Key Takeaways:
- City managers have often lacked reliable data on how their departments were performing, which made explaining their decisions or managing their departments more difficult.
- Tracking data can allow managers to see what service areas are experiencing the greatest demand so that they can allocate their limited resources more appropriately and efficiently.
- Performance management also creates an opportunity to manage service expectations and improve communication with residents. Implementing a tracking system for service requests allows residents to see their request was responded to and foster more confidence and satisfaction in city services.
- Regular meetings with department managers to review the data are key to improving service. These meetings should be used to help improve performance through collaboration, not as a forum for criticism for failing to meet set goals.
- What is measured is as important as how its measured . Making sure the right metrics are used to track performance is key to improving outcomes.
- Fostering change in departmental operations can be challenging and requires buy-in from both department leadership, as well as the workers performing day-to-day duties.
- Philadelphia has made great strides at implementing and improving its performance management systems, but there is still room for improvement.

City Management, Goals and Decision Making

Anyone who has sat through annual budget hearings in Philadelphia City Council has observed a familiar scene play out countless times. A commissioner of one of the city's operating departments - be it Streets, Recreation, Human Services, etc. - sits meekly at a witness table while a councilmember demands an explanation for the unsatisfactory services their constituents call to complain about.

The commissioner humbly apologizes, offers whatever explanation they can muster, and promises to do better (all have been coached to take their beatings stoically). But the truth is that we have not always provided a system in which city managers can operate and deploy

resources effectively. City managers have often lacked reliable data on how their departments were performing, which didn't make explaining, or managing, their departments easy.

In the 1990s, the Rendell administration began publishing a yearly "Report on City Services" based on resident satisfaction surveys. The surveys were at best an indirect and anecdotal measure of performance. During his tenure, Mayor Nutter prioritized performance-based governance with the PhillyStat initiative. While designed to provide departments real-time tracking of their performance, many department leaders found themselves spending more time preparing for the publicly broadcast meetings than managing their departments. The moral of the story is that performance management can be a useful tool when deployed properly.

Recognizing the potential that big data and advanced computing offer municipal governments in managing operational performance, the Committee of Seventy dedicated a session for mayoral candidates on "City Management, Goals and Decision Making," which was attended by now Mayor Parker and some of her senior advisers.

A key speaker was Matthew Gallagher, who worked in the Rendell administration in Philadelphia, then played senior roles in the administrations of Martin O'Malley, when he was mayor of Baltimore and governor of Maryland. Gallagher now heads the Goldseker Foundation in Baltimore.

Gallagher was director of Baltimore's CitiStat program, which got national attention for its digital tracking of citizen requests for city services and the responses to them. Philadelphia's 311 system and PhillyStat were modeled in part on Baltimore's system, the first in the nation.

"Literally every single day, we could provide [the mayor] a report in real-time that would show like what requests were coming in, what the backlogs were, what the turnaround times were," Gallagher said, "so we could report to the mayor on the status of [responses to] graffiti, property abatements, potholes, street lights and so on."

Tracking data is good, but would it actually improve performance? Gallager said that over time, it did, for a couple of key reasons. First, the data would show areas with the greatest need. The administration would hold regular meetings where city managers were encouraged to improve practices and target resources to meet citizens' needs. Externally, Gallagher said the system also improved communications with citizens, which helped to shape and manage perceptions. If someone saw a rat on the street weeks after reporting a rodent problem, for example, they assumed nothing had been done.

"We started to leave hang tags on the door indicating that a rat eradication unit had been out and had baited, or say, cleaned up an adjacent property," Gallagher said, "and suddenly the feedback from people using 311 was much better. So communication helps." The idea in all this is to develop a system that integrates citizen complaints and measurements of services provided, and uses all the data to guide management decisions and funding priorities.

The session also heard from Lauren Su, who spent six years as Director of Certification for What Works Cities, a Bloomberg-funded initiative to help local governments use data to improve

services. I asked her for some examples of mistakes cities make when they embark on a program to measure and improve service performance. One thing she cited was a "firing squad" atmosphere when managers were called to account for their performance. "The idea is to drive performance, not to chastise or punish," she said, "so I think that can be a stumbling block."

"Another problem sometimes is just having access to the data and measuring the right things," Su said. "So you need to identify what you want to measure, and ask, 'what does it take to actually get there? Who owns that data? Do we have access to it?'"

Su said managers should strive to measure outcomes, not just output. Rather than just documenting the steps a department is taking to address a problem, make sure it's having an impact as measured by citizen satisfaction. And she said, sometimes great performance measurements can indicate a weakness, rather than a strength. "If a (service) metric is performing well every time in a performance structure, then you're probably not measuring the right thing," she said.

Gallagher said it's important to use the data collected to change management practices. Sometimes there's resistance to change, perhaps because supervisors say union rules tie their hands. "When we would bring the city agency heads in for these performance-driven meetings, we actually kept copies of all the labor contracts in the room," Gallagher said. "And when a manager would say, `we can't do that because of the labor contract,' we'd say, `which page?'"

He said they often found proposed changes weren't contract violations, and could be implemented. He added that sometimes union leaders were appreciative of the focus on management, because the performance meetings cleared up misperceptions about the union workforce.

Philadelphia has made efforts to further develop data-driven service improvements since the 311 system for citizen complaints and requests was first implemented in 2008. The city's most recent Five Year Plan lists 27 programs that the city's Integrated Data for Evidence and Action initiative [pursued in 2022](#).

Lauren Su said that the What Works Cities program, which "certifies" specific cities' progress in performance management, recognized Philadelphia's efforts in 2019. It awarded the city a Silver Certification, the lowest of its three standards (gold and platinum are better). In the [website explanation](#), the group praised the city's efforts so far, while noting "there's still progress to be made."

CitiStat veteran Gallagher said that in his session,Parker and her team seemed interested in improving performance of the 311 system. A Platinum Certification might be in Philadelphia's future.

Dave Davies is a journalist who spent decades covering Philadelphia politics and government. He is currently a contributor to NPR's Fresh Air with Terry Gross.

Additional Resources:

- [The Mayor and Data Equity infographic](#)
- [Philly311 - Neighborhood Liaison Program](#)
- [Bloomberg Philanthropies - What Works Cities](#)
- [Philadelphia's Integrated Data System - 2022 Year in Review](#)
- [Bloomberg Philanthropies - What Works Cities Certification](#)