

Impossible jobs are possible, but thankless researchers say

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(Phys.org) —In most jobs, performance dictates employment, promotion and prestige. Two University of Arkansas education reform researchers, Robert Maranto and Patrick Wolf, looked at "impossible jobs," such as police commissioners and school superintendents, to determine whether success in those jobs was determined by performance.

"We know they're tough jobs, and a lot of leaders in these areas tend to shake things up. The question is if they shake things up and it works, does it help their career prospects?" Wolf said. "We found generally, no. If you're driving crime down, you're just as likely to be fired as if crime is going through the roof."

In a study published in the March issue of *Public Administration Review*, the researchers point to a lack of attention to performance-based measures as the driving factor leading to firings.

"The public, and even mayors, traditionally haven't looked at things we can measure, things that say whether you're doing the job or not. What they do look at is perception, and they also look a lot at their political interests," Maranto said.

Wolf and Maranto ultimately determined that "impossible jobs" are possible, but only if someone has good leadership skills, management support from their boss and people who are willing to pay the political price.

"Once they've done their thing, though, the next person who comes along has it much easier. The changes are part of the organizational routine; it's no longer something crazy. Not only that, but people can look back and see that it's worked," Maranto said. "They got rid of the change agent but kept the change."

The study looked at two different cases where an outsider known for improving poor agencies was brought into a failing system. The outsiders, William Bratton and Michele Rhee, implemented drastic changes in the New York [City Police Department](#) and the Washington, D.C., school district, respectively, and turned their departments around. Both paid the price with their jobs.

William Bratton took over as the New York City police commissioner in 1993, following Rudy Giuliani's mayoral victory over incumbent David Dinkins. Giuliani, who sought to lower the high crime rate in New York City, gave Bratton the resources and support he needed to accomplish the "impossible" job he had been given.

Bratton tackled the issues at the bottom end of the criminal food chain. Focusing on minor crimes, such as subway turnstile jumping, Bratton sent "a message that the police controlled the streets and would not tolerate crimes," Maranto said.

Officers were able to use new information technology to check the criminal status of anyone they stopped for minor crimes, such as subway turnstile jumping, the researchers wrote. What police often found was that "petty" offenders had outstanding criminal warrants against them: the "minor" arrests got serious criminals off the streets and boosted police morale.

The CompStat program, which provided crime statistics in real time, gave Commissioner Bratton the ability to check the job performance of

precinct commanders, and replace low performers with new leaders who could do the job. According to the researchers, the ability to demote and fire, as well as the ability to promote and hire, are crucial tools for a leader to have.

"It's a lot easier to get people to accept innovation if there's always the threat of demotion back behind that. It's rare that in public policy you have good measures and the ability to hold people accountable for those measures," Maranto said.

Removing underperforming personnel was also crucial to Michele Rhee's success in the Washington, D.C., public school system, the researchers wrote. When she took over command of the failing school district in 2007, she instituted a number of changes, which included firing ineffective principals and closing under-enrolled and under-performing schools.

She also introduced objective assessments to monitor performance and offered incentives for teachers who performed well, the researchers reported. She supported parental school choice and, according to the researchers, fought against the "organizational myth that low-income urban students cannot learn."

The ultimate result was a much improved school system, the researchers wrote. Gains made in Rhee's four-year tenure included more efficient central offices and schools as well as dramatic increases in students' reading and math scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. For example, fourth graders improved 20 percent in math and 22 percent in reading during her tenure.

Success comes at a cost, though, the researchers wrote. In Bratton's case, his changes made him more popular than Mayor Giuliani, which led to his dismissal as police commissioner. While Rhee's bluntness and tactics

were effective, they made her very unpopular, ensuring that her tenure as school system chancellor would end with Mayor Fenty's failed re-election bid. Although Bratton and Rhee were replaced, their policies were not.

Provided by University of Arkansas

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