

# Public Employees as Partners in Performance: Lessons from the Field

BY BROOKE A. MYHRE

How do you get from “Let’s not try to fix what ain’t broke” to “My job is to maintain a park that I’d want to bring my own family to”? Both quotes are from employees participating in implementation of a performance measurement system in San Jose, California. They represent the challenge and the benefit of the journey toward a customer-focused and results-driven organization. Public employees, and their acceptance of such a significant culture change, are critical to achieving—and even to initiating—a better government organization through performance measurement and public involvement.

Five lessons were learned about preparing employees, as well as other partners, to build a successful performance measurement system that integrates meaningful and useful public participation and promotes understanding among decision makers, service providers, and the range of “customers” for local government services.

## Deal with the Fear Factor

Performance measurement and increasing public involvement are often proposed as means to hold governments accountable, make them more efficient, or even make them behave “more like a business.” From the management level to the front line, however, many employees view performance measures and public involvement as threats, despite the best intentions of those who proposed these measures. The implication is that public employees are untrustworthy, professionally or technologically challenged, unmotivated, overstaffed and overpaid, or noncompetitive compared to the private sector. Obviously, no government employee wants to hear these things

stated or implied about his or her performance. When proposed as an across-the-board initiative, it is like hearing that the entire organization has been placed on the auditor’s next work plan.

Fear and uncertainty may affect other major “stakeholder” groups as well. Unions, employee associations, executives and senior staff, and even elected representatives may take a position on the effort. Outside stakeholders such as neighborhood associations, advocacy groups, or private development customers may see both positive and negative impacts from changes to increase “public” input and communication and introduce performance data into decision-making criteria.

Individual employees assess this potential change and its impact on their job, or the role they play in the organization. From their assessments, employees will decide whether to fight change, ignore it until it goes away, accept it as something they must do, or actively advance the concepts in performance of their job and role. Typical questions are, “Who owns the initiative? Who is for or against it? Is there strong leadership, as well as broad-based and top-to-bottom employee support (or at least acceptance) of the effort? Will it affect me? What’s in it for me?” If not acknowledged and dealt with early on, employee and stakeholder questions and concerns can at a minimum create more mistrust of the effort, necessitate more watchdog processes, create demands for representation in or review of any decisions, and ultimately stop the effort before it gets going.

Outside of hearing complaints, public employees may have had little involvement with customers that generates feedback on how, or how well, they do

their job. Most are unprepared to use, or lack access to, communication systems that enable outreach to and input from customers. Furthermore, involvement efforts are received with cynicism if they do not facilitate meaningful communication and useful input from all parties.

Every jurisdiction has its own set of circumstances generating the call for the proposed performance measurement initiative and its own cast of players and spectators. Although each jurisdiction is unique, two common elements of successful implementation are to ensure that (1) all key participants are clear on the why and the what and (2) good-faith efforts are made to involve all parties meaningfully. In short, employees and others need to jointly discover what is and ain't broken and then make informed decisions about what to fix and how to fix it.

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Here are two suggestions from the San Jose experience to manage the fear factor and prepare employees to participate effectively as partners in the effort.

First, it is essential to prepare the organization and the employees to understand the *why* and *what*—the rationale, goals, scope, priority, and amount of time and resources needed for the performance measurement and public involvement effort. Plan an inclusive employee rollout event or process to announce the effort, with real opportunities to ask questions and comment freely on the purpose and process ahead. This should include leadership, with participation by employees from all levels of the organization as well as representatives of key stakeholder groups such as unions. Deliver a united leadership message on the purpose, priority, and goals of the

effort, but make it clear that everyone's input is a valued part of the process. Prove this by acknowledging all suggestions and responding as to why suggestions are incorporated or not. Employees and others will judge by this response whether their input really matters.

Second, schedule a series of meetings with employees at each major step in the implementation process to ensure consistent communication and allow free discussion of issues. In San Jose, these meetings were conducted by members of a central implementation team alongside representatives of employee bargaining groups. No supervisors or managers were present. Issues and concerns were freely voiced. Misunderstandings and factual errors were addressed immediately. Suggestions and unresolved concerns were communicated anonymously to management and leadership for an appropriate response. Plan to offer additional meetings as often as necessary. A major communication challenge to those responsible for leading the effort is to compete favorably with the amazingly efficient rumor mill.

#### **Understand What Governments Really Do and for Whom (or, It's About Service Delivery . . .)**

Another way to help employees engage effectively is to build the conversation about government performance around service delivery, rather than policies, procedures, or people. Focus on which services are delivered, and the results experienced by customers. This not only reinforces the relationship of the public to the employees and their work but helps depoliticize and depersonalize the atmosphere and promote the kind of frank, factual discussion needed to allow all parties to learn how they are doing now and how they might be able to address any performance issues creatively and positively.

For a performance measurement effort to be meaningful, employees as well as customers, managers, and policymakers must share a clear understanding of why the government exists, where it is going, and

the services it delivers. It is fundamental to review an organization's mission, vision, and goals, but remember that what local governments really do is deliver services. To keep the focus of the performance measurement effort on service delivery rather than the organization, San Jose created a "service delivery framework" to be used to inventory services and evaluate the alignment of the service being delivered with accomplishment of the city's mission, vision, and goals. The basic question is, "Are we doing the right things?"

An important role for employees in this evaluation is to help develop the inventory of services. Once given the knowledge and tools to inventory and describe services, employees are potentially the best source of information on what services are actually being delivered.

In San Jose, hundreds of employees from all levels of the organization were invited to participate in this effort on the basis of their knowledge of or direct responsibility for key functions or services. Training and facilitation were conducted to guide employees through these steps:

1. *Inventory and define services delivered.* Employees learned to focus on groups of activities that result in a distinct deliverable to customers, one that can be measured. The inventory included the internally delivered services of the administrative departments in the organization.
2. *Refine and check alignment of services.* Employees checked for duplication and opportunities for consolidation or elimination, and they confirmed that each service aligned with and contributed to accomplishment of the mission, vision, and goals of the organization.
3. *Identify who your customers are.* For many government services, this is not a simple question. The analysis should identify all types of customers. For example, who receives (directly or indirectly), pays for, or cares about the service you deliver?

4. *Validate using customer input.* Employees gathered input from identified customers in focus groups to clarify service descriptions, or restructure the service inventory to ensure they were meaningful from the customers' perspective.

After these steps, the city council—in a public setting—considered and approved service inventory and service descriptions.

#### **When Determining Performance Measures and Targets, Put Learning Before Scorekeeping**

Employees should participate in creating what is measured as well as in establishing baseline performance levels and future targets. To ensure constructive participation, ascertain whether the measurement and evaluation scheme is perceived as valid, fair, and forgiving when necessary. Employees must agree that the measures fairly represent the results of their work in order for them to take ownership. If the performance measurement effort stresses performance against targets too soon, employees may challenge the data or how the targets were set, or worse they may engage in game-playing to set targets that will always be met.

The key and continuing question here is, "Are we measuring the right things correctly?" A primary goal of a performance measurement system should be to improve service delivery, not just meet targets. Performance data should not be reported just for accountability purposes but must be used to better understand why results occurred and to evaluate actions taken to address performance issues.

In the San Jose model, a balanced set of performance measures including quality, cost, cycle time (if applicable), and customer satisfaction were developed for each service. Measuring each service on multiple dimensions is intended to generate data on internal aspects (how well, how much, how fast) as well as external customer perception of the overall success in meeting customer needs.

Communication among employees, customers, and stakeholders is also critical at this stage to validate existing perceptions of satisfaction with service delivery results and determine desired levels of performance and satisfaction. Every participant can benefit from others' perspectives. Two factors to consider are, first, how well services are being provided now. Customers are often unaware of the overall performance of a service because they have experienced a horror story, some incident that may occur only rarely. Though both are important, input from a customer satisfaction survey gives a much different perspective from a review of complaint data.

Second, what do customers want from our services? What they really want, need, or value may be very different from what employees currently believe. Through closer interaction, employees can learn that customers may value quick acknowledgment that their request is being worked on and can feel satisfied with a longer response time so long as it is reasonable and they know what to expect.

#### **Just Try It—The Actual Experience May Not Be So Bad . . .**

Once the performance measurement and public involvement systems are established, what can employees expect? In place for more than five years, San Jose's system can offer examples.

A citywide resident survey is conducted every other fiscal year, asking respondents about issues the city should address and their satisfaction with city services, both overall and with individual services. Between the baseline year 2000 survey and the 2005 survey, San Jose's economy experienced the dot com crash and city revenues declined, creating the need for operating budget reductions, including hiring freezes, position cuts, and service-level reductions every year. Surprisingly, the 2005 survey showed residents' satisfaction with overall city service remained steady, and satisfaction with several individual ser-

vices actually increased from 2000. A prime example was library services, reflecting the results of a bond-funded capital program to rebuild neighborhood branches, as well as implementation of new operating practices within the branches designed to meet changing customer needs.

Overall maintenance of resident satisfaction, despite significant reductions in staffing and funding, may well be the result of employees being more productive as well as understanding which services are most important to residents.

A service delivery analysis of the city's vehicle abatement service was performed, using performance data and customer surveys to establish baseline performance and evaluate a six-month pilot program to restructure the service. San Jose's vehicle abatement policy is to cite and, if necessary, remove abandoned vehicles parked for more than seventy-two hours on city streets. To respond to a very high volume of service requests and numerous complaints of long resolution time, the service was reassigned to a new department on a pilot basis. New procedures were developed to improve initial response (warning citations) and reduce the time taken to remove abandoned vehicles. Performance measures were set up for initial response and case resolution with time frames that were reasonable to customers.

After the six-month pilot, the percentage of response time targets met increased significantly. In addition, a follow-up customer satisfaction survey of those requesting service showed a ten-percentage-point increase in satisfaction at every step of the process from initial complaint to resolution. When the results were shared with a city council committee in a recommendation to approve continuation of the new procedures, one council member asked several members of the public in attendance if the service had improved under the pilot. Despite the group's earlier presentation of a six-foot banner of photos of abandoned cars, they confirmed that things had definitely improved under the pilot program.

At the operational level, developing a better understanding between employees delivering service and their customers can produce unexpected benefits. A park maintenance worker shared a story about a customer he had thought of as a “nosy neighbor” who would regularly confront him on his rounds to clean up at a park playground. After initially finding this to be irritating, the worker realized that the customer was a good source of “field” intelligence, pointing out that teenagers would regularly have parties in the park on a particular night and the park would remain dirty for days until the next scheduled cleanup. On the basis of this information, the park worker could revise the maintenance route schedule to take care of the cleanup on the day immediately following.

### **The Three C’s: Commitment, Capacity, Communication**

#### **Commitment**

To ensure employees’ continued constructive participation, leadership must display an initial and sustained commitment to the performance measurement effort and its public involvement elements. Introduction of any new effort will compete with many other priorities and demands on employees, but given the long list of organizational development initiatives introduced over the last ten to fifteen years, efforts such as these must also pass the “flavor of the month” test. Employees constantly evaluate not only statements from leadership but their actions as well, to judge the relative priority of the effort amid competing demands.

In local governments, public involvement and performance measurement efforts are often viewed as important though not urgent, and when competing needs arise, leadership’s immediate priorities may change. However, it is particularly important for leaders to maintain a long-term commitment because once employees do choose to buy in to the effort, they will be increasingly sensitive to whether leaders are “walking the talk.” If leaders’ good faith

is questionable, employees will quickly bail out, and it will be difficult if not impossible to regain their constructive participation.

To mitigate this potential, one suggestion is to develop an enduring statement of values to serve as a reminder of what remains important to the organization, through good budget times and bad; the statement may help to sustain public involvement and performance measurement efforts over time.

#### **Capacity**

Along with leadership commitment, these efforts require significant new resources or redirection of existing ones for a lengthy period of time to accomplish something that is worthwhile:

- Designated staff and funding to establish and sustain the performance measurement and public involvement systems at an effective level
- A sustained central training and coaching program to introduce new employees to the systems and update skills of existing employees
- Membership and participation in professional associations and peer or benchmarking groups to stay current with developments in the field as well as to share data and techniques
- Valid and consistent survey development methodology, templates, software, and other tools that give employees the knowledge and capacity to receive customer feedback on individual services
- Expertise and assistance in outreach to customers of specific services to communicate successes and receive input through more face-to-face methods such as presentations and focus groups

#### **Communication**

As mentioned previously, communication with employees during implementation of performance measurement and public involvement efforts is critical to allay fears, stop rumors, and obtain employees’ participation as a major partner in the efforts. Once the system is established, open and timely communication about how the system is being used

is critical in maintaining their constructive participation. Employees as well as their collective bargaining representatives need to be kept in the communication loop when performance is reported and when public input is given.

### Final Thoughts

To be sustainable, performance measurement and public involvement cannot be seen as something extra. These efforts must become an integral part of the employees' job and expected as the way business is done. If not seen as an integral part of service delivery, these efforts may be an easy target for cuts when budget times are bad.

Sometimes government is seemingly inefficient for good reason. Although customers focus mainly on results, all parties must recognize that when it comes to government services, due process requirements and limits of legal authority cannot be ignored. Requirements such as public input or appeal processes, local policies and ordinances, and state and federal laws are significant factors in evaluating performance of government—especially when comparisons are made to the private sector. Employees must work to innovate and improve services within these requirements unless legislators, leadership, policymakers, and customers take action to change these requirements.

Resources affect the limits of what can be delivered, despite customer desires, and relative priorities and optimum service levels need to be decided on at every level, from the front line to elected representatives. Realistically, not every performance target can or should be set at 100 percent of what is ultimately desired for that service. Preparing employees to make these judgments on the basis of awareness of various customers' needs is vital.

Events and changing priorities affect the best-planned service levels; permission to revise those plans and targets has to be an element of the system. Employees' exercise of good judgment and innovation should be encouraged and rewarded, as well as whether all performance targets are met.

Finally, expect to continuously check what is working and what needs improvement. Remember, failure is how we learn.

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