

**Federal Performance Management:
Purpose, Tools, Progress, Lessons Learned, and Opportunities for Improvement¹**
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Executive Summary

The U.S. federal government has made noteworthy [progress](#) over the past 30 years managing performance to improve societal outcomes, government's operational quality, and transparency. This progress has been sustained across multiple Presidential Administrations headed by leaders of different political parties. The Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA), GPRA Modernization Act of 2010, and Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 have contributed and promise to continue to contribute to that progress.

Performance management is not, as too often assumed and communicated, primarily about measuring the performance of government programs. Rather, it is about programs and others measuring, analyzing performance measures and other data, and [using](#) data analyses and findings of well-designed trials to:

- inform where to focus;
- find ways to improve;
- increase adoption of better practices while reducing use of less effective, efficient, and equitable ones; and
- build understanding of government choices about priorities and strategies, progress, challenges, and lessons learned, hopefully building trust in government as well.

Government performance management has three primary [purposes](#):

- improve outcomes;
- improve operational quality; and
- improve transparency. Improved transparency (communication of performance information) informs goal and strategy selection, helps improve outcomes and operational quality, informs individual choice, and builds understanding of and trust in government, government programs, and those government funds.

Lessons have been learned about how to use and avoid using (and communicating with) five performance management [tools](#):

- (1) goals;
- (2) data and data analyses;
- (3) well-designed trials (including but not limited to randomized control trials) to test and assess to find ways to do better;
- (4) communication and community, including frequent data-informed meetings and continuous-learning-and-improvement communities; and
- (5) motivational mechanisms.

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These tools have multiple uses for [multiple users](#), including people in government, government delivery partners and many others.

Several [challenges](#) have slowed progress:

- One is inadequate [understanding of the why and how of performance and evidence-informed management](#). Fortunately, as knowledge and experience have grown, an increasing number of those making funding and implementation decisions have come to appreciate that government performance and evidence-informed management is not primarily about measuring program performance to inform decisions about whether or not to fund a program. It is, instead, about government programs, those government funds, and funders continually using performance management and evidence-finding, building and sharing tools to inform focus and find ways to improve. At the same time, more progress is needed to build knowledge and understanding among agency officials, delivery partners, and policymakers of the what, why, how, who, when, and where to use (and communicate) performance and evidence-informed management tools to increase wise and discourage performance-dampening uses.
- A second challenge is [building, sharing, and using understanding of incentives and other motivational mechanisms](#) to encourage continuous improvement and avoid discouraging, frustrating, and worse. The federal government lacks the existential pressure to survive that compels private companies to collect and analyze data continually to choose which products and services to sell and which markets to serve. Multiple motivators influence federal employees, most of whom report being motivated by advancing the common good. The more likely motivational problem in the federal government may be individuals feeling they lack license and authority to pursue progress on specific goals, especially when cooperation from other organizational units is needed or when risk-taking innovation is required. A complementary problem arises when poorly designed extrinsic incentives are introduced in personnel or grant-linked reward and penalty systems, whether those incentives are explicit, implied, or assumed without those assumptions getting corrected.
- A third challenge is [clearance hurdles and other administrative barriers](#) that impede effective, cost-effective, and equitable performance and evidence-informed management plus oversight mechanisms that focus on finding and reporting problems but not promising practices worth further study and without generating and sharing insights to prevent problems and realize outcome and operational quality gains.

Specific [recommendations](#) are suggested here to build understanding, more wisely manage motivational mechanisms, and prevent and reduce progress-confounding administrative barriers and burdens.

Evolving technologies for collecting, analyzing, visualizing, sharing, and discussing analyzed data and findings of well-designed trials will continue to increase opportunities for performance gain. This article suggests lessons learned and actions to take to accelerate and amplify future progress. These suggestions cannot, of course, all be done at once. Decisions must be made about what to do and when to act to find ways to improve societal outcomes, government's operational quality and government transparency. Also, decisions must be made that assure adequate resourcing so government programs and those governments fund are able to use performance and evidence-informed management tools wisely.

Introduction

Governments have long used data to inform where to focus and improve outcomes. Beset by a cholera epidemic in London in 1854, John Snow gathered data to inform his theory – not widely shared – that contaminated water was a major cause. Snow noted where cholera victims lived and mapped those locations. The map showed homes of the deceased clustering around a single water pump. Using this map, Snow successfully convinced government to remove that pump’s handle to try to speed cholera’s decline (Tufte, 1997).

In recent years, Montgomery County, Maryland collected geographically tagged pedestrian safety data, revealing that some school routes had more accidents than others. The County changed enforcement, signage, and traffic signals on those routes and launched a driver and pedestrian education campaign. In just three years, car-pedestrian collisions in the eleven targeted areas fell from 48 to 3 (Barrett & Greene, 2020).

Well-designed government performance management systems have also proven powerful for pursuing opportunities. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy announced a goal of landing a man on the moon within a decade and returning him safely back home. Inspired by the goal, government officials continually learned from data and successions of well-designed trials, both successful and unsuccessful, to decide next steps, getting Neal Armstrong to the moon in 1969.

Government performance management is first and foremost about improving the lives of people, places, communities and sometimes plants, animals and more. It is also about improving how well government operates and people's understanding of and trust in government. It is about intelligently choosing and using goals and measurements related to objectives and factors affecting those objectives, keeping an eye on current and possible changes in operating conditions – including changes in supply, demand, funding levels, technology advances and election results. It is also about doing fair and constructive comparisons that aid the search for ways to do better. In other words, it is about common-sense management.

The federal government has always required use of some performance management tools, such as measurement. The Constitution calls for a count of the American people every ten years. Mandated counts of manufacturers, agriculture, libraries, crime, and mortality followed (Kelman, 1987). Many policy-specific laws, such as the Clean Water Act, require goal setting and data collection.

The Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA93), amended by the Government Performance and Results Act Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA), was the first law requiring all federal agencies to use the five performance management tools discussed in this article. The Foundations of Evidence-Based Policy Act of 2018 (Evidence Act) complements GPRA², requiring a more intentional approach to evaluations and data and statistical capacity.

As the 30th anniversary of GPRA93 passes, it is an opportune moment to reflect on lessons learned implementing GPRA and suggest recommendations for improvement. Significant

² The remainder of this article uses GPRA93 and GPRAMA when discussing distinct provisions of each law, and GPRA when discussing the same or similar provisions of GPRA93 and GPRAMA.

progress has been made. Outcomes and operational quality have improved in many areas, as has the transparency of federal goals, strategies, progress on those goals, challenges, lessons learned, and planned next steps. In its 2021 survey on federal performance management, the U.S. General Accountability Office (GAO) found that two-thirds of federal agencies increased their use of performance information in decision-making, with those doing data-driven reviews showing the greatest progress using performance information and leading performance management practices (GAO, 2021), a finding reinforced by other studies (Moynihan & Kroll, 2015).

Yet the same GAO survey found that only about a half of survey respondents reported that their agencies used performance information for management decision-making. Responses to the 2023 annual Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey show 84% know their work unit's goals (Q26) and 85% report (Q7) know how their work relates to agency goals. Yet only 66% say their managers communicate their organization's goals (Q59) while even fewer – only 60% – say their managers promote communication among different work units (Q60, OPM, 2022) even though cross-unit collaboration is likely to be important when managing to improve outcomes.

A variety of challenges may explain relatively low federal agency use of performance information. Perhaps the biggest challenge is insufficient understanding of the “why” and “how” of performance management. Effective performance management at all levels – national, state, regional, local, and neighborhood – treats data more as a flashlight than a hammer (Data Quality Campaign, 2017). It embraces continuous learning and improvement and resists the temptation to apply evaluation findings in a “one-and-done” or “thumbs-up/thumbs down” manner (Fitzsimmons and Bauer, 2024). It does not over-interpret average findings of evaluations, appreciating the need to discern impact variations for different situations before making funding and practice decisions and realizes that the magnitude and even the direction of impact assessments sometimes change over time (Kwon, 2022; Sparks, 2022). It recognizes the value of multiple assessment methods and data visualizations to aid interpretation of needs and impacts (Tufte, p. 36-37). As Nobel Prize winning economist Michael Kremer explains in his Prize Lecture (Kremer, 2019), it recognizes that effective performance and evidence-informed management works closely, iteratively, and inclusively with frontline workers, delivery partners and those affected as well as researchers in a continuous-learning-and-improvement manner.

Two other gnarly challenges impede performance progress: (1) mechanisms that discourage and frustrate rather than motivate government employees and those in organizations government funds and otherwise supports; and (2) data collection and operational clearance processes to manage risks and reduce reporting burdens that have themselves become burdensome but are seldom assessed, updated, integrated, and streamlined further complicated by oversight processes that too often accentuate the negative while ignoring the positive and fail to tap advances in technology and data analytic methods.

This article begins positing the “what, why, who, and how” of government performance management – its purposes, uses, users, and tools to improve societal outcomes, government's operational quality, and public understanding of and trust in government. It then reflects on progress made and challenges encountered. It concludes with suggestions for practical steps to tackle the three challenges described.

Performance Management - What?

Performance management – complemented by other evidence-building, sharing, and using activities – is about making informed decisions about where government focuses short and long-term and setting priorities across those needs and opportunities. It is about continuous problem-solving and opportunity-pursuit using appropriately frequent and timely data analyzed to look for similarities, differences, relationships, clusters, and anomalies across time, place, and situation, complemented by well-designed trials iteratively testing and assessing to find ways to do better. It uses these analyses and trial findings to trigger focused follow-up questions that inform decisions and actions to realize better outcomes and operational quality as well as better understanding of and trust in government and the programs government runs and otherwise supports.

Done well, performance measurement and management help multiple users for multiple uses. Performance management is not, as too often assumed and communicated, primarily about measuring the performance of government programs. Rather, it is about measuring and analyzing performance measures and other data to inform where to focus. It also about using data analyses and findings of well-designed trials to find ways to improve and increase adoption of better practices while reducing use of less effective, efficient, and equitable ones. Done well, government performance management also builds understanding of government choices, progress, challenges, and lessons learned, hopefully building trust in government as well.

Managing Government Performance - Why?

Governments manage performance to improve three complementary dimensions of performance:

- **Outcomes:** current and future well-being of people, communities, places, and incidents and conditions affecting them.
- **Operational quality:** how well government processes used to implement laws and initiatives work, including their transactional ease, time required, complexity, fairness, timeliness, courtesy, understandability, costs, and integrity.
- **Transparency:** how well performance information is communicated to improve outcomes and operational quality, inform individual and organizational choice, inform democratic debate about goals and strategies, and build understanding of and trust in government and those it supports financially or otherwise.

Performance Information – For What?

Governments use performance measurements and other data plus findings of well-designed trials to:

- **Inform where government and those it funds focus;**
- **Find ways to improve;**
- **Increase adoption of better practices and reduce use of less good ones; and**
- **Build understanding of and trust in government.**

Inform Focus. Analyzed data inform decisions about where to focus, such as which health problems need attention, considering how those health problems vary for different subsets of people, or which cars or drivers cause the most fatal accidents and how accident numbers and rates vary by vehicle, operator, and situational characteristics. In a world of great need and opportunity but finite resources and time, data analyses inform decisions about where government and others focus. So do values, campaign promises, and other factors.

Find Ways to Improve. Governments and others use many methods to find ways to improve. They search for those with performance growth exceeding others, then try to identify which practices and skills explain their better performance and test those practices in other places. When they see a treatment worked well for some but not all (Kolata, 2017), they try to identify characteristics distinguishing those for whom the treatment worked well, screen to find others with those characteristics, recruit participants with those characteristics for new trials, test and assess if post-treatment outcomes for those trial participants improved, and, when they do, encourage their broader adoption when expected gains are considered significant relative to competing improvement opportunities. They also search for effective treatments for those for whom an initially tested treatment did not work well even when it worked well for most (Bryk, 2017). When possible, they build data systems enabling easy comparisons of places making a change to those that not making that change so good ideas can be tested and assessed as part of ongoing operations (Ton, 2014, p. 56). In addition, they use data diagnostically to try to understand more precisely the nature of a problem and its causes, both outcome and operational process problems, to find better ways to address that problem.

Increase adoption of better practices. Once better practices have been identified – preferably with information about where, when, and for whom different practices worked more and less well, government and its delivery parties try to increase use of better practices and reduce use of less good ones. As they work to increase use of better practices, they also search for ways to realize economies of scale to save money while delivering higher value. They do not just hope these adoption promotion efforts work well, however. They collect, analyze and use data and well-designed trials to improve the effectiveness, cost-effectiveness, and equity of practice promotional efforts as the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration did for its “Click It or Ticket” campaign (Solomon et al, 2004).

Support individual and democratic decision-making and strengthen trust in government. Governments communicate their goals and strategies and why they were chosen, progress and factors affecting it, findings of well-designed trials, challenges encountered, lessons learned, and planned next steps to government and government’s delivery partners to build understanding of and trust in government, strengthen democratic decision-making about government’s goals and strategies, and inform individual choice.

Government performance measurement and management efforts are complemented by evaluation and other kinds of statistical analyses, sometime done by a program and sometimes by independent third-parties. Evaluations “do what performance management alone, cannot. Evaluations determine whether programs produce outcomes superior to alternative policy choices or not putting into place a policy at all...” (U.S. Government, 2010(b), p.83.)

Performance Information – Who?

Well-executed performance measurement and management can significantly help multiple users for multiple uses if those users know about and can access relevant performance information in easy, timely, effective, affordable, and understandable ways (Wogalter, 2019; Rogers and Lasky-Fink, 2023). Potential audiences for performance information include:

- **Those running programs, working on cross-program and cross-agency goal teams, delivery partners and other goal allies** working in central offices and on the front line. This is the highest priority performance information audience.
- **Product, service, and knowledge suppliers** that have developed or are trying to develop practices and products that work better than what is currently used.
- **Those affected by government programs** including but not only program beneficiaries and regulated parties.
- **Congress** to consult on goals, objectives and strategies and consider budget and policy proposals.
- **Budget and policy officials** to consider funding and policy requests in the context of information about why goals and strategies were chosen, past performance, and estimates of resources needed to undertake proposed next steps.
- **Researchers and evaluators in and outside government** to help government and others choose goals and strategies to improve outcome and other objectives.
- **Auditors, inspectors general, GAO and others conducting oversight** to assess if agency goals, strategies, and compliance requirements make sense in the context of enabling legislation, need, opportunity and evidence and to contribute knowledge from oversight activities to realize better outcomes, operational quality, and transparency.
- **Individual people and organizations choosing among options** to enable fair and accurate comparisons to inform choices such as where to live, when to visit a park, which educational offering to buy, or which airplane to book when on-time arrival matters.
- **Voters and others** interested in government's goals, strategies, progress, challenges, lessons learned, and planned next steps.
- **Other countries** to help them think about their goals and strategies.

Performance Management Tools - How?

Performance management uses five categories of tools to improve outcomes, operational quality, and transparency:

1. **Goals**
2. **Data and data analyses**
3. **Well-designed trials and other forms of evaluation**
4. **Communication and community, including data-informed decision-making meetings and continuous-learning-and-improvement communities**
5. **Motivational mechanisms**

Goals. Setting, communicating and using goals are critical first steps in government performance management. Setting goals introduces the discipline of identifying needs, problems and

opportunities and setting priorities across them. Once goals are set, frequent, recurring conversations about how to make progress on goals keeps people and organizations focused on those goals even as other issues and responsibilities clamor for attention. Goals can and should be updated as more pressing issues arise and when relevant new knowledge emerges.

Goals come in various forms. Outcome goals, managed, help organizations resist the temptation to do what they have always done, hoping without confirmation that outcomes will improve as a result. Outcome goals can be higher-level and longer term (e.g., more healthy people), shorter term (e.g., reduced COVID rates), for intermediate objectives (e.g., higher percentage of population vaccinated by a proven vaccine), and for important outputs to advance outcome objectives (e.g., sufficient vaccine supply.) Complementary goals can be set for all or some of the above nationwide and for specific locations, populations, business sectors, or other subsets. Operational and transparency goals are useful, too, such as goals to reduce the time to apply for and get a permit, patent, or government benefit; improve application ease and understanding; reduce cost while improving outcomes; and improve awareness and understanding of a regulatory obligation.

GPRA deals with goals in numerous ways. It requires all agencies to articulate a mission statement plus longer-term strategic and shorter-term annual goals, some outcome-oriented. To encourage cross-program action, GPRAMA instructs agencies, not programs as GPRA93 required, to report performance. Informed by robust evidence finding that stretch goals focus, energize, and stimulate innovation leading to better performance (Locke and Latham, 2019) provided those targets are neither too numerous nor unreasonable relative to available resources and skills (Ordonez et al, 2009), GPRAMA requires every federal agency to adopt a small number of two-year stretch targets in areas agency leaders choose as implementation priorities, their implementation-focused priority goals. Reinforcing this provision, OMB guidance warns agencies that if they consistently meet all their priority-goal targets, they might be asked if their priority goal targets are sufficiently ambitious (OMB, 2023). In addition, GPRAMA requires agencies to identify in their annual performance plans the agency official responsible for managing progress on each annual and priority goal and describe how the agency works with other agencies to achieve its performance goals.

GPRAMA also requires the federal government, not just agencies, to adopt, manage, and communicate federal priority goals, some outcome-oriented and some management-improving. It names five management-improving areas for which federal priority goals should be set but does not preclude cross-agency management-improving goals in others. It directs all agencies to describe their contribution to relevant federal priority goals in agency annual performance plans.

Data and data analyses. Analyzed data bring goals alive, yielding valuable insights about problems and opportunities and their relative import. Analyses help government and others decide what to do and what to learn next. They capture progress on societal problems and causal factors affecting that progress. Analyses can also detect peripheral effects of goal management warranting greater attention, including beneficial effects such as unexpected economic growth from an environmental investment and problematic effects such as police complaints rising as a police force focuses on crime reduction (Sparrow, 2016).

Effective performance management looks not just at aggregated or average results but also and especially at variations, similarities, patterns, and relationships. It searches for clusters, anomalies, and positive and negative outliers as well as trends and causal factors. It uses analyses to decide which people, places, and problems or opportunities warrant attention and which to prioritize. It uses analyses to understand for which groups or situations a treatment is more or less likely to work. It uses analyses to trigger focused follow-up questions that guide the search for causes that can be influenced and practices worth promoting for broader adoption. Effective performance management increasingly uses data visualizations including mapping and animations (Rosling, 2009) to harvest greater insights and share them more successfully.

Useful data analyses are far more feasible when careful thought is given to what data to collect and when and where to collect those data; data accuracy; and attributes to capture when measuring such as timing, location, demographic and situational details. The Haddon matrix capturing operator, vehicle, physical, and socio-economic details about every traffic fatality before, during, and after each event (USDOT, n.d.) illustrates well-designed, performance-improving data collection. Great care needs to be exercised when collecting, storing and sharing data not just to improve informational value but also to protect privacy and security.

GPRA addresses a few aspects of data collection and analyses. Annual performance plans must identify performance indicators. GPRA93 required annual reports to include three years of past performance for each indicator; GRPAMA at least five years. GPRA also calls on agencies to use other contextual data to describe “key factors external to the agency and beyond its control that could significantly affect the achievement of the general goals and objectives...”. GPRA requires agencies’ annual performance reports to describe “where a goal has not been met why the goal was not met” with “plans and schedules to meet the goal.” When an agency decides a previous goal has become impractical or infeasible, GPRA wants agencies to explain why and what action they recommend. GPRAMA adds language encouraging agencies to assess “progress toward” each goal, not just compare program results with established goals as GPRA93 required. This indicates an evolving recognition that not all goals will be met and support for a continuous improvement culture. GPRAMA also requires agencies to report on data accuracy and reliability.

Beyond requiring analyses to assess targets met and inform goal setting, GPRA gives little attention to how agencies collect and analyze data to inform ways to improve. Other laws address these issues, including the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995 (PRA) and the cleverly named DATA Act of 2014, 21st Century IDEA of 2018, and GREAT Act of 2019. Have these laws been implemented in ways likely to improve federal performance management? The Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995 (PRA) has not, even though it includes performance management objectives among its purposes:

- (1) maximize the utility of information...;
- (2) strengthen the partnership between the Federal government and State, local, and tribal governments...; and
- (3) provide for the dissemination of public information on a timely basis, on equitable terms, and in a manner that promotes the utility of the information

Section 3514 of the PRA further requires OMB to report annually to Congress not just about reporting burden but also how agencies:

- (B) improved the quality and utility of statistical information;
- (C) improved public access to Government information; and
- (D) improved program performance and the accomplishment of agency missions through information resources management.

Until 2022, however, PRA seems to have been managed solely to reduce the reporting burden. The Congressionally mandated annual Information Collection Budget (ICB) submitted to Congress for 2018-2021, for example, reported only changes in information collection burden by agency (measured in hours) (USOMB, 2018-2021). It did not discuss how agencies managed information to maximize utility, strengthen partnerships, or better communicate public information nor did the ICB discuss plans to improve information collection across agencies.

OMB made a promising step toward managing to all of the PRA's purposes with the release of the M22-10 guidance (Young, S.D. and Mancini, D.J., April 13, 2022). This guidance, supplemented by a supporting Strategies document (OIRA, n.d.), aims to improve access to public benefits through the PRA. The annual governmentwide Information Collection Budget data call that followed (Revesz, n.d.) reinforced M22-10's emphasis. OMB subsequently released a report focused on reducing burden reduction for those trying to access critical benefits and services, reflecting a more strategic, user-centered approach to federal information collection for the first time (EOP, 2023).

Well-designed trials and other evaluations. Well-designed trials and other kinds of evaluations greatly enrich what can be learned from analyzed data alone. Well-designed trials, including but not only randomized control trials, are useful for assessing whether changes in a practice or product improved outcomes, operational quality, and/or transparency. Both failed and successful trials inform the path to improvement. Failed trials are not a problem but rather an opportunity to learn and an indication of an innovative organization provided an organization learns from all of its trials and designs those trials informed by evidence.

Evaluations work best when programs and independent researchers understand and communicate impact variation, explaining for whom and in what situations a practice is likely to work well and for whom it is not and following up in action and research. Developers of the highly successful cancer drug Keytruda realized this, doing follow up research on a treatment that worked well for only one of the 33 people in an initial trial (Kolata, 2017). As someone once said to me, "Knowing the average pant size is not likely to help most people buy pants that fit well."

Program offices and goal teams, not just outside evaluators, can run well-designed trials in some areas to compare effects of changes in products, practices, and programs (essentially a collection of practices) tried in some situations but not others just as private companies test and assess new products and web designers do A/B testing. To run these sorts of trials integrated into operations (Ton, 2014) and to support longer-term evaluations (Chetty, 2023), programs need to collect data in ways that enable fair and useful comparison across time and locations.

Independent researchers complement evaluative as well as analytic work of program offices in many ways. They often have more resources and time to study longer-term practice and program effects and search for causal factors affecting past outcome changes or worth trying to influence to improve future outcomes than do those tasked with daily program operations challenges. Evaluators may also be more objective designing and running well-designed evaluations than those running programs when program funders fail to make clear that they do not intend to cut funding even when evidence suggests a problem provided a funded program adjusts its practices based on lessons learned and continually tests and assesses to find ways to do better and the problems and opportunities a program was created to address remain important.

The way GPRA discusses evaluations is somewhat confusing. It requires agencies to describe evaluations used to inform selection of agency strategic goals and objectives and provide a schedule for future evaluations in strategic plans. In addition, agencies need to summarize prior-year program evaluations in annual performance reports. However, the way GPRA defines evaluations, as “an assessment...of the manner and extent to which Federal programs achieve intended objectives,” an activity far more likely to be helpful for strategy selection than for goal setting. Congress presumably meant to instruct agencies to use a broader definition of “evidence” to inform goal setting, the Evidence Act’s definition of evidence as statistical activities.

Communication and community, including data-informed decision-making meetings and continuous-learning-and-improvement communities. Communication is the fourth critical tool in the performance management toolkit. Goals, data analyses, and findings of well-designed trials have limited value if not communicated to key users in ways they know about and can easily and affordably find, access, understand, and use. Technology advances make not just data collection and analyses but also communication of those data and analyses including mapping, other data visualizations, and evidence findings increasingly possible, affordable, and meaningful for delivery partners and others.

Communicating performance information successfully requires attention to identifying key audiences and prioritizing them when needed. It also requires finding information channels to reach those audiences to deliver performance information successfully when and where needed. In addition, it requires confirming those audiences received and understand communicated information.

Communication is about government getting information out but also bringing it in to inform government decisions. In addition, it is about catalyzing discussions that explore the meaning of analyzed data and trial findings to brainstorm action options and then make decisions about what actions to take and where and when to take them. Government performance management works especially well when communication is multi-directional, ongoing, curated, nurtured, and inclusive in ways that strengthen collaboration, coordination, learning, and decision-making about who will do what when.

Governments use multiple means to communicate performance information. In addition to plans and reports, they use signs, official postings, comment-seeking notices, websites, online videos, webinars, threaded conversations, texting, social media apps, and more. Those skillfully managing performance use regularly scheduled data-informed convenings to consider relevant

data and trial findings more fully and inclusively to translate insights gained into decisions about what to do and what to learn next. In addition, skillful performance managers nurture continuous-learning-and-improvement communities that support peer learning, collaboration on similar challenges and shared tools, and constructive comparison to find better practices.

Graphics, mapping, and other data visualizations facilitate data interpretation and use. At the same time, how data get visualized affects interpretation and knowledge retention (Belle et al, 2022). So do decisions about when, where, and how data analyses and findings of well-designed trials get shared. Just as Google shows “popular times” by day of week and hour of day that people (actually, their smart phones) appear at different locations, governments can post information about time patterns for different services at different places to inform staff assignments and encourage people to visit at less popular times and places.

Government cannot just hope its communication efforts work well, though. As with other implementation practices, it needs to collect and analyze data and conduct well-designed trials to find increasingly effective, cost-effective and fair ways to communicate with priority audiences.

GPRA requires agencies to communicate performance information. GPRA93 required them to communicate strategic and annual goals and objectives. GPRAMA added a requirement that agencies choose and communicate 2-year priority goals, strategies they plan to use to advance those goals, and reasons why those goals and strategies were chosen. GPRA93 required annual public reporting about progress on all goals; GPRAMA added quarterly progress reporting on priority goals. GPRA93 required agencies to communicate performance information to OMB and Congress. GPRAMA added a public reporting requirement, mandating use of at least two communication channels – a single federal website and each agency’s website.

GPRA directs agencies to receive information, not just send it out. Agencies must solicit and consider “the views and suggestions of those entities potentially affected by or interested in” the strategic plan. GPRA93 required consultation with Congress when developing strategic plans; GPRAMA specifies the Congressional committees to be consulted and the frequency of those consultations. GPRAMA also requires agencies to explain how they incorporated Congressional views and suggestions into strategic and priority-goal setting.

GPRAMA adds a requirement that agency leaders run data-informed meetings about priority goals no less than quarterly and instructs agencies to communicate priority goal progress and planned next steps with the same cadence. The addition of this provision was informed by experience in states, localities, and other countries running “Stat” (short for statistics) and otherwise named frequent, data-rich meetings (Behn, 2014; Barber, 2008). These meetings communicate information out, bring information in, and create a forum for discussion and decision-making. GPRAMA requires inclusion of officials from organizations contributing to progress on priority goals in these data-informed discussions.

GPRAMA and the Evidence Act create several new categories of federal officials involved in performance improvement, evaluation, and data management and calls for networking them to learn and collaborate.

Motivational mechanisms. The federal government lacks the existential pressure to survive that compels private companies to collect and analyze data continually to choose which products and services to sell and which markets to serve. What motivational mechanisms encourage those working in the federal government and in grant-receiving and other organizations supported by the federal government to analyze data and continually use those analyses to make progress on goals and update those goals when needed?

Multiple motivators influence federal employees. These include their intrinsic motivation to enhance the common good, evident in their strong (92% in 2023) FEVS responses on this question (USOPM, 2022, Q 90). Many federal employees also likely feel motivated to advance agency mission objectives, be lawful, support teammates, and do a good job. Many working in grant-receiving organizations in governments and in non-profit organizations likely feel similarly motivated. In other words, insufficiently motivated employees in the federal government and delivery partners may not be a big problem.

The more likely motivational problem is that motivated individuals may not feel they have either the license or the authority to pursue progress on specific goals, especially when cooperation of other organizational units is needed and risk-taking to innovate is required. A related problem may be how federal laws often get implemented – with long guidance documents too long for all but a few to read that get interpreted by those doing oversight as strict compliance obligations. A third motivational problem may arise when poorly designed extrinsic incentives are introduced, whether personnel or grant-linked incentives such as the promise of a bonus or threat of punishment.

GPRAMA requires goal leaders be named to tap that intrinsic motivation and navigate through obstacles to progress. Strong goal leaders, both career and political, have successfully navigated through motivational impediments using goal-focused, data-informed meetings and other performance management tools. Former Secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Shaun Donovan introduced HUDStat meetings, bringing lessons learned from his tenure in New York City government. To manage progress on the Veteran’s homelessness goal, Donovan reached out to the Department of Veterans’ Affairs (USHUD, 2012; Brooks, 2011). Donovan also led development of the first strategic plan of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness in 2010 (USICH, 2010), an entity Congress had created over twenty years earlier.

Former Veterans Benefits Administration leader Paul Lawrence initiated public quarterly performance broadcasts inspired by the public quarterly performance calls of private sector companies. These sessions featured VBA managers discussing what they were learning from their data and how they planned to apply those insights to improvement efforts. VBA invited Veterans’ organizations to speak and ask questions at these sessions. Lawrence estimates 10,000 to 20,000 viewers “attended” these sessions, with as many as 50,000 watching replays. Many VBA field offices gathered to watch and discuss what they heard in real time, as did some contractors and some Veterans (Lawrence, 2021).

When he was Vice-President, Joe Biden, supported by a small operating office, ran frequent, inclusive, data-informed meetings with agency leaders and delivery partners to implement the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. According to GAO, this management

approach not only prevented serious fraud problems but also quickly got dollars out across the country, helping to stimulate economic recovery (USGAO, 2014) while also advancing progress on longer-term outcome objectives (GAO, 2019).

Career leaders at the National Weather Service (NWS) used strategic planning (NOAA, 2019-2022) and the performance reporting process (NOAA, 2022) to motivate progress on updated agency goals. NWS expanded its mission of delivering accurate and timely forecasts and warnings to include, also, provision of “impact-based decision support services” to help those on the frontline use those forecasts to make critical life- and property-saving decisions (Uccellini & Ten Hoeve, 2019).

Not all federal goal leaders are as senior as leaders in these four examples. More research is needed to understand if and how well goal leader designation, with and without active COO engagement, motivates those assigned to lead and navigate through obstacles to goal progress.

Congressional interest may also be a motivator. Congress unquestionably motivated improvement when it adopted GPRA93, GPRAMA and the Evidence Act. In theory, Congress might also motivate by asking questions in appropriations and oversight hearings and through direct inquiries to agencies. In practice, if former Labor Department Deputy Secretary Seth Harris’s experience is indicative (Harris, 2015 pp. 996-8), few in Congress have much interest in progress on agency goals nor agency performance management practices. In truth, this lack of interest may be a motivational benefit since members of Congress are likely to win more media attention lambasting government agencies and programs than praising them.

FEMA’s ongoing analyses of its caseload of oversight findings spotlighted at an Innovations Exchange Session of the Results-Oriented Accountability for Grants goal (Metzenbaum, 2021; pp. 11-15) suggests how well-analyzed oversight can also motivate continuous improvement. When oversight findings are not analyzed as a caseload to look for patterns to prevent future problems, however, a compliance rather than continuous improvement mindset easily takes hold.

The media, in theory, might motivate continual improvement by asking questions about performance goals, data, and analyses. To date, though, few in the media, even data journalists and the trade press, have given much attention to federal performance information.

The introduction of extrinsic incentives risks driving out intrinsic motivators (Agrawal, 2012). It also risks diverting attention away from what matters most. The Bush Administration, for example, introduced two scoring systems, having OMB staff rate agencies annually (Scorecard) and individual programs every five years unless a program requested an earlier update (PART). This well-intentioned effort diverted agency attention away from improving real-world outcomes toward winning higher OMB scores (Kroll & Moynihan, 2021; Metzenbaum, 2009).

Do extrinsic federal personnel incentives introduce problems? This question warrants further attention. Do, for example, Senior Executive Service bonuses given to individuals and not to teams confound progress on objectives needing cross-agency or cross-program collaboration? Do some agencies give too much attention to target attainment in how they give out personnel awards, curbing adoption of stretch targets in priority areas?

Poorly designed grant program incentives have discouraged or misdirected improvement efforts in the past, compromising performance gains and wasting resources. For example, workforce training laws (Heckman, et al, 2011) and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) K-12 education law were replaced with new laws, partly because measurement-linked incentives did not work well (Education Week, 2004; Klein, 2016). Another motivational problem arises when grant programs fail to return collected data back to grant recipients with value added through analyses. This tends to make data a compliance exercise rather than a learning tool, frustrating rather than motivating or helping delivery partners that want to improve.

Designed and applied well, some motivational mechanisms can encourage intelligent goal-setting and continuous improvement just as private sector competition does. Done poorly, they motivate compliance or worse. Far more research is needed to understand when and how to design extrinsic incentives for government employees and grant recipients to complement, not drive out, strong intrinsic motivators.

Progress Made

Significant progress has been made using performance management tools to improve outcomes, operational quality, and transparency. Several laws plus growing understanding of how and why to manage performance have contributed to that progress as have executive branch implementation decisions. Still, some progress has not been sustained, some central office decisions did not work well, and far more progress is both needed and possible. This section considers federal performance management progress, starting with a look at transparency progress because progress in that area makes it easier to see progress in the other two or lack thereof.

Transparency Progress. Transparency progress has been noteworthy, contributing to better understanding of government and, most likely, better outcomes and operational quality. As this article is being written, the federal government website Performance.gov makes it easy to find strategic and annual performance plans of all major federal agencies describing their strategic and annual goals and objectives, why they were chosen, and planned next steps. Performance.gov links to agencies' annual performance reports explaining progress on past goals, challenges, and lessons learned. In addition, it shows quarterly progress updates, planned next steps, and names of goal leaders for all major agency and federal priority goals. Performance.gov also links to agency learning agendas, which identify priority research questions to be answered to implement programs and policies more successfully.

Performance.gov enables searching and sorting across agencies' strategic goals and objectives and priority goals, supporting cross-agency learning and coordination plus searches by current and prospective goal allies. Such searches also reveal areas that some may feel warrant federal attention for which no federal agency has adopted a goal. A companion site, Evaluation.gov, enables searches across agency-identified evidence needs.

No single site provides an easy-to-scan overview of outcome progress to which federal agencies currently contribute or previously contributed; recent outcome progress information can be found

only in individual agency performance reports. Performance.gov shows trends for 97 social, economic, and other indicators from 1960 to 2020. Some government sites such as HealthyPeople.gov and EPA’s national river and streams assessment dashboard (USEPA 2018-2019) show outcome progress for specific outcome areas, but Performance.gov does not link to these sites to make them easier to find. Nor does it link to strategic and action plans and performance reports organized around a single or related suite of outcomes such as the 2022 homelessness strategic plan (USICH, 2022), the federal action plan to reduce lead exposures in children (President’s Task Force, 2018) or Congressionally mandated performance reports such as Interior Department’s annual report on permits for renewable energy on Interior-controlled land (USDOL, 2022), a report that continues reporting on a previous Interior Department priority goal (Performance.gov Obama Archives, n.d.)

Federal agencies have also made noteworthy progress communicating performance on their own websites. Every agency posts its current strategic and annual performance plan and annual performance report on its website. Many post their historic plans and reports, making it easy to see if and how agency goals and strategies have changed. HHS provides links in its FY2022-2026 Strategic Plan to relevant HealthyPeople.gov outcome objectives, strengthening understanding of why those goals were chosen and making it easier to find indicators and relevant databases and treatment evidence (USHHS, 2022-2026).

All agencies submit annual performance plans to Congress and OMB with their budget requests. Some sensibly combine these annual plans with their annual performance reports, providing greater context for their budget requests. Few, if any, visualize their performance trends with supply, demand, and funding trends, though.

Agencies have experimented to find better ways to communicate their performance. Many strategic plans provide a strategy map concisely communicating how specific objectives contribute to higher-level goals. Some agencies laudably go beyond what GPRAMA mandates in their annual performance reporting. For example, beyond reporting targets and actuals for five preceding years and for the current and proposed budget years as required, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) added three columns for each indicator in its FY2022 Annual Performance Report (USDOL, FY2022) describing “What Worked,” “What Didn’t,” and “Program Performance Improvement Plan.” EPA added two other columns, one visualizing past and projected performance as a small trend line and one noting preferred trend direction.

If all agencies added these five columns – the three DOL uses plus the two EPA uses – to all agency performance reports, it would likely improve government and public understanding of performance data, a supposition that could be tested and assessed. Including this sort of information in agency performance reports could also facilitate future efforts to enable cross-agency scans of federal agency performance to inform focus and improvement efforts.

Some agencies have opted to update their strategic plans more often than required, suggesting they use their plans to manage and communicate, not just comply. The Treasury Department, for example, posted a 2023 update to its FY2022-2026 strategic plan (Treasury, 2023). It did so in a way that made it easy to see changes made, such as updates to implement the Inflation Reduction Act.

As previously mentioned, some bureaus of large Cabinet agencies, such as the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in the Department of Commerce, publicly post strategic plans, annual performance plans and performance reports. Neither Performance.gov nor performance sections of agency websites make these bureau plans and reports easy to find and access, however.

Only a few agencies show their outcomes graphically as trends (where relevant) as EPA does using spark lines and other graphs in its annual performance report. Even fewer, if any, show those outcome and other indicator trends with other factors possibly affecting them such as funding and relevant supply and demand trends. Nor do many plans and reports graphically display dates of events possibly affecting performance trends, including but not only dates of government action (as the previously mentioned action plan to reduce lead exposures in children does) and events outside government's control such as the pandemic. Visualizing this sort of contextual information together with performance trend lines in information submitted with the budget could better inform resource allocation decisions. Fair comparisons to similar places such as comparative traffic fatalities (Leonhardt, 2023) and infant mortality (CIA.gov, n.d.) could also inform where to focus and actions to consider for future improvement.

Progress has been made communicating evaluation and other research findings, too. One popular online evidence library, PubMed.gov, was started in 1996. DOL'S Clearinghouse for Labor Evaluation and Research is designed to be user friendly for practitioners, not just for researchers. Some research findings described in federal evidence libraries are easier to access than others because the content of some peer-reviewed articles is locked behind journal paywalls, making that evidence costly for practitioners to use if they do not already know the relevance, usefulness, or understandability of an article. A 2022 Presidential Memorandum tries to address this communication challenge, requiring all federal agencies to assure that publications and supporting data supported by federally funded research are free and immediately and equitably accessible by the end of 2025 if consistent with applicable law (Nelson, 2022).

Federal evidence libraries need to experiment to find effective ways to share information about variations in impacts of studied treatments for different people, places, and organizations and sometimes or for different times of day, days of week, and weeks of year rather than just reporting average effects as some federal evidence libraries do. Government agencies will also benefit finding, building, and sharing knowledge about ways to communicate evidence using the inclusive, iterative continuous improvement approach described by Nobel Prize winner Kremer.

Another area of outcome-improving transparency progress is federal government websites organized around questions different categories of users are likely to have, not around federal agencies. Sites such as Recreation.gov and USA.gov embrace a user-centered approach to improve public access to government-provided information, resources, and services. HealthyPeople.gov organizes evidence and some descriptions of relevant state practices around outcome indicators. In what other areas would communicating performance and evidence across federal agencies make sense?

Outcome Progress. Agencies' annual performance reports show outcome progress in many but not all areas. DOL's FY2022 annual performance report, for example, shows that the 5-year rolling average of workplace injuries in mines per 200,000 hours continues to decline, while fatal mining injuries appear to be rising (USDOL, FY2022). The nation's air quality continues to improve for most but not all people and the number of non-compliant community drinking water systems continues to drop, from 3500 in FY2017 to 550 in FY2022 (USEPA, 2023).

The Economic and Social Indicators section of Performance.gov shows infant mortality, smoking, and the poverty rate declined between 1960 and 2020 while patents and the percentage of the population graduating high school and college climbed. At the same time, obesity, heavy drinking, and roadway fatalities trended unfavorably. As noted above, no single site provides an easy-to-scan overview of outcome progress to which federal agencies have contributed over the years so it is not easy to find areas with gains and those with declines to inform decisions about where to focus.

Outcome progress has been strengthened by several small but helpful cross-agency efforts to strengthen performance management tools. One such effort is the Census Bureau's Opportunity Project. It works to provide a framework for agencies to "facilitate collaboration between technologists and community advocates to design solutions for the public good," taking on challenges such as ocean plastic pollution, disaster preparedness, and Opportunity Zone investment.

Operational Quality Progress. Operational quality progress is evident in some areas managed as federal management-improving priority goals such as acquisition management. Federal agencies have realized significant savings thanks to what the federal government has called "category management," saving over \$27 billion over three years according to OMB (USGAO, 2020), for example. This program started after the U.S. Department of Commerce analyzed its purchasing data and realized it paid widely varying prices for the same product. Seeing this, Commerce negotiated an agency-wide agreement for lower prices for those products. Learning from this experience, the federal government later adopted this category management approach for all of government.

Progress has been made in customer service, too, such as improving passport processing times after the pandemic (State, 2023) and improving IRS service levels, cutting wait times and handling more calls through live assistance (Treasury, 2023b).

More operational quality progress has undoubtedly been made. That progress is hard to find, unfortunately. When found, it can be hard to interpret in action-informing ways. In 2023, for example, Performance.gov did not make it easy to find goals, trends, or discussions of progress in all five of the management-improvement areas for which GPRAMA requires priority goals to be set.

Moreover, in areas where Performance.gov did share comparison data, as it did for 7 customer experience (CX) indicators for high-impact service providers (Performance.gov, n.d. - a), it showed only one-time performance comparisons across agencies for the 7 indicators. It did show customer experience trends comparing large agencies to each other and to private entities, but

only in a highly aggregated way. It did not make it easy to find comparative trends for each CX indicator nor for similar operational processes, what Treasury refers to as “journeys that matter” in its FY2022-2026 Strategic Plan (Treasury, 2023, a, p. 45). The absence of this kind of disaggregated trend information (or the difficulty of finding it if it exists) makes it hard for agencies to learn from those making greater progress on each process and performance dimension. It also makes it hard for agencies to find other agencies with which to collaborate on tool development and user-focused problem-solving and opportunity pursuit.

One area where the federal government has facilitated constructive comparison is federal employee satisfaction with agencies’ own human capital, contracting, financial management and information technology services. Performance.gov lets agencies and their components find and compare (Performance.gov, n.d. – b). The site does not yet allow trend comparison but plans to do so.

Another area facilitating constructive comparison is the U.S. Office of Personnel Management’s Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey Dashboard (USOPM, 2022). The FEVS dashboard makes it possible to compare agency trends on every question with all or just some other agencies. Agencies can then drill down on their own internal data to look by office for lessons to share and those needing help in particular areas.

One operational quality area receiving increased management attention is the fairness and equity of government’s administrative processes (arguably also an outcome objective). Operational quality fairness and equity problems can arise, for example, when information, application and regulatory processes require internet access, disadvantaging those without access if they are not offered equally easy alternate paths. Performance.gov makes it possible to search for all agencies’ equity goals so agencies can find, learn from, and coordinate to help them make progress on those goals.

Another issue getting increased attention is the administrative burden of application and clearance processes and of reporting requirements not just for regulated parties but also for federal employees (Pahlka, 2023), for program beneficiaries (Herd & Moynihan, 2018; Sunstein, 2021), and for state, local, and tribal government delivery partners. Although the federal government adopted a cross-agency priority goal to “Leverage data as a strategic asset” and released a strategic plan as well as quarterly progress updates on the goal of making reported and collected data more useful in 2018 (Performance.gov Trump Archives, n.d.), that goal no longer appears to be a cross-agency priority goal in 2023, at least not one actively managed or highly visible. The M22-10 PRA guidance does, however, seem to make progress leveraging data as a strategic asset.

Performance.gov posts a list of reports agencies proposed to Congress for elimination or adjustment, as GPRAMA instructs agencies to do. This list suggests an opportunity to reduce one aspect of administrative burden. Performance.gov does not, however, report Congressional actions taken to eliminate or otherwise adjust any of those reporting requirements, making it hard to gauge progress on this aspect of burden reduction.

Lessons Learned, Challenges, Opportunities and Recommendations for the Federal Government and Others

Much progress has been made but not enough, not everywhere, and not always sustained. Several issues have impeded that progress, issues likely to persist if not better understood and managed. This section discusses three particularly challenging issues and offers suggestions to start addressing them: (1) insufficient understanding of why and how to manage and communicate performance information; (2) poorly structured motivational mechanisms; and (3) barriers, layers, and other administrative burdens that keep those trying to adopt performance-improving change stuck in the muck.

Understanding Why and How to Manage Performance and Use Evidence. Insufficient understanding of why and how to use (and not use) goals, data, analyses, and findings of well-designed trials deters effective performance and evidence-informed efforts by the federal government and its delivery partners.

As noted earlier, a non-trivial problem is the mistaken notion that performance management is primarily about assessing program performance to decide whether to fund that program. A closely related problem is the tendency to think that government performance measurement is about measuring to reward or punish rather than to inform where to focus and find ways to improve. A third non-trivial problem in the federal government is that many federal employees think about personnel performance management when they hear the term “performance management.” They think about how to win bonuses for themselves and their boss. This can make them resist setting outcome objectives not fully under their control and stretch targets more likely to focus, energize and stimulate innovation leading to better results.

Experience has shown that government performance management works best when it is not about evaluating federal programs, per se, but rather about federal programs and cross-program goal-focused teams regularly using data to inform where they focus. It is about their using data plus findings of well-designed trials to find effective practices (and products) in those focus areas, successfully promote their adoption, and continually search for increasingly effective, cost-effective, and equitable approaches. When effective practices have not yet been found, successful performance management continues funding the search for effective practices provided the problems and opportunities on which a program was focusing remain important and lessons learned from experience and experiments are applied to practice. Successful performance management also communicates in ways that build public understanding of what government does, why, progress, challenges, lessons learned, and planned next steps.

One more problem suggested by former Labor Department Deputy Secretary Harris is that many political appointees get hired into senior management positions because of their policy development and advocacy expertise, not their policy implementation prowess. (Harris, 2015, p. 1015-16.) Yet few political appointees nor career leaders receive initial or ongoing performance management tips and training despite preliminary evidence (Kroll & Moynihan, 2015) and common sense suggesting that such training, well-designed, will improve performance.

Several actions could help the federal government build understanding of the “why” and “how” of government performance management.

- **Provide a more complete picture of federal goals and performance for the public, delivery partners, people working in government, and others.**
 - **Performance.gov**
 - Add **bureau-level performance information** to Performance.gov and agency websites.
 - Bring **outcome-focused strategic and action plans** such as those to prevent and reduce homelessness into Performance.gov and performance sections of agency websites.
 - **Tag all goals and other information** in Performance.gov and grant and contract databases **by outcome objective, program type, and process type** to enable sorting, learning, and collaboration.
 - Continue to improve **cross-agency search and sort tools** on Performance.gov and Evaluation.gov.
 - Strengthen **analytic tools** facilitating priority-setting and action-informing analyses.
 - **Governmentwide action**
 - Encourage **more government sites organized around long-term outcome objectives** with links to indicator trends, databases, relevant evidence about treatments and factors affecting those trends, and descriptions of state and local actions to improve outcomes, building on the lessons of HealthyPeople.gov.
 - **Agency action**
 - Encourage agencies to **link relevant sections of their strategic and annual plans and reports to outcome information sites** as HHS linked some of its health goals to relevant HealthyPeople.gov indicators.
 - Strongly encourage agencies to **adopt the five additional columns** used by EPA and DOL in their annual performance reports for every trending performance indicator – what worked, what did not, performance improvement plan, trend graph (spark line), and preferred trend direction.
 - Encourage agencies to **include data visualizations in their performance plans and reports and their grant announcements** showing indicator trends and key factors affecting them such as funding, supply, and demand trends plus dates of key agency actions and major world events.
 - Experiment to find ways to make **whole-of-government performance scans** possible.
 - **National Archives**
 - **Archive** agency and cross-agency performance information in ways that make it easier to learn from experience.
- **Find and build evidence about performance management tools to improve their value and enhance their use.**

- Find, build, and successfully share **evidence about the five performance management tools** discussed here, complemented by examples of better and worse use of them so every agency does not need to search for this knowledge on its own.
- Explore the feasibility and value of **building on or sharing evidence-sharing platforms**, as NASA built on NIH's (CFOC, 2020).
- **Identify target audiences** for different kinds of performance information within and outside government and **continually test and assess to improve the efficacy of efforts to share performance information** with them for various purposes. **Find ways to share that knowledge** with the agencies that touch those audiences.
- **Support government's delivery partners and other goal allies to search for and share** examples of better performance management and communication practices.
- Encourage **peer review** on strategic and annual performance plans, annual performance reports, quarterly performance reviews and other forms of performance and evidence communication, building on lessons hospitals learned from the nuclear power industry to conduct peer reviews that are "structured, confidential, and non-punitive" (Paul, 2021, p. 175).
- **Train all federal employees about the purposes, uses, and tools of performance and evidence-informed management and support and nurture continuous learning and improvement communities.**
 - **Train incoming political appointees and all goal leaders about the why and how of performance management**, periodically bringing them together to share and learn from each other.
 - **Train members of the federal executive service and higher-level GS positions and other employees** including all program managers and CXOs as well as new staff about **the why and how of performance and evidence-informed management**.
 - **Tap new technologies to support this training** and make it rich with real-world stories explaining the why and how.
 - Train, support, and **nurture continuous learning and improvement communities among delivery partners**.
 - Strengthen and nurture **networks organized around outcomes, program type, and process type** to find ways to improve.
 - Create sub-groups to **learn from other's measurement and analytic methods** where likely to be helpful such as for programs that work to prevent bad things from happening, benefits processing programs, and credit programs.
- **Resource performance and evidence-informed management robustly.** Increase attention to and assure the adequacy of funding to use and learn how to improve the use of performance management tools, including performance communication and network nurturing within and across agencies.

Messed-up Motivational Mechanisms. More knowledge is needed to identify and understand effective and ineffective motivational mechanisms to increase use of the former and reduce use of the latter, as discussed in the tools section of this article. The federal government can consider the following actions in this area:

- **Find, build and share relevant evidence about motivational mechanisms.**
 - Find and build evidence about the efficacy of motivational mechanisms for individuals and organizations, paying attention to situational variations.
 - Share that evidence with those who write laws, rules and guidance and those who implement them.
 - Search for and catalogue stories and studies documenting past incentive structures that worked more and less well.
- **Review existing law and practice to identify currently used incentives not supported by evidence findings.**
 - Review federal personnel policies pertaining to bonuses and other incentives to determine which, if any, need updating on paper and in practice to align with evidence.
 - Review and assess current performance-linked grant conditions and incentives, including grant conditions, awards and penalties. Include in that review provisions in policy-specific laws allowing outside parties to take legal action if government has not acted to make progress on a goal as legislation requires.
- **Encourage OPM, GAO, others doing oversight, goal allies, and data journalists to explore if and how they can constructively motivate continuous improvement.**
 - Explore more explicitly if and how recurring GAO and FEVS surveys already do and could motivate agencies to improve performance and evidence-informed management.
 - Explore with outcome-focused advocacy and practice networks such as Vision Zero (to reduce traffic fatalities) if and how they might motivate attention to and progress on government goals.
 - Philanthropies, too, may want to test and assess to find ways to direct more attention to government goals, strategies, analyzed data, and findings of well-designed trials to motivate and help goal allies make progress.
 - Consider if and how journalists might motivate better performance management for better government, especially as data and community journalism evolve, especially given the reality of an “if it bleeds, it leads” culture in many media companies.
- **Resourcing.** Assure the adequacy of funding to find, build and share ways to improve government’s effective, cost-effective, and fair use of motivational mechanisms in budget proposals and appropriations.

Clearance Layers, Information Collection Barriers, and Other Hurdles. Those trying to improve performance frequently encounter barriers that significantly slow and occasionally curtail innovation and user-centered design. Some hurdles deter federal employees, some complicate efforts of those the federal government funds, and some make it harder for the federal government to collect useful feedback and other information from delivery partners and those served.

Federal employees trying to tap evolving technologies and knowledge often find themselves tangled in a maze of actual and assumed governmentwide and central agency requirements

established for good reasons but seldom integrated nor updated as experience, knowledge and technology evolve (Pahlka, 2023a). “Even when legislators and policymakers try to give implementers the flexibility to exercise judgment, the words they write take on an entirely different meaning, and have a very different effect, as they descend through the hierarchy, becoming more rigid with every step.... When things go wrong, we find new ways to constrain, and we make the hierarchy more and more rigid (Pahlka, J., 2023b).”

Grant recipients trying to use dollars and data from multiple federal sources to serve the same people and places more intelligently often face impediments, too. A paper identifying examples illustrating the value of making it easier to combine funds and data when serving the same people or addressing the same problem (Womer & Stack, 2023) may have encouraged OMB to propose changes to its Uniform Grant Guidance in 2024 (USOMB, 2024). A coalition of expert practitioners submitted comments on OMB’s proposed changes, supporting many of the proposed changes and urging additional ones. Most notably, the coalition urged the federal government to take actions to boost awareness of guidance changes and how to use them – such as cost allocation tool kits and best practice examples – concurrent with release of the updated guidance (Results for America, 2023).

Barriers to data sharing across programs complicate federal improvement efforts, too, not just grant recipient efforts. The Pandemic Response Accountability Committee (PRAC), the network of Inspectors General Congress created to monitor Covid-19 funding, was unable to access Social Security data in a timely way to prevent significant identify and benefits theft (Buble, 2023; PRAC, 2023).

Another barrier is the PRA, which requires federal agencies to obtain OMB clearance to collect the same information from ten or more entities. It can slow and sometimes altogether discourage federal agencies from gathering useful feedback from delivery partners and those served to improve outcomes and service quality. According to an OMB-run website, RegInfo.gov, this clearance process usually takes six to nine months. Fearing this process, some agency officials opt not to gather valuable feedback despite fast-track and common-form PRA paths. Whether hesitancy to gather useful feedback comes from the language of the law, a lack of awareness of the fast-track path, problems with the way the fast-track process works, misunderstanding of when a PRA clearance is needed, or something else is unclear. What is clear is that actual and assumed PRA clearance requirements confound user-centered design methods and other data-informed practices essential to continually improve outcomes, operational quality, and transparency.

Several actions might help the federal government reduce these and other types of clearance and information-collection complications.

- **Adopt and actively manage a cross-agency priority goal to improve internal clearance processes.**
 - **Make “clearance process improvement” a federal cross-agency management-improving priority goal** with a designated goal leader and team.
 - Collect and **frequently analyze progress indicators and other data, not just milestones,** to inform where to focus and find ways to improve.

- **Test use of an internal complaint and suggestion line** to receive complaints and ideas.
 - **Map processes to look for ways to integrate and streamline within and across them**, learning lessons from other process-improving efforts such as the Harvard Kennedy School’s Performance Lab effort with states (Toohey & Israelson-Hartley, n.d.).
 - **Analyze suggestions, test and assess** better ones, and encourage broader adoption of those that work well, allowing adaptation as appropriate.
 - Deeply **engage agency officials likely to benefit from process streamlining** in quarterly progress reviews to learn from experience and decide next steps.
 - **Report quarterly progress (data and not just milestones), analyses, lessons learned, and planned next steps** on Performance.gov and to agency officials seeking and giving clearances.
- **Restore active management of the federal cross-agency priority goal, “Leveraging data as a strategic asset.”**
 - Develop **supporting goals and a strategy map** for this priority goal. Include as part of that goal strategies to reduce the reporting burden and enhance the value of collected data.
 - **Manage progress on all purposes of the PRA** including strengthening information utility, partnership, and dissemination purposes, not just reducing reporting burden.
 - Build on progress of OMB M22-10 and the ICB referencing it by **identifying other categories of beneficiaries, reporters and uses on which to focus future efforts to improve cross-agency as well as single-agency information management**.
 - Use a **continually updated Information Collection Budget process to leverage data as a strategic asset** and make information collection, storage, analyses, and sharing **more strategic and coordinated**, supporting priority-setting as well as realization of scale economies.
 - **Analyze PRA clearance data** and update tracking of those clearances as needed to identify differences, similarities, relationships, and time patterns by type and requester to find opportunities to improve collected information and clearance times within and across agencies.
 - **Share those analyses** in ways that support cross-agency collaboration **to prevent and reduce common problems**.
 - Complement in-government **benchmarking surveys for** human capital, contracting, financial management, and information technology with surveys and data analyses on **the information collection clearance process**.
 - **Anticipate and advance data sharing agreements to prevent future problem prevention and process improvement delays** such as that encountered by the PRAC.
 - **Track Congressional action on reports agencies annually propose to Congress for elimination**, reports already listed on Performance.gov (Performance.gov, n.d. – c) to assess and improve the impact of this GPRAMA burden-reduction provision.
 - **Re-establish a cross-agency priority goal for “Results-Oriented Grant Accountability” and update the strategy.**

- **Develop a strategy map** showing supporting goals and objectives for this goal. Instead of reporting and managing only milestones for federal financial assistance, use and communicate analyzed and frequently collected data about federal grant activities by agency and possibly by applicant and recipient categories to inform where to focus.
 - **Analyze data to show grants by outcome objectives and sub-objectives** and identify where challenges to improving outcomes may exist.
 - **Strengthen the way grant programs and outcome teams help grant recipients** and others receiving federal financial assistance use data and findings of well-designed trials to improve outcomes, operational quality, and transparency.
 - **Learn about more and less effective grant conditions and incentives** from past grant program experience.
 - **Build collaboration across grant programs** to strengthen tools to help the field find, build, use and share relevant evidence.
 - **Build capacity and collect feedback from program officials, outcome teams, delivery partners and program beneficiaries** to facilitate cross-program learning and collaboration.
 - **Create lists of people in and outside government** working on grants, on the same and related outcome objectives, and with the same people, communities, and sectors.
 - **Tap and supply evolving technologies to facilitate multi-directional communication** among those working on related outcome objectives, program types, and process types to strengthen learning and collaboration.
 - **Implement changes to the Uniform Grant Guidance** to help the field understand how to take advantage of those changes. Then, assess and continually improve the efficacy of efforts to support grant recipients to tap flexibilities afforded to improve outcomes, cost-effectiveness, and fairness.
- **Find lessons from experience and well-designed trials for better outcomes associated with greater flexibility.**
 - **Find, build, and share evidence about lessons learned from past flexibility and innovation efforts.** Numerous federal laws have allowed agency leaders to waive specific requirements. What lessons have been learned about waivers requested, waivers granted, denied, and how well they worked? How have those lessons been applied to improve program operations? The U.S. Digital Service and the Office of Personnel Management devised an alternative hiring process to find qualified applicants with digital service expertise. Early experience suggests the system works well but few use it (Pahlka, 2023b). What are the facts and, if use is low, why? The PRA has a fast-track process. How well has that worked and what lessons have been learned?
 - Anecdotal evidence suggests **flexibility afforded states, local governments, and tribes** with pandemic and post-pandemic spending may have improved outcomes in some policy areas, such as homelessness. Who in government is looking for lessons from these experiences to improve future results? If no one is, should identifying these lessons, too, be adopted as a cross-agency goal?

- **Resourcing.** Assure the adequacy of funding to learn from government flexibility and innovation experiments and share lessons learned so they can be applied where likely to be helpful.

Summary

The U.S. federal government has made noteworthy progress over the past 30 years managing performance to improve societal outcomes, government's operational quality, and transparency to support democratic decision-making about goals and strategies and build understanding of and trust in government. This progress has been sustained across multiple Presidential Administrations headed by leaders of different parties. GPRA and the Evidence Act have contributed and promise to continue to contribute to that progress.

Lessons have been learned about how to use and how to avoid using and communicating with the five primary tools of performance management tools – goals, data and data analyses, well-designed trials, communication and community including frequent data-informed meetings and continuous-learning-and-improvement communities, and motivational mechanisms. These tools help people in government, government delivery partners and many others decide where to focus (what goals should be and when goals should be revised), find ways to improve, continually increase adoption of better practices, and increase understanding of government and the choices government makes.

Several challenges can slow that progress. One is inadequate understanding of the why and how of performance and evidence-informed management. Fortunately, as knowledge and experience have grown, an increasing number of those making funding and implementation decisions have come to appreciate that government performance and evidence-informed management is not primarily about measuring program performance to inform decisions about whether to fund a program. It is, instead, about government programs, those government funds, and other funders continually using performance management and evidence-finding, building and sharing tools to inform focus and find ways to improve. At the same time, more progress is needed to build knowledge and understanding among agency officials, delivery partners, and policymakers of the what, why, how, who, when, and where of performance and evidence-informed management tools to increase their wise use and discourage performance-dampening uses.

Building this understanding is one challenge that needs addressing to sustain and amplify future progress, including and perhaps especially building and sharing understanding of ways to use incentives and other motivational mechanisms and ways to avoid using them. Increased attention also needs to go to reducing clearance hurdles and other administrative barriers that slow and sometimes impede effective, cost-effective, and equitable performance and evidence-informed management.

Finally, those making resource allocation decisions need to resource use of performance management tools adequately.

Evolving technologies for collecting, analyzing, sharing, and discussing analyzed data and findings of well-designed trials will continually increase opportunities for performance gain.

This article suggests lessons learned and actions to take to accelerate and amplify future progress. These suggestions cannot, of course, all be done at once. Decisions must be made about what to do when to find ways to do better to improve societal outcomes, government's operational quality and its transparency.

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