

Performance Leadership: What's in Your Pocket?

by Kevin Baum

This is the first in a series of articles on the topics and issues that will be presented at the "Leading Innovation and Change in Local Government" Leadership Training Institute seminar scheduled for January 24-26, 2008, at the Hilton Austin and the University of Texas in Austin, Texas.

Imagine that you're in downtown Manhattan. You have an appointment on the top floor of a high-rise building. You get into the elevator and hit the button to your floor, and just as the doors begin to close, somebody shouts, "Hold Please!" You stop the doors and in walks your favorite media personality, whoever that may be — Bill O'Reilly, Lou Dobbs, Oprah Winfrey — you decide.

As the doors slowly close, this media icon looks over at you, extends his hand and introduces himself. You nervously shake his hand and introduce yourself in reply, to which he immediately asks, "What do you do for a living?" You answer that you work in local government and briefly describe your role there. As you speak, a big smile crosses his face, almost as if he knows something that you don't. As soon as you finish your introduction he remarks through his grin, "That's great. Local government plays a very important role. How are ya'll doing down there, are you making a difference?" "Oh, yes!" you reply, excited by his interest. "We've made some great progress over the years!"

"Really?" He remarks, as his smile fades into a skeptical grimace. "Really," you repeat. He stares at you for a long second and then finally says, "Prove it."

What will you say?

Who's to Blame?

Over the years I have run the "elevator ride scenario" by thousands of government employees. These employees have come from all over the government spectrum — elected, non-elected, management, line, executive, federal, state, local and more.

What's been striking, and even a little bit unsettling, is that I have discovered that most, if not all, of these well-intentioned government employees have no response to the "Prove it" challenge. They sit there nervously

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looking at me or at each other, shifting in their chairs and hoping that I don't call on them to answer.

In response to this uncomfortable silence, I slowly ask, "Alright, you have 25 seconds left on your elevator ride, what are you going to say?" They just stare at the table. "Okay, you now have 20 seconds left...15...10...5...done. The doors open and the media icon walks away laughing, as he quips over his shoulder, 'That's what I thought.' Folks, you just lost a great opportunity."

We like to complain that nobody appreciates government, that we are the favorite whipping post for the ill-informed, and so on. In part this is true: government will always be the object of scrutiny and criticism, and some of it will be agenda-driven. However, I am absolutely convinced that we are still partly to blame for the less-than favorable discourse on our value and the value of our services. Why? Because we don't have an answer for the simple elevator-ride challenge: "Prove it."

Think about this: In the absence of data and outcome information on the value of your services, people will write their own script of your value, and when it comes to government services that script will always be wrong.

Always.

Government Performance Accountability - GPA

Ask any college student for his or her GPA and they can cite it from memory, and even break it down to individual classes, instructors, assignments and texts.

A GPA is essentially a scorecard — an at-a-glance look at progress, achievement and challenge at any given point in time. The GPA is a great measurement tool and has many uses: we can use it to reassess direction, improve performance, demon-

strate commitment, discipline and capacity, and more.

But most importantly, the GPA is a tool from which we communicate, as it says much about the individual who is being measured. Imagine if you were to meet a college student working on his Masters Degree and when asked, "What's your GPA?" he couldn't answer. He just looks at you with embarrassment. What will you think of him and his ability to succeed? Would you hire him if you were a prospective employer? How would you communicate about him to others?

Writing the Script

What is your GPA? How is your organization performing? Do you know?

I like to tell my clients that they need to create their own scorecard of key metrics and outcome measures so that they can better assess and communicate their GPA (obviously this is a double-entendre for Government Performance Accountability).

Consider it a measurement marquee, the at-a-glance look at how we are performing as an organization — one that is scripted in a way that is meaningful to our customers and that we regularly reassess and evaluate performance against. How would this scorecard change your ability to demonstrate value?

To help you answer this question, let's re-write the elevator ride scenario. To the media icon's question "Prove it," you smile and say, "Well I'm glad you asked." You reach into your pocket and pull out your scorecard: a one-page, front and back collection of key metrics of performance for your government organization.

"Mr. Dobbs, this is our GPA, which is our performance accountability scorecard. We have organized the scorecard around key initiatives that are important to our citizens: safety and security; fiscal responsibility; and Health and Environment. As

you can see, under each initiative we have key measures of performance that we think best tell our story. Some areas we are performing very well, such as our response time indicator for 911 emergency calls. There are other areas where we need to improve, as you can see in our 'green' measures under the health and environment category, but we are working on them!"

As you are discussing your GPA, you hand the scorecard to him and tell him to keep it, and you continue. "We are very proud of our accomplishments, but we recognize that we have many areas where we can improve. This is just an at-a-glance look at our performance. If you are interested in learning more, please visit our website at www.yourtown-website.com. This site reviews all our key measures, and you can see what we are doing to improve performance in each area."

The media icon stares at the scorecard and finally remarks, "Wow. I'm impressed."

The elevator dings and the doors open. "It's been a pleasure talking to you," you say as you

shake his hand.

This time it is you who gets to walk away with a smile.

Remember: In the absence of information on your value and the value of your services, people will write their own script of your value. Do you have a script?

Do you have a scorecard in your pocket?

Details: Kevin Baum will serve as the trainer on Friday morning, January 25, with a presentation on Building Public Trust Through Performance Leadership. For more information on this seminar, contact the Leadership Training Institute at (202) 626-3170 or visit the NLC website at www.nlc.org.

Kevin Baum is the founder and president of inCentergy. He is a 21-year veteran of public service and is the former assistant fire chief and fire marshal with the Austin, Texas, Fire Department. Baum's new book "Lessons from the Line: Why Every Leader should be a Firefighter for a Day," was released this year.

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