

ENHANCING PROGRAM PERFORMANCE

You've no doubt heard the expression; practice makes perfect. Why then do we do the opposite when it comes to the planning and delivery of government programs?

Governments invest heavily in program delivery plans – this is a good thing.

Developing detailed program delivery plans based on wide-ranging consultation is necessary; however, by the very nature of their development, governments often commit to relatively narrow program delivery paths with poor adaptive capacity.

Findings of program reviews often return similar themes.

While Aither's program evaluations and reviews have varied across a range of scales, we continually find that change is often one of the only constants in program delivery. Available budgets, policy and program priorities, even the operating environments are never static. So why don't governments adopt a more proactive, flexible, adaptive and enabling approach to program delivery?

Programs with robust MERI arrangements realise benefits. Programs imbedded with a robust monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement (MERI) process are more resilient to change, more often return

maximum value on every dollar spent, and also allow for more effective demonstration of this value.

MERI process can be complex. Despite its merit, understanding and implementing the MERI process can be complex for both program deliverer and stakeholders. Broadly based on the scientific method of hypothesis-experiment-evaluation, the 'plan-do-review' approach is a more accessible application of this MERI thinking.

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THE PLAN-DO-REVIEW PROCESS:

- **Plans are important, but they are a means to an end, not the end in themselves.** Plans should be developed within short timeframes and seen as living documents. They should contain the combined knowledge and articulate SMART goals. Too often, programs are plagued by 'over reach' – goals that are neither achievable nor realistic. Fundamentally plans should put forward enabling strategies that provide the direction and the primary knowledge base for on-going development and improvement of programs in response to evolving operating environments.
- **Program implementation should have effective MERI at its heart.** MERI forms the basis of adaptive delivery in the do phase. Performance management should be handled both proactively, through clear guidance or standards, and reactively through performance audits. Service and funding agreements should reference these performance standards so that expectations are clear and delivery agents can be held to account.
- **Adaptive management requires progressive implementation associated with systematic review, monitoring and interpretation of outcomes.** At a fundamental level accountability should be recast. MERI processes must combine short-term output monitoring to ensure delivery is both efficient and effective with long-term outcome monitoring that demonstrates that the program's goals are being achieved.

Plans must be robust but flexible.

Plans should articulate performance outcomes, but should also be updated in response to changes observed through time. Plans should enable programs to deliver intended outcomes, to capitalise on shifting social and political climates, and to adapt to the requirements of future funding opportunities.

Do more of what's working and less of what's not.

Adaptive delivery accepts that cautiously intervening in a system, rather than attempting a one-off fix, is the best and most economical way to treat problems with programs related to natural resource management. This is contrary to the traditional capital works-maintenance paradigm of many management agencies.

Too often review and accountability is seen in a negative light.

Failure to undertake transparent review and accountability processes results in so-called failures being hidden and the opportunity to learn is lost.

Management of natural resource programs is complex. The variability in program delivery underscores the need for delivery to be both robust and sufficiently flexible to realise maximum value. Programs imbedded with MERI processes foster this.



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