

Managing With Data in San Mateo County: Measuring What Should Get Done

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

If it's true that, "Not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts",* how do managers best measure the most important outcomes?

Research on successful performance management in the human services indicates that achieving outcomes requires data that tie directly to a core goal. Further, that such work is more effective when it incorporates a process that ensures all involved parties understand the connection between their work and attainment of the goal. San Mateo County offers the opportunity to review just such a process.

Background and Findings

The examination of Outcome-Based Management (OBM) at the San Mateo County Human Services Agency (HSA) was guided by the following learning objectives:

- Identify methods that mesh county-level priorities with HSA OBM efforts;
- Determine how OBM measures support the achievement of these priorities; and
- Document the manner used by HSA to link OBM data to fiscal decision making.

The resulting findings indicate that each of the aforementioned areas is supported by ensuring the on-going involvement of informed stakeholders. Through their participation, the stakeholders define objectives, select and monitor related data, and are able to directly realize any successes.

Santa Clara County Social Services Agency (SSA) has used similar approaches to developing performance indicators in the past, but any effort to exam-

ine current measures could be informed by increasing staff involvement in determining, tracking, and evaluating performance toward agreed outcomes.

Any re-evaluation by SSA should consider:

- Executive review of agency goals to ensure they are aligned with Board policies;
- Executive discussions with department-level management and staff to ensure that all stakeholders understand these goals;
- Department-level decisions on how to achieve these goals within specific program areas;
- Stakeholder involvement in the selection of related data sets; and
- Training and staff development that ensures staff at all levels within the agency are able to understand data relevant to their day-to-day business activities and use it to inform successes, improvements and budget recommendations.

Conclusion

As a result of pursuing the aforementioned recommendations, department-level goals would be closely tied to agency priorities, and determinations of progress would be based on program-driven indicia. Further, involved staff would be more aware of how their efforts contribute to the desired outcomes; would better understand how to focus their efforts to effect change; and would recognize the quality of the impact of their activities. Through these practices, SSA could increase the efficacy of performance management in the areas that are the most important to the agency.

*From a sign in Albert Einstein's Princeton office

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Introduction

Oft repeated in county administration is the affirmation that, “What gets measured gets done.” The manager’s drive to demonstrate performance via measurement is evident through the sheer volume of attention, not less than ten studies since 2000, paid to the San Mateo County Human Services Agency (HSA) Outcome-Based Management (OBM) effort. While the home county environments and motivations that guided these studies could not be exactly the same, the common desire to positively impact performance through outcome measurement is evident.

In initial conversations with HSA, it became clear that their OBM model is facilitated by a seemingly simple principle—facilitating a unified effort toward achieving a common goal which is enhanced by formal communication processes. Simply stated, in the words of Peter Drucker, renowned leader in the field of business management, “Management by objective works—if you know the objectives...”¹

OBM processes facilitate the understanding of program objectives, thereby supporting program success. By gathering information about this aspect of the OBM model, I hoped to enhance long-standing performance management at the Santa Clara County Social Services Agency (SSA).

The following learning objectives were applied with that result in mind. They included:

- identify methods that mesh County-level priorities with HSA OBM efforts;
- determine how measures support the achievement of these priorities; and

- document the manner used by HSA to link OBM data to fiscal decision-making. Detailed findings and related research are provided in the following narrative.

Background and Findings

A COMMON GOAL

Human services research shows that successful performance management systems are those that are designed to achieve an agreed upon objective.² Regardless of whether this objective is defined in terms of a strategy, vision, or mission, it should be the focus for all program outcomes. Aligning performance goals across programs in support of an overarching goal is especially important when different programs serve shared populations or report to a common group of stakeholders as is common in a county environment.

In San Mateo County, OBM provides a connection to overarching goals by linking to the county-wide objectives identified through “Shared Vision 2010”.³ This vision was defined through a comprehensive effort involving stakeholders from the county, along with community members and organizations. Participants were asked to define what was important to them; where they wanted to see improvements; and what it would look like once improvements were achieved. The related discussions framed goals in measurable, plain, agreed, and easily understood terms. Their work also provided a foundation to guide the development of performance measures that could track progress toward achievement of Shared Vision objectives.

²Yates, Jessica. “Performance Management in Human Services”. Available from www.welfareinfo.org. Accessed February 2006.

³Friedman, Mark. The Results Accountability Guide. Available from <http://www.raguide.org>. Accessed February 2006.

¹Drucker, Peter. “The New Organization” SEI Center for Advanced Studies in Management, Wharton School. April 7, 1993.

MEASURES THAT MATTER

A United States General Accounting Office (GAO) Survey⁴ found that the development and selection of valid performance indicators is the greatest challenge for any performance management program.

Performance indicia tend to fit into the following categories:

TYPES OF MEASURES		
	QUANTITY	QUALITY
EFFORT	What did we do?	Did we do it well?
EFFECT	The # better off?	The % better off?

Within these categories, outcomes are those measures that combine “Quality with Effort” and “Quality with Effect”. With “Quality with Effort,” measures reflect things such as timeliness of service delivery, accessibility, cultural competence, staff turnover and morale. The measures related to “Quality and Effect” yield feedback on whether clients realize better outcomes because of the services provided. Regardless of which type of measure is selected, they define the focus of program evaluation.

In OBM, performance data selection is the purview of the stakeholders. As referenced earlier, Shared Vision 2010 participants first determined the goal to be achieved, and then developed the means by which the goal would be attained. In other words, they determined what they wanted; then how they would recognize it; and, finally, what data would show that it was achieved.

Measures chosen were reviewed to be certain that they were the best possible measures for Shared 2010 goals. This activity also ensured that resources were directed at gathering only the most useful data, rather than wasting staff time and technology to produce reams of information that do not contribute to the effort at hand.

INVESTING IN PROGRESS

Once performance indicia were established, HSA staff were able to assess current performance against

the past as part of encouraging future improvements. When launching this effort, they received additional support from the County Manager’s Office. This included dedicated resources to train HSA executives, managers and line workers in OBM processes. This staff development led to a shared organizational value for the county’s vision, which gives context to regularly scheduled discussions on OBM progress.

OBM measures are referenced when discussing the need for new programs, shifting the focus of existing programs, and budgeting for service delivery. Discussions are framed in terms of supports and obstacles to progress toward Shared Vision goals. The conversation is characterized by a full, direct, and open style of communication, which includes all department areas and opinions toward development of workable solutions.

The quality of HSA communication is noteworthy because these discussions are consistent across department and staff lines, including executives, managers and workers. As testament to the openness of HSA leadership, all staff are invited to attend Executive Team meetings, where some of these discussions take place. Through these practices, staff are able to be fully informed and resolve impasses that could hinder progress, and share any successes that are realized.

The full participation of HSA staff and the involvement of leadership is mirrored in county administration. The County Manager’s Office works closely with HSA on OBM. Together they review performance data on a semi-annual basis to ensure linkage to broader county-level priorities. Alterations to measures can be generated when data are not capturing performance in a meaningful way, or when they are not accurately reflecting impacts to programs. Any necessary data changes are carefully evaluated to ensure that both the rationale and revised indicia are clearly understood by stakeholders. Ad hoc workgroups consider the changes, and the resulting recommendations are forwarded to the HSA Executive Team. This process encourages a full review of data and guards against change for the sake of artificially enhancing actual performance.

⁴United States General Accounting Office. “Managing for Results: Analytic Challenges in Measuring Performance”, Available from <http://www.gao.gov/reports.htm>. Accessed February 2006.

The Board of Supervisors is also involved in the review of OBM data, which are presented during annual budget hearings. In preparation, HSA uses OBM measures to inform financial decisions related to Shared Vision 2010 priorities. For example, if positions are eliminated, any impacts to service delivery can be made visible through the known data (i.e. fewer workers on the job results in longer wait times for client service delivery, potentially limiting positive client outcomes).

Combining agreed county-wide goals with an increased understanding of the program-level detail generated through OBM provides board members with a clearer understanding of program performance. Further, the community is also informed on Shared Vision 2010 progress through public budget documents.

Using the mechanisms described above, a broad range of San Mateo County stakeholders are involved in the selection of desired outcomes and are informed of progress toward them. Accordingly, HSA staff and other stakeholders do know the objectives that they are trying to achieve. Therefore, following Drucker's logic, HSA is more likely to be successful in the management of performance through these objectives.

SUCCESS WITH OBM

HSA's most successful performance management efforts are in the areas of Child Welfare, Welfare-to-Work, and Work Force Investment. While the first effort is largely impacted by the need to achieve legislated requirements, introducing another layer of monitoring that is outside of the county, progress in the latter two areas is ascribed to the value that the managerial leadership communicates on OBM processes.

HSA leadership and communication practices are likely to continue influencing performance across measures. Anecdotal evidence indicates that the majority of data sets tracked by HSA since FY00 have made positive progress toward achieving the agreed goals. Actual progress for all measures is displayed in aggregate through the County of San Mateo Adopted Budget.

The following table represents available aggregate data between FY01 and FY04:

OBM MEASURES WITH PROGRESS				
Fiscal Year	00-01	01-02	02-03	03-04
Target	None	100%	83%	96%
Actual	100%	40%	74%	64%

As noted above, the percentage of performance measures that achieved targets rose by 24% from the second year of OBM to the fourth. The level of improvement is especially noteworthy since some of the HSA goals reflect a commitment to an ideal, and are, therefore, not set just to be easily attained.

Meeting the established performance targets is undeniably important for HSA. Continued success in the programs measured via OBM will likely be supported by the level and quality of stakeholder involvement in pursuit of the desired objectives.

Implications for Santa Clara

All counties have unique structures and politics that create the work milieu. Therefore, not all of any one county's approach can fit perfectly into another. Between San Mateo and Santa Clara counties there are a few distinct differences: size of each region; amount of affluence and poverty within each county; and the range of diversity within the populations. In addition, Santa Clara has an established performance management system that is different from San Mateo's.

Regardless of these distinctions, there are key lessons learned that can be applied in the interest of enhancing or implementing outcome management. The Santa Clara County Social Services Agency could benefit from reviewing the level of staff involvement in determining, evaluating and applying data from key performance indicators to evaluations of program performance. While the county-wide model used to manage performance in Santa Clara is determined outside of SSA, the evaluation of existing indicators is within the Agency's purview.

The recommended components for an SSA evaluation are as follows:

- Executive evaluation of agency goals to ensure they are aligned with board policies;
- Executive discussions with department-level management and staff to ensure that all stakeholders understand these goals;
- Department-level decisions on how to achieve these goals within specific program areas;
- Stakeholder involvement in the selection of related data sets; and
- Training and staff development that ensures staff at all levels within the agency are able to understand data relevant to their day-to-day business activities and use it to inform their successes, improvements and budget recommendations.

The end results of the activities outlined above should be closer ties between department-level goals and the priorities set by the agency leadership. Further these goals would be supported by program-driven data that could be regularly referenced in discussions of program performance, and utilized in decisions that impact the ability of programs to achieve agency objectives.

Conclusion

Overall, the preceding evaluation indicates that the key to successfully managing performance with data requires related processes that enable a full understanding of the goals to be achieved.

The San Mateo County HSA OBM approach offers a solid level of information about those things that are truly important to local stakeholders. Further, this model allows for the measurement of meaningful indicia that are understood by all involved parties. This increases the likelihood that staff can support and achieve the established objectives. Increasing the level of shared understanding, also guards against a misuse of resources in the gathering of, “too much information about nothing.”⁵

It appears clear that San Mateo HSA is counting what counts; thereby ensuring that program efforts are actually focused on progress toward goals that all parties agree lead to successful outcomes for the targeted populations. Through OBM, what matters most to HSA is measured and, therefore, does indeed get done.

⁵Dylan, Bob. “Someone’s Got A Hold Of My Heart”. Bootleg Series, Vols. 1-3: Rare & Unreleased, 1961-1991.