

Improving outcomes for citizens: The case for delivery units

Delivering results series

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This article is the first in a multi-part series describing how an innovative government management approach can help translate the promises of impact into reality for citizens.

As citizens, we expect our governments to maintain if not improve the quality and impact of public services, from reducing congestion on highways to increasing the educational attainment of our children. We also increasingly expect governments to deliver value for money. But in the eyes of many members of the public, governments fail to live up to these standards. A 2016 global survey showed that government was the least trusted institution studied, after NGOs, business, and the media, with fewer than half of respondents stating that they trusted their government.¹

Several factors drive this skepticism. One is the perception that government programs don't result in impact. To maximize the potential for producing results, governments would do well to rigorously focus on service delivery and create a culture that views delivery as one its top priorities as an institution.

A different approach

Correcting this problem may be easier said than done. But what if an approach is available that can help governments better balance where they spend their time?

This is what a delivery-focused approach can do. Having a strategy for executing a program is important, of course. The first step for any program is to develop an evidence-based plan for achieving results and identifying who's accountable for outcomes. But the plan doesn't have to be static. At the heart of a delivery-focused

approach is the need to think about implementation as a dynamic process rather than a linear one.

What does that mean? It means that once the program gets off the ground, staff are still thinking about how they can refine their implementation plan to make it better and stronger. It means they are devoting significant effort to gathering and reviewing accurate and up-to-date data about what's working and what's not. And it means they are making changes that the data suggest will improve performance, and monitoring outcomes carefully to see that they do. Once one cycle of review has been completed, the review can begin again to make use of new insights the data provide.

The project life cycle in delivery units

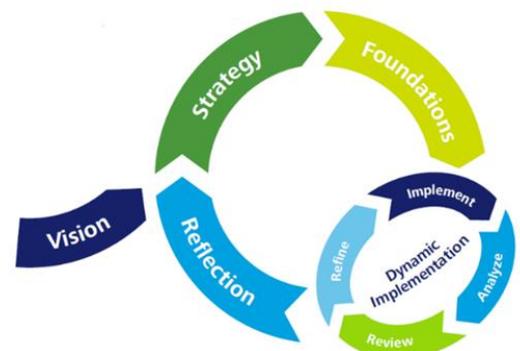


Figure 1: DUs use a dynamic implementation approach to continuously measure progress and adjust implementation to secure the best outcomes for citizens. Source: Deloitte

¹ Edelman Trust Barometer Annual Global Study, January 2016.

Delivering results

A common way to implement this approach is through a delivery capacity, or team, that resides in government. Sometimes governments choose to build delivery units in the center of government, but they can also sit in line ministries or parts of ministries.

This approach was pioneered by the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit (PMDU), an office established within then-Prime Minister Tony Blair's cabinet in the UK in 2001 when Blair voiced disappointment with the outcomes his government had achieved for citizens.² The PMDU continuously monitored performance data and other evidence to drive decision-making and accountability across a range of education, health, transport, and justice issues.

Its efforts produced strong results. Just take the length of time people waited at hospital emergency rooms. In 2003, over 23 percent of patients waited longer than four hours. The PMDU began collecting weekly data on emergency room wait times, assigned PMDU personnel to work with the health department to re-engineer emergency room treatment processes and planning, and established financial rewards for hospitals meeting wait time targets. By 2005, only 5.3 percent of patients waited over four hours. Two years later, the rate had dropped to 2.3 percent.³

The practice of setting up delivery units—teams in government tasked with continuously monitoring and improving the implementation of priority programs—has since become a leading way to get outcomes for citizens. And it is being applied across the world.

In the next article, we'll talk in more detail about what a delivery unit is, how it works, and how to design and staff a successful delivery unit.

² Modified by subsequent administrations, the PDMU no longer exists in the form described.

³ Kelman, Steven. "Central Government and Frontline Performance Improvement: The Case of 'Targets' in the United Kingdom," Jan. 2006.

Delivery efforts around the world*



State of Maryland, United States |

Established office under then-governor Martin O'Malley to monitor progress of strategic policies in the fields of skills, security, sustainability, and health.



Malaysia |

Established delivery unit to monitor and assess key government initiatives in the areas of economic and government transformation over 10 years. Hosted "pop-up" labs for government civil servants to brainstorm action plans for government problems.



Tanzania |

Established office to monitor policy effectiveness in the fields of energy and natural gas, transport, agriculture, water, education, and resource mobilization. Also oversaw effort to have ministries align their budgets with high-level goals in government's five-year plan.



South Africa |

Established sizeable delivery unit (125+ staff) with the mandate to improve frontline service delivery around 12 priority outcomes approved by the cabinet.



Kenya |

Established office devoted to developing and administering performance contracts between agencies and executive branch leadership.

**Some of these efforts are no longer in operation.*

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