

# What counts can't always be counted



**Phil Teece**

Advisor,  
personnel &  
industrial relations  
phil.teece@alia.org.au

With a federal election imminent, for the first time in memory there is no obvious debate about different public sector management models. No impatient reformer is waiting in the wings to reshape the way public services are provided. No visible challenge to current dogma is looming. Whether this means there is general satisfaction with the direction of management in our public services is quite another question. But any counterview seems strangely muted.

The organisation of government services has been subject to huge change in the past twenty years. Whether the slogan was 'new public management', as in Australia and the United Kingdom, or 'reinventing government' under the USA's Clinton administration, the result was much the same. Most obviously, focus has moved closer to so-called efficiency, effectiveness and economy models, with quantitative measurement taking centre stage. This in turn has spawned the dominance of the managerialist or 'one size fits all' approach to public sector management.

'A good manager can manage anything', or so the story goes. That view emanates primarily from a system based on universal processes and tiered documentation which is applied to all organisational activity. Mission statements are underpinned by corporate plans which spawn objectives, goals and targets. This superstructure is based, critically, on measurement of everything. And no real distinction is made between services being delivered.

The problem with this is that sometimes services *are* different. Some can be measured much more easily than others. That is no bar to effective measurement if it is recognised and legitimised. If it is not, difficult-to-measure activities are often squashed into a grid of superficial performance indicators that suit the straightforward tasks but are unsuitable for the more complex. Inevitably, this tends toward an illusion of precision, in much the same way that generalised quantitative recruitment processes purport, but fail, to eliminate subjectivity from the selection of staff. Selection always incorporates value judgements. Performance measures are never free of subjectivity.

Again, there is nothing wrong with this so long as it is recognised. When it is not, it is almost certain that the simple, output-focussed measures which are appropriate to, say, the number of books loaned will take precedence over assessment of outcomes, say of public perceptions of service standards, understanding of their needs and access to services. And it is well to remember

that, as a distinguished judge has recently remarked, 'not everything which counts can be counted'.

In a splendid paper to the recent 25th Anniversary Conference of the Family Law Courts, NSW Chief Justice Jim Spigelman lamented the absence of judgement in much current decision-making. The dominance of such people as treasury officials, accountants and auditors has seen 'bottom line' measurement become the major focus of performance assessment. Such people, says Spigelman, often resent the preoccupation of professionals with the quality of outcomes, rather than the number and cost of outputs. This is a dichotomy far from unknown in the library and information sector. Indeed, the notion that professional qualifications are somehow less important now seems to be gaining currency in several areas. Quite how reduced emphasis on professional qualifications fits with an economy requiring higher skill and more education — a knowledge nation, if you like — is not entirely clear. But myopia often brings strange results.

Spigelman argues convincingly that how we measure performance is never benign. The process of deciding what should be measured and how it should be measured has huge effects for how and what services are provided. His example from the USSR is as apposite as it is amusing. The one thing never lacking in the former Soviet Union, he says, was a suite of performance indicators. But they often had odd effects. Take nails, for example: when output performance was measured in tonnes, every manufacturer made large nails and there was a severe shortage of small nails. To deal with this, the next 5-year plan changed performance indicators to measure the number of nails. Every manufacturer then made small nails and there was soon a severe shortage of large nails.

Organisations working under rigid planning processes and dominant documented-output philosophies are likely to focus predominantly on the indicators rather than real outcomes. Indicators can always be adjusted. Organisations can, where it suits them, target or even manipulate the indicator to present what we might politely describe as an esoteric version of efficiency.

Here too, many librarians may not regard Chief Justice Spigelman's comments as news to them. But they contain truths that many of the self-styled managerialists in this and other sectors would do well to consider. Identical performance measures cannot rationally be applied to everything we do. And as the Chief Justice points out, there are few performance indicators for performance indicators. ■

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