



Cross agency priority goals in the U.S. government: Can directed collaboration be a stepping stone toward politic-centered performance?

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Abstract

The typical problems associated with performance management are particularly evident as the complexity of policy issues increases. “Wicked” policy areas with cross-cutting responsibilities, uncertain solutions, and constantly evolving problems are strongly subject to the pathology of the rational-scientific approach. One effort the U.S. government is making to mitigate these limitations is the designation of some of these areas as cross-agency priority goals. In theory, directed collaboration among the multiple agencies responsible will bring different perspectives, definitions, and potential solutions to the surface, and will allow for a critical and iterative approach toward measurement of performance toward the policy goal. However, history has shown that performance efforts have a tendency to return to the pathologies of the rational-scientific chain. This article examines three of these goals: climate change, cybersecurity, and Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) education, and considers the extent to which requiring collaboration in performance management results in increased adoption of the political-realistic chain of performance management.

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1. Introduction

Several of the typical problems faced by performance management are driven by the “wicked” nature of problems that governments attempt to address and are exacerbated by the necessarily fragmented structure of government organizations needed to address highly complex problems (Bertelli and Lynn, 2006; Rittel & Webber, 1973). In many cases, no single agency has control over all relevant aspects of these problems, and the varied nature of multiple overlapping, and in some cases duplicative, efforts to address these wicked problems highlight many of the typical problems associated with performance measurement (Kettl, 2010). Because a single agency does not have oversight of all interventions, individual agency performance measures do not comprehensively capture goals and objectives, and are inadequate to assess the net impact of government interventions (Kamensky, 2011). Further, because individual agencies are focused on separate, sometimes conflicting aspects of a problem, individual performance efforts may lead

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agencies to work at cross-purposes, and have undesirable impacts on performance toward solving the wicked problem (Radin, 2006). Success, in the context of wicked problems, is hard to define. It requires examination of multiple, conflicting goals and iterative reevaluation of the preferred balance among them.

The Government Performance and Results Act Modernization Act (GPRAMA) of 2010 attempts to address these problems in the U.S. by requiring the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to lead in the development and tracking of cross-agency priority goals (CAP goals). Since 2010, 15 CAP goals have been established. Seven of these goals are “Mission” focused, related to desired policy outcomes, while the other eight are “Management” focused, related to federal government operations (GAO, 2014). The purpose of CAP goal designation is to overcome the fragmentation of specific policy areas and enable a government-wide approach to achieving policy goals. This article examines how this mandated collaboration impacts the tendency of performance measures to reflect a political, rather than rational, approach to the chain of performance management. Because the goal is to better understand the impact of collaboration on complex, ambiguous goals, it will focus on three of the seven Mission CAP goals, climate change, cybersecurity, and STEM Education. Specifically, it will seek to examine the extent to which these collaborations represent a realistic-political adjustment to performance management, or if they result in a continued adherence to the pathology of the rational-scientific approach.

Performance measurement in the U.S. began as early as 1906, at the New York Bureau of Municipal Research (Williams, 2004). However, the first iteration of government-wide performance measurement in the United States began in 1965, as President Johnson directed all agencies to implement the Planning, Programming, and Budgeting System (PPBS) (West, 2011). This represents the beginning of the performance movement in the U.S., which has been followed by nine additional government-wide performance reforms over the nearly 50 ensuing years. Of the 10 total performance management reforms, eight were championed by presidents, while two others were established in law. The leaders of these reforms justified them, at least in part, by claiming to address the limitations of the reforms that preceded them. However, as noted by Radin (2006), each reform has relied, at least in part, on a similar set of assumptions. These assumptions underlie the rational-scientific model of the chain of performance measurement, and a pathological reliance on these assumptions has been a root cause of the typical limitations of performance management for nearly 50 years. Specifically, as noted by Moynihan (2013) in his examination of state performance management systems, these reforms have tended to focus on the strategic setting of goals and the technical measurement of data, but have not addressed the limitations of existing managerial authority, particularly in cross-cutting issues.

GPRAMA is the most recent U.S. government-wide performance reform, a reauthorization and update of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) of 1993. GPRAMA codifies a number of the lessons learned over seven years of GPRA implementation. In particular, throughout GPRA’s implementation, one consistently identified limitation was that responsibility for complex policy goals tends to be fragmented across agencies, each of which has particularized expertise on individual aspects of the problem (GAO, 2014). The requirement to establish and track CAP goals can be seen as a response to this limitation, and the imposition of cross-agency collaboration could lead to improved progress toward tackling these wicked problems by providing a forum to integrate each agency’s expertise. Given the common roots of collaboration and performance managements as reform options for inefficient and ineffective government (Amirkhanyan, 2009), it isn’t surprising that government managers are attempting to utilize both approaches to address complex issues.

GPRAMA requires OMB to coordinate with agencies and Congress in order to establish CAP goals that are long-term and outcome-oriented. For each CAP goal, OMB is required to identify a goal leader, who will be responsible for coordinating efforts to achieve these goals. In practice, OMB has identified two goal leaders for each goal, one from the Executive Office of the President, and another from the “lead agency” for each goal (OMB, 2015). Further, GPRAMA requires OMB to review progress toward each CAP goal with their goal leaders at least quarterly. These reviews consider whether contributing federal organizations and efforts are contributing to the goal as planned, by examining quarterly progress, trends, and the likelihood of meeting the desired level of performance (GAO, 2014). This last part is critical, as OMB is also required to identify strategies for performance improvement for goals that are at risk of not achieving these targets. Finally, GPRAMA requires OMB to maintain a single website (Performance.gov) where the quarterly progress and trend data, as well as strategies for performance improvement, for all CAP goals, is made available.

In order to better understand the effects of CAP goal requirements, this article will examine the literature on collaborative governance generally, as well as on collaboration specific to the development and implementation of performance management systems. It will frame this analysis into the theoretical framework of the chain of

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