

Washington State's Effective Communication of Performance Drives Results

Gaining Public Trust through Transparency & Effective Communication

For the past decade, Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) has used performance measurement and reporting to inform policy makers and citizens about the agency's work and accomplishments. In 1999 and 2000, just before WSDOT began incorporating performance reporting into its culture, the agency was well regarded by its national peers as a high performing organization. However, the public, media, and State Legislature questioned the agency's credibility and performance largely due to an information asymmetry. The causes for the information asymmetry were:

- Ineffective communication from the agency to the citizens, not the inability of citizens to comprehend information.
- Most people get their information from the media which rarely cover substantive issues in political reporting.
- Agencies are the exclusive sources of their performance data, creating an information monopoly.

The lack of trust in the agency's work contributed to the repeal of transportation tax funds in 1999 (Motor Vehicle Excise Tax). WSDOT realized performance communication with the public must be easy to comprehend, sincere, and legitimate. As a result, WSDOT began publishing "Measures, Markers and Mileposts," which was later called the *Gray Notebook*, a quarterly report on WSDOT's performance measures and program results. These efforts have helped the public gain a better under-

KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- **Developed strategic communication and reporting.**
- **Conducted effective communication regarding funding needs.**
- **Increased transportation funding as a result of voter approval.**
- **Improved public perception and trust.**
- **Accomplished performance based investment decisions.**

standing of how transportation dollars are spent, which resulted in greater public credibility and support. In 2003 and 2005, the Washington State Legislature approved two transportation funding packages (a 5-cent gas tax increase in 2003, followed by a 9.5-cent gas tax increase in 2005.) Later in 2005, Washington voters rejected a ballot initiative that would have repealed the 9.5-cent gas tax increase, demonstrating that the public's confidence in WSDOT's ability to deliver had improved.

Bridging the Information Gap Between Agency & Citizen with Performance Journalism

WSDOT uses a set of principles, collectively called "Performance Journalism," that have proven successful in gaining public support. These principles include communicating with candor and transparency, using "plain talk," making performance related information accessible to the public and the media, and being current and timely when communicat-



ing agency and system performance. WSDOT also adopted the principle of “No Surprises Reporting,” which reports the good, the bad, and the ugly with no exceptions. Performance Journalism is the agency’s chance to tell its story first and do it in a way that is correct and complete. Reporting the bad as well as the good builds credibility and trust. The agency strives to lead the story rather than to follow, which helps in communicating a complete and accurate picture.

Keeping Performance Reporting Relevant with WSDOT’s “What Gets Measured Gets Managed” Approach

The agency tracks more than 100 transportation system performance measures each year through the quarterly *Gray Notebook* and annual Congestion Report. WSDOT’s mantra is “What Gets Measured Gets Managed” along with “No Surprises Reporting.” WSDOT uses performance-based management practices to guide decision-making in areas as diverse as pavement rehabilitation and congestion relief (operate efficiently, manage demand, and/or add capacity strategically.) WSDOT enhances its ability to manage programs effectively through these performance measurement efforts.

Moving Forward

WSDOT’s established performance-reporting practices made it easier for the agency to hit the ground running when FHWA mandated reporting requirements for the projects funded through the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). WSDOT’s culture is to strive for all agency work activities to be based on solid performance analysis and external accountability and credibility with stakeholders. But this work is ongoing and WSDOT continues to evolve and improve its performance analysis and reporting practices to adapt to changing needs. Similarly, WSDOT stands ready to support and implement the performance requirements of the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21) and assist others by sharing its many lessons learned.

WSDOT received an A+ for its continued commitment to accountability. In addition, the *Gray Notebook*, WSDOT’s quarterly publication of transportation performance measures, was hailed by *Governing Magazine*’s blog [Governing the States and Localities](#) as providing “gold standard data in a way that tells a story and is accessible to the average

reader.” The headline, “Truth, Transparency and Transportation” really sets the tone for the article. The article goes on to say, “As Washington State’s experience is showing, doing the right thing by being transparent about performance can be a win-win. Making investments based on objective data showing that an agency is using public money efficiently is how democratic government is supposed to work.”

WSDOT’S Performance Management Philosophy (for all programs)

1. Communicate clear, relevant and easy-to-understand measures and results using Performance Journalism.
2. Demonstrate how programs contribute to priorities.
3. Monitor and analyze detailed program data.
4. Evaluate effectiveness (Before and After).
5. Hold regular problem-solving sessions.
6. Allocate resources based on strategies that work: performance-based investment decisions.
7. Define and target your key audience.
8. Regularly report to the Governor, Legislature, media and public on performance - seek and create opportunities to report.

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