

Chapter 1:

WHAT IS RESULTS-BASED ACCOUNTABILITY (RBA) AND HOW DOES IT WORK? (All the basic ideas in 5 minutes)

What is it? Results-Based Accountability (RBA) is a disciplined way of thinking and taking action that can be used to improve the quality of life in communities, cities, counties, states and nations.¹¹ RBA can also be used to improve the performance of programs¹², agencies and service systems.

How does it work? RBA starts with ends and works backward, step by step, to means. For **communities**, the ends are conditions of well-being for children, adults, families and the community as a whole such as *Residents with Good Jobs, Children Ready for School, A Safe Neighborhood, A Clean Environment* or even more specific conditions like *Public Spaces without Graffiti* and *A Place Where Neighbors Know Each Other*. For programs, the ends are how customers are better off when the program works the way it should such as the percent of people in a job training program who get and keep good paying jobs.

From Talk to Action for Communities, Cities, Counties, States and Nations

The step-by-step process starts with a group of partners who wish to improve the quality of life in the community.

- Step 1: What are the quality of life conditions we want for the children, adults and families who live in our community?
- Step 2: What would these conditions look like if we could see or experience them?
- Step 3: How can we measure these conditions?
- Step 4: How are we doing on the most important measures?
- Step 5: Who are the partners that have a role to play in doing better?
- Step 6: What works to do better, including no-cost and low-cost ideas?
- Step 7: What do we propose to do?

Repeat these steps each time you meet. The steps can be done in any order as long as you do them all.

Figure 1.1

11. The word "community" will be used as a shorthand for people who live together in a geographic area, including the whole range from neighborhoods to nations.
12. For readers in the EU, Australia and New Zealand, the term "program" will be used throughout the book to mean "service."

How can it help? Many people have been frustrated by past efforts that were all talk and no action. RBA is a process that gets you and your partners from talk to action quickly.

It uses plain language and common sense methods that everyone can understand. The most basic version of RBA can be done in less than an hour and produces ideas that can be acted on immediately. (See the Turn the Curve exercises in Appendix E.) RBA is an inclusive process where diversity is an asset and everyone in the community can contribute. Like all meaningful processes, RBA is hard work. But it is work that you control and that makes a real difference in peoples' lives. Figure 1.1 shows the talk-to-action 7 Questions for communities, cities, counties, states and nations. Figure 1.2 shows the talk-to-action 7 Questions for programs, agencies and service systems.

The RBA thinking process.

We all use the thinking process behind RBA to solve problems in our lives. Have you ever had a leaking roof? You know it's leaking when you see water dripping down. To fix the leaking roof, you think about who could help you. Then someone has to get up on the roof and figure out why it's leaking. Next you think about how it could be fixed. And finally you decide what you will actually do to fix it. You know it's fixed when you stop seeing water. This sequence gets a little more complicated when you're trying to "fix" conditions in your program or community, but the RBA steps come from this same way of thinking.

An action plan after the first meeting.

People often give up on community change processes because of confusing language and lack of action. You go to a meeting and everyone is talking in jargon. You feel excluded and you don't come back. Or, you go to a series of meetings and nothing happens. You feel bored and frustrated and you don't come back. RBA is a process that uses plain language and where there are actions to take after the first meeting.

From Talk to Action

for Programs, Agencies and Service Systems

The step-by-step process starts with a manager or group of managers who care about the quality of their services.

Step 1: Who are our customers?

Step 2: How can we measure if our customers are better off?

Step 3: How can we measure if we're delivering services well?

Step 4: How are we doing on the most important measures?

Step 5: Who are the partners that have a role to play in doing better?

Step 6: What works to do better, including no-cost and low-cost ideas?

Step 7: What do we propose to do?

**Repeat these steps each time you meet.
The steps can be done in any order as long as you do them all.**

Figure 1.2

Why is data important?

When you're trying to fix a leaking roof, you don't really need data. You can see if the roof is leaking or not. But community conditions and the way programs work are

much more complicated. If we rely on just impressions and anecdotes, we don't really know if things are getting better or worse. By using common sense measures, we can be honest with ourselves about whether or not we're making progress. If we work hard and the numbers don't change, then something more or different is needed. We rarely have all the data we need at the beginning, but we can start with the best data we have, and get better data. Data doesn't always have to be gathered by the experts. You can use simple, common sense methods, like community surveys with just a few questions, or a walking count of vacant houses each month, or even a show of hands at the monthly meeting about how many people know someone who was a crime victim in the last 30 days.

Why is common language important?

Whether it's English, Spanish or another language, we often use words in confusing ways that no one really understands. People who work together need a common language to be successful. RBA asks groups to agree on what words they will use to describe a few basic ideas:

Results: The conditions of well-being we want for our children, families and the community as a whole.

Indicators: How we measure these conditions.

Baselines: What the measures show about where we've been and where we're headed.

Turning the curve: What success looks like if we do better than the baseline.

Strategies: What works to improve these conditions.

Performance measures: How we know if programs and agencies are working. RBA uses three common sense performance measures: *How much did we do? How well did we do it?* and *Is anyone better off?*

Where has RBA worked?

RBA is being used across the United States and around the world. There is a growing network of people with success stories to tell. Some of these stories are presented in the sections between chapters. In Vermont, state and local partners turned the curve on a wide range of measures including blood lead levels in young children, child abuse rates and high school dropout rates. Santa Cruz County, California turned the curve on teen alcohol and drug use. Montgomery County, Ohio turned the curve on school attendance rates. California, Maryland, North Carolina and other states and counties are turning the curve on the percent of children ready for school. State and local governments, school districts, non-profits and tribal governments in Arizona, Connecticut, Hawaii, Idaho, Oklahoma, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Washington, and many other places around the world have used RBA to improve the performance of their programs and agencies.

What else do you need to get started?

Communities need to agree on how to manage and govern their work, and may need help with community organizing and the facilitation of group decision-making. Agencies and programs need to involve their employees in creating a healthy workplace, one with open communications and mutual respect between management and staff. Both kinds of efforts need to support the growth and development of new and existing leaders. You can test your progress on implementing RBA with the self assessment questions in Appendix A.

Where can you get more information?

Consider reading the rest of this book. Go to the website raguide.org, which is an implementation guide for the RBA framework, sponsored by national, state and local foundations, including the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Foundation Consortium for California's Children and Youth, the Colorado Foundation, the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation and the Finance Project. It contains answers to over 50 commonly asked questions and provides tools, formats, exercises, and links to other important resources.

Be a good consumer of advice. You shop carefully when you buy a car or refrigerator. You should also be a good consumer of advice. Learn about different approaches and pick the one that makes the most sense for you and your organization. Find out what other people's experience has been. Many frameworks look good on paper but are very difficult to implement and sustain. Consider using the criteria: Simple, Common Sense, Plain Language, Minimum Paper, and Useful, as a way to compare different approaches and make the best choice.

Be independent of consultants. Your organization needs to develop its own capacity to do this work, independent of consultants. There are many consulting firms out there willing to charge you a lot of money for things that you can and should do for yourself. No amount of consulting time and money can substitute for the will to change. Use consultants to get started if necessary, but train your own people to be in-house experts. Be careful about what you will have to pay for the rights to use a particular framework. Everything in this book is free for use by government and non-profit organizations.¹³

¹³. And small for-profit consulting firms. See the notices following Chapter 9 for details.