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THE
THE RESULTS-BASED ACCOUNTABILITY™ GUIDE

The *Results-Based Accountability™ Guide* uses and is based upon concepts and materials developed by Mark Friedman, author of *Trying Hard is Not Good Enough* (Trafford 2005) and founder and director of the Fiscal Policy Studies Institute.

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I. INTRODUCTION

What is Results-Based Accountability™?

Results-Based Accountability™ ("RBA") is a *disciplined way of thinking and taking action* used by communities to improve the lives of children, families and the community as a whole. RBA is also used by agencies to improve the performance of their programs.

How does RBA work?

RBA *starts with ends and works backward, step by step, towards means*. For communities, the ends are conditions of well-being for children, families and the community as a whole. For example: "Residents with good jobs," "Children ready for school," or "A safe and clean neighborhood" or even more specific conditions such as "Public spaces without graffiti," or "A place where neighbors know each other." For programs, the ends are how customers are better off when the program works the way it should. For example: The percentage of people in the job training program who get and keep good paying jobs.

Why use RBA?

RBA improves the lives of children, families, and communities and the performance of programs because RBA:

- gets from talk to action quickly;
- is a simple, common sense process that everyone can understand;
- helps groups to surface and challenge assumptions that can be barriers to innovation;
- builds collaboration and consensus; and
- uses data and transparency to ensure accountability for both the well being of children, families and communities and the performance of programs.

What is the RBA Guide?

The RBA Guide is a tool for leading or facilitating a group in the use of RBA in decision making. The RBA Guide is designed to be used as a roadmap with which to navigate the complete RBA decision-making process, step-by-step.

II. THE RBA "TURN-THE-CURVE" TEMPLATE

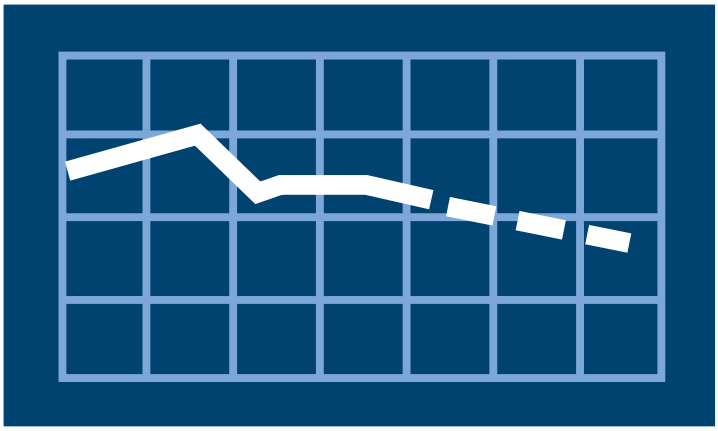
This template is an overview of the step-by-step RBA "turn-the-curve" decision-making process.

1 What is the "end"?

Choose either a result and indicator or a performance measure.

2 How are we doing?

Graph the historic baseline and forecast for the indicator or performance measure.



3 What is the story behind the curve of the baseline?

Briefly explain the story behind the baseline: the factors (positive and negative, internal and external) that are most strongly influencing the curve of the baseline.

4 Who are partners who have a role to play in turning the curve?

Identify partners who might have a role to play in turning the curve of the baseline.

5 What works to turn the curve?

Determine what would work to turn the curve of the baseline.
Include no-cost/low-cost strategies.

6 What do we propose to do to turn the curve?

Determine what you and your partners propose to do to turn the curve of the baseline.

III. STEP-BY-STEP RBA TURN-THE-CURVE PROCESS

The following is a step-by-step guide for conducting an RBA decision-making process to get from talk to action.

1. What is the end?

The starting point in "turn-the-curve" decision making is to identify the desired "end." Is it to improve the quality of life for a population (population accountability) or does it concern how well a program, agency or service system is performing (performance accountability)?[1]

If the focus is Population Accountability:

- Begin by identifying a *population* (e.g., all children in a county).
- Next ask what quality of life or condition is desired for that population (e.g., entering school fully ready) - which is called a "*result*."
- Then ask how will the extent to which that result is being achieved be gauged (e.g., a developmental assessment of kindergartners), which is called an "*indicator*."

To select an indicator (2 or 3 at the most) for a result, use the following criteria:

■ **Communication Power:** Does this indicator communicate to a broad range of audiences? Would those who pay attention to your work (*e.g.,* voters, legislators, agency program officers) understand what this measure means?

■ **Proxy Power:** Does this indicator say something of central importance about the result? Is this indicator a good proxy for other indicators? Data tend to run in a "herd" - in the same direction. Pick an indicator that will tend to run with the herd of all of the other indicators that could be used (so it is possible to use only 1 to 3 indicators).

■ **Data Power:** Is there quality data for this indicator on a timely basis? To be credible, the data must be consistent and reliable. And timeliness is necessary to track progress.[2]

If you are focused on Performance Accountability:

- Begin by identifying the program, agency, or service system.
- Next select a performance measure. There are three kinds of performance measures:
  - How much are we doing?
  - How well are we doing it?
  - Is anyone better off?

Appendix A describes the process for developing and selecting performance measures.

2. How are we doing?

After you have selected your indicator or performance measure, present the corresponding data on a graph with:

1 This distinction between population and performance accountability allows two different assessments: first, what efforts and programs should be undertaken to achieve a desired quality of life or "result" and, second, how well are those efforts and programs performing. This distinction also recognizes that a single program, agency or service system cannot take sole responsibility (or credit) for achieving a desired result.

2 Note: If an indicator is strong on the first two criteria but data is not available, consider putting that indicator onto a "data development agenda."

(a) an historic baseline (at least 5 years of data, if available) and

(b) a forecast *assuming no change in your current level of effort* (for 3 - 5 years, if possible).

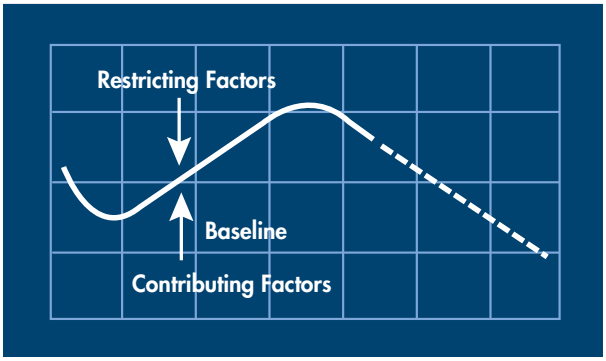
To provide the forecast, you will need to complete step 3, the "Story Behind the Curve." Turn-the-curve decision making is systematically determining the best actions to take to improve on the forecasted trend for the baseline - to "turn the curve."

3. What is the story behind the curve?

In this section, list the key factors underlying the historic baseline and forecast for the indicator or performance measure. Identify: (1) contributing factors that are supporting progress and (2) restricting factors that are hindering progress. Progress is defined as turning the curve of the baseline (or accelerating the curve if it is already headed in the right direction).

This "force field analysis," below, illustrates how factors may be viewed according to their contributing and restricting influences on the curve of the baseline.

Force Field Analysis



It is important to identify not just the most immediate and easily observed factors impacting the baseline (i.e., the "proximate causes"), but to engage in the kind of rigorous analysis that will identify the underlying or more systemic factors (i.e., the "root causes"). It is also important to conduct additional research where necessary and feasible.

Once the root causes have been identified, prioritize those root causes according to which have the greatest influence on progress and, therefore, are the most critical to address to improve progress.

The best format is a "bullet" for each root cause with a brief header that is underlined and a brief description of the root cause.

4. Who are partners who have a role to play in turning the curve?

Identify potential partners who may have a role to play in improving progress. The identification of root causes impacting progress will often point the way to the types of partners who should be engaged.

5. What works to turn the curve?

Before selecting a strategy to undertake to turn the curve of the baseline, it is necessary to determine whether what would work to turn the curve is known. And it is important to be sure to explore the full range of options for strategies. A strategy may, of course, involve the discontinuation of existing activities as well as the implementation of new ones. And a strategy should be multi-year and integrated. The following are criteria to consider in developing options:

- *Does the option address one or more of the root causes you have identified?*

  The alignment of a proposed option with a root cause provides the rationale for selecting that particular option: it is the link between the "end" (as measured by the indicator or performance measure and the "means" (the strategy).

- *Is the proposed option evidence-based?*

  What research or other evidence is available to demonstrate that the strategy has a reasonable chance of turning the curve of the baseline? There may, of course, be times that data are limited and you must move forward with the best judgment of experienced professionals; however, in most cases a strategy should be supported by research or evidence.

- *Have "no-cost/low-cost" options been developed?*

  Funding is often a critical need and careful thought must be given to ways to increase funding where needed. However, it is equally important to explore "no-cost/low-cost" options (*i.e.,* options that may be pursued with existing resources). This line of inquiry, in turn, can help to surface outdated assumptions that stand in the way of innovation.

- Is additional research necessary to determine what would work or to identify other options?

6. What do we propose to do to turn the curve?

Selecting the proposed strategy involves applying four criteria to each of the options: leverage, feasibility (or reach), specificity, and values.

■ **Leverage:** *How strongly will the proposed strategy impact progress as measured by the baselines?*

Given that resources are finite, decisions with respect to the dedication of resources to a proposed strategy must be based on the expected impact of those resources on progress. One way to gauge impact is to assess the importance of the underlying root cause(s) an option is designed to address. In other words, the strategy that is proposed should address the most important root causes identified and, therefore, be geared to having the greatest potential impact on the trend for the corresponding baseline. This concept is sometimes referred to as "leverage."

■ **Feasibility (or reach).** *Is the proposed strategy feasible?*

Can it be done? This question is the necessary counterpart to the question of leverage. Questions of feasibility should be handled so as not to limit innovation. Sometimes the consideration of an apparently infeasible option will be the catalyst in the thinking process that leads to a highly creative and feasible option. Once ways to improve feasibility have been adequately explored, however, then leverage and feasibility must be weighed and balanced in choosing the strategy. A strategy that has high leverage and high feasibility will, of course, be a prime candidate for action. The choice among other options, however, will likely involve trade-offs between leverage and feasibility and will need to be weighed accordingly.

■ **Specificity.** *Is the strategy specific enough to be implemented?*

Is there a timeline with deliverables that answers the questions: *Who? What? When? Where? How?* There should be budget detail for the strategy, including implications for future budgets.

■ **Values.** *Is the strategy consistent with the values of the community and/or agency?*

Once the proposed strategies are selected, list them in order of priority. The best format is a "bullet" for each strategy which provides a brief header that is underlined and a brief description of the strategy.

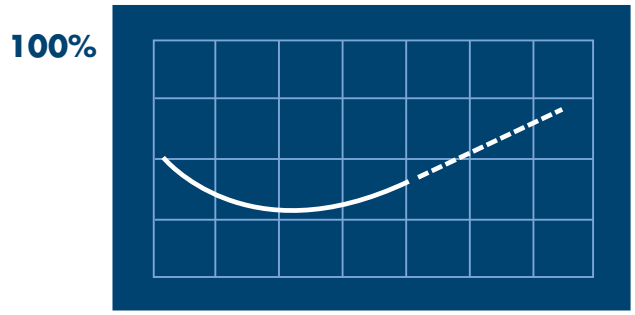
IV. AN ACCOUNTABILITY TOOL

The "Turn-the-Curve" template is not meant to be used to produce a static document; rather, it is intended to be used as a tool. On an ongoing basis, in consultation with key partners, stakeholders should use the data to assess progress and systematically adjust strategies where necessary to improve progress. The following schematic, a succinct RBA reporting format, demonstrates the nature of this ongoing process.

Results-Based Accountability™

Result and Indicator or Performance Measure

Data presented as a graph, with both an historic baseline and a forecast.



Story behind the curve

Key factors (positive and negative, internal and external) impacting progress (*i.e.,* impacting the curve of the baseline).

What we propose to do to improve progress

Feasible, high-impact actions/strategies with specific timelines and deliverables. Partners with roles to play in improving progress.

Monitor both implementation and the baseline for improvement and, as new data are obtained, repeat the process.

APPENDIX A

Performance Measures

Introduction

The selection of performance measures is the first and most essential step in the performance planning process for each element of the Population Accountability strategy. The following directions will assist you in choosing your headline performance measures.

What are Performance Measures?

Your agency/division/program provides services that improve, in some way, the quality of life of its customers/clients. Performance measures simply give you the means to know how well the agency/division/program is doing at providing those services and improving those lives.
A good performance measure gives you and your staff the ability to make changes and see whether those changes improve the agency/division/program's performance, that is, its ability to improve customers/clients' quality of life.

Importantly, performance measures are data - they quantitatively measure the agency/division/program's performance.

The following Data Quadrant, Figure 1, is a useful tool for sorting and categorizing performance measures.

Sorting Performance Measures: The Data Quadrant

All performance measures fit into one of four categories. The categories, the four quadrants, are derived from the intersection of *quantity* and *quality* and *effort* and *effect*.

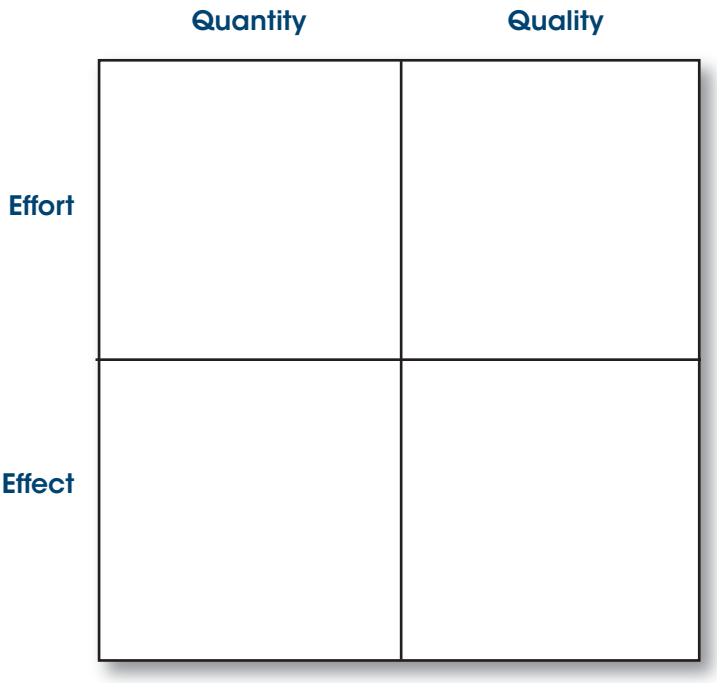


Figure 1

The rows separate measures about effort (what is done and how well) from measures about effect (the change or impact that resulted), the columns separate measures about quantity (of the effort or effect) from measures about quality (of the effort or effect).

Figure 2 shows how these combinations lead to three universal performance measures: *How much did we do? How well did we do it? Is anyone better off?* The most important performance measures are those that tell us whether our clients or customers are better off as a consequence of receiving the services ("client results," the lower left and right quadrants). The second most important measures are those that tell us whether the service or activity is done well (upper right quadrant). The least important measures are those that tell us what and how much we do. To answer the two most important questions, that is, to identify candidate for the most important performance measures, follow the following steps, using the Data Quadrant.

Step 1: How much did we do? *Upper Left Quadrant*

First, list the number of clients served. Distinguish different sets of clients as appropriate. Next, list the activities or services the department/division/program performs for its clients. Each activity or service should be listed as a measure. For example, "child welfare casework" becomes "# of child welfare cases" or "# of FTEs conducting child welfare case work." "Road maintenance" becomes "# of miles of road maintained." "Stream monitoring" becomes "# of stream sites monitored." "Provide health care" become "number of patients treated."

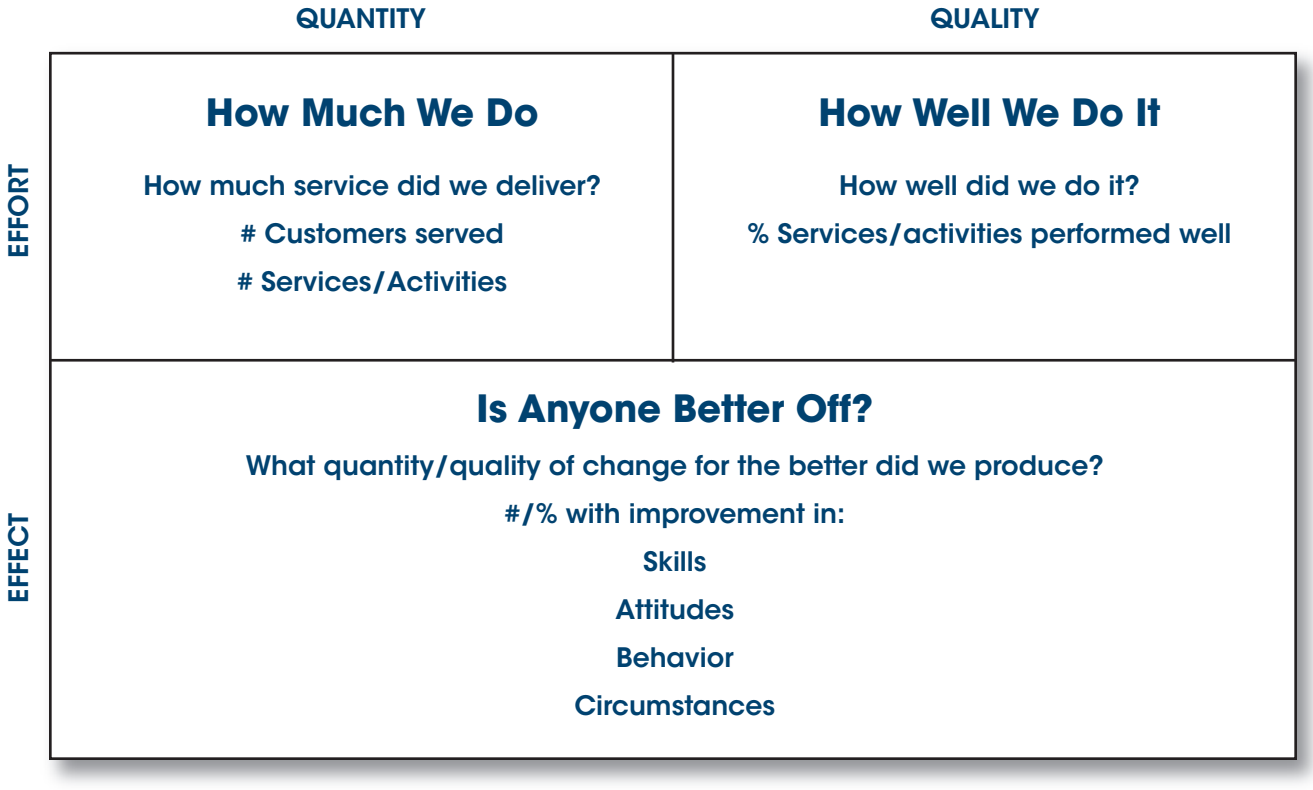


Figure 2

Step 2: How well did we do it? *Upper Right Quadrant*

This quadrant is where most traditional performance measures are found. For each service or activity listed in the upper left quadrant, choose those measures that will tell you if that activity was performed well (or poorly). The measures should be specific. For example, ratio of workers to child abuse/neglect cases; percent of maintenance conducted on time; average number of sites monitored per month; percent of invoices paid in 30 days; percent of patients treated in less than an hour; percent of training staff with training certification.

Step 3: Is anyone better off? *Lower Left and Lower Right Quadrants*

Ask "In what ways are your clients better off as a result of getting the service in question? How would we know, in measurable terms, if they were better off?" Create pairs of measures (# and %) for each answer. Four categories cover most of this territory: skills/knowledge, attitude, behavior, and circumstances (e.g., a child succeeding in first grade or a parent fully employed). Consider all of these categories in developing measures of whether clients are better off. Examples are: #/% of child abuse/neglect cases that have repeat child abuse/neglect; #/% of road miles in top-rated condition; #/% of cited water quality offenders who fully comply; #/% of repeat audit findings;

Selecting Headline Performance Measures

Key to ensuring the usefulness of performance measures is to limit the number used. In most cases, select from the list of candidate measures 3 to 5 "headline measures" (in total, from both the upper right and lower right quadrants). To select these headline measures, rate each candidate measure using the following three criteria (similar to the criteria for selecting indicators):

Communication Power: Does this measure communicate to a broad range of audiences? Would those who pay attention to your work (*e.g.,* voters, legislators, agency program officers) understand what this measure means?

Proxy Power: Does this measure say something of central importance about your department/division/program? Is this measure a good proxy for other measures? For example, reading on grade level might be considered a proxy for other measures such as attendance, quality of the curriculum, quality of the teachers, etc.

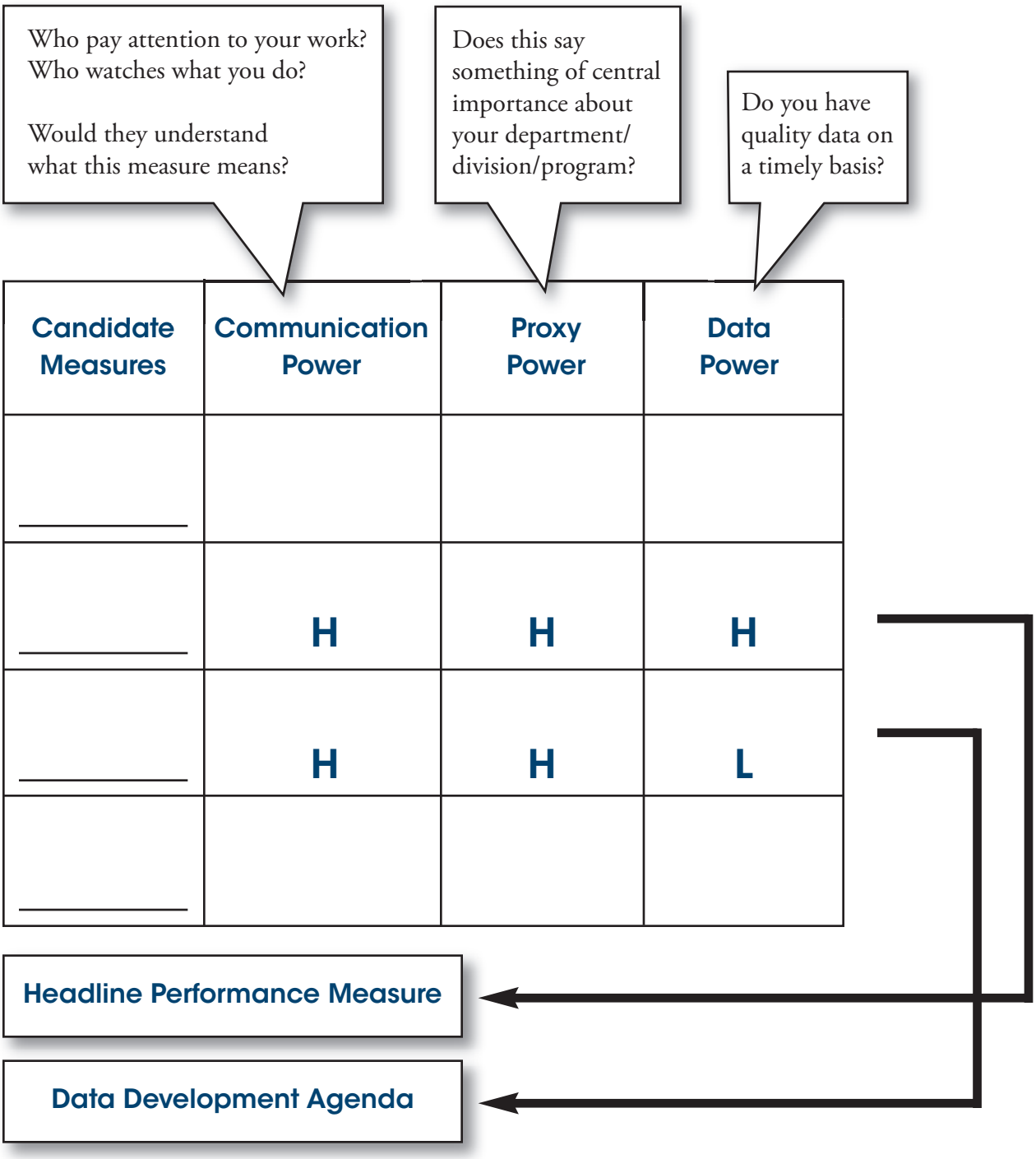
Data Power: Do you have quality data for this measure on a timely basis? To be credible, the data must be consistent and reliable. And timeliness is necessary to track progress.

Rate each candidate measure "high," "medium," or "low" for each criterion. Use a chart, like the one shown below, "Selecting Headline Performance Measures." The candidate measures that have high ratings for all three criteria are good choices for headline measures.

For those measures that are rated high for communication and proxy power, but medium or low for data power, start a data development agenda. These are measures for which you might want to invest resources to develop quality data that would be available on a timely basis.

Selecting Headline Performance Measures

Directions: List candidate performance measures and rate each as **H**igh, **M**edium, or **L**ow on each criterion: Communication Power, Proxy Power, and Data Power.



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