

PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT MATTERS

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PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT IS AS MUCH AN ATTITUDE AS AN ACTIVITY

*By Richard Eckert, Fairfax-Falls Church
Community Services Board*

We all habitually measure our performance and compare our achievements against what others do, against what we ourselves have done in the past, or what we consider to be our best possible effort. Fairfax County's Performance Measurement system is based on applying the same type of activity to what we do for the County. The County's Performance Management system, which ties pay increases to employee performance, is separate from the Performance Measurement effort but uses many of the same concepts.

Each of us has dealt with a variety of requirements to evaluate our efforts on the job for years. Through the budget appropriation process, the Board of Supervisors asks us to describe what we do - how many units of service we provide, for how many people, and at what cost? Many County agencies receiving state or federal funds are also asked to measure what we do with those funds and to report back using a variety of very specific criteria.

Performance Measurement also asks us to go one step further. It asks us to answer the "So what?" question, to describe the measurable difference(s) we are making in the quality of life of Fairfax County residents. In the words of the Performance Measurement Manual, "What was achieved? How efficiently was the work done? How were citizens helped by the effort?"

Performance Measurement is more an attitude than any sophisticated or highly technical set of procedures. It

is an attitude that requires us to look closely at what we are doing, and to measure our efforts against what we have done in the past and against what similar organizations in other jurisdictions are doing. Furthermore, it is a commitment to use the information we obtain through this effort to improve what we are doing and to give those we serve the best possible services with the available resources.

Look at it another way. We all like to believe that our professional efforts make a meaningful contribution to our community. We measure part of our success by our ability to provide a comfortable and healthy life for our family, to be sure, but we also want personal and professional satisfaction out of our work. When your kids ask you what you do, you probably give them some kind of general information about your job. Wouldn't it be more satisfying to be able to describe how what you do makes Fairfax County a better place to live? You may already do this, but many of us cannot describe our efforts in these terms.

Most of us have to keep records of what we do at work. Adopting the Performance Management attitude motivates us to focus the information we collect to more effectively describe how our efforts improve the quality of life in Fairfax County. This attitude helps us better explain how resources provided by Fairfax County taxpayers are a good investment.

Effective Performance Measurement does not have to be sophisticated. Information that is intuitive and that even a child can understand is often the best. While much of what we already collect for local, state and federal funding sources is phrased in words and concepts that contain jargon or are meaningful only to professionals in our specific professional fields, translating this information into language and concepts that anyone able to read at the third

grade level can easily understand will help County managers, our fellow professionals, and the public at-large better understand the value of our programs.

Here is an example that may be helpful. In 1993, the Alcohol and Drug Services (ADS) submitted a funding application to the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT). Funding was awarded to provide a number of specific programs and services that would improve the continuum of treatment services available to adolescents. The evaluation component of the grant required us to provide a variety of information describing characteristics of young people entering treatment, as well as how long they stayed in treatment and their status when they left the program. We modified data requirements to meet program management needs, to measure performance, and to provide a better picture of the value of the new services for clients and the community.

From the beginning, we asked children and their families for feedback on what was most helpful about the services we were offering, what was least helpful, and how services could be improved. We let them know that we were all partners in helping the kids get their lives back on track. We still had to provide CSAT information on inputs (numbers and characteristics of kids served) and outputs (status at discharge), but we also were able to continually improve our services through feedback from our clients. By building the communication process, we were able to continue to get feedback after clients left our services, getting better and better information on "so what" questions. Clients, their

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ON GOALS

You measure the size of the accomplishment by the obstacles you had to overcome to reach your goals.



— Booker T. Washington

PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT IS AS MUCH AN ATTITUDE AS AN ACTIVITY (continued from page 1)

parents, and probation officers or school personnel when appropriate, gave us information on our clients' ability to avoid alcohol and other drugs after leaving treatment, their success in education and employment, and their involvement with the criminal justice system. Even kids who didn't stay in the program very long showed less use of alcohol and other drugs, were more consistent in education and employment, and had fewer offenses requiring intervention by the criminal justice system.

Collection of this kind of data is often not easy, especially when most of those you serve come to you under pressure from the justice system, schools, family, or employers. They often are not happy to enter our doors and have little interest in allowing themselves to be contacted once the pressures that brought them to our door diminish or abate. Very tight state and federal confidentiality requirements also make it difficult to keep tabs on former clients. At least kids are easier to track because their parents may be more accessible and students may be reached through the school system.

Federal funding made much of our data collection possible and encouraged the development of our efforts to answer the "so what" questions. Numbers were important to the CSAT, but when asking the Board of Supervisors to pick up some program costs when federal funding ended, we had to explain how what we were doing was making a difference. Through support of ADS management, much of the performance measurement attitude developed as part of the grant has spread throughout the agency. Most of our follow-up data gathering takes place during clinical follow-ups – part of a continuum of ongoing support of our clients. Even so, data collection takes a significant commitment on the part of line staff, and the quality of information reflects that commitment. Management must have a similar commitment to quality information, and allocate resources to support this effort if the attitude is to flourish and better use of continually improving data is to become the norm. ADS has made progress to the point where a number of managers

are collecting and using data that even goes beyond the performance measures reported as part of the County's Performance Management system.

ICMA BENCHMARKING BEGINS FOR 2001

As many of you are aware, Fairfax County joined the International City/County Management Association's (ICMA) Center for Performance Measurement (CPM) in early 2000. Last fall, agencies submitted data to be benchmarked against approximately 120 other jurisdictions in a number of program areas (Police, Fire, Library, Parks and Recreation, Code Enforcement, Refuse/Recycling, Youth Services, Risk Management, Human Resources, Purchasing, Fleet Management, Facilities Management, and Information Technology). The 2000 Data Report is expected any day now.

In the meantime, affected agencies have been provided with the templates for collecting FY 2001 data. This information was sent in late August and is due into the Department of Management and Budget by October 31, 2001. Any questions on this matter should be directed to Barbara Emerson, the Primary Coordinator for ICMA benchmarking for Fairfax County.

YOU TELL (OR ASK) US

The Performance Measurement (PM) Team is a multi-agency team consisting of 14 members from agencies as diverse as the Fairfax County Public Library to the Police and Fire and Rescue Departments. The Team meets monthly to address issues related to the County's performance measurement effort (on the second Tuesday of each month in the Department of Management and Budget). One activity that the team began in 2001 is the practice of meeting with agencies that want to discuss, and perhaps improve, their performance measures. The Department of Community and Recreation Services was the first agency to use one of the monthly meetings as a forum for discussing its measures. The Department of Housing and Community Development soon followed. The learning was two-way – the PM Team gained a better appreciation for the agencies' measurement challenges and the agencies benefited from the team's questions and suggestions. If your agency would like support from the PM Team, please contact Barbara Emerson at 703-324-3009, or any of the other team members listed below.

PM TEAM MEMBERS

Table listing PM Team Members with names, agency affiliations, and phone numbers.



Visit the PM Website:

http://infoweb.co.fairfax.va.us/DMB/pfmeasure.htm