Self Oversight & Metrics

Is There Something Wrong About Feeling Good? (or "Oh Just Let Me Rant - I'll Feel Better")

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It was Paul Farley's presentation "Current DCMC Government Property Initiatives" given at the 1999 National Education Seminar in Orlando that inspired me to offer a workshop at the 1999 Western Region Seminar. Paul had a viewgraph with three bullets that captured my attention: Contractor Self-Oversight; Joint Audits; and Single Process Initiatives Proposals. Now, none of these were new and dynamic revelations to me, the topics having been around for some time. Having given several presentations and workshops locally in Los Angeles, I felt the topics of Self-Oversight, Self-Assessment, and Metrics might be well received and stimulate thinking differently about audits and reviews.

I developed the workshop to include a number of interactive situations hoping to inspire audience discussions between contractor and government participants, intent on facilitating those discussions on "how we can" rather than "why we can't" or "why we should." I made twenty-five handouts complete with room for "notes" on each page, hoping that twenty-five would be enough. I absconded from work with a computer projector so I could give the slide presentation remotely from my laptop as I worked the room drawing the audience into the dialogue. During the one-hour drive to the seminar, I attracted the attention of a California Highway Patrol as I rehearsed the material out loud. I stifled my verbal aria and replaced it with mental predictions of the professional demographics of the attendees, and envisioned the interaction between them as successes, failures, and the sharing of ideas on self-oversight and joint surveillance. After all, this was designed to be a "workshop" and in that sense, workshop means "interactive." After arriving fifteen minutes late, I rushed up to the designated conference room and began furiously setting up so as not to keep the people who filled the room waiting. I finished the technical hookups between the computer and projector and turned to face the crowd. Did I say "crowd?"

Six people sat there patiently watching as I fumbled with the projector remote control trying to figure out where the "On/Off" button was. I immediately went through a mental checklist of what I'd possibly done wrong: wrong room, wrong date, wrong place, wrong seminar, wrong tie, wrong aftershave, etc. I ran out of reasonable possibilities.

There is this deeply ingrained reflex action that springs to the surface of my psyche whenever faced with this type of situation. It's a direct result of watching Clint Eastwood in Heartbreak Ridge eight times and still counting. The reflex is to "Adapt, Overcome, and Improvise." And I did.

"Hello and welcome to the 1999 WRS Focus Group on Self-Assessment and Metrics."

It was during the ensuing discussions that I began to suspect the underlying cause behind the surprising attendance: The Workshop Title!

My suspicions were further validated in conversations with seminar attendees in the lobby of the conference center as the seminar was closing down. Seems that the word "metrics" has left a bad taste on working pallets of many folks in the industry who have been "directed" to implement metrics.

There were stories of metrics being applied to areas that had no relevance to any function in a property system. It sounded like "Here, I saw these being done over there so we should do over here too, say, on cafeteria seating." I heard about metrics set up to measure how many LDDR's were being issued, not why there were losses or the time frame required to report or process them, just how many. Can you say "calculator?" There were stories of an entire volume of metrics being published on a monthly basis. A monthly basis? Publishing metrics on a monthly basis is like painting the front of a house, just the front, every weekend – it looks like you're taking great care of the place from the street but the inside is falling apart! And then the one that really got me was a metric on location control that reported no defects but then was used to perform a floor audit – on the same function using the same samples. Now I am by no means a statistical genius but that scenario has the distinct appearance of being repeatedly redundant, but only over and over again.

Now these stories as told to me, exaggerated or not, all have one thing in common: They are not metrics.

Folks, I don't have a bio that fills a page with a degree in this and a masters in that and twenty years' experience here and another ten years' experience there followed by a string of semi-colons separating awards and accomplishments. All I have is eighteen years in property management, starting as a Test Equipment Expeditor and a warning note from my analyst. In that eighteen years I've facilitated audits, developed audits, conducted audits, reviewed audits, argued audits, audited audits and failed audits. I've written property procedures, coordinated property procedures, edited property procedures and failed to follow property procedures. I've developed correction action plans, implemented corrective action plans, re-evaluated corrective action plans and proudly had my name connected to correction action plans that had no hope of being successful. And as a result I can honestly say I am absolutely sure of one, and only one thing about a property management system: It's just numbers.

It has:

Asset ID numbers
Part numbers
Model numbers
Serial numbers
Contract numbers
Sub-Contract numbers
Supplier numbers
National Stock numbers
Purchase Order numbers
Vendor numbers
Purchase price numbers
Receiving date numbers
Issue date numbers
Voucher numbers
Document numbers
Consumption date numbers
Building location numbers
Room location numbers
User ID numbers
Responsible Organization numbers
Next Assembly numbers
Top Assembly numbers
Sub Assembly numbers
Drawing numbers
STE numbers
Storage date numbers
Closure date numbers
Plant Clearance Case numbers
(Did I miss any?)

and the list goes on.....

A property management "system" is merely the cohesive between all those numbers and the level of effectiveness is how well the "system" processes those numbers. It is a process you know. Beginning with receipt and ending with disposal. Oh, we may call it the "life cycle" or "cradle to grave" or "start to finish," but any metaphor you want to call it means simply we're processing an asset through a system of (can you guess yet?) numbers.

So what does that have to do with metrics you ask? Everything. Metrics, by definition, are a "standard of measurement." And "measurements" use what form as their medium of expression? Numbers. Ok, so by now I hope I've established a mind-set here that simply equates to

Property Management System =
Numbers = Measurement = Metrics.

So now let's look at metrics and how we can use them.

Publishing metrics will only work if all concerned agree on the subject to be measured, format to be used, method for taking the measurement, and frequency. In this respect I'm primarily talking about the contractor and the PA. These are the two individuals who gain the most out of using metrics. If an agreement can't be reached, then stop right there and go on to something productive. And, admittedly, the most difficult part of developing metrics is the agreement. But if optimism prevails and the intent is to at least try to develop working metrics, then simply agree to disagree and go on to the next step.

Of the 15 functions found in Appendix A of the DoD Manual for the Performance of Contract Property Administration, not all of them are "measurable" using property metrics - so don't try, it's a waste of time. Every Property Management System is different and because of that, different functions will be measurable in different ways so don't go looking at a metric that's working for an organization elsewhere and say "OK, we can do that." Another hazardous situation is if you're planning on applying common metrics to be used across a major multi-functional aerospace corporation. Plan on taking about two years of weekly meetings consisting of debates, designs, disagreements, planning, proposals, pictures, testing, and trying, resulting in something almost everyone can use, maybe. On the other hand, I kind of like to use what some may consider a new and differently unique approach: Keep It Simple.

To me, property metrics should not be some all-encompassing, dynamic, multi-organizational, management-directed, team-chartered program with milestone due dates presented in monthly briefings that are usually accompanied by explanations of what the project needs in a detailed list of unknown problems yet to be encountered. Metrics are a tool, a simple and effective way for both the contractor and the GPA to easily and quickly gauge where in a property management system there may be needed attention and where there is not.

You do metrics at home, you know. Yes you do, don't deny it. Show of hands: How many people keep track of the gas mileage and costs on a long car trip? You just did metrics. Show of hands: How many people open their monthly bills and seeing an increase in electricity or water costs, go back to the previous month's billing to compare then mentally review the month to determine why the increase? You just did metrics. Both examples are simple yet very informative and didn't require you to gather the family together and say "OK, everybody carry one of these stopwatches with you and keep a record of exact times you run water or stay in a room with the lights on – and I want a briefing from each of you at the end of the month."

The point here is effective metrics are not "make work." Remember, a property management system is a process and within that process there are data points. These are what you're looking for to produce a metric. The data should already exist, in some form, easily retrieved or transmitted. This is why I say not all functions are measurable. Because of different systems and processes, the data may not be easily retrieved.

Existing data points are usually consistent too. This is another important element of effective property metrics. Consistency. Once you've established (and agreed!) on what and how to measure a function, don't change it. Changing the measurement data, formula or method will skew the metric results and leave you without a creditable historical reference.

Which is another viable product of effective metrics: Trend Analysis. Metrics should be of a format and frequency that allow you to compare past performance. You need to see if a function is getting better or worse, or maybe not changing at all which, if all is going well, is exactly what you want to see. Depending on how the measurement is taken, this can be an early warning sign signaling you that something has changed. The advantage here is immediate awareness and the opportunity to take action. Compare that to the usual "element of surprise" factor during an annual floor audit. By that comparison, a good property management metric can replace a desk drawer full of antacids.

Property metrics can be published in a variety of forms. I personally advocate something in a spreadsheet format. Again, we're dealing with numbers here and spreadsheets were developed for the numerical management of numerals. Using spreadsheets and intra-company networks can help keep the publishing quick and easy too. Imagine setting up your metric on a server application where the "data points" I talked about earlier simply open the application, plug in their numbers, and go about their daily business. You then open the application, maybe do a few cosmetic changes, dates maybe, and *voilá*, print it off – you're done. Of course I did skim over that one phrase that will take some intentional effort: "Setting up." Admittedly, the set up is the most time-consuming and does require a bit of trial and error, but once done and done right, it should be automatic from there.

By now someone is saying "but he hasn't said 'how' to do a metric." That's because that is entirely up to you. The "how" is based on your asset management environment and/or your processes. And you know best, so only you can determine how a metric will work for you - or not work as the case may be. It's a matter of finding that data generation point that is most meaningful to a function or process, and putting in a form that is simple yet informative, in a fashion that tells you what you need to know. How often you publish metrics is also up to you. Whether you feel the need to see them once a month, every quarter or twice a year, you are the judge. Should they be published to upper management? I would think so, but I seriously don't consider it mandatory. The contractor and the GPA are the two individuals that benefit the most, so start there.

Metrics done properly let you keep one finger on the pulse of your Property Management System giving you tell-tale signs of its health. It's an early warning system that let's you be the first to know where to direct your attention before something becomes a problem. In eighteen years of property management the only other thing I'm really sure of is that I want to be the first to know...not the last. ◆

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