

A Task Force with Teeth?

Driving City Performance in Lawrence, MA

Educator Guide

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Overview

This Educator Guide is designed to assist instructors in teaching this case to students and practitioners. It is based on [case pedagogy](#), which invites participants to put themselves in the shoes of the protagonist(s) of the case and imagine how they would respond to the circumstances. Participants should read the teaching case in advance and identify key issues as a preliminary step toward meeting the learning objectives. Instructors may then use the time in the classroom to guide participants in exploring the issues and examining the challenges in the case; to introduce key concepts, tools, and frameworks; and to assist participants in applying their learning to their own environments and challenges.

This guide includes learning objectives, a synopsis, key questions, a roadmap for discussion, and appendices with additional pedagogical information and theoretical applications. The roadmap and appendices are offered to initiate meaningful conversation but are by no means the only way to teach the case. Each educator or facilitator should feel free to design their own teaching plans; both the structure and the time allotted for each component are suggestions.

Learning Objectives

The overarching learning objective of this case is to help leaders and practitioners examine the challenges of building capabilities for problem-oriented government action. More specifically, participants and students will have the opportunity to learn the following:

- How to diagnose a problem: Unpack the different facets of a problem, distinguishing its root causes, symptoms, and consequences.
- How to find the right data for the problem: Identify the kind of data needed to better understand performance and progress against benchmarks and milestones.
- How to know the right collaboration for the problem: Identify the type of cross-boundary collaboration needed to effectively and efficiently manage a problem.
- How to define the role of leadership: Gain a better understanding of the role of leadership in driving performance, leading change, holding people accountable, and motivating collaborators.

- How to identify challenges: Gain a better understanding of what the challenges are in problem-oriented work in a large and complex government bureaucracy.

Case Synopsis

After taking office, Mayor Daniel Rivera created a new task force to combat blight in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Although blight and distressed properties were not on Rivera's campaign agenda, he soon realized the matter required his attention. The issue was complex and far reaching, impacting his city's public health and safety, inequality, and real estate prices. However, on-the-ground progress was elusive, as the list of distressed properties was growing faster than the city could act to resolve them.

Rivera seemed to have little confidence in his staff, and he had limited flexibility to change staffing resources on a short-term basis. Still, he endeavored to motivate his team with a forceful management style. But creating a united task force from entrenched, disparate groups posed challenges. Effecting change is slow, and Rivera often felt frustrated with the task force.

One area of progress, however, was data collection. The case describes a data tracker for collecting information on distressed properties from various sources, containing over 600 properties with more than forty input fields. The case paints a picture of a city that embarked on a journey to become more data driven, collaborative, and performance-oriented, but had not yet progressed beyond a rudimentarily level in developing these capabilities. Participants and students are pushed to consider: *Once a team has been formed and data has been collected, how does one use it across departments to address pressing problems effectively? How do you map out milestones toward solving a problem that will expedite the process and motivate a diverse team?*

Key Questions

1. How did Mayor Rivera define success for the distressed properties task force?
2. How would you characterize the task force in terms of its composition and way of working? What aspects are familiar to you? What aspects surprised you?
3. What data did the mayor and the task force use to do the following?
 - Identify, diagnose, and monitor the problem(s)
 - Manage performance of the task force and its members
 - Engage with external stakeholders, including citizens
4. If you were in Mayor Rivera's position, what would your next step(s) have been towards improving the situation, and why? How would you have known if the task force's performance was improving?

Roadmap for Discussion (See Appendix 1.)

Introduction (3-10 minutes): Briefly state the goal of the session in reference to the case, cite specific major conflicts facing the protagonist, and foreshadow broader learning objectives.

Exploration (15-45 minutes): Use class discussion, “buzz groups,” and board work to examine the issues and options confronting the protagonist.

Diagnosis (30-60 minutes): Introduce key concepts, frameworks, and tools to help participants pinpoint possible solutions to major conflicts in the case.

Application (15 minutes, optional): Ask participants to relate the concepts and frameworks to their own organizations’ challenges.

Wrap-Up and Takeaways (15 minutes): Review the learning objectives and discuss insights most relevant to the participants’ organizations’ challenges.

Introduction (3-10 minutes)

In your introductory remarks, briefly describe the case and frame the primary subject of the session: examining the challenges of building capabilities for problem-oriented government action.

Exploration (15-45 minutes):

Break into buzz groups to discuss or ask the class as a whole:

- *What did Mayor Rivera do well? What would you have done differently if you were in his position, and why?*

Participants may rush to critique the mayor and his actions but ensure that the class is able to identify and appreciate initial progress. Solicit answers and note them on the board. (See Board Plan, Appendix 2.) Sample answers:

What Mayor Rivera did well:

- He prioritized the safety of his residents by acting quickly to form a group to address blight and distressed properties.
- He incorporated data collection into his response to the city’s blight.
- He attended meetings to push progress.
- He was willing to work hard on a messy problem that was unlikely to help his re-election chances.

What Mayor Rivera might have done differently:

- He could have focused more on how to motivate team members to work together efficiently and considered different management styles. (One colleague said of Rivera’s management style, “He will push and push until you say, ‘OK, it’s done.’” See case p. 6.)
- He may have set short- and medium-term goals against which to track progress.

- He could have focused more on analyzing the data and being proactive, instead of simply reacting to issues.
- He could have tried to more deeply understand if processes could have been streamlined.

Diagnosis (30-60 minutes)

In this segment, go a bit deeper into the main challenges of making progress on eliminating blight in Lawrence. A good starting point in assessing any project is asking the three simple questions below. Note responses on the top section of the board. (See Board Plan, Appendix 2.) Sample responses are included as a guide.

- *What was the task force doing? (What were they actually doing to work on this problem?)*
 - Holding meetings
 - Performing inspections
 - Taking cases to court
 - Responding to calls
 - Collecting data
- *Why were they doing it? (What was the actual goal? What would success have looked like?)*
 - To address a public safety issue/decrease fires
 - To eliminate as many distressed properties as possible
 - To increase quality of life for residents
 - To maintain property values
- *How did they know if they were making progress? (What were they measuring?)*
 - Simply by getting through the list

After the participants have examined what the task force was doing, ask what the task force should have been doing. One option as a framework for answering that question is the Strategic Triangle and the Public Value Chain. (See Appendix 3.) A second framework is the Capacities Framework for Innovative Problem Solving. (See Appendix 4.) Yet a third framework that may be helpful is detailed in Appendix 5.

Ask what the task force should have been doing and note answers on the board underneath the initial responses. Sample answers are included as a guide.

- *What should the task force have been doing? (What should they actually have been doing to work on this problem?)*
 - Intervening earlier
 - Establishing clear goals
 - Using data to learn
- *Why should they have been doing it? (What was the actual goal? What would success have looked like?)*
 - To address a property before it lands on their list

- To motivate people and hold them accountable
- To be able to become more proactive in addressing the issue
- *How did they know if they were making progress? (What were they measuring?)*
 - If they were preventing properties from ever getting to their list
 - If they were saving time and money
 - If they were reducing blight and improving living conditions

Application (optional, 15 minutes)

Have students work together in groups or in plenary to apply the concepts and frameworks to their own collaborative challenges.

Wrap Up and Takeaways (15 minutes)

Discuss insights most relevant to participants' organizations' challenges. Some sample, high-level takeaways to review after a productive discussion are the following:

- The key to innovative problem-solving is rethinking the problem and building capacity to innovate around it: collaborative capacity, performance management capacity and data-analytic capacity.
- Data and technology are necessary tools, but cities have much more data than they utilize, and technology does not need to be expensive.
- The most basic questions are the hardest to answer and rarely asked: *What are we trying to accomplish, why, and how would we know we are effective in making progress?*
- Getting better at innovative problem-solving starts with comprehensive self-assessment and identifying areas for growth. The tools are available—it takes leadership and a learning organization to use them!

Suggested Reading

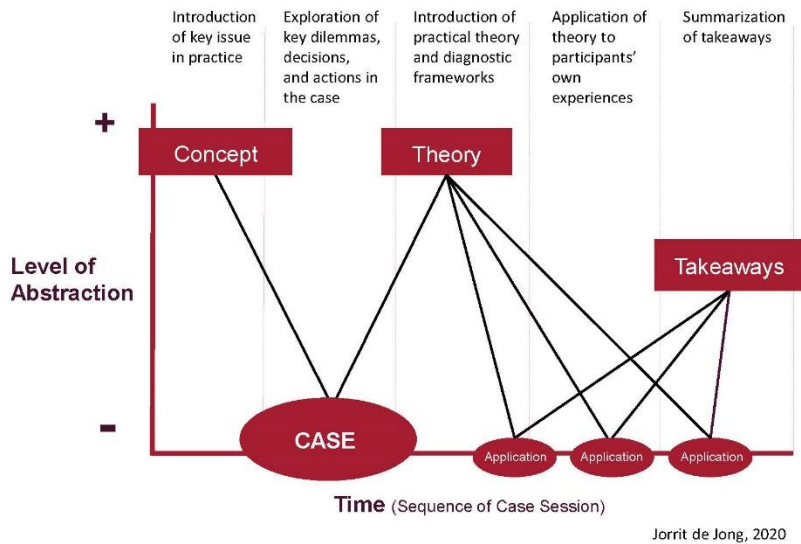
["Performance Leadership: 11 Better Practices That Can Ratchet Up Performance,"](#) by Robert Behn

["State Capabilities for Problem-Oriented Governance,"](#) by Quinton Mayne, Jorrit de Jong, and Fernando Fernandez-Monge

Appendices

Appendix 1 One Approach to Designing a Case Session

A case session aims to increase participants’ ability to use theory and frameworks to guide their thought and action in practical circumstances. To train the mental muscle and integrate theory and practice, a case session moves up and down in level of abstraction frequently, testing and refining abstract theory through practical application.



Appendix 2 Board Plans

Board 1

What Mayor Rivera did well:	What Mayor Rivera could have done differently:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ He prioritized resident safety. ○ He acted quickly. ○ He attended meetings. ○ He was willing to take on complex issue. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ He could have focused more on motivating/different management style. ○ He could have set intermediate goals. ○ He could have been more proactive. ○ He could have streamlined processes.

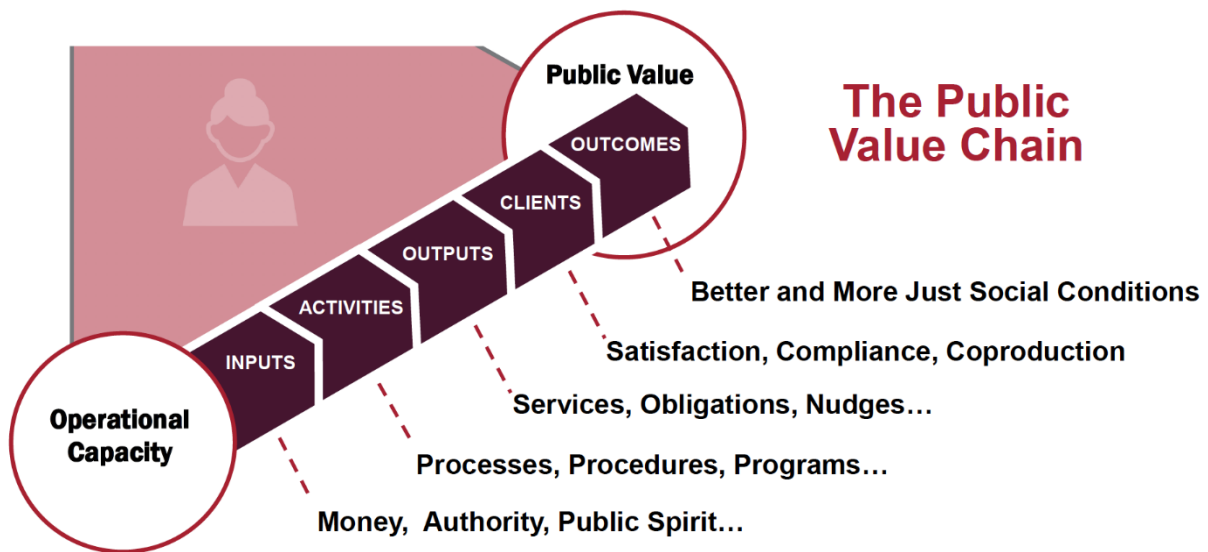
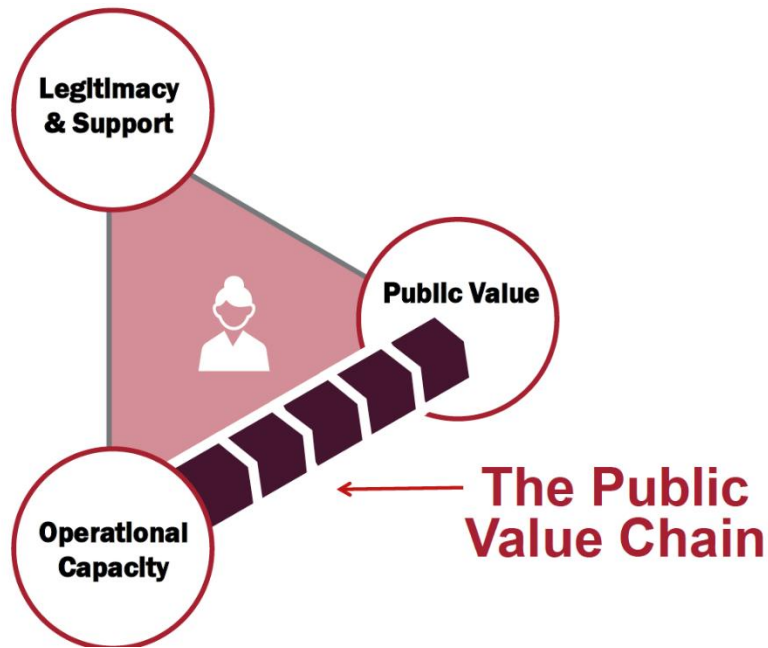
Board 2: What they did

What was the task force doing?	Why were they doing it?	How did they know if they were making progress?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Meetings ○ Inspections ○ Court cases ○ Calls ○ Collecting data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Safety ○ Decrease no. of distressed properties ○ Quality of life ○ Property values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ By getting through the list

Board 3: What they should have done

What should the task force have been doing?	Why should they have been doing it?	How did they know if they were making progress?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Intervening earlier ○ Establishing clearer goals ○ Using data to learn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ To address a property before it landed on their list ○ To motivate people and hold them accountable ○ To be able to become more proactive in addressing the issue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If they were preventing properties from ever getting to their list ○ If they were saving time and money

Appendix 3 The Strategic Triangle



Appendix 4 Capacities Framework for Innovative Problem-solving**Collaborative capacity**

- General question:
 - *Who is working on the problem?*
- Questions to drill deeper:
 - *Who do you need for capacity or support?*
 - *How strong, reliable, and effective is the collaboration?*
 - *What holds the group together?*

Data-analytic capacity

- General question:
 - *What do we know about progress?*
- Questions to drill deeper:
 - *What is the data picture?*
 - *Are data about the problem available?*
 - *Are data about government performance available?*
 - *Do we have the capability to analyze and use data?*
 - *Who is involved in collecting, processing, and analyzing the data?*
 - *Are data an integral part of the decision-making process?*

Performance review capacity

- General question:
 - *How do we learn, motivate, and hold people accountable?*
- Questions to drill deeper:
 - *What is the theory of change?*
 - *Are there clear goals and is there an idea about how to achieve them?*
 - *What are the assumptions underlying the means and ends?*
 - *Can you reverse engineer the desired social outcomes?*
 - *How are we managing performance?*
 - *Is there a system of performance review that motivates and holds people accountable?*
 - *How does the group learn and improve its performance?*

Appendix 5 “One Approach to Performance Leadership: 11 Better Practices That Can Ratchet Up Performance” (Robert D. Behn, Lecturer, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 2006)

Creating the Performance Framework:

- *What would it mean to do a better job?*

Practice 1: Articulate the organization’s mission.

Proclaim—clearly and frequently—what the organization is trying to accomplish.

Practice 2: Identify the organization’s most consequential performance deficit.

Determine what key failure is keeping the organization from achieving its mission.

Practice 3: Establish a specific performance target.

Specify what new level of success the organization needs to achieve next.

Practice 4: Clarify your theoretical link between target and mission.

Define (for yourself, at least) your mental model that explains how meeting the target will help accomplish the mission.

Driving Performance Improvement:

- *How can we mobilize our people?*

Practice 5: Monitor and report progress frequently, personally, and publicly.

Publish the data so that all teams know that you and everyone else knows how well every team is doing.

Practice 6: Build operational capacity.

Provide your teams with what they need to achieve their targets.

Practice 7: Take advantage of small wins to reward success.

Find lots of reasons to dramatize that you recognize and appreciate what teams have accomplished.

Practice 8: Create “esteem opportunities.”

Ensure that people can earn a sense of accomplishment and thus gain both self-esteem and the esteem of their peers.

Learning to Enhance Performance:

- *How must we change to do even better?*

Practice 9: Check for distortions and mission accomplishment.

Verify that people are achieving their targets in a way that furthers the mission (not in a way that fails to help or actually undermines this effort).

Practice 10: Analyze a large number and a wide variety of indicators.

Examine many forms of data—both quantitative and qualitative—to learn how your organization can improve.

Practice 11: Adjust mission, target, theory, monitoring and reporting, operational capacity, rewards, esteem opportunities, and/or analysis.

Act on this learning, making the modifications necessary to ratchet up performance again.