

# WHAT IS SUCCESSFUL GOVERNMENT?

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Is more always better? Governments tally lots of inputs and outputs, but it's a mistake to suppose that increased school enrollment, more traffic citations issued or larger capital expenditures translate to improved government performance. Nor does the opposite -- declining enrollment, fewer citations, smaller capital investments -- necessarily signify poor performance.

The point here is that it's not simple to determine what constitutes successful or unsuccessful public-sector performance. The challenge is pinpointing what exactly quality performance, and thereby success, actually means.

Over the years, a series of tools and techniques -- from zero-based budgeting to Total Quality Management to management by objectives to the Balanced Scorecard, and on and on -- have arrived on the scene as devices supporting better government performance. But while these have real potential in helping governments make more efficient use of their resources, simply deploying one of these tools, or a mix of them, is not in and of itself a measure of success.

The challenge is creating the proper mix or portfolio of relevant measures to gauge progress and determine when the finish line is crossed, if ever. That means keeping in mind a range of credibility factors that vary by jurisdiction, including political considerations, finance and budget, service levels, employee engagement, and the need for capital improvements.

The question for leaders is determining which of these factors are most aligned between constituent expectations and their government's success -- the more congruent they are, the more likely it is that a government is indeed satisfying the objective of building a better quality of life for its citizens. Once that congruence is identified, leaders who are serious about improving their organization's performance and finding a path toward sustainable success need to find answers to questions like these:

- What is the current level of performance for our work teams, our departments and our government, as a whole?
- Are they performing better this year than last? If so, in what areas and what may be the reasons?
- What are other agencies and other governments doing to promote high performance?
- What can we do to ensure that every one of our employees can respond to each of these questions?
- And, most important, how would we use this information to continuously improve performance?

An important role of a leader is to serve as educator-in-chief, moving public workers and citizens alike away from the "we've-always-done-it-that-way" approach and toward a "there-is-no-box" way of thinking. Finding answers to these questions is the crucial first step toward a disciplined approach to achieving successful government performance.



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