



Using Evidence-Based Approaches to Improve Program Performance

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Introduction

Government's performance should be judged primarily by the achievement of important outcomes. Simply measuring effort isn't enough to ensure government is making a difference. Over the last several decades, the Federal Government launched a series of initiatives aimed at improving its performance. Federal agencies have struggled to leverage the benefits of several important efforts, such as setting goals, measuring and improving performance, evaluating programs, reporting and learning from what works. With each new Presidential administration, new initiatives are launched, old ones are tossed, and much of the progress gained in the past is lost. These recommendations attempt to reverse this trend and give the new administration the benefit of lessons learned from past attempts to improve government's performance through the adoption of evidence based approaches.

Background

For the last several months, a panel of public and private, federal, state, and local performance management and evaluation experts under the auspices of the National Academy of Public Administration have met with officials involved in every facet of the government's performance management and evaluation efforts. The consultations were an effort to pinpoint what was working and where there were gaps. That investigation revealed that despite a number of major milestones in the performance management journey (e.g., the Government Performance and Results Act, the Program Assessment Rating Tool, High and Cross-Cutting Priority Goals, the Evidence Agenda), federal managers still aren't using evidence in decision making to the extent they should. We believe that doubling down on some current practices, and taking steps to address obvious gaps, could substantially strengthen evidence-based decision making in government, dramatically improve performance, and make a meaningful contribution to enhancing the public's confidence in their government.

Recommendations

The NAPA panel focused its efforts on developing a shortlist of operational recommendations to improve government performance by strengthening the use of data, evidence, evaluation, and innovation by government leaders, managers, front-line employees, those involved in service delivery, and other stakeholders in the allocation of resources and management of programs.

Based on many hours of deliberation and debate, here are the group's top ten recommendations:

Recommendation 1: *Consolidate existing evidence-based decision-making systems into a government-wide framework, led by the Office of Management and Budget, which integrates*



performance management, program evaluation, futures planning, and budgeting. Incorporate benchmarking and regular performance reviews as central features.

There is today a Performance and Personnel team at the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) overseeing the federal government's performance improvement efforts. This team also has responsibility for coordinating the cross-agency efforts of agency Performance Improvement Officers through the interagency Performance Improvement Council. But it has not always coordinated closely enough with the OMB's Evidence Team; and there are many other performance improvement initiatives across government (e.g., Open Data, Challenges, Performance Partnership Pilots) that could benefit from closer coordination. That's why it's important to define a framework and locus of responsibility for driving and coordinating initiatives designed to improve performance and evidence-based decision making across government. The use of benchmarking and 21st Century tools to measure what's working and share best practices could significantly accelerate the adoption of what works.

Recommendation 2. *Appoint agency deputies/Chief Operating Officers and other political appointees with capacity and commitment to driving performance improvement and enhancing evidence-based decision making.*

Use of evidence to make decisions begins at the top and absent strong leadership, it is unlikely to succeed. Choosing an agency Chief Operating Officer, usually the agency's Deputy Secretary, based in part on his or her comfort with metrics and a successful history of evidence-based management of large organizations is critical. This should be an explicit requirement in the job description of agency deputies and/or their Chief Operating Officers, and should be reflected in the questions asked of prospective appointees during confirmation hearings.

Recommendation 3: *Empower strong Performance Improvement Officers with adequate resources to support agency Deputies/Chief Operating Officers. Where the Performance Improvement Officer has other duties, ensure there is a strong Deputy Performance Improvement Officer devoting full attention to the adoption of the integrated performance management framework.*

Congress and the President established in each agency the position of Performance Improvement Officer to accelerate adoption of evidence-based decision making and effective performance management practices across government. The law requires that the individuals appointed to that position shall, among other things "advise and assist the head of the agency and the Chief Operating Officer to ensure that the mission and goals of the agency are achieved through strategic and performance planning, measurement, analysis, regular assessment of progress, and use of performance information to improve the results achieved." In many agencies today, the Performance Improvement Officer has a variety of other duties. Some Performance Improvement Officers are also Chief Financial Officers, for



example. Agency heads should ensure that their Performance Improvement Officers have the financial and human resources necessary to drive performance improvement and evidence-based decision making. If the designated Performance Improvement Officer has additional duties, there should be a strong Deputy Performance Improvement Officer with the qualifications and responsibilities of a Performance Improvement Officer.

Recommendation 4. *Continue to drive the conduct and use of appropriately tailored, independent evaluations to improve programs. Support this effort by establishing and funding a robust evaluation and data analytics capacity in every Department responsible for overseeing rigorous program evaluations and for a range of other analytical exercises related to, and useful for, performance management.*

Independent, rigorous evaluations of programs are the best way to find promising program practices. Over the last decade, government investment in rigorous program evaluation has grown. This trend should continue and should employ, in addition to experimental methods, a full range of evaluation methodologies to meet different program or performance management needs. Agencies should employ experts who can design and oversee a meaningful evaluation portfolio as well as a cadre of analysts who can leverage evidence of all kinds, including the growing amount of available data, and help the agency's managers integrate it into decision making.

Recommendation 5. *Enhance the accessibility, transparency, and usefulness of performance information by simplifying Performance.gov, showing clear trends in government's progress, and linking it to other, relevant sources of information about the government's performance.*

Key to strengthening accountability for performance improvement is transparency. Today, finding out how well an agency or program is performing is harder than it should be even though the sophistication of available data analytics and presentation capabilities have ballooned. The next Administration should build on the statutorily required Performance.gov by making trends in performance clearer. Though it will never include all relevant information about an agency's or program's performance, Performance.gov should increasingly become the gateway to other important sources of information of that kind.

Recommendation 6. *Collaborate with Congress (i.e., authorizers, appropriators, and overseers) more closely at every stage of the performance management process to facilitate more debate about the performance of programs and about performance management.*

Many agencies already engage their Congressional committees of jurisdiction in robust discussions about their performance (e.g., the appropriations process, oversight hearings). But getting those committees more involved – from engaging them in the strategic planning process to soliciting support for robust program evaluation – could go a long way to institutionalizing an evidence-based decision making culture in agencies and an enriched dialogue between Congress and the Administration.



Recommendation 7. *Use incentives in the grant making and contracting processes to encourage adoption by state and local government, other partners, and stakeholders of the performance management framework.*

Federal agencies don't achieve their goals without engaging state and local governments, other partners, and stakeholders in their mission. Too often, though, federal agencies simply set requirements and require burdensome oversight and reporting from their partners. Models like the Performance Partnership Pilots, where relaxed compliance reporting requirements and the ability to pool resources from multiple federal funding sources are incentives for recipients to invest in proven or promising practices, aim to alter the federal government's compact with state and local government. The new Administration should inventory and build on these innovative approaches, including in the contracting arena, and do more collaborating and sharing with partners to accelerate learning and the adoption of proven practices.

Recommendation 8. *Institute annual OMB spring reviews to assess and accelerate progress on strategic goals. Enhance OMB quarterly priority goal reviews to assess progress and identify opportunities to improve.*

Today, annual Office of Management and Budget-led reviews bring together a variety of agency and other officials to assess progress on goals and consider ways to improve. The experts consulted by --and participating in -- the NAPA working group agreed that this process showed enormous promise and evidenced more substantive OMB/agency collaboration. Quarterly priority goal reviews should continue, but be strengthened to focus on improvement opportunities. In addition, an annual "spring review" should be launched, modeled on OMB's annual budget reviews and led by the OMB Director. This review should be focused on the performance of the agency and its programs rather than just on the budget. This is not to suggest that discussion of performance be removed from the budget process but rather to suggest the addition of a distinct, regular meeting with senior level participation focusing specifically on agency performance.

Recommendation 9. *Ensure OMB is driving the development, adoption, and implementation of cross-agency priority goals.*

Most important government objectives require the collaboration of multiple agencies. Yet even when they share goals, agencies often miss important opportunities to collaborate and measure progress differently. OMB is the natural coordinator for cross-agency collaboration on common initiatives or objectives. It should redouble efforts to do this for a focused set of goals that enjoy high national priority and that depend on performance by multiple agencies.



Recommendation 10. *Develop a clear and concise performance management and evaluation curriculum for agency and other professionals. Enlist front-line employees, through employee forums or other means, to identify ways to improve performance and strengthen the adoption of the performance management framework.*

Surveys show agency employees aren't taking up the charge to adopt more evidence-based practices. A curriculum that imparts to agency managers a common, government-wide performance management and evaluation taxonomy and methodology would help. Soliciting front-line employees, through town halls, employee forums, and collaborative technology, for advice and help in performance improvement would do a great deal to enrich these insights and to engage more people in the quest to adopt evidence-based approaches in government.

Conclusion

We believe that these recommendations should constitute the Evidence Agenda of the next Administration. If implemented, we believe this Agenda builds on the progress and lessons from performance improvement initiatives of the past and accelerates progress in institutionalizing an evidence-based culture in government -- extending and sharing knowledge of what works, improving government's performance, and enhancing its credibility with the American people.