



## Deliverology: From idea to implementation

**An approach to managing reform initiatives, pioneered in the United Kingdom, has had significant impact in a number of other countries around the globe.**

**Three critical components of the approach are the formation of a delivery unit, data collection for setting targets and trajectories, and the establishment of routines.**

**Michael Barber,  
Paul Kihn,  
and Andy Moffit**

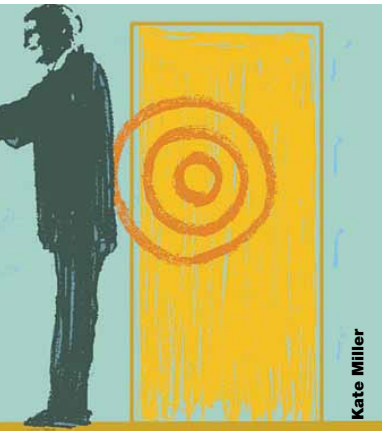
Now more than ever, governments are under pressure to deliver results in public services while ensuring that citizens' tax dollars are spent wisely and effectively. Nearly all governments—and individual public agencies—have set ambitious reform goals and developed strategic plans to achieve those goals.

Frequently, however, plans fall by the wayside and reform goals remain unmet, for a variety of reasons: political pressure can cause priorities and resources to shift, success can be difficult to measure, consequences for failed delivery are less obvious than in the private sector, and stakeholder motivations are not always transparent. The challenge for public-sector

organizations is to find ways to define and execute their highest-priority objectives so that they have the greatest possible impact.

Through our work with a number of public-sector leaders, we have developed an approach to managing and monitoring the implementation of activities that have significant impact on outcomes. The approach, which we call Deliverology,<sup>1</sup> leverages and extends the key principles of best-in-class performance management (Exhibit 1). Although we initially developed the approach in our work with the UK government, we have helped other public-sector organizations—including local school districts, regional health-system authorities, and national transportation

<sup>1</sup> The British civil service originally used Deliverology as a light-hearted term of abuse for the process developed by the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit (PMDU). Ultimately, the PMDU adopted the term and gave it a positive definition.



ministries—manage their reform efforts using Deliverology.<sup>2</sup>

This article will address three key components of the approach: establishing a small team focused on performance, gathering performance data to set targets and trajectories, and having routines to drive and ensure a focus on performance. Through each of these components runs a critical thread: relationship building. None of the techniques described here will work to greatest effect without senior leaders first thinking through the way relationships are built—among an organization’s top leaders and those responsible for delivery, as well as among the delivery staff and the line staff responsible for implementation.

**Establishing a small team focused on performance**

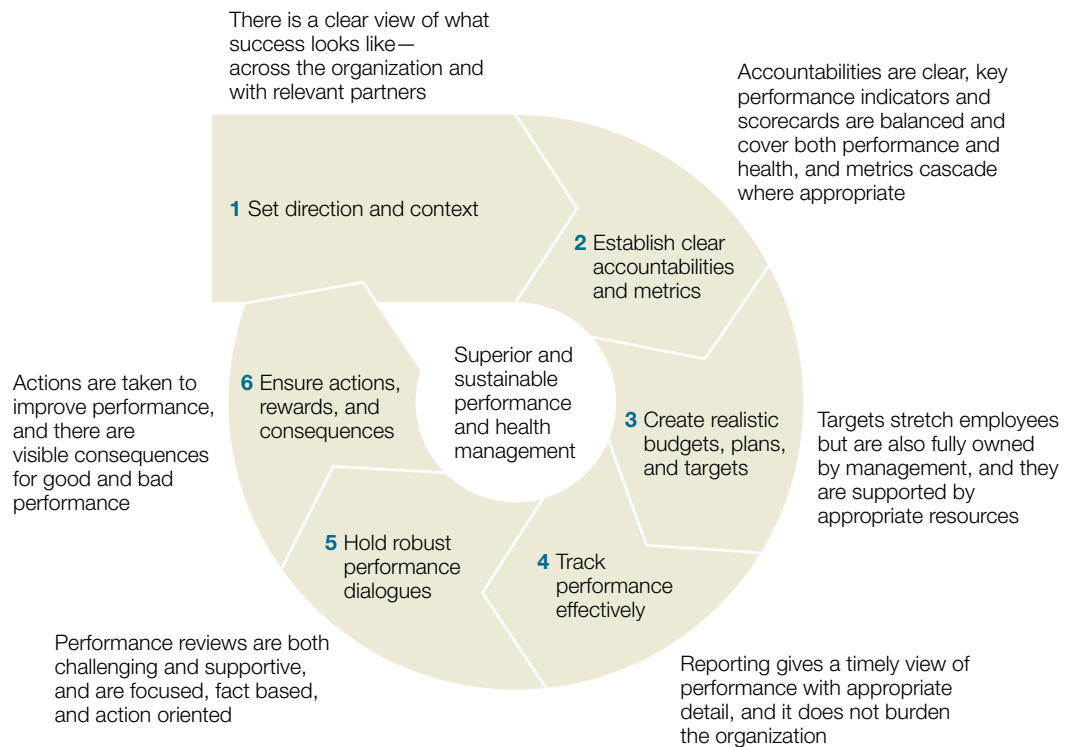
At the core of Deliverology is the establishment of a delivery unit—a small group of dedicated individuals focused exclusively on achieving impact and improving outcomes. The delivery unit constantly challenges performance and asks difficult questions, taking any excuses off the table. While a delivery unit should acknowledge competing priorities and unexpected situations, it should also consistently push for faster progress, knowing full well that the tendency of any system is toward inertia.

Tony Blair, who established the original Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit (PMDU), concluded in his

<sup>2</sup> For a full treatment of Deliverology, see Michael Barber, Paul Kihn, and Andy Moffit, *Deliverology 101: A Field Guide for Educational Leaders*, Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press, 2010.

Exhibit 1

**Deliverology embodies the six elements of best-in-class performance management.**





recent memoir that the PMDU “was an innovation that was much resisted, but utterly invaluable and proved its worth time and time again.”<sup>3</sup>

A delivery unit should not be mistaken for a project-management office, which is typically set up to guide the implementation of a particular project. Rather, a delivery unit should be a permanent structure—an extension of senior leadership. Delivery units share several key organizational-design attributes:

**Respected leadership.** The unit should designate a full-time (or nearly full-time) delivery leader who reports directly to the leader of the public-sector organization or system. The delivery leader must have the trust of the system leader and the system leader’s top team, and the respect of others in the field. As such, it is not uncommon for a delivery leader to have previously served as top policy adviser to the system leader (and thus to have great familiarity with, but also some distance from, field leaders). In a US state education department, for example, a highly respected and innovative academic and senior member of the state superintendent’s team was named head of the delivery unit. Rather than exerting its own authority, the delivery unit acts as an amplifier of the system leader’s authority, providing a careful balance of support and challenge to those responsible for implementation.

**Limited size.** The delivery unit should be small to preserve flexibility, allow selectivity in hiring,

and promote a cohesive culture. The PMDU worked with a bureaucracy that provided multiple services to more than 60 million Britons, but it was never larger than about 40 people. Most systems will provide services to a smaller population and will have a much smaller delivery unit. In one US state, the education system’s delivery unit consists of a delivery leader and three staff members. A North American regional health authority has only two individuals in its delivery unit.

**Top talent.** In screening candidates for the delivery staff, leaders should look for five core competencies: problem solving, data analysis, relationship management (sensitivity, empathy, fairness, and humility), feedback and coaching, and a delivery mind-set (a “can do” attitude). As many of these competencies are not among the criteria for traditional public-sector hiring, some delivery units have developed new hiring processes: one unit, for example, now requires candidates to do real-time problem solving as part of their interview. The unit staff should be drawn from among the most talented and qualified people inside or outside the system. Leaders may hesitate to move their most talented employees from line roles to staff roles; we have found that a careful transition—for example, initially splitting an individual’s time between a line role and a staff role—can work well in some cases. There can also be significant administrative challenges in developing and posting new job positions in order to hire people externally, but some organizations

<sup>3</sup> Tony Blair, *A Journey: My Political Life*, New York: Knopf, 2010, p. 338.

have overcome these challenges through the budget process or reallocation of roles.

#### Nonhierarchical relationship with the system.

The delivery unit should reside outside the system's line-management hierarchy. It should not be managed by any of the people or organizations it is trying to influence, nor should it directly manage those people or organizations. This independence will allow the unit to be a "critical friend" that delivers difficult messages, but also sustains trust and credibility with actors in the system. There should be clear lines of communication and relationships between the delivery unit and the departments it oversees.

One effective approach is to have a single point of contact, or "account manager," perhaps even one who is embedded in, drawn from, or shared with the department being overseen.

There is often confusion when it comes to the relationship between the delivery unit and a system's finance function (treasury, department of finance, or other such agency). If not managed carefully, the finance function could perceive the delivery unit as an agency competing for turf, a lobbying force for money for favored programs, or—at worst—an irrelevant entity. The PMDU solved this problem by building its system of targets on the Public Service Agreement (PSA) system that the UK Treasury Department had established. In essence, the PMDU adopted a subset of the PSA targets, ensuring that the PMDU's activities were aligned with the finance function's priorities.

#### Gathering performance data to set targets and trajectories

Deliverology focuses a public-sector system on its most critical outcomes and discourages "firefighting." Among Deliverology's most effective tools are targets—a prioritized set of measurable,

ambitious, and time-bound goals—and trajectories, a projected progression toward these goals that creates a tight link between planned interventions and expected outcomes.

**Targets.** While nearly all public-sector organizations set targets, many of these targets are somewhat vague or unmeasurable, or they operate under unclear time horizons. The idea of setting—and publicizing—specific, time-bound targets strikes some leaders as risky, especially in the public sector, where positive public perception is crucial but control over outcomes can be challenging.

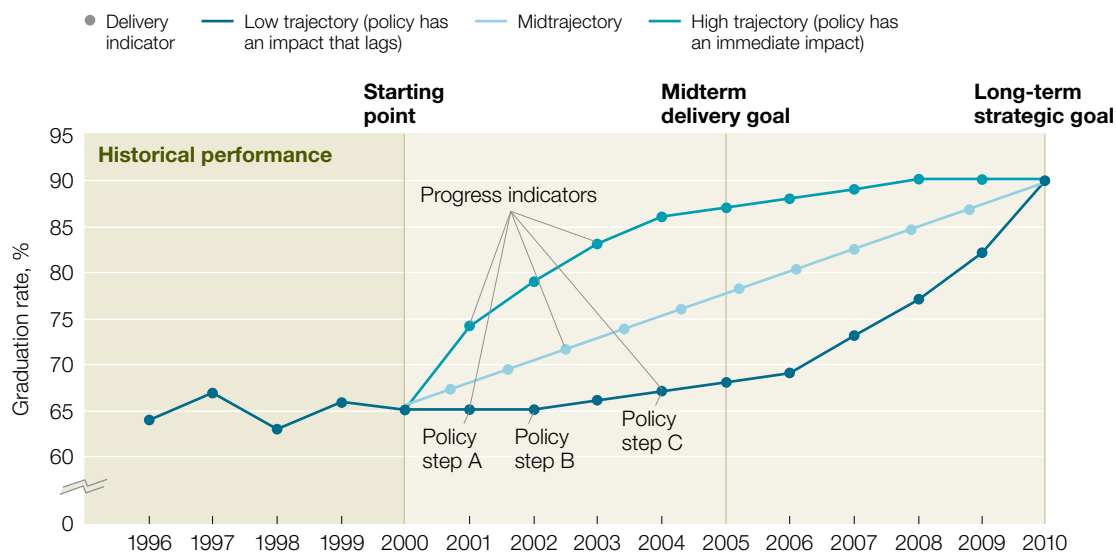
Targets should be both ambitious and realistic. An unambitious target can generate acceptance of incremental rather than transformational change, and an unrealistic one will discourage those responsible for achieving it. A delivery unit can play an important role in setting targets—perhaps brokering negotiations between system leadership and the relevant performance units—but its foremost role in this area is to ensure targets remain prominent for the entire public-sector system.

When the government of a developing country sought to immediately improve its basic infrastructure, the prime minister's aspirations were to provide housing, electricity, and clean water to low-income families in rural areas. The delivery unit worked with the relevant ministries to translate these aspirations into concrete targets: over the next three years, build or restore 50,000 houses for low-income families, provide electricity to an additional 140,000 households, and give an additional 360,000 households access to clean water.

**Trajectories.** For every target it sets, the delivery unit should also develop a trajectory: an evidence-

## Exhibit 2

## Trajectories are a tool for understanding a system's progress toward its target.



based projection of the performance levels the system will achieve as it pursues the target. Trajectories serve as a tool for understanding a system's progress toward its target and allow for meaningful debate as to whether a target is both ambitious and realistic. Presented well, trajectories have a powerful visual impact that can clearly communicate the gap between performance and expectation at any point in time. Exhibit 2 illustrates three possible trajectories of a school system's delivery effort.

Public-sector organizations rarely develop and use trajectories—in part because they can be difficult to establish, as evidence is sometimes unclear or hard to find. In addition, there is often great resistance to continuous performance measurement given the potential for failure. In our experience, two approaches can help ground both the target and the trajectory in available evidence. The first approach, the

use of benchmarks, allows for calibration based on what other systems or groups within those systems have accomplished. A variety of comparisons can be made using benchmarks:

**Historical comparisons.** How have levels of the target metric moved in the past? (A school system, for example, might observe that graduation rates have been increasing an average of 0.5 percent per year in the past five years.) To what extent can we expect the system or its subgroups to outperform history?

**Internal peer comparisons.** Within the system, how does performance differ among groups of performance units with similar characteristics (such as teachers or principals in the same school district)? What does the performance of some groups suggest about what others should be able to attain?

**External peer comparisons, either domestic or international.**

How does the system's performance compare, both now and historically, with that of other systems in the country?

In other countries? How do performance units in the system compare with their peers in other systems? For example, school systems can be benchmarked on key operational metrics—such as non-instructional or central administrative expenses—or, more commonly, outcome metrics.

A second approach entails the use of interventions. This approach requires having some evidence of the impact of particular interventions (for instance, how performance incentives for teachers help improve student outcomes) and extrapolating the potential impact on the entire system. It is a way of checking whether planned policies or actions are sufficient to hit the targets.

**Using routines to ensure a focus on performance**

One of the most important contributions that a delivery unit can make is to establish and maintain routines: regularly scheduled and structured opportunities for the system leader, delivery-plan owners, and others to review performance and make decisions. Routines work because they create deadlines, which in turn create a sense of urgency.

Many systems already have annual reviews in place and may question the need for more frequent check-ins. However, the lag between making a decision and seeing results is immense. More frequent routines help the system

identify problems earlier and act faster. Three distinct routines—that vary in frequency, audience, format, and the type and depth of the information they provide—have proved effective.

**Monthly notes.** These notes are the most frequently occurring routine and thus cover less information than the others. Each note consists of a succinct summary of progress, current and emerging delivery issues, and key actions required, followed by an appendix with supporting information. The progress reported in monthly notes can be at the level of leading indicators, as data for the target metric will not always be available. The PMDU prepared a monthly note for each of four departments, which meant the prime minister received a note, on average, once per week. Monthly notes provide a tremendous opportunity for organizations to engage in timely problem solving and course correction. As demonstrated in Exhibit 3 (a sample of a monthly note from a US school system), monthly notes should provide a detailed, “at a glance” snapshot of progress without making judgments on the overall program.

**‘Stocktakes.’** These are quarterly meetings to review and discuss performance for each priority area in depth. Stocktakes are used to demonstrate the system leader's commitment to the delivery agenda, enable the system leader to hold individuals accountable for progress on targets, discuss options and gain agreement on key actions needed, share best practices and support interdepartmental cooperation, celebrate successes, and identify new policy needs. Participants should include the system leader (who should also

One of the most important contributions that a delivery unit can make is to establish and maintain routines

chair the meeting), delivery-unit staff, and leaders from the relevant departments. A few features make stocktakes distinctive. First, they rely heavily on data; trajectories, for example, must be a part of each stocktake discussion. Second, they maintain a focus on a sustained set of priorities. Finally, having the system leader chair each stocktake ensures a high level of visibility and attention.

**Delivery reports.** These are in-depth assessments provided to the system leader every six months on the status of all of the system's priority areas. Delivery reports allow leaders to compare progress across priorities; identify actions for relevant departments, with dates and named responsibilities; and reassess the allocation of resources and attention based on each priority area's need and distance to targets.

One of the main purposes of a delivery report is to predict the likelihood of delivery for each of the priorities. We have developed a framework for assessing the likelihood of delivery that examines four categories: the degree of the delivery challenge (low, medium, high, or very high); the quality of planning, implementation, and performance management; the capacity to drive progress; and the stage of delivery (on a scale from one to four, where four is the most advanced). This is then combined with recent performance against the trajectory, as well as data on any other relevant leading indicators, to generate an overall judgment on the likelihood of delivery for the priority in question (Exhibit 4). For all four categories and the overall judgment, ratings should be on a four-point scale in order to prevent a regression to the middle and to force a decision about whether a priority is more on track

### Exhibit 3

## Monthly notes provide a short-term synopsis on the progress of delivery plans.

### Sample monthly note

#### Overall assessment: Off track

##### Update on progress

- To reach an 85% graduation rate at our current cohort size, we would need 39,400 graduates. Currently, we graduate approximately 29,400 students. Therefore, we need 10,000 additional graduates.
- Baseline growth and existing programs may reduce that gap by 5,350. We have evidence to suggest that this goal is possible.
- This leaves a remaining gap of 4,650 graduates (see trajectory on following page).

##### Issues facing delivery

- A strategy for reaching the remaining 4,650 additional graduates has yet to be developed.
- Programs are currently writing—but have not completed—detailed delivery plans for reaching the 4,650 students.
- The quality of data supporting the trajectory is weak for most programs.

#### Next steps










- The first stocktake will be held March 15.
- The delivery unit is working with program staff to write delivery plans for program goals, expected by August 18. These will build toward a delivery plan for reaching the 85% goal.
- The strategy unit is developing a strategy for closing the gap of 4,650 additional students. Specific ideas for accessing those students are being discussed.
- A completion date for the overall delivery plan will be decided within two weeks.

#### Supporting data

- The chart shows our trajectory toward the 85% graduation-rate goal based on our current programs.
- This is a *preliminary* projection that will evolve as we track progress, test assumptions, and make decisions.
- This is our best estimate of what our current programs can accomplish based on good implementation and the data available today.

Exhibit 4

### An assessment framework shows barriers to progress and risks to delivery for key priorities.

Judgment	Rating	Rationale summary	Example
<b>Degree of challenge</b> (L/M/H/VH) <sup>1</sup>	<b>H</b>	The challenge is substantial but has been overcome in other regions.	Recent performance against trajectory and milestones ↓ Likelihood of delivery 
<b>Quality of planning, implementation, and performance management</b>  Understanding the challenge  Governance; program and project management  Managing performance		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Program plans have been developed.</li> <li>• Annual milestones and lead indicators have been set.</li> <li>• Most programs aimed at this target currently have weak evidence of efficacy.</li> </ul>	
<b>Capacity to drive progress</b>  Understanding and structure of the delivery chain  Engaging the delivery chain  Leadership and culture		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data are somewhat centralized but access can be a challenge.</li> <li>• Critical people in the delivery chain are overloaded.</li> <li>• Unpredictability of funding makes planning difficult.</li> </ul>	
<b>Stage of delivery</b> (1/2/3/4)	<b>1</b>	The delivery chain and strategic plans are being formed now.	

■ Highly problematic: requires urgent and decisive action    
 ▨ Problematic: requires substantial attention, and some aspects need urgent attention  
▨ Mixed: some aspects require substantial attention, but some are good    
 ■ Good: requires refinement and systematic implementation

<sup>1</sup>Scale: low, medium, high, very high.

or off track. Assessing the current likelihood of delivery, while imprecise, is a critical management prod to ensure that the system accounts for recent developments and charts new strategic paths as needed.



experience in setting goals and implementing new strategies, and they should reflect on the reasons they did not achieve their goals. Following the key steps described here—building a delivery unit to manage the change, setting targets and trajectories, and establishing routines—can help overcome the challenges of past reform efforts. ○

The tenets of Deliverology can be useful to leaders of public-sector systems committed to results. Such leaders should start by evaluating their past