Citizens as Partners in Performance Management

by Paul Epstein, Lyle Wray, and Cortney Harding

You and your staff worked hard to implement a government performance management system. Perhaps you involved your elected officials. But what about the people who are supposed to benefit from improved performance? Will they even notice? Robust engagement of citizens in performance management can help ensure that the system will endure and continue to produce results that people care about.

Limiting participation in performance management to people inside government tends to limit who will notice performance gains and the value of performance information. Only the people personally involved might know about important changes, which creates the risk that the performance management system will not outlast particular elected or appointed leadership. Keeping a local government performance management system relevant to community priorities over time helps assure that its use and benefits will be sustained.

This article offers an effective community governance model, citizen roles in the community that create robust engagement, and promising practices for citizens in the performance management cycle illustrated by community examples. These concepts are based on the authors' direct experience with local government and a decade of research on best practices of citizen engagement and performance measurement in more than 30 communities across the country.

Public Management featured earlier versions of these practical ideas (Wray and Hauer, 1997; and Marshall et al., 1999). More complete discussion can be found in Epstein et al., *Results That Matter* (Jossey-Bass, 2006) or on the Effective Community Governance Web site at www.resultsthatmatter.net .

Model of Effective Community Governance

The effective community governance model outlined here provides a context for citizens' roles in performance management. The model starts with three core community skills: engaging citizens, measuring results, and getting things done. Community governance becomes more effective when two or three of the core skills are combined to form any of the four advanced governance practices described below, keyed to the numbers in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Effective Community Governance Model

1. Community problem solving combines engaging citizens and getting things done; what gets done tends to be what citizens want but without measurement of results to assess the impact over time.

2. Organizations managing for results systematically combines measuring results and getting things done and represents most government performance management systems. Note that citizens are left out of the process.

3. Citizens reaching for results combines engaging citizens and measuring results; citizens' priorities get measured but links to implementation are missing or weak.

4. Communities governing for results systematically combines all three core community skills. This is the most advanced governance practice, and it is rarely found.

Engaging citizens in performance management is one way to get there.

Citizens Can Play Many Roles

One key to robustly engaging citizens in performance management is to recognize that citizens can play a variety of roles in community life. City and county performance management systems often focus on citizens as customers of public services. Although it is important to provide citizens with the quality public services that are due to valued customers, simply engaging citizens as customers is not sufficient to keep performance management relevant to the range of community issues that concern citizens.

Also, a customer role alone will not unleash the energy citizens can bring to improving their community. To treat citizens as more than customers, consider how to engage them in the following five major citizen roles:

• **Stakeholders,** including public service customers, taxpayers, voters, residents, and others with interests in the community. Performance reports to community "shareholders" help stakeholders play the role of owners interested in public performance.

• **Advocates,** including community members acting to protect their own interests or to advance specific interests in the community they support.

• **Issue framers,** a role that has a large scope, includes such components as foundation builder (developing visions or long-term strategic goals for the community), agenda setter (setting budget priorities or an agenda of issues to be addressed), problem definer (framing key questions and understanding drivers of problems), and solution identifier (developing feasible and acceptable solution options).

• **Evaluators** rate community conditions, the quality of public services, or alternative solutions to community problems.

• **Collaborators** include compromisers (who help forge compromises among different interests to get things done), co-producers of services or solutions (who adopt a park or mentor a child, for example), and asset leveragers (who identify and engage other citizens or organizations to help achieve community goals).

Robust citizen engagement typically involves citizens playing multiple roles. A

local government that wants to stimulate robust engagement will support citizens in their various engagement roles. Building and strengthening neighborhood associations, for example, help citizens associate with neighbors to strengthen their roles as stakeholders and as advocates for their neighborhood's interests. Engaging citizens early in decision processes and fostering deliberative processes in which people listen to each other and make hard choices strengthen citizens' role as issue framers.

Communities Choose What Is Best for Them

Performance management systems are best understood as cycles in which measured results are fed back into organizational decision processes to improve future decisions and results, as demonstrated in Figure 2. Figure 2 also shows opportunities for citizens to play different engagement roles at various points in the cycle.

Figure 2. Typical Performance Management Cycle with Potential Citizen Roles
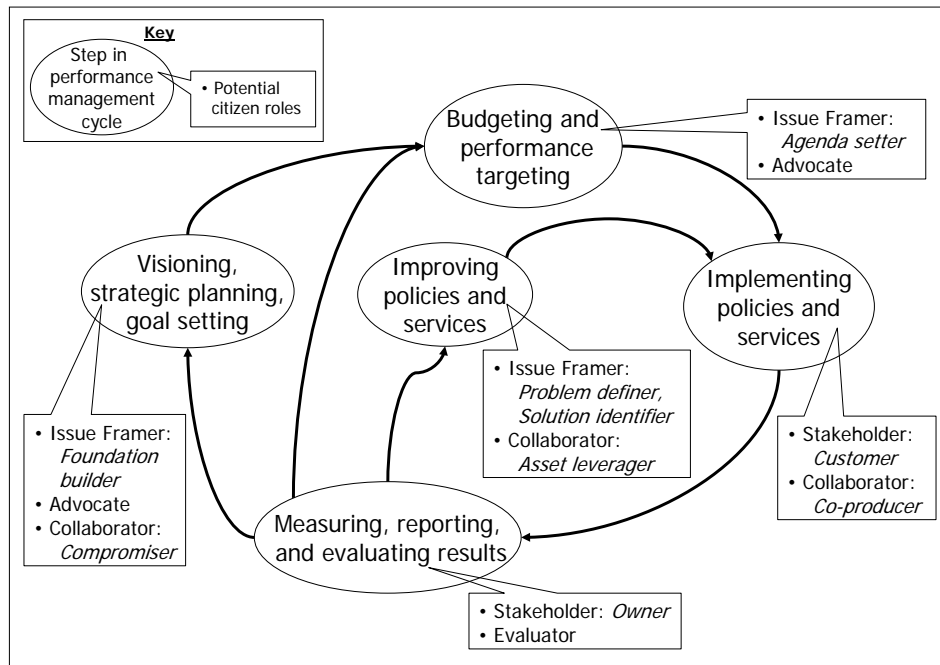
While all citizen roles can come into play in government performance management, the role of issue framer is probably the most crucial for keeping performance management relevant to citizen priorities. When citizens are engaged in determining a community vision or setting priority goals in a city or county strategic plan, they build a foundation for developing budgets and setting service performance targets

that are relevant to citizen priorities.

In Washington, D.C., for example, Mayor Anthony Williams has engaged thousands of citizens as issue framers every two years since 1999 in "citizen summits" to develop or revise strategic goals that have driven multimillion dollar shifts in budget priorities. Nearby Prince William County, Virginia, engages citizens as issue framers through deliberative focus groups and task forces in setting goals and articulating measurable outcomes every four years in major updates of the county's strategic plan.

The performance management systems of these different jurisdictions give citizens opportunities to play all engagement roles in between major strategic plan updates or citizen summits. In the urban community of Washington, D.C., most citizen engagement is organized on a neighborhood basis. Much of the citizen engagement in suburban and rural Prince William County focuses on specific issues and services, although some of the county's more extensive citizen co-producer efforts, especially volunteer fire companies, are organized geographically. As the following examples illustrate, there is no one right way to engage citizens in performance management. Communities can improve governance and results in different ways.

Different Paths to Robust Citizen Engagement

Prince William County built its own system of citizen engagement in performance management to achieve governing-for-results status, the most advanced practice of the Effective Community Governance Model (see #4 in Figure 1). Washoe County, Nevada, is in the process of moving toward governing-for-results status by building on the efforts of a popular civic organization that had already engaged citizens in defining how quality of life should be measured.

The Prince William County, Virginia, government encourages many forms of citizen engagement and supports active citizens through leadership institutes, citizen academies, volunteer coordination, and staff support for various citizen boards, commissions, and task forces. County citizens play all the citizen engagement roles and, in the absence of a tie to performance management, would exemplify a robust case of community problem solving as an advanced practice of the governance model.

But, at the county government's initiative, Prince William citizens are also built

into performance management, and they help drive it through their active role in strategic planning, which in turn drives the county's budget and the performance management system. In the county's major strategic planning updates every four years, it first engages citizens as stakeholders through phone surveys that ask a random sample of citizens to rank potential goal statements related to various county issues.

The surveys complement the more deliberative focus groups and goal task forces mentioned above by providing a statistically valid list of citizen priorities. The deliberative processes allow participants to dig deeper, describe their concerns in their own words, and listen to their fellow citizens with different views as they identify priority issues in the focus groups and later articulate specific goals and desired outcomes in the goal task forces.

Over the years, the county board of supervisors has used citizen-developed goals to drive budget priorities. Also, in a strong show of respect for citizen priorities, the board of supervisors has repeatedly made educational achievement a priority goal even though the county government is not responsible for education. To meet that goal, the county government has developed a strong collaboration with the separately elected school board, including joint financial planning by the two entities that has enabled the school board to build and renovate schools ahead of schedule to meet the needs of the rapidly growing population of the county.

In Washoe County, in the Truckee Meadows region that includes the cities of Reno and Sparks in Northwest Nevada, a civic organization called Truckee Meadows Tomorrow (TMT; www.quality-of-life.org) emerged from an early-1990s regional planning process that led to the development of indicators to measure the quality of life of the region.

Quality-of-life indicators were initially developed through extensive engagement of citizens as stakeholders and issue framers, and they included surveys and numerous deliberative community meetings. Since 1994, TMT has enabled citizens to be evaluators of their quality of life, and the group produces biennial reports on community well-being that are based on indicators of six major issues: economic vitality, health and wellness, natural environment, education and lifelong learning, land use and infrastructure, and public safety and welfare.

TMT has also engaged citizens to improve the quality of life by "adopting" indicators, which makes them co-producers of community improvement. Citizens adopt an indicator by committing to personal actions, such as volunteering at their children's school or participating in a river cleanup, that contribute to moving the indicator in the desired direction.

Some of TMT's more active volunteers have become collaborators who develop quality-of-life compacts with large public and private organizations that agree to take measurable actions that contribute to improving indicators and to report on the progress of their actions. As part of a compact to improve environmental conditions, for example, the Washoe County government increased the number of alternative fuel vehicles in its fleet by 50 percent. By itself, TMT helped Truckee Meadows "Citizens Reach for Results," an advanced practice of the governance model.

Washoe County is now building on TMT's achievements in an attempt to take community governance to a new strategic level. When the county commission updated its strategic plan in 2005, it linked strategic goals to TMT quality-of-life indicators. In 2006, the county took it further by relating performance measures in the budget to those goals and TMT indicators.

Washoe County will need to follow through in several results-based cycles linked to citizen-driven indicators to demonstrate governing for results. But it has shown ingenuity to build on the accomplishments of TMT to start paving its own road toward advancing community governance.

Borrow Ideas or Go It Alone?
Some cities or counties may find they can borrow substantially from governments already far along in advanced community governance practices, such as Prince William County; Washington, D.C.; or Washoe County, while other communities may decide to design a much different approach. Either way, it is important for local governments to help their communities travel a path to more effective community governance.

If that path leads to robust engagement of citizens in performance management, then efforts to build and maintain a performance management system should pay off handsomely in sustained, visible benefits to the community. **PM**

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