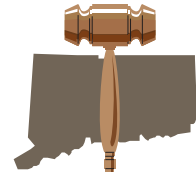# Connecticut Appropriations Committee

Glossary of RBA Terms Used in Connecticut*

The Language of Accountability

The most common problem in Results Based Accountability or any similar work is the problem of language. People come to the table from many different disciplines and many different walks of life. And the way in which we talk about programs, services and populations varies all over the map. This means that the usual state of affairs in planning for children, families, adults, elders and communities is a Tower of Babel, where no one really knows what the other person is saying, but everyone politely pretends that they do. As a consequence, the work is slow, frustrating and often ineffective.

It is possible to exercise language discipline. And the way to do this is to *agree on a set of definitions that start with ideas and not words.* Words are just labels for ideas. And the same idea can have many different labels. The following six ideas are central to RBA. The labels for these ideas are those chosen by the Appropriations Committee in Connecticut to ensure that everyone means the same thing when they use these ideas.

RESULTS are conditions of well-being for entire populations — children, adults, families or communities, stated in plain English. They are things that voters and taxpayers can understand. They are not about programs or agencies or government jargon. Results include: "healthy children, children ready for school, children succeeding in school, children staying out of trouble, strong families, elders living with dignity in settings they prefer, safe communities, a healthy clean environment, a prosperous economy." *In Connecticut, we refer to population results, or quality of life results.*

INDICATORS are measures that help quantify the achievement of a population result. They answer the question "How would we recognize these results in measurable terms if we fell over them?" So, for example, the rate of low-birth weight babies helps quantify whether we're getting healthy births or not. Third grade reading scores help quantify whether children are succeeding in school today, and whether they were ready for school three years ago. The crime rate helps quantify whether we are living in safe communities, etc. *Indicators refer only to whole populations, not programs.*

STRATEGIES are coherent collections of actions which have a reasoned chance of improving results. Strategies are made up of *our best thinking about what works*, and they include the contributions of many partners. No single action by any one agency can create the improved results we want and need. Programs are not themselves strategies; they are expressions of strategies. *Programs are specific ways of implementing strategies*, usually targeted toward a specific

*Adopted from Mark Friedman's Results Accountability Implementation Guide,
 http://www.raguide.org/RA/the_language_of_accountability.htm

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sub-group within the population. For example, a strategy of family support may have as one expression the program Nurturing Families Network, which is targeted at new parents at risk of abusing or neglecting their newborn child.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES are measures of how well public and private programs and agencies are working. The most important performance measures tell us whether the clients or customers of the service are better off. Measures that track the quality of the program are also important. *In Connecticut, we refer to measures of whether are clients being better off as client outcomes* (to distinguish them from cross-community population results for all children, adults or families). Performance measure can apply to entire agencies, service delivery systems, or individual programs.

BASELINES are what we call a trend line of an indicator or program measure when presented in a chart. The baseline consists of the *history of the measure* (what the measure has been for the last 3-5 years) and the *forecast of where the measure will be* in 3-5 years if we keep doing what we are doing.

TURNING THE CURVE describes efforts to improve the direction or rate of change in the baseline of an indicator or performance measure. It is also a short-hand for the process of determining whether the current and projected level on an indicator or performance measure is acceptable or requires change.

Ends and Means are an important distinction in RBA. Results and indicators are about the ends we want for children and families. Strategies, programs, and performance measures are about the means to get there. Processes that fail to make this crucial distinction often mix up ends and means. Ends are usually something everyone can agree on (e.g., people with better health, more education, safer streets). This agreement forms a common ground that allows the discussions to focus on the means, about which there are often legitimate differences of opinion that can be explored. Failed processes tend to get mired in a mixed discussion about ends and means that causes hopeless confusion and disillusionment. Clarity and discipline about language at the start will help you take your work from talk to action.

What about Mission and Vision, Values, Benchmarks, Goals, Objectives, Problems, Issues, Inputs and Outputs? Many of us have grown up with these traditional words in strategic planning and budgeting. Where do they fit? *Remember that words are just labels for ideas.* These seven words have no natural standard definition that bridges across all the different ways they are used. They are terms of art which can and are used to label many different ideas. This is why we pay so much attention to getting language discipline straight at the very beginning. It's the ideas that are important not the words. *To avoid confusion, Connecticut does not use these words in its RBA work.* For more information on how these words can be used in other contexts, see Mark Friedman's discussion of The Language of Accountability at the web site below.