

GOVERNING

THE STATES AND LOCALITIES

What Good Data and Good People Can Accomplish

Houston's mayor has set the pace for leveraging data-driven management to improve city-government efficiency.

BY [STEPHEN GOLDSMITH](#) | DECEMBER 4, 2015

A people-first strategy for government recognizes that data without good people who can wisely and attentively use it produces little real value. Strong leaders recognize the importance of recruiting, training and retaining valuable employees. Annise Parker, who is wrapping up her third term as Houston's mayor, proved this point when in the wake of the 2008 recession she balanced necessary spending cuts with a data-driven effort to keep critical employees on board and motivated.

Parker has a long history of serving Houston. She was an at-large member of the city council from 1998 to 2004 and city controller from 2004 until she became mayor in January 2010. All along, she understood that having capable city personnel was paramount and that running a city well depends on equipping those people to perform their best.

Parker has brought those people to the forefront of her leadership strategy, using data to efficiently enhance their skills and maximize their impact. To develop city employees while remaining sensitive to budget constraints, Parker created [the Performance Improvement Division](#) (PID) in 2011 to leverage data-driven management and create a "culture of continuous improvement" for the city government. The division is located in the city's finance department to emphasize the strong connection between PID's work and good stewardship of public resources.

Data underlies every aspect of the division's activities, according to Jesse Bounds, PID's deputy assistant director. "We use data to find and validate improvement opportunities through performance reporting and data analytics," he wrote in a recent progress report. "We share data with stakeholders to have meaningful evidence-based discussions about performance. We provide data to the public, businesses and researchers to gain additional insights and develop community-driven solutions."

In 2013, Parker and PID implemented Lean Six Sigma, a proven process-improvement method that originated in manufacturing, to train more than 1,500 city employees in an effort to reduce process times, increase compliance and improve service delivery. This investment in workforce training had big results: Bounds said that projects completed through the program have resulted in approximately \$2.2 million in annual savings and additional revenue. In the Department of Neighborhoods, for instance, the Inspections and Public Service Division found ways to increase the number of managers in the field by 22 percent. This drove up both efficiency -- the inspection response time was 50 percent longer before the intervention -- and worker morale.

Mayor Parker also knew that she needed a clear and consistent channel to communicate successes (and areas needing improvement) to city staff and residents. She created Houston's "[Performance Insight](#)," one of the country's most robust public-facing performance-analytics dashboards. Internally, she uses its municipal data reports to hold departments accountable for performance, improve the way resources are allocated, and quantify the outcomes of policy and budgetary decisions. The interface also allows other users -- council members and interested citizens as well as municipal managers -- to gain insights on city operations, 311 requests, budget targets and personnel metrics.

By sharing the information that drives her own decisions with all relevant stakeholders, the mayor holds the city's government to a high level of accountability. When that information is underpinned by steady improvements in human performance, a system such as Performance Insight amounts to an executive acclamation of a staff's accomplishments, bringing the investment in good employees full circle. Parker has put her confidence in the people who are responsible for translating her leadership into the everyday tasks of government. This confidence, when combined with an internal culture of improvement, creates empowered employees and more efficient service delivery.

Local leaders are increasingly turning to data to make the gears of government turn faster. As cities become well-oiled machines, it is important to remember that any results-oriented organization has, as its core competency, the human component behind the numbers -- the people fueling the day-to-day production of government.