

Open Letter
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The June 2016 issue of "The View" includes several articles critical of the Northern Ireland government's decision to use Outcomes-Based Accountability (OBA) in its Programme for Government. I think it is important to encourage debate about how to improve outcomes for our communities and I welcome the contributions of your publication. However, amid many worthwhile comments, are articles that reflect a serious misunderstanding of OBA. It seems important to get the record straight so that we can continue the discussion from an informed perspective.

OBA has a track record of success. Over the past 20 years, OBA has been used by hundreds of government and NGO organizations around the world to produce measurable improvements for service users and communities. Most recently, the City of Leeds used OBA over the span of five years to safely reduce the number of looked-after children, reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) and increase primary and secondary school attendance to record levels. The recent OFSTED inspection in Leeds (March 2015) noted that "The local authority's commitment to becoming a learning organisation has been helped by a service and partnership-wide commitment to the use of Outcomes Based Accountability (OBA)". Ofsted further added that "The application of the Outcomes Based Accountability approach to performance is facilitating a shared understanding of priorities for children. In Wales, the NHS Epilepsy Unit in Cardiff used OBA to improve response times for new patients and decrease hospitalisations, as documented in their report "The Cardiff and Vale Experience." The reports on Leeds and Cardiff are available on line at resultsaccountability.com/publications.

OBA uses plain language. In a field dominated by decades of jargon, OBA uses three plain language performance measurement categories: *How much did we do? How well did we do it? Is anyone better off?* These categories apply to all government and NGO services. They help communicate clearly with the public. And managers find them easier to understand and use than traditional jargon. OBA does not replace other impact measurement tools, but rather provides a clear place for those tools to be used and valued.

OBA provides easy-to-understand useful processes. The central "Turn the Curve" thinking process at the heart of OBA is the same common sense process we use in our everyday lives to solve problems. This process starts with the ends or outcomes we want for people in our community or for the customers of our services. At the community level these outcomes include such things as a safe community and a clean and sustainable environment. At the service level, the customer outcomes vary by type of service. For a job training program, for example, the most important customer outcome would be for each trainee to get and keep a good paying job. OBA uses data at the beginning of the process (in this case percentage who get and keep a good paying job) in contrast to traditional methods that often use metrics only in post-mortem evaluations. OBA looks at the story behind the data, the causes that explain why the data is getting better or worse. It includes a disciplined consideration of partners who can help and an examination of what the research tells us about what works. From this thinking, an action plan is created. The OBA thinking process is designed to be repeated so that the action plan can be improved over time. The simplicity of this process is deceptive. The record shows that it is capable of addressing the challenges of complex social and organizational change. Anyone can experience the power of this thinking process by trying the publicly available one hour Turn the Curve exercise.

OBA is flexible and inclusive. Most planning models require experts to explain and implement the model's processes. They are so complicated that everyday citizens often feel excluded. They are often oriented toward punishment and not improvement. OBA is a process that community members can readily understand and use. Diversity of participation is an asset as participants work to understand causes and possible solutions. OBA explicitly warns against the misuse of targets and penalties. OBA is flexible and has been used in more than 15 countries, at all levels of government (national, regional, state, local) and nonprofits of every size. It has been used to address conditions that span the distance from school success to national security. The basic thinking process in OBA can be learned and applied quickly. While some form of sound initial training is important, organizations are encouraged to build their own capacity to support OBA and many places have implemented OBA with little or no outside assistance.

OBA is free for use by government and non-government organizations. There are no fees or licenses required for government and non-government organizations. OBA was developed with support from charitable foundations and is offered to the public in the spirit of shared interest in quality of life. Many other models have vested interests that see new ideas like OBA as a threat. OBA is compatible with most, if not all, other models and has an international network of practitioners who can help each other.

OBA stands in opposition to the long history of misuse of management and planning models. Some models have been imposed on communities and organizations without regard to their needs. Many models are complex and filled with confusing jargon. Many models waste time and produce nothing useful. Many models have been used in a punitive way or for the sole purpose of saving money. It is no wonder that the field is filled with people who are wary of anything new. This caution is justified. But the

cynicism that can protect us from danger can also blind us to good ideas. We need to guard against the misuse of OBA or any other planning model. There are some instances, such as one report on work in NSW Australia, that shows how one government agency failed to use OBA properly and got it badly wrong. But if we truly share an interest in improving quality of life, if we all have a stake in the quality of essential services, then we need to be open to the possibility that some methods might work better than others in helping us get there.

For people who want more information about OBA, the methods are described in the book "Trying Hard Is Not Good Enough 10th Anniversary Edition." and the new accountability companion reader "Turning Curves." There is a growing literature of reports and studies about OBA (Trying Hard Is Not Good Enough, Appendix J) that provide a balanced look at how it has worked.

- Mark Friedman

Mark is the author of "Trying Hard Is Not Good Enough," the central OBA text, with more than 50,000 copies in circulation worldwide. He has 20 years of experience working in the government sector, and was the victim of every stupid idea that anyone came up with during that period. OBA is his response to those experiences.

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