Top 10 Measurement and Planning Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

Tips on Building a Bullet-Proof Strategic Plan for Government and Non-Profits

A White Paper

by Mark Graham Brown

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Introduction

Just about every government organization today has a strategic plan, which could not be said a few years ago. Most plans are well written and beautifully prepared with color photos and graphics. Most departments also have performance metrics or “scorecards”.

Many began their initiatives years ago, with the advent of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA), and have refined their measures with time. However, most strategic plans are susceptible to planning and performance measurement mistakes.

In this white paper, I will review the 10 most common planning and measurement mistakes that organizations commit, which are:

- Mistake # 1: Establishing poor goals
- Mistake # 2: Over-reliance on surveys
- Mistake # 3: Outcome measures that can’t be controlled
- Mistake # 4: Superstitious process/program measures
- Mistake # 5: Plans are written and forgotten
- Mistake # 6: Too many metrics
- Mistake # 7: Many versions of the truth
- Mistake # 8: Focus on reporting vs. analysis and action
- Mistake # 9: Unclear accountability
- Mistake # 10: Measures drive the wrong behavior

I’ll also offer advice – based on real-world experience – on how organizations can avoid or correct these mistakes.

If you want to improve performance, you need to measure performance. Measure what matters, measure often, choose measures that address different user needs, and combine metrics into analytics.
It is very important to begin with clear and measurable goals; they are the foundation for developing measures and assessing performance. The organizational goals you set should focus on important outcomes. However, many of the goals themselves need work. Some of the more common mistakes I see are:

- **Vagueness.** Example: Support American prosperity through economic diplomacy (DOS)
  - This is really an area of responsibility, not a goal
- **Unrealistic goals.** Example: Eliminate poverty in Asia by 2020 (Asian Development Bank)
  - Unlikely to happen and even if it did, it is even less likely to be caused by the ADB
- **Unachievable goals.** Example: Eliminate the reliance of the U.S. on external sources of energy (DOE)
- **Sandwich goals.** Example: Reduce the growth of healthcare costs while promoting high value care (HHS)
- **Unmeasurable goals.** Example: Modernize, manage, and continue building a strong modern infrastructure that assures the achievement of business results (DHS)

A good rule to follow when developing goals is to first focus on an outcome that is important to taxpayers or other stakeholders. The other important rule is to begin each goal with:

- **Increase/improve**
- **Decrease/reduce**
- **Maintain/stabilize**

Forcing people to write goals with one of these three action words makes them easily measurable and focused on improvement, for public safety, the economy, air quality, health, traffic, crimes, or obesity. Examples of good goals might be to increase the number of students graduating with science/engineering degrees, decrease housing foreclosures, or maintain current low levels of a particular disease.
Most government organizations appear sincerely interested in measuring and improving the satisfaction of key stakeholders, such as customers, employees, and taxpayers. However, the approach they most often use to measure that satisfaction is surveys. The problem with surveys is that they may not represent the feelings of most customers/patients.

Surveys are considered successful if 20 percent of the people return them, meaning that you are not getting any data from 80 percent of your customers. Employee surveys tend to get a much better return rate, but most people are not likely to communicate any negative feelings for fear that they might be labeled as having a bad attitude.

A periodic survey can be a good study to assess feedback from customers and stakeholders, but successful organizations typically supplement them with other measures.

Using periodic surveys to measure the satisfaction of key stakeholders can be effective – but only when supplemented with other measures.

For example, a government research lab in New Hampshire measures employee satisfaction and engagement monthly by looking at how much work and money the organization has, as well as how many active projects scientists are working on. When the funding and workload are low and there is no money for travel, education, or hiring contractors, morale and engagement levels are low. When the organization is flush with budget money and there are too many active projects, stress levels and overtime are high, impacting morale and engagement.

The goal is to have just the right amount of funding and projects to keep people engaged and happy, but not take on so much work that they become stressed out. Because workload and funding change at least once a month, this is a good measure that can be easily tracked using existing data.

Another client measures customer satisfaction daily by counting how many operational problems they have and assigning a weight to the problem based on the degree to which it frustrates a customer. For example, having to call back for a problem that was not handled properly yesterday might be a minor aggravation, but getting your call disconnected after waiting on hold for 45 minutes would be a much greater aggravation. Each day the organization counts how many customers it angered and how angry they became. FedEx has been tracking its “aggravation index” for many years and finds that if you aggravate customers enough times, they eventually take their business elsewhere.
Mistake # 3: Outcome Measures That Can’t Be Controlled

One of the guidelines of the GPRA requires organizations to develop measures that focus on important outcomes. Being held accountable for measures over which you have little control or influence has caused many to have a negative association with performance measurement.

Some government strategic plans and scorecards include outcome measures, which suffer from one of two problems:

1. **Control/Influence.** The organization cannot do much to control or even influence the outcome since it is impacted by many factors. For example, air pollution in American cities might be a good outcome measure for the EPA. However, pollution is caused by a number of factors over which the EPA has no jurisdiction: population growth, job growth, number of vehicles, etc. Yet, if any agency should be accountable for pollution it’s the EPA right? The Federal Highway Administration (FHA) is measured on traffic fatalities. Most fatalities, however, are not caused by bad roads, but by drinking, speeding, fatigue, and distractions. The FHA is responsible for none of these factors, so it might be frustrating for that organization to be charged with reducing fatalities considering the limited control they have over those factors.

2. **Shared Outcomes.** Most important outcomes are not the responsibility of a single government department or agency, but of many. The Department of Homeland Security and the Department of State both have goals relating to improving prosperity and business results. A sound economy is certainly an important outcome, but you would think that this would be the job of Commerce, Economic Development, Federal Reserve, or other departments. The problem with broad and important outcomes like economic prosperity, public safety, or population health is that many share in their responsibility. Thus, if you find these types of outcomes on the scorecards of 10 government departments, it is hard to hold any of them accountable for poor performance or know which to congratulate for good performance.

The test of a good metric for any organization is: "Can you make the needle move on the gauge?" In other words, can your programs and processes help to improve performance on this measure?

Don't ask: “Can I control this?” or you won’t find anything to measure. Establish outcomes that you can strongly influence through your actions. For example, many government organizations measure the percentage of contracts awarded to small and minority businesses, which they can influence. A research lab measures how many patents it is awarded as well as how many are commercialized.

Another option with outcomes that are influenced by many departments is to assign a percentage of responsibility to all the various stakeholders. For example, a big problem in Los Angeles is gang crime, a metric that is shared by several city departments, including the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), the Los Angeles Unified School District, and Community Development. The LAPD and school district have the largest percentage of accountability for the outcome with smaller percentages assigned to other departments that have programs for youth.
It is important to include both leading and lagging measures on your scorecard. Outcome measures have some of the problems I mentioned above, but also are very slow to move.

For example, a county health department in Riverside, CA tracks many health outcome metrics such as obesity, cancer, heart disease, and diabetes. However, because of the size of the population (several million people), these measures take many years to show any measurable improvements. Also, most outcomes are measures of the past.

Traffic fatalities, gang crimes, interest rates, foreclosures, newly created jobs, and new business are all measures of good and bad things that have already happened. Consequently, many government organizations are tracking program, process, or activity measures that they believe lead to important outcomes. The problem is that belief, theory, and hope are not appropriate criteria for selecting a leading indicator. There should be solid evidence of causation or at least a strong correlation.

No one in government, however, wants to challenge these beliefs and theories to expose their program as being ineffective. No one wants to be politically incorrect and challenge a much-loved government program, even if there is clear evidence that it does not work.

How many millions of tax dollars did the “Say No to Drugs” campaign spend until a study finally showed that drug use had actually increased in America while that program was in full force? The amazing thing is that the program continues in spite of clear evidence that advertising does not curtail drug use.

A large county in California just put a more than $1 million contract in place to educate people on nutrition. The theory is that if people knew more about nutrition they would make healthier food choices and there would be less obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. Good theory, but the research does not support this. In fact, knowledge of nutrition or calorie counts does not do much to change people’s eating behavior. They still order the 1,500-calorie triple bacon cheeseburger.

Some government programs are successful. It took more than 20 years, but today most people wear seat belts and there are fewer traffic fatalities. Fewer Americans smoke today than they did 10 years ago.

The key to coming up with valid processes or leading indicators is to track correlations to important outcomes, or at least rely on the research of others that shows a link. Once there is a proven link, you have the foundation of a good leading measure. Tracking how much time kids spend exercising or playing outside is a proven leading indicator for obesity, just as the ratio of HDL to LDL cholesterol is a good predictor of heart disease. It is a good idea that at least half of the measures on your scorecard be leading indicators.
Mistake #5: Plans Are Written and Forgotten

Today you can find well-written and beautiful strategic plans in most government departments and offices. Months are spent producing these plans, and most go through many drafts before they are printed and distributed to stakeholders.

In business, plans are rarely written for more than a year because too much can change, making them obsolete. Many government plans are written to cover a five-year time period, I guess on the assumption that not much changes in five years. One would think that government is just as influenced by global changes as industry is, but it takes so long to write and approve these strategic plans that no one wants to do it again for another five years.

The same thing used to happen in industry 20 years ago. The planning process was focused on creating a document. So much time and effort was put into creating and approving the document, that everyone was loath to change it. Consequently, plans often became irrelevant and the entire planning process got a bad name.

Don’t focus on creating beautiful, four-color documents to detail your strategy; more useful are brief, informal plans that can be easily adapted to changing situations.

Current best practices in industry do not focus on creating a beautiful, four-color document, but on producing brief, informal plans that can be easily changed and adapted as situations change. For example, Nestle Purina writes all of its strategic plans on one double-sided page. The goals, objectives, and measures are on the front, and the strategies and actions are on the back. Many times they have had to revise this “blueprint” as problems and opportunities arise. The plan is a living document that is subject to unlimited change, but there is a process in place to make sure changes are not made because someone sees he is not going to be able to achieve his objective.

What’s needed in most government organizations is a process that focuses on managing organizational performance, not just creating a plan and then forgetting about it for many years. Some government clients review performance against the goals and objectives in their plans once a quarter, which is a step in the right direction. A lot can change in three months so monthly reviews are even better.

More emphasis should be on the relevance of the plan rather than aesthetics. Government plans today look like annual reports from Fortune 100 corporations designed to convince shareholders that they made a sound investment. I would rather see an ugly, informal plan that has some real meat in it than a polished, beautiful document that contains a bunch of vague goals and unclear strategies. The more time and money you put into creating and printing the plan, the less likely you are to change it when necessary.
Mistake # 6: Too Many Metrics

Most federal and state government organizations are huge behemoths, with thousands of employees and many varied areas of responsibilities. Look at Health and Human Services, which oversees the huge Medicare program and other functions, such as the new government health insurance website. The size and complexity of these organizations requires that they track hundreds of measures to see how their programs, facilities, and employees are performing.

There is no shortage of metrics and data in most government organizations. In fact, most are drowning in data and thirsting for insights to help them assess performance and make better decisions. Metrics are tracked not only for reviewing performance on goals, but for regulators, taxpayers, politicians, and special purposes. For example, a recent government client tracked a bunch of measures for Laboratory of the Year, a designation/award given out each year to the best government lab. These were in addition to the huge number of metrics they already tracked.

A study by the American Productivity and Quality Center suggests that no one in an organization should track more than 20 metrics.\(^1\) Another study of 3,000 American and European companies by the Advanced Performance Institute suggests that fewer metrics are not only better, but also that the more advanced organizations make use of composite or analytic metrics.\(^2\) This involves combining a series of measures that all relate to a single dimension of performance into a single number for senior management. Data are stacked in layers like a pyramid so that if the top number is green there is no need to drill down into the details.

Trying to run a big and complex organization with a handful of key metrics is not a good bet. Organizations today are more complex than ever. However, trying to monitor 50-100 variables on a regular basis is just as ridiculous. The best way to still have a reasonable number of metrics for management and to have a great deal of insights and intelligence in those metrics is through the use of analytics. My most recent book, *Killer Analytics – Top 20 Metrics Missing From Your Balance Sheet*, includes explanations of how to calculate analytics for dimensions that are difficult to measure, such as risk or culture.

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Mistake # 7: Many Versions of the Truth

Many hours of overtime are spent preparing PowerPoints and charts for the dreaded quarterly or monthly review meeting. Each manager tries her best to display the performance of her unit in the most favorable light. Through the clever use of selected data and good explanations, negative levels and trends in performance can be magically transformed into a good story.

Observation of a monthly meeting of a healthcare organization revealed the assistant chief medical officer presenting charts on clinical health measures showing “green” levels of performance. A few days earlier everything was red because improvement targets had not been achieved. The presenter changed all the reds to green because there had been some slight improvement on each measure from last year.

The problem with having each manager prepare his own report of performance is that it allows for a great deal of manipulation of the data, leaving executives to wonder what the real truth is. A better approach is not to prepare for meetings.

A Navy Captain who ran a shipyard had someone plug in a laptop for the monthly meeting and they looked at live performance data using scorecard software and the shipyard databases. There was no opportunity for anyone to change reds to green or manipulate the data since it was coming directly from databases that contained cost quality and schedule data.

We later discovered that there were also problems with the integrity of the data in the databases. When a manager saw he was over budget on one project he instructed workers to charge their time to another project, where he might have had some surplus funds. The same customer (the Navy) was paying for it all so no one thought they were being unethical. It turns out this was highly unethical and this practice ensured that no one could really track the true maintenance cost of each vessel. Managers would also change dates for milestones when they saw they were not going to make them so it always looked like they were on schedule. The captain helped implement many efforts to improve data integrity and reporting accuracy at the shipyard, and it helped him get promoted to admiral.

The use of good scorecard and business intelligence (BI) software can do a lot to ensure that leaders are looking at one version of the truth. However, problems with the integrity of the data itself and measurement methods usually need to be fixed as well. Automating bad data does not increase its accuracy, unfortunately.
Most of the time in monthly or quarterly performance review meetings is spent reviewing performance. Attendees must endure mind-numbing slides that are hard to read and in different formats, and any questions that do arise are often requests for clarification about what the slides show.

Many of these meetings last four to eight hours or longer. Little or no time is spent discussing what the results mean or what to do about them; each manager just spends time reporting on unit performance. There is usually no time for discussion because everyone wants their turn at presenting their own charts. This is a major waste of time for the most important and highest-paid people in the organization.

There is no need to have a meeting to review performance. Leading organizations make use of software-enabled smart devices so managers can review real-time performance data at any time on their phone, iPad, or laptop. In fact, these organizations expect that managers monitor key performance measures daily and be prepared to answer questions about the results in case anyone asks.

The best-run organizations have monthly meetings to discuss performance but the meeting is not about reporting. The focus of the meeting is to identify on poor levels and/or trends in key performance measures, analyze that performance, and develop strategies and action plans for improvement. This actually is a great use of an executive’s time and something which they excel.

Everyone is expected to have already reviewed performance before showing up to the meeting and managers with poor performance will have already had a chance to prepare an analysis and action plan that is reviewed in the meeting.

Others usually want to weigh in on the analysis and some software tools allow for this, with almost blog-like functionality. The big differences in meetings that are run this way is that the focus is almost exclusively on the poor performing metrics, and the majority of the time is spent analyzing the root causes of negative levels and trends, developing action plans, and reviewing completion of actions relating to previously poor-performing metrics. The focus of the meeting is about improving performance, not reporting it. This is a welcome change for most leaders, who actually look forward to using their brains and experience rather than sitting through a series of boring reports.
Key outcomes are often shared by many government organizations at the federal, state, and local levels. When performance is good, they all claim the credit, and when it is bad, they all place the blame. Also, the same outcomes are often found on the scorecards of multiple departments and agencies (e.g., measures of the economy can be found in DOE, HHS, State Dept., Commerce, etc.)

In order to have a performance management system it is important to identify an owner of each metric. Being an owner does not necessarily mean you collect the data associated with the metric; it means you are responsible for performance on the measure. It is fine to have multiple owners of a single metric, but each one is assigned a percentage of accountability. For example, if you have 20 percent of the organization’s budget, you might own 20 percent of the overall budget performance metric. Ownership percentages are also determined by the degree of influence/control the organization has over the dimension of performance.

Accountability is good; without it, everyone stands up to claim credit when performance is good and blames others when it is bad.

Through the use of software it is easy to drill into the budget gauge to see what segment of the organization is overspending and if they have an action plan for getting spending under control. Accountability is not bad – it means we know whom to congratulate when performance is good. Without clear accountability and individual measures of performance, everyone stands up to claim credit when performance is good and blames others when it is bad.

For example, a client performs a quarterly employee survey but, because the data is anonymous, there is no way to segment it and hold anyone other than the director accountable for performance. By being able to segment the data and hold managers accountable for the satisfaction/engagement of their own staff, the performance data now can be used to diagnose the location of problems and develop plans for improving employee engagement.

It is fine to have some team and shared metrics, but it is better to have most of the measures on anyone’s scorecard pertain to individual performance. No one in sports cares about overall league performance. Players and fans monitor and care about team performance and individual performance. This is not perceived as negative, but as a way of keeping track and striving for improvement.
We’ve all heard expressions like, “Be careful what you measure” and “You get what you measure.” However, not everything that gets measured gets the proper focus or attention. Doctors do get measured on some quality metrics, but their pay is based on how many patients they see per day. Airlines care about customer satisfaction but their two most important metrics are RASM and CASM (revenue/available seat mile and cost/available seat mile). Similarly, hotels are measured on occupancy rates and revenue per room.

Government organizations are measured on a lot of activity metrics, such as people served. Even though most government organizations today have some version of a balanced set of measures that look at different dimensions of performance, most have a few key metrics that get focused on by management. This often drives undesirable behavior from employees.

Pearl Harbor Navy Shipyard (PHNS) was getting a lot of pressure from bosses at NAVSEA to reduce costs, and one of the biggest costs that they could control was overtime. At the time, PHNS had the lowest productivity of any of the four shipyards, and costs were high. The CO decided to implement a policy that stated there would be no more than 15 percent overtime. Of course, everyone complied and the goal was achieved within a few weeks. They started missing more of their milestone dates, however, so the Navy was not happy with that. The shipyard commander then told everyone that they had to work harder to achieve milestones, so that improved as well. So what do you think got worse? You guessed it: quality.

Successful measurement requires balance. Focusing too heavily on one or a few key metrics can cause or allow undesirable behavior in other areas.

Everything in life is about balance. Push on one dimension of performance it gets better, but pull on another and it gets worse. That is why it is so important to have checks and balances in your performance measures and not to reward someone for doing a good job on one aspect of performance while getting worse on others. This is a concept that is easy to understand but seems hard to put into practice.

The Los Angeles Fire Chief recently lost his job over poor performance on one metric: response time. Firemen were not hitting their performance targets and the trend was worsening. Of course, we all remember when Domino’s Pizza focused on the same metric: delivery people started driving recklessly and got into more accidents because there was so much focus on getting people their pizza in 30 minutes.
If you want to improve performance, you need to measure performance. Without data we don’t really know if anything we are doing is making a difference. Measurement in non-profits and government organizations is much harder than it is in business.

In business there is usually one type of customer. Their needs are clear, and there are rewards for doing a good job on your metrics. In government things are much more complicated, and no one gets $100,000 bonuses for making all their metrics green. The keys to having good performance metrics are to:

- Measure what matters – Outcomes that stakeholders really care about
- Measure often – Daily and weekly metrics are best; annual metrics should be avoided
- Select measures that address different stakeholders’ needs
- Combine metrics into analytics by stacking measures into pyramids

No matter how good your metrics are, they do not take the place of good management. A lot of the most important data you need about organizational performance can be gathered by just observing. Going out where the real work is done or seeing what it is like to be a customer can do a lot to supplement the insights that come from good metrics.

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