Solutions to the Problem of Managerial Mediocrity: Moving up to Excellence (Part 2)
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SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEM OF MANAGERIAL MEDIOCRITY

Moving Up to Excellence (Part 2)

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ABSTRACT: *This second of two articles examines strategies for addressing managerial mediocrity. It finds that (1) strengthening expectations, (2) providing feedback and information, (3) aligning consequences for managers' performance with organizational goals, and (4) continuing professional development and training are effective strategies for increasing the commitment of managers to modern values and practices of public administration. Such commitment is, in turn, shown to be associated with improved outcomes. Cities in which most managers are perceived as having a mediocre strong commitment can make significant improvements by expanding these efforts. This article provides practical suggestions for doing so, and is based on a survey of local government officials.*

KEYWORDS: *excellence; leadership; local government; management; mediocrity; performance; public sector; quality*

How can mediocre managers become more effective? Little is known about ways in which organizations and their senior managers go about improving subordinate managers, yet the performance of midlevel managers often has significant consequences. The commitment of such managers can make or break agency programs. Mediocre managers may be problematic when they avoid difficult problems or hide behind rules and perceived "misunderstandings" when results are disappointing. The lack of workplace enthusiasm that often is a hallmark of mediocrity may produce results that are only barely acceptable. Part 1 of this study found that mediocre management is prevalent—about 41% of cities are characterized by a majority of managers who have only mediocre commitment to public administration values and practices—and that such weak commitments affect workplace productivity and citizen trust.

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This article examines solutions to the problem of managerial mediocrity in government. The research considers a broad range of responses and is based on a national survey of senior managers in cities with populations over 50,000. The survey also includes in-depth, qualitative interviews. This article is the second of two and follows "What Is Managerial Mediocrity? Definition, Prevalence, and Negative Impact," in this issue, which lays the foundation for this one.

Managerial mediocrity continues to be an important challenge to improving agency performance. Although most agencies and their managers now know what excellence is and how it can be achieved, many agencies remain mired in their own mediocrity. We think that sometimes managers do not know how to deal with it, and in other instances they have not yet identified mediocrity as an important barrier. This article shows that effective strategies exist to address managerial mediocrity. Many of these strategies can be integrated with already existing transformational change efforts, too. Overcoming managerial mediocrity is an important first step along the path toward achieving greater excellence.

Framework

In our first article, we defined managerial mediocrity as having only *a modest commitment to the contemporary values and practices of public administration,* such as having only a modest commitment to providing accountability, to performance improvement efforts, or to processes of public participation. This definition emphasizes commitment, including the commitment to acquire modern skills and knowledge to produce good results, rather than outcomes themselves. This emphasis is chosen, in large measure, to avoid any confounding effects between commitments and outcomes, which were examined in our previous article. That article finds that mediocre commitments are strongly associated with negative impacts on workplace productivity and community conditions.

Insofar as mediocrity is understood as a modest commitment, we harbor no illusion that managerial mediocrity or any other form of mediocrity can be eradicated quickly. As a voluntary act of individuals, people choose their aspirations and commitments in life, and some appear satisfied with mediocrity in the workplace—either their own or that of others. Consequently, symptoms of mediocrity such as shifting blame and foot-dragging will persist (Ashworth, 2001; Benveniste, 1977; Caiden, 1991; Cohen and Eimicke,1995). Yet, actions can be taken to decrease the desirability of this choice and thus reduce the extent of mediocrity. This article explores such strategies by focusing on public managers. Given the vast extent of managerial mediocrity today, we think that even modest actions to reduce it will yield substantial benefits to organizations and their communities.

A useful starting point for thinking about strategies for dealing with managerial mediocrity lies in theories of transformational, planned change in organizations. These theories discuss how people can be brought into processes that effect change (Beam, 2001; Chaudron, 1992; Gaebler et al., 1999; Holzer and Calahan, 1998; Julnes and Holzer, 2001; Light, 1999b, 2000; Packard, 1995; West and Berman, 1997). Although such successful approaches to organizational innovation do not explicitly address the

problem of managerial mediocrity, they can do so by focusing on strengthening the commitment to public administration values and practices as the principal, targeted change. In addition, these theories need to be adapted by applying the change tactics to managers rather than to employees. Although not every manager in the organization will be receptive to these strategies, we argue that if they are effectively implemented, a significant number of managers will be receptive and thus make a difference in the organization.

Although these theories involve many different strategies that could be used, they all suggest a strong need for re-enforcement and follow-through; it is well established that there are no one-shot solutions in the journey toward excellence. Similarly, addressing managerial mediocrity requires the use of several different strategies over some period of time, until new ways of going about the organization's business have become familiar routines for managers.[1] Increasing commitment to modern public administration values and practices among mediocre managers requires persistent strategies in four key areas (specific examples of strategies are discussed further in the results section):

1. *Commitment to a higher standard: strengthening expectations.* The first set of strategies aims to define the standards of excellence in the organization. Often, the first task of organizations overcoming mediocrity is to introduce or reintroduce managers and employees to core public administration values. By clearly defining these standards, managers provide an alternative to mediocrity, as well as specific arguments to counter the many rationalizations used to justify the status quo. Raising the bar on outcomes begins with identifying specific expectations for performance and may include specific actions or strategies that operationalize these standards in an empirically manifest way (Gaebler et al., 1999). Some specific standards include a stronger commitment to serve the public interest (e.g., identifying new projects), increasing awareness of the importance of ethics (e.g., requiring training), and ensuring modern management practices (e.g., requiring the use of performance measurement or community-based planning).

2. *Detection of performance gaps (or "errors").* It is not enough to merely set standards; managers must also identify specific instances in which these standards are not met. The gap between where things are and where they ought to be is called "error."[2] Argyris (1994) was among the first to address the problem of top management teams closing themselves off from criticism and, hence, from learning, improvement, and growth. Learning requires openness to accept that things today are not as good as they might be: as noted by one interviewee in this study, "If it ain't broke, you probably haven't looked hard enough." Strategies for detecting performance gaps (or errors) include managers using regular audits, conducting citizen and employee surveys, and embracing client feedback in a variety of different forms. Employee empowerment also encourages error detection and improvement because it allows (and often requires) employees to act on whatever relevant information they may receive. Many organizations empower their workers, and require this of their managers as they seek to detect errors (Bowen and Lawler, 1995; Gaebler et al.,1999).

3. *Consequences for all.* The third set of efforts for overcoming mediocrity is to ensure rewards for excellent performers and sanctions for mediocre performers. The

power of consequences is through reinforcement: people tend to persist in activities that are rewarded (bring pleasure) and desist in those that bring on punishment and pain (Bentham, 1970; DiIulio, Garvey, and Kettl, 1993; Garafalo and Geuras, 1999; Mill, 1979). Thus, holding managers accountable for their performance ("consistency in word and deed") is an important first step when moving from mediocrity toward excellence; holding everyone else accountable is an important second step. To get individuals to progress beyond mediocrity, consequences must make the status quo unattractive.[3]

4. *Capacity building.* Organizations that are entrenched and conditioned in mediocrity often lack the capacity to be excellent (Chetkovich, 2002; Honadle, 1999). People cannot detect errors if they don't know what excellence is. Managers cannot promote new management strategies if they don't know how to get positive results from these efforts. Capacity building can take various forms and is usually thought to include some form of training. For example, managers and supervisors will need training in performance measurement if it is to be used. Other forms of capacity building include hiring people with higher skills or educational levels. It is often observed that organizations underinvest and cut back on training in the face of budget shortfalls, thus impeding their capacity for overcoming mediocrity that is based on training.

It is obvious that the highest payoff comes from these efforts working in tandem; for example, error detection without higher expectations is unlikely to produce as much change as when those expectations are in place. Also, because the above theories have been so widely applied in recent years (e.g., Golembiewski, 1999; Bruce and Wyman, 1998; Stroh, 2001; West and Berman, 2001; Hellein and Bowman, 2002), there is some credence to theoretical predictions that these strategies will reduce mediocrity. However, there is no necessity for "one size fits all," as organizations differ in their unique challenges and conditions (Howard, 1994; Reich, 2002). Rather, we expect that different organizations will use a somewhat different mix of specific strategies to overcome mediocre managerial commitment as they seek to decrease the gap between themselves and those organizations that achieve higher planes of commitment.

Methods

The methods section in our first article describes our data set, sample size, response rate, and respondent characteristics.[4] Conceptualization and operationalization of managerial mediocrity is also provided in the first article, and readers are referred to that article for more detail. *Mediocre* commitment is operationally defined as, on average, only somewhat agreeing with 18 items that encompass performance, accountability, and public participation. These items are shown in Table 2 of the first article, and readers are referred to that. *Strong* managerial commitment is operationally defined as, on average, agreeing or strongly agreeing with these items.[5] Across these three areas, slightly fewer than half of the sample is classified as coming from cities in which most managers are said to have mediocre commitment, and about one-quarter have strong commitment.

Results

STRENGTHENING EXPECTATIONS

The first strategy in the above framework for addressing managerial mediocrity involves increasing managers' *commitment to a higher standard by strengthening expectations.* Table 1 lists a range of initiatives that can be used to strengthen expectations. Part A shows the use of these strategies in jurisdictions where most managers are perceived to have only a mediocre commitment to modern values and practices of public administration. Part B details how these strategies differ between organizations with mediocre and strong managerial commitment.

Table 1 indicates that strengthening expectations is not merely about developing a statement of expectations or goals; it shows that jurisdictions with different levels of managerial commitment vary least of all in this regard: 68.4% of jurisdictions with mediocre levels of managerial commitment and 86.4% of jurisdictions with high levels of managerial commitment, respectively, agree or strongly agree that "(their city) has adopted a formal mission, vision, or values statement as policy." The difference, 18.4%, is shown in Table 1, part B. Jurisdictions with high levels of managerial commitment to modern public administration values and practices are more likely to require that managers ensure that employees are aware of ethics standards (70.4% versus 36.8%), demonstrate their commitments (87.0% versus 42.1%), and require community participation in planning (68.5% versus 46.3%). Such actions reflect the organization's seriousness about attaining its goals, and these actions affect managerial commitment. Although it is not necessary for cities to use each of these strategies in order to have a high level of managerial commitment, further analysis shows that, on average, cities in which managerial commitment is strong use 5.7 of the 8 (71.3%) strategies shown, compared to 3.7 (46.3%) in cities with mediocre managerial commitment. The strategies identified above are among those that most distinguish such cities.

Interviews provided examples that further buttress some of these points. Several interviewees mentioned the use of performance measurement as a way of expressing expectations and providing a vehicle for follow up: "You can't manage what you don't measure. Managers need to have a tick mark on the door to know how high they should leap." At issue is not the use of quarterly performance measurement reports of managers' programs and departments, but rather measuring how well *managers* are doing in their job: keeping their departments and projects on track, planning for future activities, managing budgets and staff, responding to information requests, contributing to the management team, and encouraging personal growth. These are among the outcome-oriented measures that higher managers identify. Some respondents see positive value in such measures:

> Outcome-oriented performance measures are a good strategy. My experience in Boulder County, Colorado, with performance measurement was very positive. It made people more accountable both for what they were as individuals and for what they were contributing to the organization's mission.

In some cities, assessment against these individual expectations is completed by

Table 1. Strengthening Expectations

Strategies for Addressing Managerial Mediocrity: Strengthening Expectations

A. Use of Strategies in Cities with Mediocre Managerial Commitment, Only

	Strongly agree/ agree	Somewhat agree	Disagree[1]
We adopted a formal mission, vision, or values statement as policy	68.4%	17.9%	13.7%
People are encouraged to take on rather than avoid new challenges	48.4	41.1	10.6
We require community participation in planning, wherever practical	46.3	30.5	23.2
New managers must have demonstrated commitment to public sector values	45.7	33.0	21.2
We organize events to demonstrate our commitments	42.1	30.5	27.3
We require the use of performance measurement in all departments	41.0	17.9	41.1
We prefer new employees with a demonstrated commitment to public sector values	37.9	33.7	28.5
Managers ensure that employees are aware of ethics standards	36.8	44.2	18.9

Scale: alpha = .71

B. Comparing Strategies Between Cities with Mediocre and Strong Managerial Commitment

	Cities with Managerial Commitment		
	Mediocre	Strong	Difference[2] (%)
We organize events to demonstrate our commitments	42.1%	87.0%	44.9**
Managers ensure that employees are aware of ethics standards	36.8	70.4	36.8**
People are encouraged to take on rather than avoid new challenges	48.4	77.8	29.4**
We require the use of performance measurement in all departments	41.0	66.7	25.6**
We require community participation in planning, wherever practical	46.3	68.5	22.2**
New managers must have demonstrated commitment to public sector values	45.7	66.7	21.0**
We prefer new employees with a demonstrated commitment to public sector values	37.9	54.8	19.9*
We adopted a formal mission, vision, or values statement as policy	68.4	86.8	18.4**

1. Includes: "don't know," "disagree somewhat," "disagree," "strongly disagree" categories.

2. ** 1% sig., * 5% sig. (respective tau-c test statistics are: .482, .408, .361, .355, .333, .205, .203, and .218)

managers' superiors on a quarterly basis and may involve input from others as well. Such focus on specific measures is also evident when "cultural" changes are needed, such as getting managers to be more proactive rather than reactive, or more attuned to transparency than to CYA tactics. The development of such defining concepts is seen as a critical top management task:

> Mediocre managers are motivated day-to-day with little long-term, strategic focus guiding their actions. Top management needs to conceptualize a direction they would like to move: where do we want to be five or ten years from now organizationally, from a workforce perspective, or from an agency-by-agency perspective. Once conceptual goals have been clarified, top management can then work on an individual basis to gain conformity to standards.

Then, managers develop a concept (for example, customer service or accountability) and implement the concept as described above, incorporating it into management evaluation procedures. Other managers commented on strengthening expectations regarding values or ethics as a guide to managers' actions, thereby addressing mediocrity:

> Professional codes can be very helpful to top management. Most professional organizations have codes of ethics—ICMA, APWA, IPMA, ASPA. I require managers to sign their professional codes and to hang them on their office wall, and I list the values that are most important to me on a plaque on my wall, as well.

These codes are repeatedly used to help managers develop new plans, to address current issues ("what does the code say about this?"), and to address questionable or unethical conduct:

> I can forgive a mistake, but I will not tolerate an unethical or immoral act by a manager. We had an incident whereby a manager hung some of her colleagues out to dry by blaming them for a problem and thereby deflecting her responsibility for a mistake. In counseling with her, I used the GFOA Code of Ethics to explain why her conduct violated a provision in the professional code. She recognized the problem, and there has been no recurrence of unethical behavior.

Finally, at least one interviewee also commented on the need to provide a supportive environment for managers to take on new initiatives, where there is real learning from errors and tolerance for "honest mistakes." Overall, the above interview examples reinforce the mail survey results, showing the importance of performance measurement and commitment to public sector values. General strategies such as performance measurement are made effective by applying them at the level of individual managers, rather than applying them exclusively at higher levels such as programs, departments, or even the entire jurisdiction. They also include "built-in" opportunities for followup and corrective actions as needed to ensure that expectations remain strong.

DETECTING PERFORMANCE GAPS

The second strategy is *detecting performance gaps (or "errors"),* suggesting that improvement is possible or desirable. This is an information-based strategy, which identifies a need for new initiatives, or corrections of existing ones. Table 2 shows

Table 2. Detection of Performance Gaps

Strategies for Addressing Managerial Mediocrity: Detection of Performance Gaps

A. Use of Strategies in Cities with Mediocre Managerial Commitment, Only

	Strongly agree/ agree	Somewhat agree	Disagree[1]
We have an open-door policy	82.1%	12.6%	5.4%
We audit to ensure that actions conform to legal requirements	73.7	18.9	7.4
Our organization encourages open and constructive dialogue	51.6	41.1	7.5
We use feedback to demonstrate our commitment to our values	35.2	33.0	30.9
Employee surveys or focus groups are conducted	28.4	25.3	46.3
Use surveys to solicit citizen preferences	27.4	24.2	47.3
Empower employees to make important decisions	23.2	52.6	24.3
Scale: alpha = .76			

B. Comparing Strategies Between Cities with Mediocre and Strong Managerial Commitment

	Cities with Managerial Commitment		
	Mediocre	Strong	Difference[2] (%)
Empower employees to make important decisions	23.2%	64.8%	+41.6**
Our organization encourages open and constructive dialogue	51.6	81.5	+29.9**
We use feedback to demonstrate our commitment to our values	35.2	64.8	+29.6**
Use surveys to solicit citizen preferences	27.4	53.7	+25.3**
Employee surveys or focus groups are conducted	28.4	42.6	+14.2**
We audit to ensure that actions conform to legal requirements	73.7	87.0	+13.3*
We have an open-door policy	82.1	94.5	+12.3*

1. Includes: "don't know," "disagree somewhat," "disagree," "strongly disagree" categories.

2. ** 1% sig., * 5% sig. (respective tau-c test statistics are: .452, .389, .400, .342, .264, .300, and .217)

that respondents in cities with mediocre management commitment agree or strongly agree that they have open door policies (82.1%) and conduct audits to ensure conformance to legal requirements (73.7%). Both of these strategies aim to increase the flow of information. However, far fewer conduct surveys of citizens (27.4%) or employees (28.4%) or offer feedback that demonstrates commitment to values (35.2%). Empowerment is also listed as a gap-detection strategy because empowered employees often deal with a broad range of scenarios and thus encounter new situations (for example, new customer demands) that they then bring to the attention of their supervisors, hence, providing information that may lead to corrections by managers.[6]

Table 2, part B, shows that jurisdictions with mediocre levels of managerial commitment are less likely than those with high levels of managerial commitment to use

citizen surveys (respectively, 27.4% versus 53.7%), to offer feedback that demonstrates commitment to values (35.2% versus 64.8%), to encourage constructive and open dialogue (51.6% versus 81.5%), and to empower employees (23.2% versus 64.8%). Cities with high levels of managerial commitment use on average 4.9 (of 7, or 70.0%) of the listed strategies compared to 3.2 (or 45.7%) among those with mediocre managerial commitment. These strategies distinguish between cities of mediocre and strong commitment. Strategies such as citizen surveys require analytical skills, whereas empowerment initiatives often involve modifying existing managerial behaviors that are barriers to adopting modern public administration strategies.

A recurring theme from our interviews is getting mediocre managers to be less defensive and more open to new information:

> When a performance gap is pointed out to mediocre managers, their reaction often is defensive. They provide justifications and denials, such as "I have never been reprimanded" or "I complete all my projects on time" or "I complied with legal requirements." In other words, they may claim they do what is minimally required. That which is lacking is "excellence" which is admittedly intangible and difficult to measure, but important.

Another interviewee reported a manager responding, "I did what you told me to do. I am not paid to think." Interviewees describe several approaches to get managers to open up to new ideas. One approach is to simply sit down with a mediocre manager:

> I felt the supervisor was a mediocre manager who was not solving the problem, but just throwing darts at it. I brainstormed with the manager about alternative ways to solve this problem. After several discussion sessions . . . this manager realized that he had been misdiagnosing and mishandling the situation. My intervention with the manager, and later his with his employees, was successful in resolving this problem.

Some jurisdictions also use employee or citizen surveys for this purpose: "We survey citizens' attitudes every other year. It is a powerful tool. It helps to identify problems or performance gaps. Mediocre managers do better when they understand what the problem is." Some interviewees note that in order for mediocre managers to consider new ideas, such managers need to be persuaded that their mediocrity will have adverse consequences for them. One interviewee uses empowerment of his managers to get them to consider new ways of doing things (making them responsible for outcomes causes some to come up with new approaches), but he noted that empowerment is quite scary for many managers and that it requires considerable training.

Feedback is an important source of corrective information. One manager commented: "Mediocrity develops over time. If mediocre performers get timely feedback on their performance, they may be able to address performance gaps early." Brainstorming is not only a way to communicate the importance of the situation; it is also an opportunity to interject feedback. Other avenues for providing feedback are regular scorecard review, performance appraisal, and periodic meetings. Many top-level managers report routinely sitting down with subordinate managers and helping them with specific problems, or identifying solutions for subpar performance. As one such manager noted: "It is really difficult to turn mediocre managers around. It takes constant vigilance and monitoring." Hence, ongoing feedback is necessary. But such

information need not always come exclusively from higher managers; it can also include feedback from below:

> One of our new managers, a recently promoted lieutenant, became involved in community policing. By attending numerous community meetings he became aware of citizen complaints and suggestions for improvement. His focus changed from cleaning up lots (vacant lots, broken windows, dilapidated buildings) to cleaning up lives (work with the homeless and needy). His exposure to community needs helped him realize the enormous number of things that could be done. He saw how problems were interconnected and how projects and successes in one area were transferable to other areas. He became more enthusiastic about his work. This community feedback helped to transform a mediocre manager into an excellent one.

Clearly, there are many sources of information that can be used to point out deficiencies, and also many opportunities to be helpful in suggesting useful responses. These anecdotal comments support the mail survey results regarding feedback, but further point to the necessity of overcoming defenses. Getting managers to take information seriously often involves being clear about expectations, but resistance is sometimes caused by denial, having rule- or precedent-based justifications, or the lack of consequences, discussed below.

CONSEQUENCES

The third strategy is *providing consequences.* As often noted, behavior is reinforced by its consequences. Table 3 shows that only about one-half of respondents in cities with mediocre management commitment agree or strongly agree that their jurisdictions look for consistency in word and deed (50.5%) and deal with unethical conduct harshly (49.5%), and far fewer agree or strongly agree that performance appraisal is used to hold managers accountable (39.0%), that evaluations of managers are linked to agency results (21.0%), that counseling is provided for managers who commit missteps (26.3%), and that rewards are withheld from poor performers (20.7%). Clearly, such cities do little to reinforce expectations of performance and ethics, and this, in turn, is reflected in only mediocre management commitment to modern values and practices of public administration.

Not surprisingly, respondents in these cities are less likely than those in cities with strong management commitment to use these "consequences" strategies. They are less likely to use performance appraisal to hold managers accountable (39.0% versus 79.7%), to link managerial evaluation to agency results (21.0% versus 61.1%), to hold managers responsible for meeting citizen expectations (38.0% versus 75.9%), and to deal harshly with unethical conduct (49.5% versus 81.5%). Cities with high levels of managerial commitment use on average 5.5 (of 8, or 68.8%) of the listed strategies, compared to 2.8 (or 35.0%) among those with mediocre managerial commitment. The widespread use of many of these strategies suggests that performance appraisal and other strategies can be simultaneously employed. These results also indicate that effective approaches to ensuring managerial commitment require multiple, reinforcing strategies.

Several interviewees noted a problem of inadvertent rewards for mediocre managerial performance in their agencies. The following comment is typical:

Table 3. Consequences: Rewards and Recognition

Strategies for Addressing Managerial Mediocrity: Consequences

A. Use of Strategies in Cities with Mediocre Managerial Commitment, only

	Strongly agree/ agree	Somewhat agree	Disagree[1]
We look for consistency in word and deed	50.5%	36.8%	12.7%
Unethical conduct is dealt with harshly	49.5	31.6	18.8
Performance appraisal of managers holds them accountable for their actions	39.0	38.9	22.2
We hold managers responsible for meeting citizen expectations	38.0	42.1	19.0
Performance appraisal of employees holds them accountable for their actions	33.0	46.8	20.2
We provide counseling for managers when they commit missteps	26.3	43.2	30.5
We link managerial evaluation to agency results	21.0	28.4	50.6
Rewards are withheld from poor performers	20.7	37.0	42.4
Scale: alpha = .90			

B. Comparing Strategies Between Cities with Mediocre and Strong Managerial Commitment

	Cities with Managerial Commitment		
	Mediocre	Strong	Difference[2] (%)
Performance appraisal of managers holds them accountable for their actions	39.0%	79.7%	+40.7**
We link managerial evaluation to agency results	21.0	61.1	+40.1**
We hold managers responsible for meeting citizen expectations	38.0	75.9	+37.0**
We provide counseling for managers when they commit missteps	26.3	61.1	+34.8**
Unethical conduct is dealt with harshly	49.5	81.5	+32.0**
Performance appraisal of employees holds them accountable for their actions	33.0	64.8	+31.8**
Rewards are withheld from poor performers	20.7	50.0	+29.3**
We look for consistency in word and deed	50.5	77.7	+27.2**

1. Includes: "don't know," "disagree somewhat," "disagree," "strongly disagree" categories.

2. ** 1% sig., * 5% sig. (respective tau-c test statistics are: .434, .444, .439, .376, .351, .348, .395, and .375)

One problem we have with mediocre managers in this department is that they are inadvertently rewarded. This happens because when top management detects mediocrity they tend to give these managers less to do. More dependable managers then have to take on more work to compensate. I happen to have a reputation as a "fixer" of problems, so as a consequence my reward is more tasks or more complex tasks. But the result of this action by top management is to unintentionally reward mediocrity and allow people to get by doing less, while more productive workers are penalized with more work.

Obviously, failing to address mediocrity as a problem inadvertently supports it, and other interviewees mentioned that this occurs when, for example, agencies give across-the-board (equal) salary to all managers, regardless of (high) performance: "If mediocrity is accepted up the chain, if only the less than mediocre is punished, then it keeps people being mediocre." Yet, many managers do find that performance appraisal can be effectively used to address behavior that does not live up to their expectations:

> Performance appraisal can be a useful carrot and stick. I have used performance appraisal to orally communicate with subordinates about problematic behavior. If this is not corrected, it escalates to written feedback. This has led to marked improvement in performance. This also has financial implications for the subordinate because merit increases or promotion prospects are affected.

Some organizations now use six-month performance reviews for managers, which increases the frequency of such review. There is disagreement, however, about the utility of sticks and carrots to increase greater commitment to modern public administration values and practices. Excessive reliance on sticks creates fear, foot-dragging (compliance rather than enthusiasm), and retaliation. This often affects many others beyond the intended target (manager). Excessive reliance on carrots or rewards is impractical (they are not often unavailable) and, in any event, deflect attention from understanding why greater commitment is desirable:

> Mediocre managers do not thrive on rewards and punishment. Those who respond to these inducements are usually highly motivated and competitive. For many mediocre managers their job is a means to an end (buy a car, grow the pension). They do not derive a lot of self-actualization from their job.

Rather, the needed emphasis appears to be aligning performance criteria with the goals of the organization:

> We don't reward reactive behavior. For example, we don't expect the public works department to receive public accolades. It is best for a public works department head if no one knows him. Rewards are based on complaints we don't get, on no potholes, on clear drains, etc. Managers know when they have succeeded and failed because the process and system are transparent. They can measure their own performance against standards they help to create. Their self-evaluations are surprisingly accurate.

and

> We are reviewing the way department and division heads are evaluated. Our strategic planning process is becoming much more mission and results oriented. We are linking performance appraisal to strategic goals and business plans.

Then, sticks and carrots are used to selectively reinforce and demonstrate commitment to these criteria, complementing and supporting the consistent "brainstorming" and other information-gathering that helps explain why a shift in attitude, position, or skills is needed. In this goal-oriented context, pay raises and other "sticks and carrots" may help:

> I have dealt with people who were underperforming by withholding their bonus and annual pay raise. This worked. I tell them that the reason for this is their

underperformance. They disagree with my performance critique, but I tell them "this is what I see." In each case, subsequent performance improved, and bonus and pay increases were restored. Part of what is necessary is to communicate whatever is on your mind regarding performance. Money is a way to concentrate their attention.

Still, there are instances when feedback and appraisal have been insufficient to correct deficient action. Then, progressive discipline may need to be applied to managers:

It is important to document performance. I often use coaching memos to do this. The memo documents what happened, why I am displeased, and what I expect. This is progressive—starting with oral communication, then in writing, then copying the HR Department and requesting a written response, and so forth. Establishing clear expectations, documenting performance, communicating, and dispensing a lot of praise—these are strategies that work when dealing with mediocre managers.

But I encountered two managers in my career that I couldn't fix: both involved substance abuse—one with cocaine, the other with alcohol. One retired early, the other flunked a second drug test and was let go. We need to find a way to deal with substance abuse if we want to improve performance of mediocre managers.

Unethical conduct is also mentioned as a reason for terminating mediocre managers. However, reassignment and reorganization are favorite backup strategies when outright firing is unavailable as a remedy:

One year after I came here, I realized that I had two supervisors that were key to some of my desired changes. Neither was interested in my goals or trying something new. But both would be difficult to fire due to their long-standing (tenure and) community ties. In this situation, I transferred their functions (and them) to a senior manager that was known for his "attention to the work ethic." He was demanding but fair. Within 30 days, both had voluntarily left the organization. I was shielded from Council and public criticism because I didn't have to fire them, and I ultimately accomplished my aim.

There are obviously many different ways to strengthen expectations by providing additional consequences for managerial mediocrity. It often involves creatively finding what works best given the individual and situation at hand: "I have found that given the choice, most people want to succeed and excel at their jobs. Every individual will respond to challenge differently, and as leaders, we must be willing to find that key to changing subordinates and to be willing to put a part of us in the equation." In any event, it is clear that addressing managerial mediocrity by providing consequences is an important part of the equation.

CAPACITY BUILDING: TRAINING FOR MANAGERS

The fourth set of strategies is *capacity building* through training (see Table 4). Jurisdictions with mediocre levels of managerial commitment are less likely than those with high levels of managerial commitment to require continuing professional development (26.6% versus 81.5%) and training in such areas as program evaluation (20.0% versus 57.4%), employee empowerment (24.3% versus 46.3%), and productivity improvement (26.4% versus 46.3%). Jurisdictions with mediocre managerial commitment provide very little training; of the six training strategies shown, they provide only 1.5 (25.0%) compared to 3.2 (53.3%) among jurisdictions with high levels of

Table 4. Capacity Building: Training

Strategies for Addressing Managerial Mediocrity: Training

A. Use of Strategies in Cities with Mediocre Managerial Commitment, only

	Strongly agree/ agree	Somewhat agree	Disagree[1]
Managers receive training in dealing with the media	31.6%	28.4%	40.0%
Require staff to pursue continuing professional development	26.6	37.2	36.2
Managers receive training in productivity improvement strategies	26.4	26.3	47.4
Managers receive training in employee empowerment	24.3	35.8	40.0
Managers receive training in program evaluation and accountability	20.0	41.1	38.9
We sometimes require managers to pursue continuing education in order to improve their performance	18.9	42.1	38.9

Scale: alpha = .79

B. Comparing Strategies Between Cities with Mediocre and Strong Managerial Commitment

	Cities with Managerial Commitment		
	Mediocre	Strong	Difference[2] (%)
Require staff to pursue continuing professional development	26.6%	81.5%	+54.7**
Managers receive training in program evaluation and accountability	20.0	57.4	+37.4**
We sometimes require managers to pursue continuing education in order to improve their performance	18.9	51.8	+33.0**
Managers receive training in employee empowerment	24.3	46.3	+22.1**
Managers receive training in productivity improvement strategies	26.4	46.3	+20.0**
Managers receive training in dealing with the media	31.6	40.7	+9.1*

1. Includes: "don't know," "disagree somewhat," "disagree," "strongly disagree" categories.

2. ** 1% sig., * 5% sig. (respective tau-c test statistics are: .522, .284, .397, .250, .317, and .171)

managerial commitment. Further analysis shows that these lower rates appear to be related to concerns about training budgets. Among jurisdictions with mediocre levels of managerial commitment, only 21.1% of respondents agree or strongly agree that they have adequate resources for training, compared to 50.0% among jurisdictions with high levels of managerial commitment. One interviewee commented that "in times when funds are tight, and morale and performance should be at its highest to achieve efficiencies, training and professional development budgets are cut."

Many interviewees commented that training is beneficial in moving up from mediocrity, for example:

I think the best way to "turn around" mediocre managers is to support their partici-

pation in the American Society for Public Administration, the regional ASPA orga-
nizations, and other professional development activities. When top management
supports these things, it sends an important message to mediocre managers that
keeping abreast of developments in their field is essential.

While this is somewhat related to strengthening expectations (in the sense of staying
on top of one's field), most interviewees coupled such general awareness with more
specific strategies to better ensure that training is in fact effective:

> We encourage professional development. Our core training is provided in-house,
> but we also encourage managers to attend professional conferences. However, we
> tell them to be prepared to present to the management team what they have learned
> at the conference. We insist on accountability. Before they go to the conference we
> require them to say what they are going to do, why they want to go, and what they
> expect to get out of it. They often return with good ideas about how to improve their
> own performance and that of the city.

And some also see a need for integrating training together with other strategies
mentioned above:

> We have supervisors in accounting who lack self-direction and planning skills. Coach-
> ing and management training have helped. We send all of our staff through supervi-
> sory certificate training. It helps those who are unsure of themselves. This coupled
> with some handholding and coaching where we outline expectations and give clear
> guidance has effectively addressed problems of mediocre management. Informal as
> well as formal feedback is essential together with on-the-job learning.

Interviewees suggested that training might be useful only if it addresses the spe-
cific causes of mediocrity: "Training may be useful depending on what makes the
manager mediocre." They suggest that it might be motivating and reinvigorating, if
the employee feels that a lack of professional renewal is the cause. They also suggest
that over time managers may have lost touch with emerging technologies and that
training can be effective to acquire up-to-date skills.

These findings suggest that training is an important component of efforts to ensure
strong managerial commitment. What distinguishes cities with varying levels of mana-
gerial commitment the most is the *requirement* that staff pursue their continuing pro-
fessional development. The extent to which this requirement is taken seriously and
implemented probably goes a long way toward explaining the role of capacity build-
ing in addressing managerial mediocrity. Training is a means of ensuring profes-
sional skills and orientations; visiting professional conferences is probably a minimum.
Beyond that, managers need to assess the training needs of specific positions and
individuals. Clearly, training is no magic bullet, but rather a component of a well-
balanced set of strategies that are designed to strengthen commitment to modern pub-
lic administration values and practices.

BRINGING IT TOGETHER

Table 5 summarizes some of the important practical strategies to address managerial
mediocrity mentioned by interviewees in response to an open-ended question. These
strategies support those mentioned in Tables 1 and 4, but also include a few additional
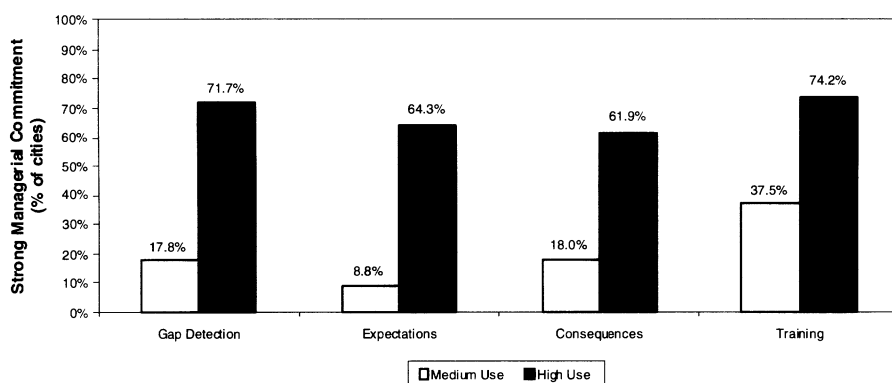
Figure 1. Strategies for Increasing Managerial Commitment

promising ones, such as reinforcing expectations by organizations' events that demonstrate commitment, and encouraging an open and constructive dialogue in a consistent manner.

Figure 1 shows the effect of these different strategies on perceptions of the level of managerial commitment. In this figure, a medium use of each strategy is defined as, on average, only somewhat agreeing that these strategies are used. A high use level is defined as, on average, agreeing or strongly agreeing that these strategies are being used. In practice, cities that indicate a medium use of these strategies (which make up 42.1% of the sample) use 11.5 of the 29 (or 39.7%) strategies shown in Tables 1 through 4, compared to those that have a high use (28.7% of the sample), which use 21.0 of 29 (or 72.4%) of the strategies shown. Those cities that use a majority of strategies are much more likely to have strong managerial commitment. The correlation between the number of strategies and managerial commitment is strong and significant ($r^2 = .58, p < .01$). This is no tautological artifact; the items of strategies (Tables 1 through 4) and of commitment (see note 5) are substantively very different. Analysis of the results in the preceding sections shows that cities with mediocre managerial commitment use, on average, 11.0 strategies, compared to 19.3 among those with strong commitment, which is consistent with the above results.

Additional analysis shows that these strategies not only affect managerial commitment, but they also correlate with important outcomes. For example, 69.0% of respondents who, on average, agree or strongly agree that their organization undertakes the above-mentioned strategies to strengthen expectations also agree or strongly agree that employee productivity in their city is high, compared to only 28.7% among those who only somewhat agree or disagree that their city undertakes the above strategies. These strategies also strongly distinguish the perceived level of citizen trust in jurisdictions: these percentages are 58.5% and 16.6% respectively. Likewise, among respondents who, on average, agree or strongly agree that their city uses the above stated training strategies, 78.1% also agree or strongly agree that employee productivity is high, compared to 39.0% of those who do not agree or strongly agree.

To further examine the relationships among strategies, managerial commitment,
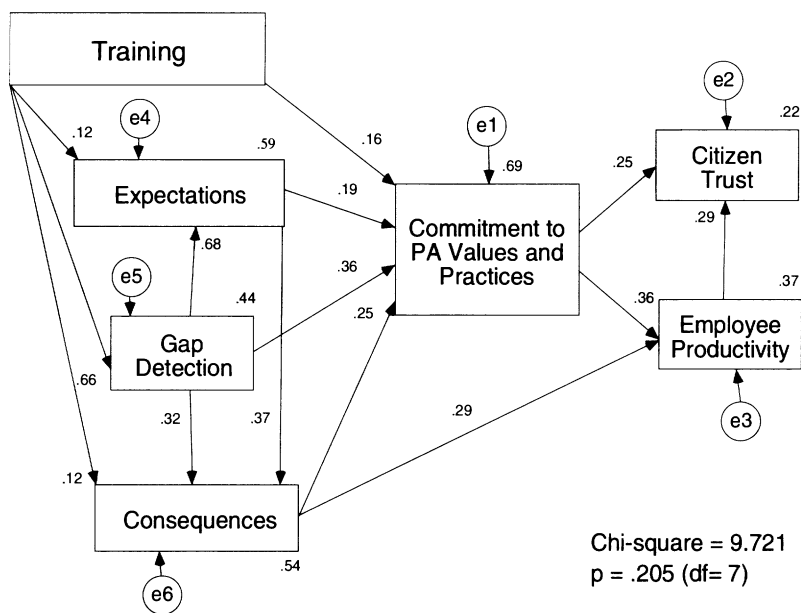
Figure 2. Structural Equation Model of Strategies Affecting Managerial Commitment

and such outcomes, Figure 2 shows the results of a structural equation model, which tests the above associations in a more rigorous and integrated way. Although this recursive model can be estimated in a piecemeal fashion using path analysis (and with similar results), the approach used here includes additional tests for the appropriateness (specification) of the overall model. Figure 2 satisfies the usual goodness-of-fit standards: the model's covariance-variance matrix is consistent with that of the data ($\chi^2 = 9.72, p > .05$), the RMSEA is 0.047 (under the norms of 0.05 or 0.08), and the Goodness of Fit Index is 0.985, exceeding the threshold value of 0.90.[7] Effect sizes of the four managerial strategies and other variables are indicated along the arrows; only significant relationships are shown.[8] This model shows that, first, although the relationships are somewhat complex, managerial commitment has a significant impact on perceptions of employee productivity and citizen trust. Indeed, the effects of all but one strategy, consequences, on these outcomes are indirect, through increased commitment. Other strategies are insignificant and hence are dropped from the model. Figure 2 shows that the direct effect of managerial commitment on perceived employee productivity is slightly larger than that of the "consequences" strategy (0.36 versus 0.29). Second, Figure 2 shows significant indirect effects of various strategies on managerial commitment. Although the direct effect of training on commitment is 0.16 (lowest of all four strategies), the total indirect effects are calculated as 0.48,[9] resulting in a total effect of training on commitment of 0.54. The total effects of the other strategies on managerial commitment are expectations, 0.28; error detection, 0.63; and consequences, 0.25. The total effect of training is thus considerable

Table 5. Strategies to Address Managerial Mediocrity Mentioned by Interviewees

A. Setting the stage:

Avoiding "perverse" rewards that promote mediocre performance, or that sustain mediocrity by
  ignoring it.
Communicating that negative consequences will occur if performance problems associated with
  mediocrity persist.

B. Addressing Mediocrity:

Addressing defensive reasoning (justification for current performance) and suggesting why
  greater commitment is desirable.
Brainstorming with managers to identify new solutions or redefinition of problems.
Bringing information from citizen or clients to employees and managers, suggesting a need for a
  higher standard.
Conducting performance appraisals of managers on a semi-annual basis that is linked to the
  strategic objectives of organizations.
Empowering managers in order to get managers to think beyond current solutions and
  approaches and to hold them accountable for a higher standard.
Encouraging and rewarding managers to take risks.
Ensuring that goals are well articulated for both programs and individuals.
Ensuring that the sticks and carrots of the organization are aligned with the performance goals as
  defined for individual managers by senior managers.
Giving praise for improvement.
Providing other sources of ongoing feedback to managers about their performance.
Reassigning or reorganizing to remove mediocre managers from their current positions or from
  the organization (only when improvement fails).
Disciplining (progressively) mediocre managers to improve performance.
Requiring managers to pursue their continuing professional development, and developing a plan
  to that end.
Sending managers to professional conferences as means to strengthen expectations about
  professionalism in general.
Sending managers to professional conferences or training and holding them accountable for
  learning or applying new skills.
Tolerating "honest mistakes" and learning errors.
Identifying a new "theme" (e.g., customer service) and implementing that theme consistently in
  many departments over a prolonged period.
Using balanced scorecards or performance measurement to monitor the performance of
  individuals on a regular basis (for example, quarterly).
Using Codes of Ethics and professional standards to justify actions, including discipline.

compared to the other strategies. This is plausible because the rise in skill levels makes
it easier to use other strategies, such as detecting "errors." Alternative model specifi-
cations all support the relatively large total effects of training, as well as similar re-
sults for the other strategies. Figure 2 also shows the relatively small direct effects of
merely raising expectations, in the absence of using other strategies.

Third, in a separate analysis, we examined the effects of perceptions of wide-
spread entitlement and fear in organizations. An index variable of widespread fear
was developed, but it is not significantly associated with commitment, employee pro-
ductivity, or citizen trust, after controlling for other variables in the model. Further
analysis shows that fear is associated with differences between cities with poor and
mediocre levels of commitment but not between cities with mediocre and strong lev-
els. An index of widespread entitlement was also developed, measuring the extent to

which employees and managers "just act busy, rather doing meaningful work" and where "people spend more time thinking about retirement than serving customers" ($\alpha = 0.84$). This variable is significantly, negatively associated with commitment (the standardized coefficient is –0.17), employee productivity (–0.39), consequences (–0.28), and "error" detection (–0.29). This model is not shown here because model diagnostics do not suggest it is a better model and also because this model only marginally affects the total effects reported above. However, it does show that widespread perceptions of entitlement lower organizational functioning: the total effect of perceptions of entitlement on commitment is –0.37, which is quite substantial compared to the total effects above. Entitlement's negative effect on employee productivity is –0.56, about equal in magnitude to the combined direct effects of managerial commitment and the consequences strategy. Entitlement, even in moderate degree, is one of several important challenges to productivity.

Conclusion and Discussion

This article examines strategies for addressing managerial mediocrity, which present organizations with significant challenges. It finds that (1) strengthening expectations, (2) providing feedback and information, (3) aligning consequences for managers' performance with organizational goals, and (4) continuing professional development and training are effective strategies for increasing the commitment of managers to modern values and practices of public administration. Such commitment is, in turn, shown to be associated with important outcomes. Cities in which most managers are perceived as having a strong commitment use a range of such strategies in a consistent manner, but cities in which most managers are perceived as having a mediocre commitment use far fewer strategies; they may fail to articulate clear, measurable goals or provide consequences for mediocre performance. Organizations can make significant improvements in addressing managerial mediocrity by expanding their current use of the above strategies. This article provides numerous practical suggestions for doing so (for example, see Table 5).

Although organizations now know how to address managerial mediocrity, an obvious but unanswered question is why so many do not. While we think that many managers do not know how to address mediocrity, one interviewee offered that: "If within the organization you have mediocrity, it suggests something is wrong at the top. There is truth to the old saying, 'A fish stinks from the head down.' If there is mediocrity at the top, it permeates the organization." Indeed, another likely, important reason for allowing managerial mediocrity to persist is disinterest among top managers in ensuring high-quality performance. Anecdotally, we observe that some top managers have their hands full with other matters, such as dealing with elected officials, other jurisdictions, and important constituents, and that it may well be that organizational performance then takes a back seat. Some may be unfamiliar with or unwilling to use modern management approaches. In any event, through this study, we have come to appreciate even more the role of professionally aware and forward-looking top managers in setting the tone of the organization, and dealing with mediocrity at lower levels.

Although the strategies discussed in this article can be used independently from other efforts that organizations may undertake (combating mediocrity is a worthwhile endeavor in its own right), it is worth noting that these strategies can be readily integrated with modern transformational change efforts. Many of these latter strategies (see, e.g., Berman 1998, 2004 forthcoming) begin with laying the foundation for success, by identifying those who support change efforts, and by providing clear rationales and convincing examples of initial successes. Then, as more and more successes are achieved, and the change becomes routine, more and more employees or departments are asked to join in. While mediocre managers are obviously not to be chosen as initial champions of change, the strategies discussed in this article can be readily used to prepare the ground for subsequent diffusion efforts. Organizations can use these strategies to improve the quality of their managerial resources before these managers must inevitably become part of the change efforts. This has further benefits, because mediocre managers who have improved their performance may be able to use the same tactics described in this article on their mediocre employees as they are requested to undertake subsequent change efforts.

This study is the first in recent times to systematically examine the extent and consequences of managerial mediocrity; however, significant knowledge gaps remain in this rather new line of inquiry. The following are highlighted for consideration. First, we know very little about what is needed to survive in cultures of mediocrity. Many graduates of public administration programs are taught to value excellence and cutting-edge management strategies, but the reality is that only a minority of organizations offer such an environment. Most workplaces exhibit mediocre or even poor management. What do new graduates need to know about surviving in such environments? How can they bring change to such organizations? How should they deal with poor or mediocre supervisors? Clearly, graduates need survival skills to work in many different environments if they are to be successful. (At least part of the answer begins with correctly assessing managerial commitment and performance, a topic explored briefly at the end of our first article.)

Second, we need to better understand top management's role and other factors that affect an organization's willingness to hold its managers accountable for performing at high levels. While it is unclear the precise direction such a study might take (e.g., determining which factors to focus on, including the role of political appointees in federal, state, and local agencies), it could include knowledge among managers about how to deal with mediocrity. A useful outcome of such a study could be an expanded set of criteria for screening, hiring, and evaluating top managers. Third, while our definition focuses on commitments, we would welcome further studies that focus to a greater extent on performance outcomes. Our reason for focusing on commitment is to avoid confounding measurement effects with outcomes; however, this is a surmountable problem, and, beyond this, there are other dimensions of mediocrity worth exploring as well. Finally, we would welcome efforts to add managerial competency and performance to the many "balanced scorecards" and performance measures that are now being made available to the public. Such information would make possible interesting comparisons across jurisdictions and agencies, draw attention to the need for improvements, and assist job-seekers.

Mediocrity is increasingly a significant problem in many parts of our society—public schools, health care, law, business corporations, higher education, and government (e.g., Bennett, 1997; Light, 1999a; O'Neill, 2002a, 2002b). While everyone has areas of mediocrity that they need to work on, the good news is that there are many tools to address managerial mediocrity in a productive fashion. We strongly urge public organizations to identify and take their managerial mediocrity seriously. Moving up from managerial mediocrity is crucial to a high-performing government and increased public confidence in government.

Notes

1. Of course, traditional "bypass" tactics may still be necessary where unreceptive managers continue to display mediocre levels of commitment (see, e.g., Ashworth, 2001; Cohen and Eimicke, 1995).

2. The term *error* is used here as analogous to error in regression analysis, the difference between the actual (observed) and predicted values. It does not imply a lapse of judgment, error in strategy execution, or any other kind of error.

3. We prefer the use of this older term *consequences* rather than the newer, and increasingly common term, *accountability*. Accountability includes meting out consequences, but also providing information about performance that may be used by others to evaluate performance and determine the desirability of sanctions. Here, where we are only concerned with meting out consequences, we prefer this older term.

4. That methodology also provides a demographic analysis of the respondents and examines possible sources of response and nonresponse bias, which are found to be insignificant.

5. The term *strong* as defined here combines the categories of "good" and "excellent" used in the first article.

6. Also, the item of empowerment scales well with the other items. Without this item, the Cronbach α of the remaining items is .71 rather than .76 as shown in Table 2.

7. Other measures indicating acceptable fit are the Tucker-Lewis Index of 0.989, NFI of 0.987, and AGFI of 0.939 (all above 0.9 and close to 1.0), RMR of 0.026 (under 0.05), and the maximum Modification Index is 1.92. The PNFI value of 0.329 compares favorably with other valid, competing models.

8. Shown are the standardized (beta) coefficients. The beta coefficients can be compared against each; for example, a standardized coefficient of, say, 0.50 suggests an effect that is twice as much as a variable with a coefficient of 0.25 in the model. Standardized coefficients should not be confused with the squared multiple correlations that are shown in the upper-right corners of the endogenous variables (e.g., 0.44 in "error detection").

9. For example, the indirect effect of training on commitment through consequences is calculated as .12 * .25 = .03. Indirect effects are calculated for all paths and then totaled.

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