Managing for Results in an Impossible Job: Solution or Symbol?

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Abstract: Recent years have been characterized by widespread adoption of reforms that called for governments to manage for results. This article tackles the question: what is the impact of results-based reforms in functions that the public management literature has defined as “impossible jobs?” The implementation of strategic planning and performance measurement in the Alabama Department of Corrections provides a case study of such a scenario. The explicit goals of results-based reforms suggest a solution to “impossible jobs” by achieving improved allocation, effectiveness, and efficiency. However, the case evidence suggests that their main use is as a symbol of rational governance, to be used by beleaguered agencies and governments in a bid to increase resources. Beyond this, the public manager in an impossible job finds little benefit from results-based reform, and seeks to devote as few resources as is necessary to comply with reform requirements.

INTRODUCTION: WHEN PUBLIC JOBS BECOME IMPOSSIBLE

The Commissioner of the Department of Corrections (DOC) in the State of Alabama leans over a fax machine, closely inspecting the pages emerging. He is examining a court order forcing the State of Alabama to accept into custody the overflow of state offenders that had been placed in county jails. Within a month he will have to introduce over 2,000 new prisoners into a system that is already egregiously overcrowded. Dealing with the courts is a core characteristic of most jobs in the public sector, indicative of the frequently formal, value-laden, ambiguous and conflict-centered environment inhabited by public managers. The critical and often unpredictable influence of the organizational environment is a staple of discussions of “publicness.”

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As a result, senior public managers spend the bulk of their time responding to outside influences and managing the environment, motivated by the public administration truism that autonomous and well-resourced public organizations tend to be more successful. Organizations that enjoy such conditions have mastered their environment, often because they perform popular missions with powerful constituent support. Many public organizations do not enjoy these favorable conditions, however, and are at the mercy of environmental trends, lacking a buffer to manage external events. In this situation, all a manager can do is find the best way to cope with an “impossible job.” Hargrove and Glidewell enumerate the shared characteristics of such functions: an unpopular client base; intense conflict among the stakeholders; low public confidence in manager’s professional authority, and a weak or negative agency myth. As we shall see, managing corrections in Alabama is one such impossible job. While managers may use a variety of strategies to better cope with their problems, they are unlikely to gain the autonomy, resources, or clarity of mission that would enable them to perform well. Can results-based reform help?

MANAGING FOR RESULTS: SOLUTION OR SYMBOL?

Another characteristic of the public sector environment is the continual efforts to reform government to provide for more rational modes of public management. The 1990s were characterized by an upsurge in adoption of reforms that called for a more results-oriented government, and are collectively referred to here as managing for results (MFR). MFR has been defined as a combination of strategic planning (systems that set organizational goals), performance measurement (systems that track and provide information on cost and accomplishments of government), and some form of strategic/performance management (systems that shape working relationships and structure discretion in a way consistent with organizational goals). Evaluations of such reforms fall into two camps. A pessimistic literature suggests little or no success. A more optimistic literature cites the possibility of success from case studies and an appealing theory of how the public sector can become more results focused.

This article tackles the question: what is the impact of results-based reforms in functions that the public management literature has defined as “impossible jobs?” Two competing alternative outcomes suggest themselves. The first alternative, based on the optimistic literature, proposes that reforms will be successful, arguing that best-practice successes can be recreated in impossible jobs, precisely because these impossible tasks are most in need of clear goals and performance data to inform decisions. This approach assumes that the means-end rationality associated with MFR will inform both resource allocation and implementation. If managers can demonstrate performance
benefits from additional resources, they will gain a larger share of the pie relative to those who cannot link budget to performance. With the resources they receive, managers will use performance information to reorganize their processes and become more efficient. From this perspective, MFR is a silver bullet to many of the alleged ills plaguing government. For example, Aristigueta sees state adoption of MFR practices based on an underlying implication that the effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability of state government will improve by having agencies focus their management practices on the results or outcomes, that state programs strive to achieve. Ultimately public satisfaction, availability of service, and cost reductions will demonstrate the benefits of managing for results.[11]

The second alternative is consistent with the pessimism of the literature of results-based reform failure and the coping approach of the impossible jobs literature. The literature of failure suggests that managers or elected officials do not use performance information in any systemic way; that decision-making is based on other, more traditional concerns. However, according to the impossible jobs literature, even if performance information does not inform decision-making, it still has benefit. DiIulio writes about the impossible job of corrections commissioner.[12] He suggests that strong corrections leaders will grab opportunities to implement managerial innovations. Even if the innovations fail to work, they create a sense of progress among agency employees and external constituencies and generate good press. The benefit of reforms such as MFR in an impossible job, therefore, is chiefly symbolic.

DATA AND METHODS

A number of different data sources were used in constructing this case study. First, I examined the data collected on Alabama by the Government Performance Project (GPP), a 50-state analysis of different management systems undertaken by the Campbell Institute at Syracuse University. This data included two very extensive surveys, from 1998 and 2000, containing both open-ended and close-ended information, for each of three relevant management areas: human resource management, financial management, and managing for results. The surveys were completed by government officials in Alabama, and prompted descriptions of the management systems in place. The next source of data was documentation. As part of the GPP, public documents such as budgets, MFR legislation, statewide strategic plans and performance reports, and a sample of agency strategic plans and performance reports were collected (including those for the function of corrections), and their content analyzed. Together, the surveys and content analysis portrayed Alabama as a
state that had decided since 1998 that it would implement a strong MFR system and was just beginning to do so.

The third source of data was interviews. The GPP had interviewed senior level government officials in both 1998 and 2000, and I gained access to transcripts of these interviews. However, I wanted to interview more and a wider range of officials while avoiding the potential for responder bias that existed in the context of the GPP evaluation. Therefore, in May 2001 I traveled to Alabama. For an agency perspective I chose to examine corrections, a large but understudied area in public administration and one that features in the impossible jobs literature. The interview selection strategy was to interview the key actors who were designing the MFR system and the key actors expected to use this system. Ban utilized a similar sampling technique to good effect, illustrating consistent variation in behavior of members of different parts of the same organization.\[13\] The following groups were interviewed: (a) three operational managers in correctional institutions; (b) five senior managers at the DOC; (c) three managers in the state Department of Finance; and (d) two consultants who helped design and provide training on the system. The interviews were undertaken using a semi-structured interview protocol, and I developed slight variations on the basic protocol depending on the type of interviewee. Each interview was taped and transcribed, and its content was analyzed using a qualitative software package called QSR Nudist. Interviews were confidential, so when using quotations, I cite an interview number rather than name of interviewee, for example, A4.

A quick note on generalizability: Because I examined only the DOC, I cannot claim that my agency findings are representative of the entire government in Alabama. Indeed, I heard more positive reports of the experience of at least one other agency that had adopted MFR. I also do not claim that the DOC in Alabama is representative of departments of correction everywhere. As part of a wider project I studied DOCs in other states, and they did not face the dire situation that Alabama does. I do claim, however, that the experience of the Alabama DOC reveals one fate of MFR that is likely to reoccur among other agencies facing similarly impossible jobs, or ones trying to expand minimal resources.

THE ALABAMA MODEL OF MANAGING FOR RESULTS

Alabama was something of a latecomer to the world of MFR. Its adoption might be seen as indisputable evidence that MFR ideas are no longer the sole property of public management academics and a handful of innovative practitioners, but have been diffused to virtually all state governments. The adoption of this reform was prompted at least partly by external criticism. In a 1999 assessment of MFR practices in state government, based on GPP data, Governing magazine issued the state with an F grade, finding little evidence of any sort of strategic planning or performance reporting.
MFR practices had been introduced in previous administrations under Governor Folsom (1993–1995), but faded away once he left office. The only vestiges of previous efforts were a pronounced sense of cynicism by long-term employees toward results-based reform, and a barely implemented legislative requirement for MFR. Under legislation (Alabama Code 41-19-2 – 41-19-12), MFR occurs in conjunction with the biennial budget cycle: the governor is required to develop a statewide strategic plan, and agencies are required to produce goals, objectives, and plans for implementation and performance measures. These requirements, passed under Governor Folsom, were largely ignored or implemented in a pro forma manner under his successor, Governor “Fob” James (1995–1999). No statewide strategic plans were created; a few agencies reported a handful of performance measures or nothing at all. In instances when performance information was reported, it was widely acknowledged that such information had little impact on either resource allocation or management (A2, A9, A11, A12). Performance measures were no longer included as part of the printed budget by 1999, eliminated, says a budget official, because “it just wasn’t worth what it was costing to print extra pages” (A2).

Governor Don Siegelman (1999–2003) led more recent efforts to create an MFR. Siegelman wanted to reestablish the existing but largely ignored requirements for agencies to set strategic goals and include performance data in their budget submission. But first he wanted to develop a comprehensive vision for the state through a statewide strategic plan. To this end, the governor, policy staff and officials from the Department of Finance in 1999 and 2000 created Achieve: Achieving Accountability for Alabama. Achieve and subsequent agency plans adopted a “balanced scorecard approach,” a technique suggested by the private consultants employed. Achieve itself suggests that this approach was adopted to allow Alabama to succeed in improving accountability and efficiency, aligning individual actions with overall state expectations and strategies, communicating strategic objectives clearly, and linking objectives to resource allocation. [14]

Although Achieve was a product of the executive branch, the goals of accountability, improved resource allocation, and management efficiency found support in the legislative branch also. A joint legislative and administrative task force on MFR was established, explicitly specifying five goals for MFR in Alabama in a written report.

- For internal management by agency heads: to achieve long and short-term objectives; to inform the uses of management resources; and to focus attention on customer/client satisfaction.
- For general management by the executive branch: to comply with federal government performance reporting standards and Governmental
Accounting and Standards Board (GASB, a professional accounting body) requirements.

- To influence policy and resource allocation decisions by the legislative and executive branches.
- To inform the public on the services government delivers.
- To determine the unit cost of services.

The creation of a statewide strategic plan was seen as the first step in building a “Strategic Plan and Performance Measurement System” that “aligns individual actions with overall state expectations and strategies.”[15] The main linking mechanism to provide vertical goal integration between statewide goals and individual action is the creation of agency level plans. Following the development of Achieve, Governor Siegelman required five pilot agencies, including the DOC, to undertake MFR. Achieve suggests a logical order in the selection of goals: choices are first made at a government-wide level and become increasingly specific. According to Achieve, the Strategic Plan and Performance Measurement System is patterned on the following chronological order of actions:

- Create a mission statement for Alabama;
- Determine strategic issues areas, or “focal areas of great importance;”
- Determine strategic objectives that provide direction for activities occurring at the agency level;
- Establish the long-term goals Alabama would like to achieve;
- Identify performance measures that match the strategic objectives and will help determine levels of success, prioritize allocation of resources and create needed accountability;
- Create agency action plans to implement goals; which leads to
- Results, which are intended to be reviewed and to feed back into every element of the process for future adjustment of the system.

Alabama was a model student of other state innovators in MFR. The concepts represented by the Strategic Plan and Performance Measurement System—vertical goal integration and the creation of a performance information system—are common to the states perceived as being leading practitioners in MFR.[16] Alabama sought to learn lessons from these states, and spent a sizable amount of money on consultants who not only trained managers about MFR, but also brought in practitioners from a variety of other states (including Texas, Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi), and members of GASB, the accounting body that has encouraged governments to increase performance information availability. How did the carefully constructed reforms fare in the DOC? As we shall see, the answer has everything to do with the context of the corrections function in Alabama.
“WE OPERATE FROM CRISIS TO CRISIS”: CORRECTIONS IN ALABAMA

Possibly the most salient single fact about the DOC in Alabama is that it is, by far, the lowest funded in the United States, with $9,176 budgeted per prisoner annually, compared to a national average of $27,114. While part of this disparity is due to the lower than average cost of living in the state, it is worth noting that the next lowest state, Louisiana, budgets $14,185 per prisoner. Low funding shapes every aspect of corrections in Alabama, and of any management reform that is introduced. Lack of resources, combined with a punitive approach to sentencing, have led to chronic overcrowding, warehousing of offenders, and a crisis management or coping approach to running the correctional system. MFR reforms introduced in the Department became viewed through the lens of resource requirements. Staff hoped that MFR could be used to expand the DOC budget, but were pragmatic enough to see that this was unlikely to happen, at which point MFR was essentially undertaken out of a sense of compliance rather than a belief in its virtues.

Among DOC staff there was a widespread view that the public had a highly negative view of offenders and staff; that they supported incarceration but resented spending tax dollars on offenders. The legislature translated negative public attitudes toward offenders and taxes into inadequate appropriations, DOC procedures, and sentencing guidelines that impact the intake and outflow of prisoners. As with other parts of the country, there has been an increase in punitive sentencing, resulting in a rapid growth in the incarcerated population. In Alabama, this was combined with a reluctance to provide adequate resources to manage this growth. As one DOC staff member said: “We want people to serve large amounts of time in this state, but we’re not a state that’s willing to fund it to that level” (A7). Alabama, despite having the seventh highest incarceration rate in the country, is ranked 45th of the 50 states in its per capita spending on corrections. Incarceration is the most expensive aspect of corrections, costing far more than probation or parole, partly because it is a labor-intensive task. Alabama not only spends like a state with low incarceration rates, it also staffs corrections in the same way, ranked 42nd in corrections staff per capita (see Table 1 for this and other information on corrections policies in the Alabama). The problems become more evident when posed in terms of the day-to-day running of a corrections institution. For instance, a corrections institution I visited had 25 officers on duty for 1,266 prisoners.

Under such conditions, the DOC has had little option but to adopt a warehousing approach to corrections, that is, to incarcerate safely the maximum number of offenders with limited staff and space. The warehousing goal has the effect of undermining other goals. Dilulio points out that corrections commissioners are expected to simultaneously realize a variety of values and goals, including retribution, reformation, deterrence, and public protection,
Table 1. Aspects of Corrections in Alabama

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect of Corrections</th>
<th>Alabama</th>
<th>National Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spending on corrections (in thousands), 1998</td>
<td>$257,214</td>
<td>$612,011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending on corrections per capita, total 1998</td>
<td>$75</td>
<td>$141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending on corrections per capita, rank 1998</td>
<td>45/50</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correction spending as % of personal income, total 1998</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correction spending as % of personal income, rank 1998</td>
<td>43/50</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incarceration rate (prisoners per 100,000 population), 1998</td>
<td>519</td>
<td>423</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incarceration rate, rank 1998</td>
<td>7/50</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incarcerated total (% of state corrections population), 1998</td>
<td>23326</td>
<td>??--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probation population total (% of state corrections population), 1998</td>
<td>44047</td>
<td>??--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parole total (% of state corrections population), 1998</td>
<td>6785</td>
<td>??--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrections Employees FTE, 1999*</td>
<td>4,443</td>
<td>9,135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrections Employees FTE per 10,000 population, 1999*</td>
<td>15.95</td>
<td>23.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National rank, corrections employees per capita</td>
<td>42/50</td>
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without violating the public conscience or emptying the public purse.\(^{[19]}\)

Unless corrections commissioners embrace all of the public values expected of corrections, even those not currently popular, neglect becomes apparent to the press, the public, and elected officials.

In Alabama, difficult and ambiguous goals such as reducing recidivism are a luxury that cannot be seriously attempted unless more resources become available. The DOC struggles to achieve even the very basic goal of warehousing. Prisoners are wards of the state and goals related to maintaining basic living conditions are undermined when more and more prisoners are packed into less and less space. The search for room for more prisoners has, at different points, led to prison chapels being appropriated for bed space, the closure of cost-efficient work release programs, and placing more beds into cells so that single bunks are laid beside each other. Overcrowding is such an issue that it has threatened the constitutionality of the system, ensuring that the DOC remains a fixture in the state and federal judicial system. In May 2001, the Commissioner of the DOC was a defendant in over 1,000 cases.

The lack of any redundance has made the DOC vulnerable to surges and unanticipated events and placed it in a state of permanent crisis: “We’re pretty much in a constant emergency situation in the Department of Corrections. We are in crisis mode” (A6). While the judicial system offers the best protection of prisoner’s constitutional rights and a check on the warehousing goal, court
decisions can increase strain on the system without any consideration as to competing uses of resources or managerial challenges. In some situations the existence of a strategic plan is useful in demonstrating to the court a show of purposeful activity. However, if the plan does not directly relate to the issue in front of the court, judges are unlikely to defer to the higher wisdom of a balanced scorecard:

Many of these variables, particularly orders coming down from the courts, we have no options about. We can’t choose, “well, sorry judge we’re not going to do that because it doesn’t fit in with our performance-based objectives.” This federal judge sitting out here doesn’t give a rip about our performance-based objectives. The only thing he wants us to do is obey his court order, and of course we have no choice about that (A6).

A concrete example of the DOC coping with a crisis situation arose from a conflict with the county jail system. Shortly prior to my visit, the county jails made an unannounced drop-off of 150 prisoners to the state classification institution, where all prisoners are classified before being moved to different institutions around the state. County officials handcuffed the prisoners to the outside of the perimeter fence of the state institution before driving off. The first that the warden of the institution heard about it was on the morning news, as the prisoners arrived. The prisoners were state prisoners held in county jails. It is not unusual for state corrections systems to deal with overcrowding issues by transferring prisoners into county jails and paying something close to the equivalent of what it costs to house the prisoner. However, in Alabama, the state pays the county system no more than $1.75 per prisoner per day intended for food costs.

By any measure, the DOC in Alabama is overcrowded, with approximately 26,000 prisoners in a system originally designed for 14,000 (A6). The county jails, themselves overcrowded, are effectively subsidizing the state corrections system, and have gone to court seeking orders to force the state to retake the prisoners. The courts have agreed with the county jails, but the state has dragged its feet on accepting the prisoners, leading one court to give the county jails the power to make the unannounced drop-off of prisoners. Before I left Alabama another court case (Civil Action No. CV-92-388-SH and CV-92-399-SH) concluded. The judgment gave the DOC 30 days to transfer all state inmates in county facilities into the state system, but prevented the county jails from transferring inmates without first gaining permission from the DOC. Even so, the task of introducing 2,000 additional prisoners into the state prison system in a month seemed infeasible, if prisoners were to be classified in an orderly fashion and even ad hoc lodgings found. In its judgment, the Court acknowledged overcrowding problems, and the role of elected officials in providing basic resources:
The Courts of this state can only go so far in remedying prison and jail overcrowding. The real solution must come from the executive and legislative branches of state government. They have the capacity to fund and provide for enough prisons and correctional staff to insure the safety and well being of the citizens of this state.

The image that emerges of the DOC in Alabama is not one of lean, purposeful efficiency, but rather of a department desperately trying to keep a lid on a steadily degenerating situation. I asked one DOC staff member about whether strategic planning matters in an environment where they face an unanticipated event or crisis situation: “Basically it doesn’t. We don’t think, ‘well, we’re going to miss our performance indicator’” (A11). In fact, facing situations such as the drop-off of 150 prisoners handcuffed to a perimeter fence leads staff to cope in ways that compromise standard operating procedures. For those working within the organization the environment appears highly uncertain and unstable, even though the majority of technologies involved in safely incarcerating prisoners are straightforward and achievable given adequate resources. If, as Mintzberg claims, planning works best in highly predictable conditions, it is unsurprising that MFR has become of marginal interest to members of the Alabama DOC.\(^{[21]}\) The factors that most effect their work lives—money and overcrowding—are the factors they have least control over.

CASE DISCUSSION: HOW IS MFR USED?

The standard goals of MFR reform, and the explicit goals of reform in Alabama, assume a high level of use of performance information by a variety of actors. Elected officials will use performance information to set major goals, monitor performance, and make resource allocation decisions; agency managers seek to implement programmatic objectives, and will use performance information to reengineer processes and improve efficiency. But in Alabama these scenarios have, thus far, not transpired. Instead, the benefits of MFR are largely symbolic, creating an image of a rational and efficient state government and DOC that both deserve more resources. I assess the impact of reform by examining, in turn, the motivations and actions of statewide and DOC actors.

Statewide Actors

The DOC, like the other pilot agencies attempting MFR, has reported performance data with their budget submission, as requested by the governor. What the Department of Finance and legislative appropriations committees do with this information is important, if for no other reason than that agency management
observe whether and how statewide actors use the information and react accordingly. If elected officials do not send signals that the reform is important to them, or that information is not closely observed, this creates a greater likelihood that managers will react with pro forma completion of requirements. In Alabama, prior to the Siegelman administration, elected officials had become so indifferent to performance information that it was no longer deemed important enough to be published in the budget, a point not lost on agency officials, who complied with legislative requirements by delivering poor quality performance information, if any.

The latest round of reforms appears to be moving in the same direction. DOC officials report uniformly that elected officials and their staff have not changed their decision-making behavior in allocating resources. One statewide official confirms that budgeting remains primarily incremental, with policy priorities having an impact only on new dollars:

Sorry to say, the usual procedure is to say: What did we give them last year, and do we have any more, and if we do give the more. If we have one percent more we give each agency one percent more. It probably isn’t quite that bad but it is definitely a matter of what did you get last year. Different governors have different priorities, there would be some moving around, and typically I would think on marginal dollars. The new dollars would be concentrated here by one governor, and over here by another governor. But it is pretty much what you did last year (A10).

If elected officials tend not to use performance information, at least on any systemic basis, why then go to the trouble of creating and trumpeting MFR? The answer, in Alabama at least, has much to do with the need to recast the image of government. Siegelman and other elected officials believed that the image of effective and efficient government is seen as having tremendous potential benefits in terms of expanding the state’s narrow revenue base.[22] Changing the revenue base is difficult because any major overhaul of the tax system requires a change to the state constitution. Specific tax policies that are outlined in the constitution foster a regressive tax system based on high sales and low property tax.[23]

Alabama is an extreme example of how popular perceptions of government inefficiency, though largely uninformed by evidence, are tenaciously held.[24] There is, therefore, little electoral incentive in advocating for constitutional reform of the tax base when much of the population perceives government as wasteful.

If you read the letters to the editor almost any day of the week there will be one letter in there saying “Why are they talking about this stupid tax reform? The government has lots of money, if they just stopped wasting it, it would be enough” (A10).
However, if public perceptions could be swayed towards a belief that a more efficient government was in place, then the possibility for tax reform becomes more significant:

The Governor has a pretty strongly felt view that Alabamians are really suspicious of state government, of governments generally, state and local governments, and until people are going to be convinced that their money will be well spent they are not about to support tax reform (A10).

Apart from the general public, the other audiences for executive-led MFR reform are other branches of government. Two of five pilot agencies for MFR, Mental Health and Corrections, were selected partly because of their continuing high profile interactions with the courts (A10, A12). MFR has a couple of possible benefits for court interactions. It serves as a framework where agencies under court oversight can point to formal goals they are pursuing to satisfy court orders, reducing the risk of more constrictive court orders. In addition, the existence of strategic plans and performance measures help justify to legislators and the public the increased resources required by court mandates. In this way, MFR serves as a symbol for a number of constituencies who are unlikely to ever actually view or use the performance information. It represents purposeful, efficient and prudent spending of public money. As the Achieve document itself states:

Through this plan, we present a direction, we set goals, and we provide measures for accountability and efficiency. This plan, along with performance-based budgeting, means we will give Alabama taxpayers more accountability for how tax dollars are spent, and we will advance Alabama further and faster toward our strategic goals.[25]

Elected officials believe that the electorate is supportive of the idea of making government more accountable, results-oriented, and efficient. For elected officials, the adoption of a reform that appears to satisfy these requirements is an appropriate response, regardless of whether the reform actually has these effects or not. While the public may be uninterested in the specific performance information generated by MFR, the idea that MFR type-reforms are taking place offers what Edelman calls “symbolic reassurance” that there is some effort to make government more accountable, effective and efficient.[26]

**Agency Actors**

Most state managers experience results-based reform as an administrative or legislative requirement to collect, distribute, and use performance information. The typical agency leader is therefore reacting to elected officials, not leading
his or her own initiative. So how will agency leaders react? The answer depends on the ambitions and vision of the leaders, and the context the agency faces. In deciding—within their limited zone of discretion—how to use MFR, agency leaders will do an approximate cost–benefit analysis of the potential results of the reform. This calculation will be based on the environmental conditions of their organization, organizational needs, the costs of implementing the reform, and ambitions for how the organization should be run and what it will achieve. The most important environmental consideration in an impossible job is resources: how to defend and enlarge them, and the constraining effect of inadequate resources. Corrections management in Alabama hoped that MFR could be used to defend or enlarge resources, but soon determined that it would not bring about dramatic change in their resource base. Consequently, any investment of time and energy in MFR was regarded as a cost without return. The DOC met the formal requirements for MFR, but did not devote any more organizational resources than was required for compliance.

Warehousing is not a complicated goal, and does not require complicated managerial technologies. However, the DOC in Alabama is struggling to achieve this very simple goal. Why? Know-how is not lacking. Raising capacity to guarantee achievement of the warehousing goal is simply dependent on more resources. Agency management believes that planning, if supported by resources, could reduce the potential for unexpected events and crisis management. Most of the unanticipated or unexpected events that derail achievement of goals are not too difficult to predict, are likely to occur again in the future, and have their root cause in lack of resources. For example, the conflict with the county jail system has been in the courts since 1992.

The main purpose of the DOC strategic plan was, therefore, not a blueprint for achievement, but the formalization of an investment option that the DOC tries to sell to external constituencies. This becomes clear from an examination of the DOC plan. Measures are largely inputs, for example, “number of officers,” “number of inmates,” or workload indicators, for example, “ratio of officers to inmates.” Such inputs draw attention to the severe lack of resources in the DOC system, and most measures included in the DOC plan could be characterized as measures of organizational stress. Other measures such as “percentage of state female/male inmates in county jails” advertise the need for additional inputs. Measures such as “cost of inmate diverted from DOC system” seek to reduce the inflow of offenders into state facilities. The DOC was required to demonstrate links between Achieve goals and departmental goals, and such linkages were also interpreted as a way to highlight the need for more resources. For instance, the Achieve goal of “Keeping our streets safe” is translated by the DOC into “numbers of correctional officers and inmates,” and “beds not occupied due to employee vacancies.”[27]

The DOC plan communicates its challenges and needs to an environment it hopes will provide resources and other support for agreed-upon goals, thereby stabilizing the corrections function. I asked staff if they believed that
their balanced scorecard will in fact achieve this purpose, convincing legislators that the needs of the department are real and must be addressed. All answered in the negative.

We can plan. We can set goals. We can develop performance indicators. We can do all of those things and submit those. But if the funding body doesn’t buy into them, then obviously what we can accomplish is going to be limited to the amount that they buy into the programs themselves (A7).

The DOC, caught in a resource-poor and demanding environment, effectively used their strategic plan to focus responsibility for achievement of goals not on its own employees, but on resource providers. This use of MFR is ingenious, and completely at odds with the idea that MFR is used in a top-down means by which a higher level of the hierarchy holds a lower level responsible for performance. This is not to say that administrators in the DOC do not face difficult responsibilities. Administrators face real responsibilities: to a judiciary that demands a constitutional correctional system, to a legislature that offers few resources and specific guidelines about how they may be used, and to an executive branch that wishes to avoid a major public failure of the prison system on its watch. In some ways, these responsibilities are more daunting than the idea of results-based accountability, where administrators are given adequate resources, authority, and a clear set of goals against which they will be held accountable. A warden mentions that one of the things on which he will be evaluated is how he deals with crisis situations without it becoming a public disaster for the Commissioner and executive branch officials, and more generally, how he keeps a lid on an overcrowded, underfunded prison. How does results-based accountability sound in comparison?: “I would love to have that.”

While resources do not guarantee the success of reforms, chronic inadequacy guarantees failure. For the Alabama DOC, the lack of resources impacted the MFR reform in two ways. First, and most importantly, the sense of crisis management that pervaded the DOC meant that organizational focus was on coping with immediate problems created by a lack of resources rather than on long-term strategic agendas. MFR was interpreted as a means by which the Department could increase resources, with little relevance for changing long-term strategies or managerial technologies.

The second way in which inadequate resources impacts a reform is a lack of time and administrative attention devoted to implementing it. If agency leaders see little potential for positive benefits of MFR, but know they need to maintain compliance, they will meet the minimal requirements for compliance, reducing the burden on staff in terms of time and changed managerial routines. Rather than devote a full-time single staff member to oversee the collection and diffusion performance information, the additional duties of MFR were placed on already overworked DOC budgeters. Unsurprisingly, the
budget staff focused simply on ensuring that the required information was reported to the Department of Finance, and not on how the organization could otherwise use MFR.

Long-time DOC staff were aware of the passing nature of most executive-led reforms. Agency leadership recognized the necessity of compliance to the wishes of the Governor, and the legitimacy of his authority over their actions was not questioned. MFR was also viewed as a good idea on some level, but not really applicable to the DOC in Alabama. For employees, the idea of cutting costs is akin to putting a starving person on a diet. Compliance is done in the knowledge that the only immediate cost to the agency is the time and effort involved in preparing the performance information. In the future, the reform may fade away, but it is easier to simply comply with the Governor’s wishes than to defy him and suffer the negative political consequences. There is not hostility to the Governor or his ideas, but there is an acknowledgement that these are “his” ideas, externally imposed, with little agency ownership. The following quotes emphasize the idea of compliance with the Governor’s wishes, rather than benefits for the Department itself:

Once the Governor directed it, it was no choice that we were going to do it. And as we got into it, we basically directed our people, this is where we’re going. And everyone’s been very cooperative (A6).

Right now we’re doing it because we’re being told to do it (A9).

This sense of compliance is enabled by DOC staff belief that MFR is a (most likely unsuccessful) tool to increase resources, not as a tool to change management practices. The DOC produces the necessary performance information but will not involve (or from their point of view, bother) lower-level members of the organization. Managers working in prisons were unaware that a strategic plan even existed, and senior departmental management viewed it as a tool and responsibility of budgeters (A7, A8, A10). The perception of one DOC staff member that “about 99 percent of the people in corrections don’t know anything about it yet” appeared accurate based on my conversations with staff. I asked if he meant institutional staff or more senior managers:

I’m talking about everybody. I mean, some of the support directors were interviewed, but really they could care less cause they don’t think anything will come from it (A9).

Once performance information was produced, no additional bothersome mechanisms—high employee participation, communication, training, performance reviews, or other learning opportunities—were set up to take advantage of the information and to emphasize its part in day-to-day management. The group whose day-to-day work routines has been most impacted by MFR
requirements has not been the staff who manage institutions or their supervisors, but the budget staff that prepared the MFR documentation. The budget staff did not welcome this additional responsibility or view it as a chance to extend their power in the organization. It was simply viewed as an additional onerous task on top of their budget preparation duties, and without additional resources.

CONCLUSION: THE SYMBOLIC BENEFITS OF REFORM

This article has sought to answer the question of how results-based reforms fare in the context of an impossible job, using the Alabama DOC as an example. In an impossible job managers will use whatever tools at their disposal to better cope with the situation, and more resources makes coping easier. In this context MFR and similar reforms will become a tool to create an image of more rational, efficient, and effective government, with the hope that external constituencies will react by increasing resources, enabling the manager to actually improve performance. Of course, the desire for greater resources in an impossible job is simply the extreme end of a wider tendency for public managers to seek additional resources. Most public managers can quickly list a dozen different service improvements they could make with more resources, so it is likely that the use of MFR to build a positive image for external constituencies occurs elsewhere.

For statewide actors in Alabama, the benefits of MFR were much the same as for the agencies: convincing external constituencies, especially the public, that a results-oriented government can be trusted to use resources wisely, and that the barriers to accessing resources—the state constitution in Alabama’s case—must be overcome. The cash-strapped Alabama governor therefore faced a similar incentive as his agency staff to use MFR as a symbol. He, and indeed other governors, faces other incentives to pursue MFR. As public figures, many will actively campaign on the issue of making government more result-oriented, and will feel pressure to demonstrate actual reform of government once elected. Rolling out a series of requirements that purports to improve government serves these needs.

However, the potential benefits of MFR as a symbol may be as overstated as they are for management improvement. Despite the efforts of the DOC to use performance information to illuminate the need for resources, the patterns of resource allocation decisions did not change. The benefits for Governor Siegelman were even more disappointing, as became apparent in a postscript to the Alabama case: the 2002 elections. Siegelman faced an opponent who based his campaign largely on a promise to clean up government, accusing Siegelman of running an incompetent and corrupt regime. Siegelman’s aides were surprised that the charges stuck—they thought they had the perfect “good government” candidate. But the public and press seemed uninterested
in hearing about MFR or other good government initiatives, and an increasingly negative campaign ended in defeat for Siegelman.

What we find in the Alabama DOC is that MFR does not achieve stated goals of improvements in allocation, effectiveness, and efficiency. The greatest perceived benefits of MFR are symbolic, and they also largely failed to materialize. But, just as it is misleading to generalize from best-practice case to the norm, it would be inaccurate to suggest that the picture of MFR looks everywhere as it does in Alabama. While it is likely that other governments engage in MFR reform partly to accrue symbolic benefits, this does not exclude the possibility of the reform also achieving instrumental benefits. In a different context, with a greater resource base, and active use by statewide actors of the performance information, the DOC in Alabama might well have found MFR useful and applicable to its management. But the simple practice of collecting and distributing performance information has not brought such changes about.

REFERENCES


11. Aristigueta, Supra note 10; 1.


15. Siegleman, supra note 14, 5.


17. The data are provided by the American Correctional Association, 2000 American Correctional Association Directory.

18. As more and more prisoners entered the system there was a failure to hire new staff, with one commissioner in the early 1990s closing down the DOC’s training academy. At this point the Department has approximately the same number of staff that it had in 1991, but with about 10,000 additional prisoners. Even so, the DOC cannot fill all of its authorized positions, and had 11.5% of positions vacant in February 2001. Source: Alabama Department of Corrections. February 2001 Monthly Statistical Report.


20. O’Leary has eloquently made this point in reference to another function wherein courts have become increasingly active: environmental protection. See O’ Leary, R. Environmental Change: Federal Courts and the EPA; Temple University Press: Philadelphia, 1993. DiIulio documents how the courts have become more active in corrections, moving from a hands-off doctrine in the 1950s to a much more interventionist approach in the 1970s with regard to issues of crowding, food services, sanitation,


25. Siegelman, supra note 14; 3.


27. Alabama Department of Corrections. FY 2001 Performance Based Budget.

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