It's America, where you stand up to be accountable

How can public bodies improve their services? Perri 6 considers performance management US-style, which 'puts a face on the problem'

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When Martin O'Malley was elected mayor of Baltimore in 1999, he was a man in a hurry.

Frustrated by what he regarded as the poor quality of public services, and suspicious of the calibre and commitment of service managers, he introduced CitiStat - a system of decision-making for improved performance management and resource allocation.

Now adopted by other US cities, CitiStat is based on a particular kind of performance review meeting and supported by off-the-shelf hardware and software.

In its technical aspects, CitiStat is a generalisation of a programme called CompStat developed for the New York Police Department. That involved the detailed collation of performance statistics about every police activity and about the distribution of incidents, presented graphically using a geographical information system. The idea was to match effort to reported incidents.

When an agency is brought into the CitiStat programme, a template is developed for reporting input, activity and output, and outcome indicators. Many items are standard ones, such as levels of staff sickness and expenditure; others are specific to each programme.

The agency supplies the CitiStat team in the mayor's office with a spreadsheet of raw data to the template. CitiStat analysts use it and other information they have accessed from the agency to prepare a briefing in a standard format for the mayor. Analysts may also use data from the city's call centre and make unannounced visits with digital cameras to depots and offices to gather evidence.

The agency is then called in to answer questions from the mayor, deputy mayor and the CitiStat team. The meetings take place in a special room in City Hall, laid out for confrontation. A podium stands on one side, in front of a screen. The agency manager is then examined on the rostrum and is required to justify her or his department's performance. Facing it are chairs and desks for the questioners and representatives of other departments, and in the centre sits the mayor.

Mayor O'Malley believes individual area managers are individually responsible for performance. Electronic maps used in CitiStat presentations show the name and often photographs of the area managers for each district, colourcoded by performance band. O'Malley calls this "putting a face on the problem".

During the meeting, the mayor or an analyst may check on claims made by agencies by telephoning an agency's call centre or office posing as a local resident. The conversation is relayed simultaneously to the whole meeting.

CitiStat analysts tell of an occasion when one agency chief denied that they possessed a certain type of truck. The mayor used a satellite photograph taken only a few minutes before to demonstrate that such trucks were indeed on one of the agency's sites.

The confrontational character of the review meeting is made clear by the language used by the CitiStat team to describe it and the tools used in it. One said that the ability to

relay live telephone conversations, to use digital photographs, to individualise responsibility on the GIS-generated maps, and to use satellite photographs meant that "it gets really fun" and that for the agency chiefs there is "not much opportunity to hide".

Several agency chief officers are said to have lost their jobs in the early months of the programme. High performers among individual managers are identified: the main visible rewards offered are free tickets to sports events, although it is thought that there are longer-term effects on promotion prospects. They are, however, not given pay increments nor are there rewards for high-performing agencies.

The analysts reject the idea that the mayor and his CitiStat team are "micro-managing". "It's not that we are saying, 'You should put Crew 4 over here'," one said, "No. We're saying 'Have you thought about that: why is Crew 4 not over there?'... It's holding them accountable that makes them manage.'

This confrontational and individualised accountability defines the way in which the technology is used in CitiStat, and not the other way around. The digital tools are, as O'Malley freely admits, much less important than what goes on during the meetings, and in the relationship between the agencies and the Mayor's CitiStat team.

The CitiStat approach has been applied in the UK. One of the first authorities to explore the use of the method has been the London borough of Barnet, using the title of "FirstStat". Barnet's meetings are conducted between chief officers and the chief executive, finance, human resources and information technology heads, and a diagonal slice of service staff. Cabinet challenge events link the process to elected members but, unlike Baltimore, FirstStat itself takes place without them. The borough's departments report on a two-monthly cycle.

Attention has been given to such issues as dealing with abandoned vehicles, fly-tipping, graffiti, respite care, staff sickness and late invoicing. The authority has a plan to extend the approach to more cross-cutting issues and to cover services provided by local voluntary bodies under contract. The Barnet briefing document stresses that the chief executive seeks to avoid an autocratic role, that managers have been "careful not to emulate the 'blood on the carpet' scenes witnessed in the US" and that meetings focus as much on praise as on blame.

• Dr Perri 6 is a senior research fellow at the University of Birmingham. This is an extract from The next phase: rewiring local decision making for political judgement, published by the New Local Government Network