Reaching Out to Stakeholders:
The Georgia DOT 360 Degree Assessment Model

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Introduction

This paper presents a 360 assessment model developed for the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) which was designed to solicit systematic feedback from a variety of key stakeholders including partners and oversight entities as well as customers and employees. The approach employed was a loose adaptation of the 360 assessment model drawn from the field of human resources development and apply it to the assessment of an entire organization operation and performance from the perspective of a set of external stakeholders. Building on GDOT’s recognition that its overall effectiveness depended on a number of important partnerships, the process was designed and piloted to solicit systematic feedback from a variety of stakeholders in order to help the Department work more effectively with those stakeholders and, ultimately, to improve its performance.

After briefly providing background on GDOT and the genesis of the project, the paper discusses how the model was developed as an organizational assessment tool through a set of stakeholder surveys, describes the process of developing and piloting the surveys themselves, presents a summary of the results, and overviews follow-up on the part of the Department in response to the information generated by the surveys. Finally, the paper concludes with comments on the usefulness of the 360 degree organizational assessment model at GDOT and its implications for other public agencies.

Prior Research

This research rests on the premise that public agencies increasingly perform their functions in partnership with other public, nonprofit, and private sector actors, with many public services the
joint products of collaboration between governmental and non-governmental actors (see, for example, Alford 2009). This perception has prompted a proliferation of research on collaborations and on specific participants in the collaborations.

On the former, growing numbers of researchers have examined collaborations and networks themselves: when collaborations arise, how they function, and how well they perform, among other questions (e.g., Edelenbos and Klijn 2006; Agranoff and McGuire 2003; Schrage 1995). Others have explored the extent to which functioning through collaborations or networks has come to characterize the work of government (e.g., Hill and Lynn, 2005; Considine and Lewis, 2003).

As for the latter, another line of research has focused on the defining the nature and role of various stakeholders. Here the most notable research may be John Bryson’s work (2004) on stakeholder analysis and involvement. Bryson proposed using a range of techniques to identify and then engage stakeholders at various steps in agency decision-making, beginning with “organizing participation,” progressing through “creating ideas for strategic interventions” and “proposal development review and adoption,” and concluding with “policy implementation” (for an illustration of the techniques, see Bryson, Cunningham, and Lokkesmoe, 2002).

To date, though, few scholars have thought it worth asking how collaborative partners and/or stakeholders perceive each other’s performance. Yet, those perceptions could provide valuable readings on an agency’s performance, especially where a public agency works in collaboration with many partners. Indeed, some evidence suggests that incorporating measures of collaborative effectiveness into regular performance evaluations can increase that effectiveness (Daley 2009).

Partner perceptions of agency effectiveness might be useful both for specific partners and for partners collectively. In the former case, the perceptions of specific partners could speak both to
how well the two sides work together and to what areas might need attention in order to improve the working relationship. Here there are ample public sector precedents, but mostly through the use of citizen satisfaction surveys to gain citizen perspectives on agency effectiveness (e.g., Miller and Kobayashi 2000; Hatry et al. 1998; Lyons, Lowery, and DeHoog 1992). A few scholars have extended this research to additional stakeholders beyond citizens (e.g., Daley 2009; Van Ryzin and Freeman 1997).

Even fewer, if any, scholars have asked how an agency’s performance may be perceived by partners collectively—by, for example, citizens, customers, contractors, and public-sector partners (in other agencies or other governments), and in combination rather than separately for particular stakeholder types. This kind of perspective, assuming it includes all or most agency partners, customers, and constituents, holds the potential to provide something akin to a global, or 360 degree, assessment of an agency’s performance. In addition to learning how specific partners regard it, an agency could learn whether different partners perceive it similarly or differently. Those perceptions could suggest whether perceived problems—or virtues—are confined to dealings with specific partners or generalize to all or most partners, perhaps reflecting entrenched agency culture.

Many or most public agencies relate to multiple partners and constituents, and so might have interest in this panoramic perspective. These agencies have in common a diverse stakeholder base, including probably customers, contractors, other partnering agencies and/or governments, as well as the citizens and taxpayers to whom the agencies are ultimately responsible. Included among these agencies is the case of interest here, a state department of transportation that works with hundreds of local governments, private contractors, and consultants to produce services for thousands of drivers and other state residents.
Customer and Other surveys by DOTs

Nationally, state departments of transportation have become increasingly customer oriented and concerned with other stakeholder groups over the past two decades (Stein-Hudson et al., 1995; Schwartz, 2006), as evidenced in part by the customer surveys or public opinion polls conducted by many of the DOTs (e.g. Poister et al., 2002, Delaware Department of Transportation, 2006; Michigan Department of Transportation, 2009).

Some state DOTs have also conducted surveys of other stakeholder groups. For example, in addition to conducting a statewide survey of residents every few years, the Kansas Department of Transportation (KDOT) has also conducted a survey that included seven other external stakeholder groups including cities, counties, state legislators, consultants, contractors, vendors, and others (such as rail system operators, public transit agencies, and other state agencies (Kansas Department of Transportation, 2003). In addition to asking the same questions that were asked in the residents survey regarding the department’s performance in providing transportation services, maintaining highways, allocating resources, planning to meet future transportation needs, and so forth, these external stakeholders were also asked questions regarding a number of KDOT’s policies and work processes as well as the department’s responsiveness to their own organizations. However, this survey utilized a common instrument for all seven of these external stakeholder groups rather than tailoring questions to the specific interests and concerns of each one.

360 Degree Assessment Literature

Compared to a traditional assessment in which a supervisor provides performance feedback to a subordinate, a 360-degree assessment incorporates performance feedback from multiple sources as each source provides unique insight into an individual’s performance. According to the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) guidelines (U.S. OPM, 1997), the sphere of feedback
sources usually includes one’s supervisor, peers, subordinates, customers and one’s self. While supervisor ratings are generally viewed as continuing to provide the more traditional top-down view of performance, each of the other feedback sources provides useful information regarding an individual’s performance. Due to reduced hierarchies in organizations and increased team accountability, peers may be more directly involved in day-to-day work efforts with the individual than the supervisor; thus, peers may have more accurate information regarding an individual’s behaviors, level of expertise, and contributions to the organization (OPM, 1997). Likewise, subordinates may observe and be affected by an individual’s performance in ways that are not always evident to those who are superior to the individual. (London & Beatty, 1993). In addition, the perspective of customers, both internal and external, provides feedback on the way products or services are delivered to them as well as working relationships (Rao & Rao, 2005). Finally, the self-assessment is important as both the positive and negative gaps between the self-ratings and the ratings of others can be used to target development efforts (Alimo-Metcalf, 1998).

There tends to be general agreement that 360-feedback is used widely in private sector organizations (Dalessio, 1998; Rao & Rao, 2005) and Van Wart (2003) indicates that many of the leadership training programs at all levels of government often include 360-feedback. Further, a brief look at the OPM website indicates that each of their four leadership tracks from project/team lead to executive incorporates 360-feedback as a development tool (OPM, 2011).

Rao and Rao (2005) indicate that 360-feedback is being used for many purposes within organizations including identification of development needs of individuals, reinforcement of change management efforts, alignment of individual/group goals with organizational goals, leadership development, performance rewards, and so on. Further, these authors state that in order to get the maximum benefits from the tool, 360-feedback should be linked to other processes in the
organization such as career development, management development, succession planning, and performance management. Similarly, the OPM supports utilization of 360-feedback for assessing individual performance and other evaluative and developmental purposes (U.S. OPM, 1997). Dalessio (1998) indicates dissatisfaction with traditional performance evaluations coupled with increased focus on empowerment, participation and customers as reasons underlying the inclusion of multiple feedback sources in assessing individual performance. At the same time, Waldman, Atwater, and Antonioni (1998) cite problems with inter-rater reliability as a deterrent to using 360-feedback for performance appraisal and indicate that some organizations have discontinued their use for evaluative purposes. This disagreement in the literature is still relevant with Alimo-Metcalf and Alban-Metcalf (2006) stating that 360-feedback should be used solely for development purposes while Rao and Rao (2005) point out that using 360-feedback for individual performance appraisal provides more complete and accurate information because supervisors do not see all aspects of an individual’s performance.

Focusing on the use of 360-feedback for development, Rao and Rao (2005) believe that most organizations are using 360-feedback to develop individuals within the organization, and more specifically, to build leadership and manager competencies. As a result of the feedback received from the 360 process, the authors indicate that individuals are generally expected to identify strengths and weaknesses and create development plans aimed at building on strengths and improving performance in areas of weakness. Similarly, Alimo-Metcalf and Alban-Metcalf (2006) suggest that individuals attend a workshop in which they create a development plan and that individuals have follow-up meetings with a coach/facilitator to review progress toward meeting their goals.
Moving from the individual level to the organizational level, Testa (2002) proposed using a model that draws on the 360-feedback model as a means of conducting an organization-level evaluation that would improve relationships between collaborating organizations as well as internal/external stakeholders. Testa notes that building relationships with suppliers, customers and other stakeholders has become a method of creating value and developing competitive advantage. In order to maximize these close relationships, Testa suggests using an organization-based 360-feedback process that puts the organization, instead of an individual, at the center of the assessment and replaces peers and supervisors with internal and external stakeholders. More specifically, the model suggests seeking feedback from customers, suppliers, business partners, and employees. Similar to individual-level 360-feedback, Testa believes this organization-based 360-feedback process may reveal gaps between how the organization perceives its performance and the perceptions of the raters.

The Case: The Georgia Department of Transportation

The Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) is the principal transportation agency in state government in Georgia. While providing support for aviation and commuter rail service in addition to urban and rural public transit systems, GDOT’s core business consists of planning, building, maintaining, and operating nearly 18,000 miles of state highways in Georgia. When this case was initiated in 2005, the Department’s total complement numbered approximately 6,000 employees, having dropped incrementally from a high of more than 10,000 in the late 1960s due to a series of budget retrenchments. Among other impacts, growing program demands in the face of this shrinking in-house staff resulted in much greater reliance on external consultants to perform the
Department’s engineering and design work than had been the case 15 years earlier (Gen and Kingsley, 2007).

Like many other public agencies in the U.S., GDOT had become much more customer oriented as it entered the current century. This led the Department to focus on improving the quality of services provided to the public and to track measures of customer satisfaction in a variety of ways, including annual public opinion polls as well as response cards for its traffic management call center and its highway emergency response operation.

In addition, GDOT works with and through a number of partners and suppliers to provide transportation facilities and services, and it had become increasingly committed to improving working relationships with these groups as well. The Department’s top leadership had come to recognize more explicitly that succeeding in its mission of providing a safe, seamless, and sustainable transportation system in Georgia required the cooperation and support of numerous other external stakeholders. Thus, one of the 14 objectives identified in the strategic plan that GDOT completed in 2004 called for improving working relationships with suppliers, business partners, and other critical stakeholders. Pursuant to this objective, the plan also established a strategic initiative for identifying the Department’s stakeholders and soliciting feedback from stakeholder groups regarding GDOT’s performance and areas that might need improvement. Its purpose was to assess the Department’s performance from the perspectives of a variety of stakeholders and to engage stakeholder in helping to find ways to improve performance where needed.
Development of the GDOT 360-Degree Assessment Model

Our project began when GDOT invited us to assist the Department in implementing this strategic initiative. We recommended loosely adapting the 360 degree assessment model utilized in the human resources development field as discussed above to organize an ongoing assessment of an organization’s performance from a variety of stakeholder perspectives. This section briefly overviews the stakeholder audit process we used to develop the model, presents the 360 degree model itself, and then discusses development of the stakeholder surveys used to operationalize it.

Conducting the stakeholder audit

We began by examining what GDOT already knew about its stakeholders. Working with the Department’s Office of Strategic Development, we conducted personal interviews with 28 top managers in the Department, beginning with the Commissioner, Deputy Commissioner, Chief Engineer, and Treasurer and then “snowballing” down through division directors and executive staff members to office heads and program directors who by virtue of their programmatic responsibilities had “outward-looking” perspectives on GDOT’s interactions with stakeholders. The purpose of this “stakeholder audit” was to identify the full range of relevant stakeholders and any information needs the Department might have regarding their interactions or common interests. For each stakeholder group identified through this process, the line of questioning in the interviews focused on existing communication channels, the extent to which GDOT received systematic feedback from that group, and whether and the extent to which there were additional needs for information from those stakeholders that was not being received currently (Thomas and Poister, 2009).

The information obtained through these interviews was summarized in a file which was organized into clusters of stakeholders and, where they existed, organizations or associations representing them, substantive areas of interest or interaction with the Department, existing
feedback processes, and additional information needs. We used these clusters to construct the “stakeholder map” shown in Figure 1. Briefly, the stakeholders on the right side of the map may include various and overlapping customer groups such as public transit users, property owners, and motorists in addition to citizens at large. On the left side are partners and suppliers such as consultants, contractors, and vendors. Across the top of the stakeholder map are five clusters that include (1) entities that provide oversight and resources to GDOT such as the Governor’s Office and the General Assembly, (2) non-transportation agencies whose missions overlap with GDOT in some way such as the Georgia Departments of Community Development and Natural Resources, (3) other agencies of state government whose missions also focus on strengthening Georgia’s transportation system such as the State Road and Tollway Authority and the Department of Driver and Motor Vehicle Services, (4) a number of other entities that are also involved in planning and delivering transportation services in the state such as units of local government and public transit
authorities, and (5) the media such as newspapers and local television stations. At the risk of suggesting something of an ethnocentric view of the world with GDOT in the center, this stakeholder map does provide a distilled representation of the larger universe within which the Department operates.

As indicated above, the interviews with GDOT personnel served to document existing channels of communication with the wide array of entities included in the stakeholder map and to assess needs and opportunities for soliciting additional feedback from some of these groups. Through this process we identified 14 instances in which GDOT appeared to need or at least to potentially benefit from additional feedback or more systematic feedback from particular stakeholder groups on particular issues. For each of these opportunities, we outlined a particular data collection initiative to meet the additional information need.

The relative importance of these additional channels of stakeholder feedback would depend on a number of factors, such as centrality to GDOT’s mission, usefulness to the Department’s overall strategic planning process, relevance to particular strategic goals and objectives, and the uniqueness of the information to be obtained. In order to obtain a sense of priority among these 14 recommended initiatives, we distributed a brief survey form to 96 high level managers in the Department, including the four top executives, the nine other members of the leadership team, 33 office heads, and 50 district engineers and other district managers. The survey simply asked respondents to indicate their perception of the usefulness of each of the recommended feedback initiatives on a scale ranging from “not useful” through “somewhat useful” to “very useful.”

All 14 potential feedback enhancements were generally seen by these executives and senior managers as being useful to the GDOT. With one exception (mass media feedback at 79%) they were all rated by 80% or more of the respondents as being at least somewhat useful to the
Department. Furthermore, four of them—an evaluation of GDOT’s public involvement process, a survey of professional drivers, a survey of county administrators, and a survey of highway contractors—were rated as being at least “somewhat useful” by 90% or more of the respondents. In a more discriminating view, four of them—a professional drivers’ survey, a survey of members of the General Assembly, executive sessions with FHWA staff, and a survey of contractors—were rated as being “very useful” to GDOT by 50% or more of the respondents, while three others—an evaluation of the public involvement process, a motorist survey, and a survey of planning and design consultants—were rated by 40% or more as being “very useful.”

According to the Department’s Director of Strategic Development, this identification and prioritizing of information needs proved very valuable to GDOT. In his assessment, “The project brought attention to information needs that we weren’t aware of.” Further, “The idea is to convert the anecdotal into the systematic which then can be addressed” by moving “from responding to a one-time event to monitoring change across time” through use of the various feedback mechanisms.

Based in large part on these ratings and the overall assessment of the four statutory officials in the Department, we recommended to the leadership team that GDOT initially should move forward with seven of the fourteen proposed opportunities for enhanced stakeholder feedback. We also presented the findings of the entire stakeholder audit to the State Transportation Board, a body overseeing GDOT policy and operations whose members are elected by General Assembly caucuses from each of Georgia’s 13 congressional districts. The Board, which is necessarily sensitive to the concerns of a wide number of GDOT’s external stakeholders, endorsed the recommendation to proceed with the initial seven stakeholder surveys. Thus, our 360 stakeholder assessment model included these seven stakeholder groups with the addition of GDOT’s employees as internal stakeholders, who had been surveyed initially through an independent leadership
accountability initiative instituted by the Department during the same period but who were then incorporated into the 360 degree model, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2.

**Eight Stakeholder Surveys**

Adoption of this model by GDOT then led to developing and piloting the following eight surveys which constitute the 360 assessment process:

- An on-line survey of planning and design consultants, focusing largely on GDOT’s consultant management processes from consultant selection through audits, interactions between consultants and GDOT staff through the preconstruction process, and the consultants’ overall working relationship with the Department.
- An on-line survey of highway contractors, focusing largely on GDOT’s construction process from bid letting to audits, interactions between contractors and departmental
personnel at various levels throughout a construction project, and the contractors’ overall working relationship with the Department.

- A mixed mode online/hard copy survey of county and municipal elected officials, focusing on GDOT’s responsiveness to local needs and priorities, GDOT programs of particular interest to local jurisdictions, and the elected officials’ overall working relationships with the Department.

- A mixed mode survey of county and municipal administrators, focusing on GDOT programs of particular concern to local governments, local administrators’ experiences in working on cooperative efforts with GDOT, and their overall working relationships with the Department.

- An intensive mail survey of licensed drivers, focusing on their assessment of the quality of state highways they regularly use in terms of road condition and ride quality, traffic flow and congestion, and safety.

- A self-administered survey of professional drivers, focusing on their assessment of the quality of state highways in Georgia they regularly use in terms of road condition and ride quality, traffic flow and congestion, and safety.

- A written survey of members of the General Assembly, focusing on GDOT’s responsiveness to constituent and other concerns raised by individual legislators, GDOT’s communication with the legislature, and the Department’s overall performance in meeting transportation needs in Georgia.

- A mixed mode survey of GDOT employees, focusing on organizational climate, leadership at the executive, program, and operating levels, communication, delegation and decision
making, teamwork, quality and productivity, training, career development, compensation, recognition and rewards, and job satisfaction.

We developed the instruments for each of these surveys working through an iterative process with a GDOT steering committee composed of departmental executives, managers, and staff whose responsibilities intersected with that particular stakeholder group. For most of these surveys we also worked separately with an advisory committee comprised of representatives of that particular stakeholder community. For example, the advisory committee for the consultants survey was formed by members of the American Council of Engineering Companies of Georgia (ACECG), while that for the contractors survey was formed by the Georgia Highway Contractors Association (GHCA). For the two surveys of local government officials, we were assisted by advisory committees put together by the Georgia Municipal Association (GMA) and the Association of County Commissioners of Georgia (ACCG), while the Georgia Motor Trucking Association (GTA) advised us in the development of the survey of professional drivers. Finally, we were assisted in developing the survey of state legislators by key individuals in the General Assembly such as the chairs of the transportation committees in both houses.

While each of the eight surveys contained some items that were in common to some or all of the other surveys, the most questions were tailored to each group. Common questions typically focused on performance grades for GDOT, departmental priorities, and satisfaction with the stakeholders’ working relationships with the Department. Tailored questions focused largely on GDOT programs of interest to a particular stakeholder group and specific processes through which those stakeholders interacted with the Department, e.g. consultant selection, contract negotiation, project management, consultant evaluation, payment, and the audit process for the consultants.
In addition, several process dimensions were common to various stakeholder surveys. For example, dimensions such as process effectiveness, consistency, responsiveness, timeliness, and fairness that characterized processes in which stakeholders were engaged with GDOT were common across four of the stakeholder groups.

Once created through an iterative process working with both the GDOT steering committee and an advisory group from the respective stakeholder community, each of these surveys was initially piloted with a small group of respondents, revised and refined accordingly, and then launched on the entire target population of interest over the period 2005 through 2007. (Although earlier versions of both the public opinion poll and the employee survey had been conducted in 2003, they were revised substantially and incorporated in the 360 stakeholder survey process for the first time in 2005.) Most of these surveys have been replicated at least once and some several times, as shown in Figure 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder Group</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Response Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public at Large</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>801</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultants</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>206</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contractors</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>126</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Administrators</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>404</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Elected</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>400</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motorists</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6,791</td>
<td>24%*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legislators</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>112</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Drivers</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>420</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employees</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5,868</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Response rate based on an original sample of 28,000 licensed motorists.
Findings

Questions in all of the surveys were designed to focus on three types of perceptions: (1) perceptions of the processes of working with GDOT, (2) assessments of GDOT performance, and (3) desired priorities for future GDOT work. The discussion of the findings below will address each in turn.

GDOT Processes

The questions about GDOT processes asked for assessments of how well respondents felt the processes functioned. For example, consultants who worked with GDOT were asked such “agree-disagree” questions as:

- “Consultant selection at GDOT is largely based on qualifications.”
- “The time it takes to move from initial award to a contract is usually reasonable.”
- “Our firm understands how GDOT evaluations affect future consultant selections.”

Similar questions were asked of the other stakeholder groups, covering the different areas of their interaction with GDOT as shown in Figure 4.
Based on these questions, multiple indices were developed for each set of stakeholder surveys for process dimensions that recurred in the different areas of interaction, dimensions such as timeliness of responses, fairness, etc. For consultants, for example, an index of timeliness was created based on responses to questions about timeliness in all of the areas of consultant interaction with the department.

A first interesting finding concerns the extent of similarity of those process dimensions between the different stakeholder groups. As Figure 5 shows, three dimensions (responsiveness, timeliness, and fairness) were common to four of the stakeholder groups (i.e., consultants, contractors, local government administrators, and legislators), and four other dimensions (process effectiveness, burden, clarity, and consistency) were common to three of the groups. These different stakeholder groups appear to assess the processes of their work with GDOT according to very similar criteria, perhaps suggesting what good what customer service looks like in the public sector.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consultants &amp; Contractors</th>
<th>Local Gov Administrators</th>
<th>Legislators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Process Effectiveness</td>
<td>- Process Effectiveness</td>
<td>- Responsiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Burden</td>
<td>- Burden</td>
<td>- Timeliness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Clarity</td>
<td>- Clarity</td>
<td>- Fairness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Consistency</td>
<td>- Consistency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Responsiveness</td>
<td>- Responsiveness</td>
<td>- Helpfulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Timeliness</td>
<td>- Timeliness</td>
<td>- Courtesy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Fairness</td>
<td>- Fairness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Professional Treatment</td>
<td>- Customer Service</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Competence</td>
<td>- Usefulness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Local Government</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Program Effectiveness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As for how well these groups perceive GDOT as performing on these various dimensions, Figure 6 suggests several conclusions. First, some groups feel better treated than do others. Legislators give the highest marks to GDOT, rating interactions with the department much higher than does any other stakeholder group on the three process dimensions of responsiveness, timeliness, and fairness. That finding is hardly surprising given the power legislators can exert over GDOT, power no other stakeholder group approaches. Local government officials give GDOT the second highest set of marks, a finding that also may not be surprising given the power of local governments in Georgia.

Figure 6

At the other end of the spectrum, consultants and contractors give GDOT the lowest ratings of the four stakeholder groups. GDOT may give less care and consideration to these groups because, after all, the groups are competing for GDOT resources and probably lack significant political clout.
Some patterns also emerge in where GDOT appears to perform better and worse across the several stakeholder groups. The department receives the highest marks for responsiveness, fairness, and burden, and draws the lowest marks for consistency and timeliness (although neither legislators nor local officials rate the department poorly on the latter). Low ratings on timeliness might have been expected, given the public sector’s reputation for red tape and delays. The lesson here for GDOT may be that the department needs to work harder to achieve consistency (between the different GDOT districts in the state) and timeliness, especially with consultants and contractors.

How do these different assessments combine into an overall assessment of working with GDOT? To answer that question, respondents in each of the surveys were asked to rate satisfaction with their overall working relationship with GDOT. (In the case of employees, they were asked “Overall, I am satisfied with my job.”). The results are shown in Figure 7.
Several patterns can be discerned in the data. First, satisfaction levels are roughly similar across all of the groups. Between three-fifths and four-fifths of respondents in every stakeholder group report some degree of satisfaction in every survey, and only 4-20% of respondents report some degree of dissatisfaction.

But, second, of the groups for which two observation points are available, all but one shows a noticeable decline in satisfaction over time (i.e., between two surveys). That decline coincides with the brief, but controversial, tenure of a new GDOT Commissioner (the head of GDOT) who tightened GDOT’s purse strings, upsetting local officials and legislators, in particular. Her actions probably explain lower levels of satisfaction among legislators, local elected officials, local administrators, and contractors.

The exceptions to this pattern are the consultants, whose ratings of satisfaction with their GDOT working relationship actually increased by 14 percentage points between 2005 and 2007. This exception is readily explained by the fact that the GDOT staff who worked most closely with consultants took the results from the 2005 survey as a mandate to change those relationships. As documented elsewhere, the ensuing reforms were received positively by the consultants, presumably explaining their increased satisfaction with the GDOT working relationship in 2007 over 2005.

**GDOT Outcomes**

Respondents in the various surveys were also asked to rank GDOT on its performance in achieving a variety of outcome goals. In contrast to the process dimensions, these goals were stipulated either by the GDOT leadership or developed based on our own sense of desirable transportation outcomes. Figure 8 shows the outcome dimensions and which of the groups were asked to grade GDOT on each.
The various groups were asked first to grade state highways, on a scale from A-F, on “pavement condition and road quality.” The results, as shown in Figure 9, suggest several patterns. First, the different groups give state highways 65-75% A or B grades, suggesting a relatively positive overall evaluation. Second, the highest grades, 80-90% A’s and B’s, come from consultants and contractors, as might be expected given that these are the entities principally responsible for road quality and so may be inclined to speak positively of their own work. Third, the lowest grades, ranging from 54-74% A’s and B’s, come from motorists and professional drivers, with their lowest ratings for state roads as opposed to interstates. These are the individuals who spend the most time on state highways and roads, and so may be most aware of any flaws. Overall, though, viewing the grades across the several groups, including understandable outliers on both ends of the spectrum, may suggest a relatively position conclusion about how road quality is perceived by GDOT’s various stakeholders.
Grading of the safety of highways, as shown in Figure 10, reveals similar patterns. The lowest ratings again come from motorists and professional drivers, with grades lower than for road quality: no more than 40% A or B grades from either group. Some of the highest grades again come from consultants and contractors, but, surprisingly, the highest grades come from the public at large, with 79% giving A or B grades to the safety of the state’s highways. Thinking from a 360-degree perspective, state highways are viewed as relatively safe by all groups except for those who drive them most. For them, safety appears a major issue.
The lowest grades yet come when the various stakeholder groups were asked about “traffic flow and congestion,” a chronic problem for the Atlanta metropolitan area, in particular. Where GDOT received a majority A and B grades on the first two performance dimensions, most groups give less than 50% A’s or B’s on this dimension, with some groups—legislators, as a notable example—giving less than a third A or B grades. Only local officials give a majority of A or B grades for traffic flow and congestion, and that pattern probably reflects the high proportion of officials from small rural jurisdictions—outside the Atlanta metro area—in the survey samples.

Here, though, the overall patterns may be less important than the differences between those who live in the Atlanta area and those who do not. As shown in Figure 11, grades for traffic flow and congestion are dramatically lower for respondents from the Atlanta area than from elsewhere in Georgia for every stakeholder group. Among motorists, for example, respondents from the Atlanta
metro give the state’s highways less than 20% A’s and B’s, while those from the rest of the state give more than 80% A’s and B’s.

Figure 11

Finally, respondents in most of the surveys were asked to give GDOT a summary grade for its performance in “meeting transportation needs in Georgia.” The data, as shown in Figure 12, again suggest several patterns. First, most groups when first surveyed gave GDOT predominantly (61-77%) A or B grades, suggesting a generally positive evaluation at that point. But, second, when surveyed again, all of the groups gave GDOT lower grades, providing more evidence of the likely negative reaction to the change in GDOT leadership and policies late in the decade.
Third, and perhaps most alarming for GDOT, legislator grades of GDOT’s overall performance began relatively low in 2007 (40% A’s and B’s), then still declined steeply over the next year. By late 2008 only 16% of responding legislators gave GDOT’s overall performance an A or B grade; a substantially larger 39% gave D or F grades to that performance. While most of GDOT’s stakeholders may perceive its overall performance more positively than negatively, state legislators, the department’s oversight body, could not be counted in that number.

**GDOT Priorities**

The various stakeholder groups were also asked to rank the importance of ten different priorities identified by GDOT leadership. These are shown for the public in general in Figure 13.
From the 360-degree perspective, the most striking finding may be the similarity of priorities across the different stakeholder groups. As Figure 14 shows, four of the principal stakeholder groups agreed on what should fall in a) the top four priorities, b) the middle three priorities, and c) the lowest three priorities. Thus, for example, the top four priorities for all groups are comprised, in varying sequences, of improving safety on state roads, improving ride quality on state roads, reducing congestion on state roads, and increasing assistance on local roads. Disagreements appear only on the relative rankings of priorities within those three groupings. For example, local officials unsurprisingly give the highest priority to increasing local assistance for local roads, while the public gives the highest priority to improving safety, and legislators give the highest priority to reducing congestion.
Even with those similarities, one difference in priorities proved important for GDOT in its dealings with legislators. Departmental leadership noted to legislators that the general public gave a lower priority (#3) to traffic flow and congestion than did the legislators, for whom congestion was the top priority. That fact may have influenced legislative action on transportation issues related to traffic flow and congestion.

### Reporting Results and Follow-up Actions

Whenever one of these surveys was conducted, we provided GDOT with a comprehensive report on the results which was disseminated to all personnel serving on that particular steering committee as well as other managers with direct interest in the results. Typically we also presented an overview of the results to the Commissioner and his top leadership team and other relevant staff.
members and engaged them in discussion of their meaning and implications regarding the Department’s productivity and overall performance.

**Taking the Results to the Stakeholders**

Copies of our reports were always forwarded to members of our advisory committees and/or representatives of the respective stakeholder groups as well, but in several instances the results of the surveys were presented to relevant audiences as well. For example, along with the Department’s Director of Strategic Development we presented the results of both consultant surveys to representatives of the consulting community in forms sponsored by ACECG in sessions designed to solicit reactions from them as well to get a sense of what was “behind” some of the survey responses, what the priority issues were coming out of the survey, and what kinds of actions or decisions they felt needed to be taken by the GDOT to address these issues.

A similar kind of session was conducted with officials at GHCA regarding the results of the first contractors survey. We also presented the combined results of the initial consultants and contractors surveys to the statewide 2005 annual meeting of the Georgia Partnership for Transportation Quality, with many representatives from the consulting and contracting communities in attendance, and GDOT’s then Director of Planning presented the combined results of the second consultant and contractor surveys to that same audience two years later. In addition, one of us reported the results of the initial surveys of local government administrators and local elected officials back to the advisory groups that had helped guide those surveys and also presented the results of those two surveys, and later the results of the second round of local government surveys, to annual statewide meetings of GMS and ACCG.

Finally, the results of two of our stakeholder surveys were reported extensively to personnel at the operating level within GDOT. First, since the item in the motorist survey focused in
considerable detail on perceptions and ratings of very specific aspects of the quality of state highways in respondents’ local areas, one of us along with the Director of Strategic Development presented these results to large groups of managers and staff in each of GDOT’s seven districts, which are responsible for carrying out all highway maintenance activities, in which the responses from motorists residing in a particular district were compared with the comparable statewide totals. Secondly, the Director of Strategic Development reported the results of several of the employee surveys in person to the employees of each district as well as each office at GDOT headquarters in Atlanta, again comparing the responses from that particular unit to those from the Department as a whole. As with the consultants, these sessions were conducted as focus groups designed to solicit further feedback regarding the implications of the survey results and what should be done in response to them.

**Tangible Follow-up Efforts**

Follow-up actions taken by GDOT in response to survey findings varied widely and were more proactive with respect to some of the stakeholder groups than others.

*Consultants.* The results of the first survey of consultants, along with additional feedback obtained in a focus group session with representatives from several consulting firms surfaced a variety of issues that were of concern to the consulting community. The most pressing of these issues focused on (1) GDOT’s consultant selection process being perceived as based on favoritism and not having clear criteria for scoring technical proposals, (2) a lack of understanding of how GDOT conducted consultant evaluations and how those evaluations affect future consultant selections, and (3) a failure on the part of the department to make prompt payment of invoices submitted by consultants.
In response, GDOT’s Division of Preconstruction developed an action plan in 2006 to address these and other related issues. Regarding the consultant selection issue, GDOT staff discussed the selection process “openly” with representatives of the consulting community at ongoing meetings of the consultant relations committee in a “neutral” forum sponsored by the Georgia Partnership for Transportation Quality. The Department also published a set of criteria it used to evaluate proposals from consultants, along with weights. In addition, GDOT staff began using an average of annual consultant performance review scores for the last three years of a firm’s work as an indication of its ability to perform the work laid out in proposals for new projects.

Concerning GDOT’s evaluation of consultants’ performance, the action plan documented that the Department had (1) contracted with an outside firm to “develop criteria...for the evaluation process,” (2) reported those criteria to a state meeting of the consultants, and (3) implemented the resulting new evaluation system in 2006. Finally, in the area of payments, the action plan acknowledged that “some challenges” had resulted in GDOT “falling significantly behind with invoice payments.” According to the action plan, Department staff “made a concerted effort to address the problem,” such that “most of the outstanding invoices have been paid,” and staff were “working hard to ensure this problem does not occur again.” The second consultants survey, conducted in 2007, showed substantially more favorable responses to the several items that related to these three areas of concern, suggesting a more positive view regarding how the department interacted with consultants. This interpretation is also reinforced by the fact that the proportion of consultants indicating that they felt satisfied or very satisfied with their firm’s working relationship with GDOT increased from 62.7% to 76.9% from the 2005 survey to the 2007 survey (Poister and Thomas, 2009)
Contractors. Initially, no concerted effort was made to strengthen the department’s working relationship with the contractors beyond simply reporting the results of the two contractors surveys back to the advisory panel that had been formed by the GHCA. Belatedly, however, after a change in leadership of GDOT’s Construction Division, the new director of construction formed a construction task force and initiated regular monthly meetings of the task force with GHCA’s executive director and representatives of the industry to discuss issues of concern to the contractors and resolve them before they escalated into bigger problems. The fact that the chair of the Transportation Commission, the governing body which oversees GDOT, participated in these meetings on a regular basis lent additional credibility to the process. This interaction has led to changes in several departmental policies which have both addressed contractor concerns and reduced delays in ongoing construction projects. Early successes included the following:

- Bringing force account specifications up to date by raising ceilings on subcontractor and other rates to put Georgia in line with other states. These come into play when a project requires additional work and allow work to proceed in the absence of a supplemental contract or contract extension, with contractors paid for documented labor costs at predetermined rates.
- Developing a method of assessing road user costs incurred by contractors when late completion of a project results in a road not being open to traffic beyond the contract period.
- Developing a policy for determining stop times – when construction projects are determined to be completed so that no additional charges can be brought to the department.
- Negotiating adjustments on the fuel index, providing for adjusting the dollar value of contracts when highway builders incur higher costs due to spikes in fuel prices, as was the
case in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and application of the index to certain other cost items such as a bridge beams whose costs are sharply subject to changes in fuel prices.

**Local Government Officials.** In a focus group conducted with leaders from cities and counties as a follow-up to the local government surveys it became clear that the local officials felt strongly that they needed clearer information regarding GDOT services and resources that were available to local governments. In response the Department implemented a comprehensive communications effort that involved identifying those services and resources that were the most useful and valuable for local government, creating print and web-based media to provide “citizen readable” descriptions of them, and assigning specific district personnel to make “positive contact” with the local officials in their areas to disseminate this information in person and clear up any questions or confusion about how local jurisdictions could engage with GDOT through any of these venues.

In the statewide rollout of this program, called the “closing the loop” initiative, specific responsibilities were assigned to the staff in the department’s seven operating districts, including district engineers, state aid coordinators, district communications directors, and especially area engineers for ensuring that all appropriate local government officials were personally engaged in meetings designed to present the relevant information and materials and let the officials in each local area know who their respective GDOT contacts were for various individual programs. These responsibilities were incorporated in area engineers’ individual performance plans on an ongoing basis.

**Other Follow-up.** GDOT followed up on other fronts as well. For example, the principal sense of feedback obtained in the legislative survey was that although legislators gave the Department high marks for responding effectively when legislators made inquiries, raised issues, or
requested assistance from GDOT, they were less sanguine about the Department’s provision of information to them regarding policies, programs, and projects before such questions were raised. In the next legislative session, therefore, in a more proactive approach spearheaded by the Deputy Commissioner, GDOT initiated a strategy of more purposeful engagement with legislators to provide them with such information on a more routine basis in anticipation of the kinds of problems and issues that might otherwise arise.

With respect to citizens as GDOT customers, the public opinion polls conducted as part of the 360 assessment model consistently showed that the public’s to two priorities regarding transportation were to improve road condition and improve safety on state highways, as indicated above in Figure 14. These priorities were strongly reinforced by the results of the more intensive survey of motorists, which showed substantially more concern with maintaining existing highways and improving safety than on adding more lanes to interstate highways, building new highways, or adding more lanes to other state roads. This was somewhat at odds with the position taken by the legislature, which had been pressing GDOT to place greater emphasis on increasing capacity in the highway system, even at the expense of allowing the condition of existing roads to deteriorate to a degree if necessary. However, the Department was able to use the results of these two stakeholder surveys to effectively to support maintenance of the existing highway system as its continued top priority.

Finally, the results of the employee surveys conducted in 2005 and 2006 heightened a concern within GDOT’s executive team that the kinds of leadership practices which were being espoused and taught as part of the Department’s leadership accountability initiative were not taking hold throughout the organization as widely as had been hoped. Thus, in taking those survey results “on the road” to every district and central office, the Director of Strategic Development discussed
the static quality of leadership as perceived by employees in these units, reiterated top management’s concern with strengthening leadership at all levels in the Department, and indicated that leadership behaviors would be increasingly emphasized in managers’ annual performance appraisals. The result was modest but across the board improvement in these leadership ratings in the 2007 employee survey.

Conclusions

Public agencies, as well as private businesses, have become increasingly concerned over recent decades about relationships with their stakeholders, stakeholders who range from citizens to contractors to other agencies and governments to oversight agencies. That concern has prompted a variety of initiatives by these agencies to learn how those stakeholders relate to the agencies as well as how to improve those relationships.

This proposes and pilots the logical next step in pursuing this concern: a 360-degree assessment of an agency’s performance by combining the different perspectives of a variety of stakeholder groups. That assessment is piloted here for the case of—and at the request of—the Georgia Department of Transportation through a battery of surveys of nine different GDOT stakeholder groups.

An examination of the comparative findings of those surveys suggests a number of preliminary conclusions by way of a 360-degree assessment of GDOT’s work and relationships with its stakeholders, including the following:

- Different stakeholder groups assess the process of working with GDOT on mostly similar dimensions, including fairness, timeliness, and responsiveness. Some different dimensions
emerge based probably on differences in the nature of the specific stakeholders (e.g., legislators as oversight bodies vs. contractors as vendors of services).

- In the eyes of the various stakeholders, GDOT tends to perform better on some dimensions (especially, responsiveness and fairness) than on others (especially, consistency and timeliness).
- GDOT also appears to perform better for stakeholders who have more control over the agency’s fate (especially, legislators and local government officials) than those who have less (contractors).
- Assessment of GDOT’s performance on key outcome measures is relatively consistent across different stakeholder groups, with differences appearing to reflect predictably different perspectives of specific groups (e.g., contractors vs. professional drivers).
- Organizational turmoil in GDOT appears to have produced lower assessments on almost all outcome measures for almost all of the stakeholder groups.

To GDOT’s credit, the agency’s leaders have sought to address problems specific to particular stakeholder groups through follow-up discussions with the groups. However, the agency has yet to attempt to address the 360-degree implications: what the collective findings imply. This issue remains both for GDOT and other public agencies that might wish to attempt their own 360-degree assessments.
References


