



your township's programs and services

Chances are, you weren't a certified assessor when you ran for township office. Your only experience with tax collection was receiving your property tax bill in the mail. Ran a class election back in high school? It probably didn't involve special equipment or precincts.

Most township board members don't come to their elected position with extensive expertise in township services. It's not your job to know every detail—that's why the township has staff, consultants and others to help accomplish the township's programs and services. But as a board member, the buck ultimately stops with you. Your residents elected you to ensure that the township follows state statutes and meets residents' needs. They expect their elected officials to set standards and ensure accountability to meet those standards.

Some township officials may believe that without a large staff or department heads, the evaluation process does not apply to them. The reality is this responsibility is critical for townships of *all* sizes. All townships have at least some individuals who assist in the delivery of township services and programs. For a majority of townships, the elected township officials themselves *are* the "department heads." In others, volunteers, office assistants or appointed committee members oversee a majority of program delivery. Still others have full-time staff, including departments comprised of department heads and employees, and dozens of townships have hired township managers to oversee day-to-day operations.

This continuing education article and accompanying self-assessment are worth 2.0 elective credits in MTA's Township Governance Academy. See page 27 for details.



OBJECTIVE

- To examine the roles and responsibilities of township officials in ensuring township programs and services best serve and meet residents' needs

CORE COMPETENCIES

- Possesses knowledge of township services and their policy implications
- Works effectively with individuals, departments and committees to achieve desired outcomes

cover story

But in all cases, the township board needs to ensure that the township's programs and services—no matter how many or how extensive—are provided effectively, efficiently and in a manner consistent with community wants and needs. Your job doesn't end with delegating. The board must provide the oversight necessary so that you are best serving your residents.

Evaluating services is sometimes overlooked as a board's key function, but Susan Radwan, owner of Leading Edge Mentoring and a frequent instructor for MTA Township Governance Academy (TGA) courses, says it's one of the most important.

"It's the base. It's the essential piece of government," she said. "If the board is not doing that, they're not even beginning to do their job."

The responsibility is heavy, but it's not out of reach. By setting goals and expectations, asking questions and communicating with departments or those overseeing programs and services, your board can go a long way toward creating a culture of accountability and excellence.

A culture of accountability

Every member of the township team—including elected and appointed officials, staff and even volunteers—must be held to a certain standard. Whether they're tasked with estimating a home's taxable value or putting out fires, they'll still be held accountable to how they treat township residents and exhibit ethical character in their daily interactions.

But personnel can't be held to a standard if they don't know what it is. Defining the desired outcome creates the playing field for the entire township and empowers individuals to succeed, Radwan said. It's up to your board to create a culture where all township personnel understand what's expected of them. This shouldn't be left up to chance. Your board's values should be put in writing and communicated to all township employees, Radwan said.

To create this list of core values, your board could brainstorm what's important to both officials and residents, such as professionalism when interacting with the public and township colleagues, customer service and transparency. Radwan recommends putting these values into a board policy that also defines unacceptable behaviors and consequences for these actions.

When **Todd Anderson** became a **Conway Township** (Livingston Co.) clerk, township employees had no human resources document to guide them. After attending TGA courses, he learned the board should give employees a detailed policy manual. The board spent about a year working to create its first employee handbook—a much more complicated process than Anderson ever expected. Creating a culture of accountability is a process that takes time.

"We're taking it step by step," Anderson said. "I'm learning as I go."



To create a list of core values to guide township personnel, your board could brainstorm what's important to both officials and residents, such as professionalism when interacting with both the public and township colleagues, customer service and transparency.

Remember, the township's culture starts with your board. Every official should embody these values and set an example for all township personnel. Your township team will learn from the board—for better or worse.

Beyond the status quo

The board's job is to cast a wholistic vision for the township and determine how each program, service or department fits in that vision. Program leaders or department heads can't do this themselves—it can sometimes be difficult to see beyond their own goals and day-to-day operations to how they fit into the entire township's vision.

Some boards might say they already evaluate their services. Once a year, whoever is responsible for a program takes the podium at a board meeting and rattles off a list of activities that have been completed. The board might ask a question or two, but the dialogue doesn't expand beyond the surface level.

Others might say they go above and beyond the norm for evaluating their services. Board members are in the assessor's office or the treasurer's office almost every day, and they don't hesitate to email the fire chief with suggestions for how the fire department can improve.

But Radwan says neither scenario is ideal. Your board needs more than an activity log to adequately evaluate your township's services. At the same time, meddling in departments' daily operations goes beyond what's necessary and is still activity focused.

Instead of only worrying about making sure departments check off a to-do list, board members need to step back and see the big picture. Evaluating your township services means carefully examining their outcomes. In other words, what is the result of all those activities? How do they fit into the township's overall goals? Board members need to define what success looks like for each program or service and how that success will be measured.

"Evaluation is creating the expectation, defining the expected outcome, and monitoring to make sure those outcomes are being achieved," Radwan said.

Evaluating your township's services comes down to asking more questions, said **Brian Reed**, manager of **Delta Charter Township** (Eaton Co.). As he examines the diverse departments of his township, and the programs and services they offer, he views everything through the lens of three questions:

- What do we do well?
- What isn't going so well?
- How can we improve?

It's critical that your board has a process for asking these questions, with no assumptions of how the department is doing.

"Evaluation is creating the expectation, defining the expected outcome, and monitoring to make sure those outcomes are being achieved."

—Susan Radwan, governance expert and
MTA Township Governance Academy instructor

It all starts with goals

Your township can't evaluate a department, program or service without criteria or a standard by which to hold its personnel accountable. For many townships, this criteria is developed naturally during the budgeting process. This is a time when the board is taking a fresh look at its priorities for the coming year, and department heads or staff are determining their needs.

Before the **Delhi Charter Township** (Ingham Co.) board votes on its budget, Manager **John Elsinga** sits down with each department head to ask, what defines your department's mission? What else would you like to be able to do? And what resources do you need to meet those goals?

These questions help department heads educate board members on what their department does, while also helping to shape their goals for the coming year. It's also a good

time for board members to evaluate how the department performed the previous year and, if it missed the mark in areas, determine if the budget should be adjusted so that the program has the resources it needs to reach last year's goals.

While expected goals might include "buy new equipment" or "shave 10 seconds off our response time," Radwan challenges townships to shift away from project-based policies. Project-based policies are easier to write and meet, but values-based policies are more all-encompassing statements that set an overall expectation.

For example, rather than saying, "The fire department will buy a new fire truck in the next two years," the policy might instead say, "The fire department will ensure its equipment is up-to-date and safe." Values-based policies should include how the department treats staff and residents, how it spends money and how it uses its resources.

Kalamazoo Charter Township (Kalamazoo Co.) Manager **Dexter Mitchell** refers to this type of goal as taking a 100,000-foot view of the township. With the help of community input, the board created a strategic plan with broad goals for the entire community and for departments such as police and fire, assessing, and planning and zoning.

The board starts with a broad, short statement that communicates a vision. Then, Mitchell meets with department heads to drill down into the vision statement and determine what that looks like in practice. The department head works with his or her employees to make a game plan for steps the department will take to meet that goal.

For example, the board set a goal of community policing for its police department. Mitchell and the township police chief took a microscope to that broad statement to decide what it meant for their community and how the department would implement it. From there, the police chief created a plan of action—spending time in area high schools, hosting Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops, and inviting community children to see the inside of a police car and watch the lights flash.

"The board's vision and the board's statement doesn't have to be crystal clear," Mitchell said. "The vision should be broad. Then we fine-tune it from there."

The best policies mean nothing if no one knows what they are. Your board creates a culture of accountability by communicating its policies to the staff, then reinforcing those policies. The point is for your board to delegate responsibilities to the department heads and responsible individuals and let them do their job. Then, it's up to the board to regularly evaluate each department and determine whether those expected outcomes are being met.

Mitchell believes this not only prevents boards from taking on too much responsibility, or even micromanaging, but also motivates township staff and adds a sense of ownership. Most employees are more eager to tackle their work when feel they had a hand in the process, Mitchell said.



Boards should examine departments, from assessing to parks and recreation, from a lens of risk management, thinking through possible risks present in any of the programs or services and outline ways to minimize those risks. This mindset helps boards define unacceptable situations and think about the big picture beyond one-time incidents. It also keeps the focus on what's most important—what's best for residents.

Evaluation as risk management

When a goal is project-based, it's easier to track and evaluate. The board hears regular updates on the project's progress, and members can clearly evaluate the result. Evaluating a department's yearly accomplishments when a major project isn't involved takes a little more thought. Radwan recommends that boards examine departments, from assessing to parks and recreation, from a lens of risk management. The board should think through possible risks present in any of the programs or services and outline ways to minimize those risks.

This mindset helps boards define unacceptable situations and think about the big picture beyond one-time incidents. It also keeps the focus on what's most important—what's best for residents.

For example, many townships offer trail systems. A common goal might be to keep the trails clear of leaves, snow and debris. But dig a little deeper, and the root issue is that snowy and icy trails are unsafe and leave the township open to liability. A broader, more encompassing goal might instead be to keep the trail system safe. Then, the parks and recreation department—or whoever oversees trails in your township—would be responsible for determining what that means. The department director could conduct a risk assessment and determine where risks exist. Then, the board would sit down during the budgeting process and determine the funding that's needed to minimize those risks.

Don't wait for an annual review

An annual review of each department and department staff is a great practice for your board and an excellent way to ensure that each is regularly evaluated. But don't wait a full year to check in. By that point, a project could be significantly far behind, or what could have been a small problem may have ballooned into a full-on crisis.

Many boards ask departments to provide updates at board meetings at least on a regular basis. This not just a time to list recent activities, but also to discuss accomplishments and results. It's also a chance for board members to ask questions.

Communication doesn't always need to be formal, said **Jim Nankervis, Ishpeming Township** (Marquette Co.) supervisor and MTA District 2 director. The long-time official makes it a point to have frequent conversations with everyone from assistants to department directors. He asks questions and helps employees plan when they need it. If he notices an issue, he addresses it right then and there. While there's certainly a line between being involved and micromanaging, Nankervis says that isn't an issue in his township.

"If I start micromanaging, the employees tell me," he said with a laugh. "I back off a little bit."

Those frequent conversations aren't just essential for determining whether your departments and services are effective. Mitchell said they're the key to building relationships with township employees. When you have robust relationships with employees, they'll come to you when there's a problem.

Don't stick to the surface level in your conversations. If all you ask is, "How are things going?" you'll rarely gain valuable insight. Mitchell's strategy is to keep asking "why?" Start with a question, then follow each answer with "why?" as many as five times. These questions help you to reach the root issue rather than just the symptoms.

How do I evaluate?

You've set goals, you've monitored, but how do you know if your department is succeeding? Your board needs to evaluate the township's departments using metrics outlined in your goals. This is especially daunting when looking at technical and complicated departments, such as assessing. Luckily, many services are held to specific standards by statute. Your board can use the data already available to you to determine where departments are succeeding and where they're falling short, Reed said. Is your Audit of Minimum Assessing Requirements (AMAR) showing deficiencies to be addressed? Does your public drinking water meet the state testing and quality standards? Were your assessment notices and tax bills sent by the state deadline? These metrics can help to raise red flags if something in a department isn't quite right.

Other numbers can paint a picture of where your board needs to make changes. For example, more people showing up to contest their assessments at board of review meetings could indicate a trend or problem to analyze. While you shouldn't judge your fire department's success by how many runs it made last year, a significant increase or drop could indicate your staffing needs have changed. An increase in response times could also signal an issue.

Elsinga also relies on feedback from his township's residents. If park equipment is in disrepair, or the wait time was too long on Election Day, he knows he'd hear about it. By the same token, if he routinely hears residents say the township's emergency medical technicians took good care of them, he knows that department is doing well. And with the advent of social media, the public has ample opportunity to let their opinions be known. "Feedback is my No. 1 method of determining whether or not we're meeting the demand and/or expectations of the public," Elsinga said.

When considering complaints, it's important to put them in context. If your board receives multiple complaints about the same issue, it could signal that there's a systemic issue you should address. But don't make major changes in response to outliers. You can't please all residents at all times—there are bound to be complaints here and there.

Sometimes, even if everything looks good on paper, something doesn't smell right when you evaluate an issue or program. Trust your gut, Reed said. If something tells you

that something's not right, ask more questions and find out what's triggering your intuition. An objective look at an issue can be helpful.

We're not meeting our goals. Now what?

Most departments won't hit their goals 100 percent of the time. Sometimes, a department head misses the mark, or a service falls short of expectations. When this happens, your board needs to sit down with the department head and find out why. While the problem could be a performance issue, there could also be contributing factors that are just as important for the board to consider, Radwan said.

Sometimes, falling short of a goal can point to inadequate funding. Maybe the department didn't have the resources or equipment it needed to meet expectations—a problem that could be remedied during the budgeting process if your board has enough dollars to move around. It's also possible that the goal was unrealistic and could be modified for the next year.

This kind of careful examination can make a huge difference in the quality of your services. Just 20 years ago, Delhi Charter Township Fire/EMS Department had about 1,500 runs a year and provided basic life support. But a review of the numbers showed that runs were drastically increasing due to the township's aging residents, as well as an overall growth in population. This didn't mean that the department wasn't doing a good job. Elsinga realized they just needed more people and more training.

Donate a Park Bench Program

Portland, Michigan placed over 200 donated benches in parks and along a river-walk trail with no cost to their budget

**for more info:
877-609-2243
PollyProducts.com**

Made from Recycled HDPE #2 Plastic

cover story

So when the time came to evaluate the township's emergency medical services, Elsinga helped the board craft a new goal—offer the staffing and services needed to adequately serve older residents. The department transitioned from being staffed by volunteers to being a full-time fire department. And in the past year, the township added a few extra full-time personnel so they could be staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

If the problem is a personnel issue, it's time to sit down with the department head and work together on how to improve their performance. But Mitchell said personnel issues can largely be handled by having regular conversations and dialogue well before a formal evaluation takes place. If you know about issues as they happen, you can address them right then and there.

When your township has truly created a culture of accountability, employees who don't agree or won't comply often don't stay, Elsinga said. Creating a workplace that's focused on excellence and serving residents becomes self-perpetuating. Township and department leaders who are dedicated to public service and constantly striving to improve will attract like-minded employees.

"Folks who don't understand the beauty of delivering services to this community, they generally won't stay here,"

Elsinga said. "Our department heads create a great work environment where they all work well together. We all collectively help one another out. It's an intrinsic value that department heads have when they see that the customers they serve are worth working for. That's who stays."

Never too late

If your board hasn't evaluated its programs and services regularly, it's not too late to start. Your next budget could be the perfect opportunity to sit down with department heads and set goals. Or, if you don't have an employee handbook or personnel policies, your board could tackle that project. The process certainly isn't easy, but the result will be assurance that your township is delivering on its promise to residents—high-quality, efficient services.



Bethany Mauger,
MTA Staff Writer

See page 27 for a continuing education self-assessment, worth 2.0 elective credits in MTA's Township Governance Academy.



Mika Meyers PLC
Attorneys at Law



Legal counsel that helps local government work effectively.

Our Local Government Law practice group works with local governments and public authorities to ensure the efficient and cost-effective delivery of vital public services. We provide specialized legal expertise in areas as diverse as zoning and land use planning, bond issues, special assessments, tax increment financing, DDAs and other public authorities, labor contracts and arbitration, employee benefits, elections, environmental regulation and many other matters affecting local governments. For more than 50 years, skilled Mika Meyers attorneys have helped public-sector entities meet the ever-increasing demands of their constituents and communities.

For more information on how our **Local Government Law** team can assist your community, visit mikameyers.com.



900 Monroe NW Grand Rapids, MI 49503 (616) 632-8000

mikameyers.com



Continuing Education Self-Assessment

Participants enrolled in the Township Governance Academy (TGA), MTA's credentialing program, may obtain 2 elective credits for successful completion of this quiz. To obtain credit, participants must answer the following 10 multiple-choice questions by circling the correct answer and receive a minimum passing score of 70 percent. The questions are based on content from the article, "Evaluate your township's programs and services". There is no charge for MTA members to take the quiz or to obtain TGA credit.

Completed quizzes should be faxed to (517) 321-8908 or mailed to: MTA, 512 Westshire Dr., Lansing, MI 48917. MTA will notify you of your results within two weeks after receiving your quiz. **IMPORTANT:** Please keep a copy of your completed quiz in your TGA binder. For information about TGA, call (517) 321-6467, email tga@michigantownships.org, or visit www.michigantownships.org/learning/tga.

TGA Continuing Education Evaluate your township's programs and services

NAME: _____ **TOWNSHIP & COUNTY:** _____

EMAIL ADDRESS: _____

- 1. Evaluating your township's programs and services:**
 - a. Should be done each year by the department head.
 - b. Is the supervisor's responsibility.
 - c. Is a requirement in state statute.
 - d. Is the entire board's responsibility.
- 2. Ideally, programs and services would be evaluated by:**
 - a. An annual report at a township board meeting.
 - b. Carefully examining the department's outcomes.
 - c. Daily interaction between board members and township employees.
 - d. Providing board members with a log of recent activities.
- 3. Goal-setting:**
 - a. Provides the criteria by which departments are held accountable.
 - b. Allows boards to create action plans for each department, program and service.
 - c. Tells boards how much to budget for new equipment.
 - d. Provides an up-close look at each aspect of the township.
- 4. How are goals turned into action plans for departments?**
 - a. Board members create a list of steps and activities.
 - b. Township managers are responsible for interpreting policy.
 - c. Department heads and staff interpret goals.
 - d. Township supervisors delegate this responsibility to trustees.
- 5. Boards create a culture of accountability by:**
 - a. Eliminating employees who don't meet their goals.
 - b. Communicating its policies to township personnel.
 - c. Creating policies in closed session.
 - d. Hiring experienced department heads and staff.
- 6. How can boards evaluate accomplishments when a major project isn't involved?**
 - a. Carefully track the department's activities.
 - b. Delegate the responsibility to the department head.
 - c. Evaluate it through the lens of risk management.
 - d. All of the above.
- 7. When should the board check in on a department's progress?**
 - a. Monthly
 - b. Weekly
 - c. Yearly
 - d. Up to the board
- 8. Boards should determine metrics for evaluating programs and services in advance, including:**
 - a. Data provided by the state
 - b. Personal observations.
 - c. Feedback from social media.
 - d. All of the above
- 9. While complaints can be an indicator of how a program or service is doing, your board should consider:**
 - a. Who was making the complaint.
 - b. If the complainer was trying to get someone in trouble.
 - c. Whether the complaint indicates a systemic problem.
 - d. Whether the complaint was made by a prominent citizen.
- 10. When a department isn't meeting a goal, the board should:**
 - a. Put the department head on a performance improvement plan.
 - b. Determine what factors contributed to the problem.
 - c. Budget more money for the department.
 - d. Create a less lofty goal for next year.