gov (HUDSTAT ca 2011). In addition, Performance Improvement Officers started annual peer reviews, providing feedback to other agencies on their review processes. In doing this, they also accelerate the peer reviewers' learning.

Progress linking performance measurement and other evidence-based management tools

Another area where progress was made was integrating performance measurement and other evidence-based management tools, such as regression analyses, randomised control trials and matched samples.¹³ The US Department of Labor hired a chief evaluation officer to work closely with the Deputy Secretary and the performance improvement office to identify relevant past research and support program offices in identifying and designing future research (United States Department of Labor n.d.). HUD experimented with a matched sample to compare how residential vacancy rates in neighbourhoods hit hardest by foreclosure receiving help from the department compared to those that did not receive assistance (Chavez 2013), while the US Internal Revenue Service explored a number of 'test and learn' measured trials in areas as diverse as reducing improper payments associated with paid Earned Income Tax Credit preparers, small business income under-reporting, and fraudulent returns.¹⁴

¹³ Discussion of the need for and approach to integration was first set out in the Analytical Perspectives to the President's FY2013 Budget, see Office of Management and Budget 2013.

¹⁴ Personal correspondence with Dean Silverman, Senior Advisor to the Commissioner in the IRS's Office of Compliance Analytics, 29 December 2014.

Progress on transparency

Performance.gov was created as a single website to report performance on US federal government goals for current and past agency goals,¹⁵ as well as for cross-agency priority goals. Performance.gov also introduced the key elements of the Obama Administration performance improvement approach to people in the federal government.¹⁶ As at the end of 2014, each of the 16 Cabinet departments and eight other large US government federal agencies report on four different types of goals on Performance.gov: longer term **strategic goals**; **strategic objectives** supporting each strategic goal; two-year **priority goals** for the goals that agency leaders designated for near-term performance acceleration and focused senior leadership attention; and **annual performance goals**.

Each agency's **strategic goals and objectives** can be found in its strategic plan, accessible from Performance.gov. The strategic goals and objectives can also be seen on the site itself in three locations: the Performance.gov home page, the agency 'home page', and by sorting on budget themes (e.g. energy, national defence, health).

Agencies' **annual performance goals** can be found in their annual performance reports, again available via Performance.gov. All agencies release their annual performance plan with their budget request and justification, laying out the goals they hope to accomplish with their requested budget. Many combine budget justifications and annual performance plans into a single document. Agencies report progress on their annual performance goals in their annual performance reports. Some, but not all, combine their annual performance reports with their annual performance plan. Performance.gov makes all of this information readily accessible, although improvements are needed to make goals, trends and strategies easier to find and interpret in context.

Performance.gov provides more detail on **agencies' two-year priority goals** and a small set of **cross-agency priority goals**. Progress on both sets of priority goals is updated no less than once per quarter.

Each priority goal has its own 'home page' with the following information:

- **Goal leader:** identifies the 'goal leader', designated by the agency Secretary or chief operating officer (COO), who is responsible for driving progress on

15 Progress on FY2013 priority goals can be found at the archived section: 'Using goals to improve performance and accountability.' Performance.gov. Online: archive-goals.performance.gov/goals_2013 (accessed 15 June 2015).

16 To see the original public site introducing the key components of the Obama Administration approach, see 'Delivering a high-performing government.' 2013. A non-public beta version of Performance.gov introduced the key concepts to all federal employees in advance of the public site launch.

each priority goal and appropriately adjusting planned actions if problems or new opportunities arise.

- **Overview:** explains why the agency selected this goal.
- **Strategies:** describes strategies chosen to achieve the goal and explains why they were chosen. Agencies are encouraged to discuss relevant evidence, such as past evaluations and insights from peer benchmarking in this section.
- **Progress:** discusses progress made since the goal was set and for the most recent quarter, including trends and milestones completed during the quarter, and likely reasons for progress and for problems.
- **Next steps:** describes the next set of actions planned to achieve the goal, updated as experience is gained and lessons learned.
- **Indicators:** shows trends on the key performance indicators for each goal, as well as for other indicators. All agencies must have *performance* indicators, but can also show *other* indicators. Other indicators could include whatever measures the agency found useful and wanted to share with the public, such as *demand-side indicators* of incoming claims or applications, *productivity indicators*, *precursor indicators* that can act as a warning sign, *unwanted or beneficial side effect indicators*, or *outcomes indicators that lag agency action*. The 'Data & Explanation' button in this section shows quarterly targets and allows more detailed explanations of each quarter's performance. The 'Indicator Details' button provides the metadata.
- **Contributing programs tab:** shows programs contributing to the goal's accomplishment. Agencies can list programs within the agency or in other parts of government, as well as external delivery partners. This tab makes it possible for goal leaders to show the reality and complexity of managing across organisational boundaries.
- **Learn more:** agencies have the option to add 'Learn More' buttons wherever they choose. For example, for its renewable energy goal, the Department of the Interior used the 'Learn More' button to link to a list of active renewable energy projects and a list of projects approved since the beginning of the calendar year of 2009. DOI also used the 'Learn More' button to share a handbook on crime reduction in Indian communities based on lessons learned from working with the initial four Indian communities to reduce violent crime.
- **Feedback:** the public can click on this button and offer suggestions for improvement using a 'Feedback' button.

Factors contributing to progress

I made the case in the preceding section that the Obama Administration's approach to performance measurement and management achieved noteworthy and, in some cases, breakthrough progress on goals, with progress on priority goals most readily apparent. We also made significant progress on key processes such as outcomes-focused goal-setting, measurement, data analysis, data-rich performance reviews, and complementing measurement with evaluations and measured trials to find ways to improve. In addition, we put in a place a system designed to strengthen accountability by making more readily transparent agency and cross-agency priority goals, progress, problems encountered, two-year strategies, near-term planned actions and accountable officials.

Perhaps this progress is not surprising because the approach was based on a careful look at lessons learned during the Clinton and Bush Administrations, and from other governments in the United States and abroad. That look identified a common set of practices contributing to progress: setting ambitious outcome-focused goals; measuring frequently to get timely intelligence; analysing the data to look for problems and promising practices; searching for root causes contributing to progress and problems; applying insights from analysis to improve practice; complementing retrospective analysis with occasional measured trials to find more effective new practices; clearly designating responsibility for managing progress on each goal; frequent, constructive performance reviews with each 'goal leader' led by a senior person in each department; and accountability for significant improvement and cogent strategies rather than for target attainment.

Other likely reasons for this progress include a shift in the emphasis of central office oversight from punishment in the form of a potential bad rating (and fear of consequent funding reduction) to encouragement for improvement along multiple dimensions (outcomes, return on the taxpayer's spending, government's interaction quality and accountability). Budget examiners remained involved with the process, but not as graders. They were, however, given multiple opportunities to raise concerns and encourage new practices.

Likely reasons for progress also include strengthening the community of performance improvement leaders across government, engaging them more aggressively in identifying and sharing better practices, providing specific feedback on agency performance measurement and management processes, and developing common performance improvement tools needed by many agencies. In addition, likely reasons include tapping the power of two key tools used during the Bush Administration—goals and measurement—not just to meet reporting requirements but also to enlist ideas and assistance from across and outside an agency to speed progress on goals.

Finally, an attitude change about accountability expectations may have contributed to progress. We tried to move away from a 'gotcha' attitude, implying that those who did not meet all their targets would be punished, to expecting every goal leader to know if key performance indicators were all trending in the right direction at rapid speed and, if not, to know why and have a cogent plan to deal with the problem.

Observers may appropriately question whether the progress described here, especially on the goals, would have occurred in the absence of the changes described here. It is an important question to ask and a good question to study. Such studies would help government determine which management and communication practices make a difference. It would also help identify which practices, in isolation or with others, make the most difference. It is worth noting, however, that several of the practices worthy of study, most notably goal-setting and measurement, don't just contribute to better outcomes but also facilitate objective analysis by academics and others.

Future challenges and opportunities

While progress was made, problems did arise and more progress is needed. Ten recommendations for near-term improvement are:

1. **Link organisational goals to social indicators.** The President's Budget (Analytical Perspectives) has long included a chapter on social indicators. The value of this information would be greatly enhanced if Performance.gov was updated to show trends in social indicators and link agencies' goals, strategies and programs to them. Performance.gov already links the strategic goals and objectives and the priority goals to budget themes. Linking to social indicators is an obvious next step and should not be too costly or difficult.
2. **Communicate and consider long-term trends.** Performance.gov gives agencies the option to show long-term historic trends for priority, annual and strategic goals, but few take advantage of this option. This is unfortunate for several reasons. First, long-term trend lines provide a quick sense of directional and rate changes. Also, and perhaps more importantly, government spending and action long ago contributed to dramatic improvements in a variety of policy areas such as public health, public safety and transportation. Continued funding is often needed to sustain past progress, but the public no longer remembers many of those gains. Whenever possible, trend lines should start early enough to show key performance indicators starting from 'before' key government actions were initiated, noting on the trend line when significant government actions took place and what they were (Bloomberg 2008, 17). When displayed with information about dates of government action, this

provides a sense of whether government action had the intended effect, even though it cannot control for other factors possibly influencing what is being measured. Complementary analysis and evaluation is needed for that.

3. **Link to relevant studies and evaluations.** Performance measurement and program evaluation are complementary tools, each enhancing the value of the other. Performance measures are essential to ongoing, real-time continuous improvement, but often cannot answer key questions that independent evaluations can, such as whether changes in performance measures were likely to have occurred in the absence of government action. The Overview section for each priority goal on Performance.gov should clearly describe data and other research about problems (and opportunities) that informed priority setting, while the Strategy section should discuss evaluations and other information that informed strategy selection. Some agencies provide this information in their narrative discussions on Performance.gov. Others, such as the US Department of Labor, have created dedicated websites to facilitate access to relevant evaluations (United States Department of Labor n.d.). Both practices should become standard practice for all agencies.
4. **Link to relevant data sets.** The Obama Administration made ‘open data’ a priority, opening over 100,000 data sets to the public (‘The home of the US Government’s Open Data’ n.d.). It also opened up opportunities for the private sector to create new economic ventures with ‘Datapaloozas’ (White House Office of Science & Technology Policy 2014). A next logical step would be to create a link between the social indicators in the budget, and the goals and indicators on Performance.gov, and relevant data sets to make it easier for researchers to find relevant data and amplify government’s analysis about priorities and effective practices. In addition, an effective but safe way to expedite researcher access to government data is needed.
5. **Invite constructive feedback.** Performance.gov includes a feedback button. In the era of social media, however, the government should test new ways to get constructive feedback from the field, from current and potential delivery partners, and from outside experts. It could start by asking targeted audiences the kinds of questions addressed in PART questions. Some of the starter questions might be: Are the goals outcome-focused enough? Is it clear why the goals were chosen? Are they sufficiently specific and ambitious? Are there better ways to measure progress? Is there relevant research or related experience that could accelerate outcome and productivity gains? Most PART questions touched on important issues, but asked them in a yes/no format without suggesting ways to improve and, as noted earlier, were limited in value because they reflected the views of only a single rater. PART-like questions should be asked and answered, but by a larger group of experts.
6. **Enlist and engage national and local partners.** Government seldom improves outcomes through its own actions. It usually needs to collaborate with

others for that purpose, whether through formal or informal collaborations. Goal-focused partnerships, supported by data to inform everyone's decisions, should be the norm rather than the exception. Recently, the Department of Health and Human Services used specific goals to enlist organisations and individuals to join its Partnership for Patients to reduce hospital-acquired infections and readmission rates. It has long done this with its decennial Healthy People effort. Other agencies should do the same, and experiment with better ways to share data and crowdsource improvements.

7. **Support continuous learning and improvement communities and build frontline intelligence.** Structured, managed continuous learning and improvement communities should be created and financially supported for common mission-support functions, for similar program types, and for mission-focused goals. Leaders for these improvement communities should be clearly designated and supported. This has already started to happen for common mission-support functions, such as human resources and information technology management, with cross-agency priority goals ('Cross-agency priority goals' n.d.). Sporadic progress has been made creating improvement networks for similar program types, such as benefits processing, permit approvals, grants management, and research and development, but far more is needed.¹⁷ Similarly, some progress has been made creating continuous learning and improvement communities on mission-focused objectives, but not enough, especially in federal grant-giving agencies that depend on state and local governments or non-profit organisations to accomplish their objectives. These agencies and their grant-giving programs should be authorised, and arguably mandated by law, to support structured, managed continuous learning and improvement communities that fully engage the frontline delivery agents (Metzenbaum 2008, 209–42).¹⁸
8. **Use constructive comparison.** The private sector has long used comparison to peers running similar processes and comparisons across similar field units to find more effective, efficient practices. Some federal agencies routinely

17 During the Clinton Administration, as part of the National Performance Review, communities of practice evolved around some similar program types, such as regulatory programs, research and development and programs dependent on states and locals. Change agents from different agencies came together to learn from and share each other's experience and work on similar problems, such as finding effective measurement methods. The Bush Administration established a set of program types for PART reviews (listed in Metzenbaum 2009, 56), which provide a good starting point for creating these communities. During the first term of the Obama Administration, a benefits processing working group was supported that decided to focus on reducing improper payments. The Obama Administration subsequently devoted significant work to speeding infrastructure permit processing building on lessons learned by the Interior Department with its renewable energy goal. See Cobert 2015.

18 This describes early federal learning leadership efforts at mission-focused agencies, such as the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Anthony Bryk (2010) at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has recently developed the concept much further, building networked improvement communities to improve community college education.

compare with others to find better practices and to motivate,¹⁹ but not enough. More systematic attention should be given to identifying agencies and programs that would benefit from more sophisticated internal and external comparisons and benchmarking.

9. **Promote effective, evidence-based accountability structures.** Continued efforts are needed to reinforce accountability expectations likely to encourage continuous improvement, with breakthrough progress in a few areas. Evidence on effective individual and organisational incentive systems with minimal dysfunctional responses should be shared, used and strengthened in grant programs, contracts and personnel reviews. Often, the most effective incentive systems do not involve financial incentives. In fact, motivational systems with financial incentives often backfire, leading to measurement manipulation or the selection of timid targets.
10. **Add other agencies and major components to Performance.gov.** When Performance.gov was launched, it included performance information for 16 Cabinet and eight other US federal agencies, but not for smaller agencies such as the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation. It is time to add performance information, including priority goals, for all but the smallest federal agencies and pilot ways to show the priorities, progress and practices for the largest components of the 16 Cabinet departments already reporting, such as for the Federal Aviation Administration, the Centers for Disease Control, and the US Coast Guard, and for some regional offices.

Appendix

Experience informing our performance improvement approach

A large body of experience informed our thinking in the Obama Administration about what to do and what not to do. Tony Blair's Prime Minister's Delivery Unit, for example, showed that intensive data analysis brought into discussions with program managers can lead to dramatic reductions in hospital wait times (without compromising medical care) as well as better health outcomes (Kelman 2006; Kelman and Friedman 2009; Barber 2007, 380–89). New Zealand's earliest ventures into performance measurement and management warned us that linking

19 See, for example, HUD's comparison of voucher use to serve veterans (HUDSTAT 'Using data to understand the problem to be solved: Where are these homeless veterans located?').

senior executive pay to target attainment can cause a retreat to output (rather than outcome) targets, making it less likely that conditions will improve and that the cost and consequence of unwanted incidents will decline (James 1998).

At the state and local level in the United States, DC Mayor Tony Williams showed how public posting of agency scorecards can be used to motivate department heads to set comprehensible goals and manage progress on them. He also used web-based scorecards to enlist public assistance in identifying community (e.g. pothole) priorities and data problems (Scott 2002; Winkler 2001). Other departments in New York under Mayor Rudy Guiliani and Baltimore Mayor and subsequently Maryland Governor Martin O'Malley demonstrated that 'Stat' meetings, modelled after New York Police Department *CompStat* sessions described below, also work well in other parts of government (Behn 2014). Washington State Governor Christine Gregoire built on the performance measurement foundation established by her predecessor, Gary Locke (Washington State Office of the Governor 2004), and added to that televised, taped, data-rich program performance reviews (Krieger 2005). At the beginning of her second term, Gregoire pioneered a statewide outreach effort to invite the public to inform the state's goal-setting process (Patton 2006). Virginia Governor Mark Warner, term-limited by law to one four-year term, enlisted the assistance of the university to create a single performance portal, *Virginia Performs*, which survived his tenure and has been used by several successive governors ('Virginia Performs' 2015). Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels, fresh off his experience running the US Office of Management and Budget during the first term of President George W. Bush, created a counterpart Indiana OMB, which adopted a more sophisticated approach to performance-informed budgeting, including encouragement of cross-agency management of problems, such as rising methamphetamine use (Horst 2005).

Several agencies pioneered goal-focused, data-rich management in the US federal government, producing steadily improved results. The US National Highway Traffic Safety Administration system adopted an injury epidemiology framework, often referred to as the Haddon matrix that helped drive down both the traffic fatality rate and fatality numbers (Maddox n.d.; Sleet 2011). The US Department of Health and Human Services adopted the goal-focused, data-supported Healthy People campaign to enlist state and local partners in setting national, state and local health goals and using them to inspire improvement (Metzenbaum 2008). The Coast Guard, too, has long made effective use of goals and risk management for better results (United States Coast Guard 2010 and n.d.).

The following two cases, pertaining to crime reduction in New York City and water quality improvement in Massachusetts, illustrate in more detail some of the practices we prescribed.

Case 1: New York City policing and *CompStat* to reduce crime

In 1994, New York Police Commissioner William Bratton created the *CompStat* (computerised statistics) program to reduce crime in New York City (Bratton with Knobler 1998; Smith with Bratton 2001; Henry n.d.). He publicly announced a specific outcome-focused goal (a 25 per cent reduction in crime in two years, with a 10 per cent reduction in year one); made clear that precinct commanders were accountable for managing progress on the crime reduction goal in their precinct; increased the frequency of crime reporting; and convened frequent data-rich reviews with each precinct captain to discuss strategies,²⁰ progress, problems and future plans.

After setting the goal, Bratton needed to find data to gauge progress and decide next steps. He discovered that the New York Police Department (NYPD) collected data about police response primarily to submit in quarterly reports to the US government, a condition of its federal funding. These data were due six months after the close of the quarter, so could be as much as nine months old and seldom fewer than six.

Bratton wanted more actionable information and these data were too dated to be useful. He wanted crime statistics collected, reviewed and delivered to headquarters weekly. At the time, before the days of near-instantaneous electronic transmission, this meant someone from each precinct had to drive a floppy disk containing a Lotus 123 spreadsheet of crime data into headquarters each week.

Bratton used the data for what he called *CompStat* sessions, a frequent process of in-person reviews of precinct-level data. Before each *CompStat* session, an analytics team would review the data to look for interesting or unexplained patterns and relationships, and suggest questions to be asked of the precinct

20 One of the most well-known theories informing Bratton's choice of strategies is referred to as the 'broken windows' theory, based on the writings of respected scholar James Q. Wilson. The name comes from the theory that broken windows and other signs of neighbourhood disorder create citizen fear and that inattention to these signs indicates that no one cares, leading to more disorder. Bratton felt that these kinds of small problems need to be reduced in highly visible ways, relying on citizens for legitimacy and assistance. For further discussion of Bratton's view on 'broken windows', see Bratton and Knobler 1998, 152. See also Nagy and Podolny 2008.

The 'broken windows' theory and police use of 'stop and frisk' practices, which became an issue during the New York City 2014 mayoral campaign as a cause of police abuse, are sometimes erroneously equated. While stop-and-frisk may be one tactic for reducing 'broken windows', it is not the only one nor necessarily as effective over time as it might be originally. See Rose 2014; and Golding 2014.

To make sure that police abuse did not rise as efforts to reduce broken windows did, the NYPD introduced statistics about civilian complaints and patterns of police misconduct into *CompStat* review meetings. See Smith with Bratton 2001, 453–82, 463.

commander. Questions might be general, such as: ‘What’s going on with crime in your community? If crime is up, why and what are your plans to deal with it? If it is down, why and did you take an action others might want to take, too?’ They could also be much more specific, such as ‘What is happening in this area?’

The precinct commander was accountable for knowing his or her statistics and for having well-informed plans to address problems and make improvements. During the meetings, other precinct commanders and departmental experts with relevant experience might offer suggestions. In addition, the meetings afforded a convenient venue that savvy precinct commanders could use to seek assistance from those they did not directly supervise, such as detectives, and to get fast feedback on ideas.

Penalties and rewards were not directly linked to crime reduction or target attainment. Deputy Commission for Crime Control Strategy, Jack Maple, who worked closely with Bratton to develop *CompStat*, would say, ‘Nobody ever got in trouble because crime numbers on their watch went up.... [T]rouble arose only if the commanders didn’t know why the numbers were up or didn’t have a plan to address the problems’ (Maple and Mitchell 1999, 33; Godown 2015). Still, precinct commanders who did not like this way of doing business tended to look for other work or left the department of their own volition, while those who liked to use the data to make more informed decisions found opportunities to advance their careers.

Prior to the introduction of *CompStat*, the person responsible for bringing crime rates down in different locations was unclear. Was it the borough chief or the precinct commander? *CompStat* clarified the answer: the precinct commander was on the line.

In fact, prior to the introduction of *CompStat*, when Bratton talked to the police about crime reduction, most argued that they should not be held accountable for outcomes—for reducing the crime rate—because they could not control it. They could only *influence* it, so felt they should only be held accountable for what they *could* control: response times.²¹

Bratton disagreed. He felt the police were responsible for public safety, and made clear that under his command the objective of the police force was to reduce crime. While this does not seem controversial today, it was then. Response times can be important for customer perceptions and public safety, but they are a means and not an objective. It is better to explain to a resident that the police

21 According to Smith with Bratton (2001), long before he offered the ‘broken windows’ theory, James Q. Wilson argued that police could not assess the impact of their actions to reduce crime, likely lowering the police’s own expectations regarding what they could accomplish. Bratton clearly did not subscribe to this theory when he chose to measure and manage crime reduction.

might be delayed if more pressing incidents demand immediate attention than to respond to less pressing calls that will keep response time indicators looking good. Bratton wanted his police force to focus on reducing crime.

CompStat, focused on a crime reduction goal, helped him shift the focus. Not only was the goal met, but the *CompStat* approach has spread across policing in the United States and the world. It also spread to other parts of city government, including the management of city parks and correctional facilities.

In a separate chapter in this book, Gary Sturges writes about fire services spending less time fighting fires. This is because, years ago, firefighters similarly focused on an outcome as their objective: reducing fires and their cost and consequence. They also gathered and analysed data from past fires to find ways to prevent future ones. In the United States and I presume across the world, many of the outcome-focused, data-rich aspects of *CompStat* have long been applied to fire reduction. In the US, the National Fire Protection Association and other national organisations collect data about every significant fire, their characteristics, their costs and their causes. They analyse frequency, patterns and causes to identify the most common and consequential causes of fires and to inform recommendations for model codes, such as mandating the preventive practice of installing sprinkler systems in large buildings. Thanks to this disciplined, data-rich approach to understanding the problem, firefighters have almost been put out of business (Metzenbaum 2007). At least in US communities, this has allowed them to change the nature of their work, picking up emergency response responsibilities. This dual responsibility works well because it allows firefighters to maintain capacity distributed geographically across many different locations to be ready to respond to the increasingly rare fires that do occur and to continue, through inspections and other means, to prevent future fires (Bloomberg and Flowers 2013).

Case 2: The US Environmental Protection Agency and cleaning up the Charles River

In 1995, during the presidential term of Bill Clinton, the regional administrator of the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) New England regional office, John DeVillars, initiated a variation of what Bratton had done in New York City. He set a public goal, designated someone to manage progress on the goal, and made clear he expected progress on the goal as well as public reporting about that progress. His team also quickly discovered the value of frequently gathering and analysing data (Metzenbaum 2002).

On the eve of the Head of the Charles Regatta, a major event that at the time brought a quarter of a million people to the Boston metropolitan area, DeVillars announced an ambitious, outcome-focused goal: the lower Charles River (running between the cities of Cambridge and Boston in Massachusetts) would be swimmable in 10 years. To give you an idea of how ambitious that goal was, rowers who fell into the river at the time of the announcement were advised to get a tetanus shot.

DeVillars' announcement won front-page news coverage. Six months later, on Earth Day, he gave the river a grade, once again garnering media attention. By picking a recurring annual event to announce the first grade, DeVillars signalled his intent that the initial goal announcement not be a one-time media story but something EPA actively managed and for which it would publicly report progress at least once a year.

DeVillars also designated a lead accountable official, Ken Moraff. A staff lawyer, Ken reached out to two of his engineering colleagues and, together, the three of them, all working part-time on this assignment, assumed responsibility for getting the Charles River to achieve swimmable status within 10 years.

Moraff and his colleagues started this effort by looking for useful data to inform their actions and to achieve measurable improvement in water quality before the next Earth Day. Finding useful data proved harder than expected. The state, long considered a national leader in using a watershed management approach to improve water quality, gathered water quality data for the watershed once every five years. Local governments also lacked water quality data EPA could use to find new ways to accelerate progress on the goal. Local governments collected data frequently to make sure there were no permit violations, but only about the quality of the discharge water released by permit holders, not about the quality of the receiving water. Fortunately, the Charles River Watershed Association had begun gathering data more frequently. Every month, volunteers collected faecal coliform and dissolved oxygen samples at 37 points along the 80-mile stretch of the river, posting the data online for all 37 locations. Moraff and his colleagues wisely decided to look at this information and found it useful for triggering focused follow-up questions that not only pointed them to problems needing attention but allowed them to gauge progress more often than once every five years.

Every month, the EPA team could quickly scan the watershed association data to look for anomalies in the data. When a downstream reading was worse than an upstream reading and could not be explained by a permitted discharger between the two sampling locations, it naturally prompted the question 'Why?' and focused the EPA on trying to understand the causes of the unexpected readings.

In the case of one anomaly, EPA called the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to ask if the state knew why water quality was worse in that particular area. The DEP did not, nor did the local government (the Boston Water and Sewer Commission). So EPA called colleagues at the Boston Water and Sewer Commission and asked them to grab their maps and, with EPA, ‘walk the pipes’. This revealed an illicit hook-up to the storm sewer system sending untreated contaminated water that should have been flowing into the sanitary sewer system for treatment directly into the river.

This example illustrates why setting outcome-focused goals and measuring changes in outcomes, not just measuring and managing activities and outputs believed to affect outcomes, is so important. To improve water quality, the staff of EPA and other regulatory agencies issue permits establishing allowable conditions for permitted discharge. Inspectors check if permit holders are in compliance with permit conditions. When non-compliance is suspected, enforcement staff follow up and levy penalties where warranted. These are all sensible activities and tracking them is helpful; trying to improve their productivity can also be useful.

EPA also receives complaints and needs to determine those warranting further attention. It had heard from rowers that disgusting stuff was flowing from pipes into the river but chose to put those complaints aside, thinking they were not as important as the other cases on which they were working. It was only after EPA set a specific outcome-focused goal, and started using frequent measurement to manage water quality, that EPA detected arguably some of the most egregious violators in its regulatory system, those who had not bothered to get a permit in the first place.

To accelerate progress on the goal, the EPA team embraced data-rich brainstorming. It looked for data anomalies and asked why they were happening. When it found an answer—illicit hook-ups—the team wanted to look for other illicit hook-ups. Someone suggested lifting manhole covers on days when it was not raining to look for water running through storm sewers. EPA instructed local governments across the states to do this and search up-pipe for sources when they found running water on dry days. One illicit hook-up detected this way was a 90-bed dormitory, sending untreated outflows directly into the Charles. Through this data-rich decision-making process, EPA and local governments were able to improve the water quality from being swimmable 19 per cent of the time in 1995 to being swimmable 59 per cent of the time in 2000, five years later.

The EPA team did not meet its goal of a swimmable Charles River by 2005, nor had it attained the goal by 2013. But through three different presidents and even more politically appointed regional administrators, EPA's New England regional office has continued pressing for and making progress toward a swimmable

Charles River ('Region 1. EPA New England. Charles River Report Cards' 2014). In September 2014, EPA reported that the Charles River was swimmable 70 per cent of the time in 2013 (United States Environmental Protection Agency n.d.).

One interesting note of special import for those who fear that public adoption of a specific, ambitious goal will provide fodder for those eager to attack government: the EPA has not come under serious attack for missing its target. One possible reason for this is that EPA updates the community on progress made, problems encountered, and plans for further improvement every year ('Charles River 2013 Report Card Reflects Cleanest Water in Decades' 2014). It also uses the goal to enlist assistance and expertise from others—including other governments and the private sector—to make progress on the goal.

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