

Telling the ‘Performance Story’

With more governments issuing annual ‘report cards’, there is the danger that politicians, public managers, interest groups, the media, and the public at large will become mesmerised by the numbers. Excellence in the public sector could become equated with scoring high results on a limited number of measures over a short period of time. To promote deeper understanding of what the numbers mean, public organisations need to be able to ‘tell their stories’, as departments of the Australian government do in their impressive annual reports. Storytelling should not be dismissed as merely self-serving anecdotes. Stories serve to put measures in context and to provide explanations. It is on the basis of the stories they tell and to which they listen that public managers gain a greater understanding of and assign meaning to the changing realities of program operations. Also, plausible and vivid stories are important rhetorical and persuasive devices to gain attention for issues and action on problems. The communications requirements for promoting the use of performance evidence have not received enough attention.

The communications function of a performance measurement system needs to be approached from a strategic perspective by carefully analysing such situational and design factors as objectives for communicating, the nature of the intended and unintended audiences, the role of the sender, the context in which communication is to take place, the choice of media, and the format of the message.¹ More attention should be paid to design considerations in the presentation of information. As Edward Tufte writes, “For information displays, design reasoning must correspond to scientific reasoning”.² Ideally, design formats should document sources, demonstrate cause and effect, promote comparison, recognise the multivariate nature of problems and indicate alternative explanations. All of this sound advice is complicated in practice by the fact that performance reports in the public sector serve multiple aims and multiple audiences.

The Office of the Auditor General of Canada (OAG) has done valuable work in developing criteria of ‘quality information’ and ‘excellence’ in reporting. It must be remembered that the focus of this work is mainly on external reporting for purposes of accountability to Parliament and the public. In a 1992 report the OAG identified the following criteria for quality information for Parliament:

- Relevancy - meaningful, complete, timely
- Reliability - accuracy, validity and consistency
- Understandability - clear, concise and comprehensive.

All of these terms have positive connotations. Putting operational meaning into them requires judgement about the context and the audiences' needs. Also, there may need to be 'trade-offs' among the criteria (e.g., balancing comprehensiveness with timeliness). In 2002, the OAG published a report recommending a model for rating departmental reports based on five criteria:

- organisational context and strategic outcomes are clear;
- performance expectations are clear and concrete;
- key results are reported against expectations;
- reliability of performance information is supported; and
- use of performance information is demonstrated.

This format enables the leadership of an organisation to identify the challenges it is facing. Expecting all organisations to display results in the same format within the same time frame may ignore the fact that some policy and program fields represent more difficult problems. Qualitative information is as important as quantitative information in telling the 'performance story'. Measures should be restricted to factors under 'reasonable control' by the organisation and there should be an opportunity to identify uncontrollable factors. Managers should be encouraged to discuss the causal links they believe are occurring between the outputs of the program and the evidence of the outcomes to which it has contributed. The 'performance story' will never achieve the status of scientific proof, but over time it can become more credible. To encourage improvement in performance reporting, governments might consider an award recognising the best and most improved performance reports produced annually or bi-annually. This is done for the annual reports of crown corporations within the Government of Canada.

ENDNOTES

¹ James Garnett. *Communicating for Results in Government*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994.

² See Edward Tufte. *Visual Explanations*. Cheshire, CT.: Graphic Press, 1997, the third of his books on presenting quantitative and qualitative information in ways to promote deeper understanding.