

Building a Results-Oriented Performance Culture in the Public Sector¹

by Evan Piekara

Abstract

Building a more results-driven performance culture is challenging in any domain. The obstacles to developing this culture in the public sector requires close communication to ensure strategic alignment, as well as rigorous planning and analysis. Additionally, establishing a more results-driven culture requires coordinating with many stakeholders with distinct needs and priorities to invest them in the process and gain their insights. This article addresses how to cascade priorities from the top into Performance Work Plans (PWP) and how to use a sound methodology and communication to aid in transforming an organization's culture.

Building a Results-Oriented Performance Culture in the Public Sector

The common critiques of the public sector culture – inefficient, bureaucratic, personality-driven, lacking creativity – are often unfair, exaggerated, and can be mitigated to provide essential services and meet mission critical goals. While changing culture is inherently one of the greatest, and most time-consuming challenges any project manager will face, identifying and incorporating the right stakeholders, following a sound methodology fueled by the right analytical components, and developing strong communications materials that supports strategic alignment will aid in developing a more results-oriented performance culture in the public sector.

Defining a Results-Oriented Performance Culture

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) defines a results-oriented performance culture as “A system that promotes a diverse, high-performing workforce by implementing and maintaining effective performance management systems and awards programs.” OPM identifies key elements of success in shifting culture as communication, performance appraisals, awards, pay-to-performance, diversity

¹ *Second Editions are previously published papers that have continued relevance in today's project management world, or which were originally published in conference proceedings or in a language other than English. Original publication acknowledged; authors retain copyright. This paper was originally presented at the 2nd [annual University of Maryland Project Management Symposium in College Park, Maryland, USA](#) in June 2015. It is republished here with the permission of the author and conference organizers.*

management, and labor management relations.² This shift starts with defining the results and work people must do to become successful. A Government Accountability Office (GAO) report found that the vast majority of high-performing United States public sector organizations have built a results-oriented culture by establishing clear linkages and oversight between the employees and organizational goals.³ This report established nine guiding principles to lay the foundation for a more results-oriented culture.⁴

Table 1: Nine Guiding Principles for Results-Oriented Culture

1. Align individual performance expectations with organizational goals.
2. Connect performance expectations to cross-cutting goals.
3. Provide and routinely use performance information to track organizational priorities.
4. Require follow-up actions to address organizational priorities.
5. Use competencies to provide a fuller assessment of performance.
6. Link pay to individual and organizational performance.
7. Make meaningful distinctions in performance.
8. Involve employees and stakeholders to gain ownership of performance management systems.
9. Maintain continuity during transitions.

Top-Down Planning Aids Alignment

Culture change requires aligning the mission goals from the top and ensuring that these goals cascades down throughout the organization. This strategy can pose a challenge as subordinates may view the changes as management-driven and may believe there is a fundamental disconnect between their perspectives in the field, and management's experience. When we began this initiative, our team started by reviewing the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) results to assess the current state of performance at the agency. This tool is used by OPM to better understand how human resources are functioning at government agencies, provide data on how well agencies are strategically managing their human capital, and provide senior managers with data to guide decision-making.⁵ Results from this survey indicated that employees in this agency:

- Did not feel that employees were held accountable for actions and results
- Did not feel that performance objectives were clear
- Did not know how work tied to agency goals and mission

Conversations with Executives and Senior Leaders further revealed that clearly communicating expectations, holding people accountable, and recognizing top performers were major challenges that their agency, and many other agencies, were facing. Our team was responsible for leading a project that would “transform the way the agency conducts business.” In doing so, we sought to make sure that the vision and agency priorities were better reflected in standardized Performance Work Plans (PWP) and that these priorities were tied to measurable and documentable objectives. The team began by collaborating with a Program Sponsor from the Executive Level to prioritize which plans would have the greatest impact on the agency. Once this step was complete, the team embarked on a two year process that would ultimately lead to the development of PWP for 77% of an agency that protects 1.4 million people throughout the country. These positions ranged from the more traditional “boots-on-the-ground” law enforcement and physical security to the more specialized criminal investigators, to program managers, mission-support staff, and Supervisory and Executive roles. Coordination, communication, and alignment were extremely important throughout the process.

Collecting Resources Develops Solid Foundation and Understanding

The team began a thorough current state review of the agency by examining a broad range of documents and data pertaining to the agency’s strategic direction and priorities. Multiple PWP were collected for each position, across each grade level, and from varying regions throughout the country to assess trends and determine gaps.

Table 2: Key Resource Inputs

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strategic Plan(s)• Policies and Procedures• PWP across Positions, Levels, and Regions• Office of Personnel Management (OPM) Job Classifications• Position Descriptions• Labor Agreements (if applicable)• Activity Based Costing/ Workload Performance Data• External PWP from Comparable Organizations• Interviews with Stakeholders/Sponsors |
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While a Program Sponsor from the Executive Level was necessary to ensure strategic alignment throughout the agency, having a Project Sponsor for each job series was also a crucial step in gaining buy-in, proactively mitigating disagreements over the strategic outlook of the position, and preemptively identifying key communication needs, discussion topics, and anticipated areas of concern. One of the biggest challenges will often be remedying competing needs and priorities and it is best that this is mediated between decision-makers and the project manager prior to developing performance measures.

The team served as an intermediary between the Sponsors and relied on knowledge and understanding gained to facilitate conversations. When assessing the situation, it is important to determine if the project Sponsor is reluctant (“volun –told” rather than volunteered) or enthusiastic about being a part of the process. Challenges with reluctant Sponsors may include lack of interest, commitment, or vision. This can be mitigated to some extent, by incorporating reluctant Sponsors into the planning process, using deadlines, and working with the Sponsor to identify enthusiastic personnel to serve in a working (focus) group.

Analyzing to Prioritize Objectives and Identify Gaps

Once the team had collected key resources, it conducted an analysis by reviewing each submitted PWP for each job series to determine trends in format, goals, weights, and activities. It is vital that data collected across regions and position levels provides an understanding of how regional dispersion, priorities, and workload impact the position.

Our team found that each of the eleven regions was operating differently and this analysis enabled us to determine trends, assess alternatives, and identify competing priorities. This analysis was a crucial step in gaining sufficient understanding to facilitate discussions. Furthermore, it helped build a stronger case for standardizing performance efforts by showing stakeholders that regions had different standards, were speaking a different language, and were not all aligned with organizational goals.

The team then identified which goals tended to be weighted most heavily and appeared most frequently across PWPs and which activities were common across the PWPs. Next, the team assessed the gaps between these goals and activities and where the agency needed to be based on the strategic documents, policies, and vision of the Director. The team also determined key discrepancies and areas of discussion that needed to be addressed with the Executive Program Sponsor, the Project Sponsor, and professionals in the field. Throughout the entire process, the team drafted communication materials to educate stakeholders, address key lessons, and clarify changes.

Developing and Refining to Incorporate Stakeholder Input

The analysis served as the backbone for dialogue on the current state and future state of the agency. Once clarification and alignment was established between the Program and Project Sponsors, the team drafted PWPs and vetted them in the field through working groups. The working groups were a manageable size of 6-10 participants from different regions and levels within the job series. This size enabled broad enough participation, while supporting manageable discussion. When applicable, participants from other job series' who engaged frequently with the position under review were invited. Participation from other job series enabled the participants and team to capture a 360 degree perspective of the position in the field.

Table 3: Working Group Best Practices

- Manageable size (6-10 participants)
- Regional /geographical variation of participants
- Range of levels (entry – supervisor)
- Range of job series (360 degree view)
- Education on process, analysis, methods
- Facilitate rather than dictate (provide structure and guiding questions to stay on track)

The team educated participants on the organizational strategic outlook, the methodology employed for reviewing the PWPs, key analytical findings, and methods to use when reviewing draft PWPs. This analysis helped build the case for standardization, as it often revealed that different levels of work, responsibilities, and definitions were being applied.

Before draft PWPs are shared, it is important to note that the plans are current state and were developed based solely on the analysis. Facilitators should also highlight that draft PWPs are just one of multiple iterations that will be undertaken and that their participation will really shape the process. Empowering working group members to take ownership of the process and contribute feedback and assist in the development will help move the process further. Once draft PWPs were shared, the working group was able to assess whether the analysis matched what was occurring in the field. Participants were also asked to review draft PWPs to ensure goals were SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Timely).

Once plans were vetted through the working group, they would go through rounds of review with stakeholders such as the Project Sponsor, Executive Level, and Union to ensure understanding, consistent strategy, and to identify key communication points before being finalized.

Table 4: SMART Goals

- **Specific:** Is the performance measure clearly related to the intent of the objective?
- **Measurable:** Is data readily available, or can it be easily collected to monitor results?
- **Attainable:** Is the objective feasible given workload, geography, and other considerations?
- **Relevant:** Is the objective within the roles' purview and aligned with organization strategic priorities?
- **Timely:** Can data be collected and provide results within the timeframe?

Communicating Results to Anchor Change

Communication is a key element throughout the process. Each group of stakeholders generates questions, highlights changes they support, and identifies implementation challenges. Collecting both positive and negative feedback throughout the process facilitates the creation of communication material that can be developed in advance and shared throughout roll-out and implementation. Explaining how these materials can be used and who the target audience is for each communication material ensures consistency, appropriate usage, and cohesive messaging.

Leveraging members from the working groups to serve as change agents in their regions can also further change efforts. The team helped to communicate change by visiting each region with someone from the Executive Level to share the process, provide an understanding of the PWPs, and share communications materials with Supervisors from the region. These meetings provided opportunities to show the rigor of the process and gain buy-in by explicitly identifying the benefits to the agency and explaining what the change means for the individuals. It also provided Supervisors with the opportunity to ask questions and share their own best practices with fellow Supervisors and Executive Leaders, which further increased buy-in and enabled the team to continue to update communication materials with these best practices from the field.

Moreover, these visits asserted that each region is valued, would receive consistent training, and would have an opportunity to provide feedback. Consistency in messaging and providing Supervisors and mid-management with the opportunity to be heard and gain understanding of the process, changes, and benefits was the most important step in anchoring the change.

Table 5: Communication Materials

- Alignment charts
- Broadcast messages
- Career progression chart
- Competency chart
- Factsheets
- Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)
- Newsletter
- Supervisors guide
- Talking points
- Webinar / presentation

Use of Change Management Best Practices

Leading change management academic and expert John Kotter has identified eight steps for successfully implementing change.⁶ These eight steps were incorporated into the process to assist in the change efforts.

Table 6: Kotter's Eight Steps for Leading Change

1. Establish a sense of urgency.
2. Form a guiding coalition.
3. Create a vision.
4. Communicate the vision.
5. Empower others to act on the vision.
6. Plan for and create short-term wins.
7. Consolidate improvements and produce more change.
8. Institutionalize new approaches.

Urgency was established through GAO reports, the results of the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, and analysis that revealed how disparate performance was being evaluated across the regions. Involving Sponsors from the Executive and managerial levels and selecting personnel across regions and positions to participate in working groups helped to establish a guiding coalition of change agents. Throughout this process, the Executive vision was shared, feedback was exchanged, and the process and efforts were communicated.

Developing communication materials and facilitating opportunities for feedback helped to communicate the vision and gain buy-in from the agency. Each member of the working groups also served as conduits that enhanced communication channels and provided opportunities for others to get involved. The team also personally visited each region with Executives to share the process, communicate major changes, and obtain feedback. There were several instances where regions provided compelling data and argument against certain changes and the Executives listened and accepted their amendment to the PWPs. These short-term wins fostered goodwill and furthered buy-in.

As the PWPs were launched, the next round of PWPs was identified for review. This next round was communicated to show that the entire agency would be undergoing change. While the next round of plans was being reviewed, the launched plans were being monitored, assessed, and evaluated to ensure feedback was considered and improvements were initiated if needed.

Evaluation and Lessons Learned Enhances Change Efforts

It is important to note that this is just one phase in the process. Ideally, competencies and results should be determined in advance of recruitment and selection to ensure that the right people are being hired and positioned for success. Additionally, training should be mapped to competencies and skills and gaps should be identified up front.

Once the PWPs are implemented it is important to keep communication channels open. This assures staff that feedback is welcomed and reinforces that the end goal is to have a stronger organization. Targets should continue to be monitored periodically to gauge whether the PWPs are having the anticipated impact towards the identified mission goals. Monitoring, evaluating, and obtaining feedback ensures key lessons are learned, outstanding questions can be addressed by the Program Sponsor, and modifications and ongoing communications materials can be developed. Only by regularly collecting feedback and continuing conversations with stakeholders can the agency gain vital lessons that influence the future course. Capturing and reporting these results will build a bridge towards a more results-driven performance culture that better meets mission objectives.

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