



Centre for  
Public Impact

A BCG FOUNDATION



Briefing Bulletin:  
**The science of  
delivering results:  
past, present and future**

# The challenge

Governments exist to deliver results for their citizens.

This is true even in the most challenging contexts, where states strive to provide security and order for their people. And it is especially true in democracies, where the ability to govern rests on explicit promises made to citizens in each election. No matter where one lives, making government deliver effectively for its citizens is one of the great moral issues of our time.

But when most political leaders arrive in office, they find that delivering results is the hardest part of the job. Formally speaking, they have authority to direct what government does. But they sit on top of a large and complicated bureaucracy, and it's not immediately evident how to work through it to get things done. At the same time, political leaders must of course manage politics – the inevitable day-to-day distractions of events that public figures must deal with.

The challenge feels intractable. But in recent years, a group of leaders in government around the world have come to understand this challenge better – and to develop a solution.

## The emergence of 'deliverology'

One starting point of this movement was in the UK at the turn of the millennium. In Tony Blair's second term as prime minister, he prioritised 20 public service targets. They covered a range of outcomes – literacy for 11-year-olds, reduced road traffic congestion, and lower street crime rates, for example – that captured citizens' expectations of what effective government should accomplish for them. And he set up a new entity, the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit, headed by Sir Michael Barber, which reported directly to him and was responsible for ensuring the delivery of these targets.

Within four years, the unit had helped the government to achieve over 80% of these targets and had made significant progress on the others. This attracted attention and interest in the work of the delivery unit, especially after a book detailing the original experience was published.<sup>1</sup> Without realising it at the time, Sir Michael and his team had discovered a repeatable methodology for achieving real impact in government. They had invented a missing discipline: 'deliverology', the science of delivering results.

## A movement for change

Today, deliverology has been duplicated around the world, as delivery units have been established in dozens of countries spanning six continents. And as the discipline has spread, a cadre of practitioners – 'deliverologists' – has grown along with it.

These practitioners have codified the essential elements of deliverology. At its heart are five deceptively simple questions:

- ◆ What are you trying to do?
- ◆ How are you planning to do it?

- ◆ How, at any given moment, will you know whether you are on track?
- ◆ If you are not on track, what are you going to do about it?
- ◆ How can we help?

Deliverology is about nothing more and nothing less than building systems that allow a leader in government to ask and answer these questions consistently and rigorously. As we best understand them today, the tools for building these systems break down into fifteen elements, which are summarised in Figure 1 opposite.

Today, more resources exist than ever before to help a government establish a delivery unit that makes good use of each of these tools.<sup>2,3</sup>

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*"From the outside, people at the heart of government look all-powerful; on the inside, they often feel helpless, stretched to and beyond breaking point by the weight of expectations on the one hand and the sheer complexity and difficulty of meeting them on the other."*

– Sir Michael Barber, *How to Run a Government*<sup>4</sup>

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## On the horizon

As the movement for deliverology grows and matures, it faces several challenges. But there are also deliverologists addressing these barriers.

### Focusing on outcomes

The challenge of maintaining an outcomes focus is as old as deliverology itself, but it is always at risk of resurfacing. By nature, we are much more comfortable targeting inputs (projects, actions, even strategies) rather than outcomes for citizens – especially in the short term.

It is important for governments to strive for big, ambitious outcomes that can take a longer time to deliver – and, for this reason, to map out the inputs that will get them there. But you also want to know, when you start, that citizens will see a difference because of your work in a matter of weeks, not months or years. The best deliverologists keep this question front and centre: how will what we do make a difference for citizens, as soon as possible? And how will we know?

### Measuring the unmeasurable

This brings us to the next challenge. We know how to monitor many of the fundamental outcomes that governments deliver, but leaders are increasingly seeking to accomplish things that have never been measured regularly before: increasing social inclusion, changing citizen attitudes, and mitigating the effects of climate change – to name a few. The best deliverologists are tapping into new sources of data to make real-time information available – for example, by using social media to crowd-source information on results or attitudes or both.

But it's also important for leaders to recognise that their ability to seek ambitious outcomes is limited by their

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1. Barber, Michael, *Instruction to Deliver: Fighting to Transform Britain's Public Services*. Methuen, 2008

2. Barber, Michael, Paul Kihn, and Andy Moffit, *Deliverology* 101. Corwin, 2011.

3. Barber, Michael, Nick Rodriguez, and Elyn Artis, *Deliverology in Practice*. Corwin, 2015.

4. Barber, Michael, *How to Run a Government*. Penguin, 2015.

willingness to do what it takes to measure them. Prioritising a metric is a matter of balancing three qualities:

- ◆ Is it meaningful? If we move the needle will it make a difference for citizens that they care about?
- ◆ Is it moveable? Can what government does conceivably have an impact on the metric (even if it's indirect)?
- ◆ Is it measurable? Do we already measure it frequently or are we willing to put the necessary systems in place to do so within the next three months?

### Managing decentralisation

Good data is even more important because of a third challenge: the trend in many parts of the world towards decentralisation in government. In a world where leaders, especially at the national level, have fewer and fewer levers of formal authority to make change on the ground, two things become apparent. First, strong data and transparency are critical levers for change in and of themselves, as they allow for the right intergovernmental conversations to take place about how to improve results for citizens. Second, informal influence – not formal authority – is the coin of the realm in managing implementation at scale. The good news is that this has actually always been true – the trend towards decentralisation just makes it clearer. The best delivery units are better at cultivating and wielding this kind of influence than any other part of government.

### Institutionalising the approach

Finally, a perennial question that comes up is about sustainability: how do we embed the approach in government, especially when political leaders seem to be transitioning all the time?

There is no delivery unit whose longevity is absolutely guaranteed. But the best deliverologists maximise the likelihood that the approach will last by working closely with the civil service and building capacity throughout government, even though they begin their work with a view from the centre. They also use the trend of decentralisation to their advantage (often with an assist from technology) by involving citizens directly in the process of demanding, choosing, planning, and giving constant feedback about the policies and strategies the government undertakes.

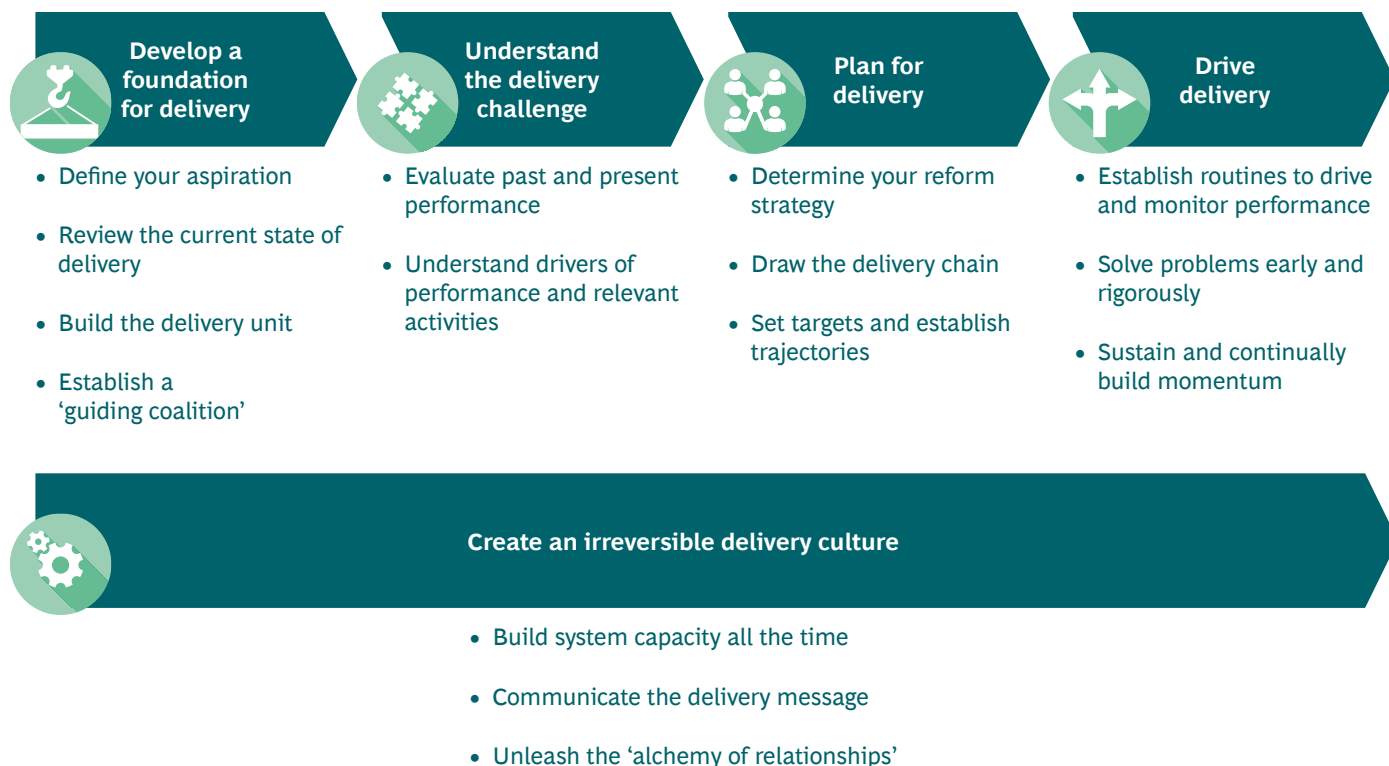
In summary, the best deliverologists recognise that, while delivery units may come and go, deliverology as a discipline can become an irreversible part of a government's culture – and they strive to make this happen.

### Next steps

Government leaders around the world are continuing to innovate and improve the science of deliverology. If you're one of them, please do not hesitate to get in touch with the Centre for Public Impact team.

As more and more governments adopt deliverology, the movement to grow this discipline and expand its frontiers gathers strength. At this critical moment, it is a cause for optimism for the millions of citizens who will benefit.

Figure 1: Essential elements of Deliverology



*The Centre for Public Impact is a not-for-profit foundation, funded by The Boston Consulting Group, dedicated to improving the positive impact of governments.*

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*Founded by Sir Michael Barber, Delivery Associates is dedicated to improving the effectiveness and accountability of government worldwide. The organisation works with the Centre for Public Impact, and partners with governments on six continents to advance this mission.*

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