



From performance to contribution

Rethinking leadership in the public sector



If you've ever felt that performance reviews drain energy instead of lifting it, this special report shows a simpler, more human way to lead; one that builds trust, clarity and meaningful contribution across your team.

'Beverley, in the space of a week, you've taken an enthusiastic, confident, dedicated colleague and turned her into a nervous wreck.'

This line, delivered by Tony Woodford in the satirical series *Utopia*, is played for laughs; but it reflects a deeper truth that Leaders and People and Culture (P&C) professionals alike will recognise. Tony, the fictional CEO of the Nation Building Authority, isn't criticising Beverley or her team. He's reacting to the unintended consequences of performance management systems that were designed for a different time and their impact on the team he leads.

Performance review and development has long been a cornerstone of public sector

management. Yet in today's fast-paced, cross-functional, and increasingly hybrid work environments, traditional performance systems often feel outdated and disconnected from the realities of modern public service. This article explores a shift from performance management to contribution management, a dynamic, human-centered approach that transcends current practice and better aligns individual effort with public value.

It builds contribution while restoring trust, the critical factor of high performance. The shift from measuring the past to mobilising the future is here.

Executive summary

Traditional Performance Review and Development (PRD) systems no longer fit the reality of government work. Designed for a more predictable era, they consume time and energy, without meaningfully improving performance.

In our experience, people spend more time administering performance review systems than improving actual performance. PRD frameworks, while sound in principle, have become compliance exercises rather than catalysts for contribution. They consume time, energy, and goodwill, often without delivering meaningful outcomes.

The result? Leaders feel burdened, employees boxed in, and P&C teams are left managing processes that, while technically correct, are increasingly irrelevant and do not reflect the reality or complexity of work in the public sector.

The solution? Contribution Management (CM), built for the realities of modern government work, offers a pathway to better. Better conversations, better individual and team performance... and better outcomes for the public sector and the society it serves.

CM is a human-centred, real-time approach that shifts the focus from retrospective evaluation to real-time enablement.

Rather than pushing people to perform, CM invites people to contribute, shifting focus from ticking boxes to enabling success.

CM emphasises three essentials:

1. *Clarity*: People tend to work better when they know how success is defined as distinct from how a job is described
2. *Leadership in Action*: A leader discovers and removes interference and coaches and course-corrects in real time
3. *Values-aligned*: A shared strategic narrative which connects individual contributions to public value and fosters professional pride.

CM replaces static ratings with dynamic coaching. It enables short, meaningful conversations supported by living artefacts that clarify what matters, why it matters, and how leaders can help their people and teams succeed. It turns paperwork into purpose and transforms the role of leaders from process manager to performance enabler, replacing the burden of compliance with the opportunity to coach, align, and empower.

Why performance review and development feels out of step

Performance review and development (PRD), also known as performance management (PM), has long been a fixture of public sector life. Yet the environment these systems were designed for; stable structures, predictable cycles, clearly bounded roles; bear little resemblance to today's complex reality. The public sector is increasingly cross-agency and multidisciplinary, often delivered in hybrid settings, under tighter fiscal constraints and sharper (and ever increasing) public scrutiny.

When systems feel bureaucratic or irrelevant, confidence in leadership and fairness declines, creating hidden costs in engagement and discretionary effort. Global surveys reinforce this view: Gallup reports that only two per cent of Human Resource leaders in Fortune 500 companies believe their performance management system inspires better work, demonstrating that the ritual often fails at its core purpose of improving performance¹.

Australia's public sector frameworks show us what an effective PRD system needs. The Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) emphasises clear expectations, capability building and contribution to outcomes as hallmarks². NSW's Performance Development Framework codifies ongoing, honest conversations and alignment to outcomes³, while South Australia's Public Sector Act 2009 goes further, placing a legislative obligation on each agency to establish effective performance management and development systems, integrated with employment practices and decisions⁴.

The policy intent is right. The lived experience lags. We think CM can help make things better.

¹ Gallup. "2% of CHROs Think Their Performance Management System Works." Gallup Workplace, May 6, 2024. <<https://www.gallup.com/workplace/644717/chros-think-performance-management-system-works.aspx>>

² Australian Public Service Commission. "Performance Management in the APS." Updated May 23, 2022. <<https://www.apsc.gov.au/working-aps/information-aps-employment/performance/performance-management-australian-public-service>>

³ NSW Public Service Commission. "Performance Development Framework (v2)." 2018 (framework page and PDF). <<https://www.psc.nsw.gov.au/workforce-management/performance-development/performance-development-framework>> and <<https://www.psc.nsw.gov.au/assets/psc/documents/Performance-Development-Framework-v2.pdf>>

⁴ South Australia – Public Sector Act 2009, s.8. "Public sector performance management and development." <https://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/sa/consol_act/psa2009152/s8.html>

The core problem:

Design assumptions from another era

Traditional PRD is built on design assumptions that rarely hold up in contemporary government work:

- **Retrospective timing:** Reviews occur annually or biannually, making feedback slow and often irrelevant.
- **Static targets and ratings:** Responding to fixed Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and completing numeric ratings can drive a compliance mindset at the expense of growth and consume significant administrative effort.
- **Thin connection to real work:** When PRDs become ends in themselves, they crowd out the coaching, problem solving and learning that improves performance. Over time, this transactional approach erodes trust. People see leaders as focused on fitting them into a bell curve or treating the review as a tick and flick exercise; not on genuinely helping them improve, grow or stretch.

None of this suggests abandoning structure, process, or accountability – rather it challenges us to re-design the structure and process to achieve better for our public sector professionals and the community it serves.

A better approach

Our experience demonstrates people don't like being pushed to perform and fit into a graph; they want to be invited and championed to contribute and make things better.

Contribution Management focuses on three key ideas:

1

Clarity: People tend to work better when they know what success really looks like, clarifying the context in ways that drive home why it is strategically significant and why they genuinely matter.

2

Leadership in Action: A leader's role is to discover and remove interference, coach and course-correct in real time, and connect people to the work that most needs their skills. This is especially relevant in diverse, hybrid, multi-generational teams where relational leadership matters more than process administration. By clarifying expectations and aligning them with strategy, leaders create confidence and remove the barriers inherent in the traditional, familiar PRD dance.

3

Values aligned with a common strategic narrative: People crave context; work becomes more meaningful when they understand why what they are doing matters. We strongly recommend building strategies by crafting compelling narratives of future success to give work the meaning, direction, and coherence needed. Strategic plans and blueprints born out of these narratives tend to overcome typical execution constraints.

How CM works

CM uses two simple tools to help leaders put these ideas into practice:

1. The Contribution Standards Document (CSD™)

The CSD™ is a living, one-to-two-page artefact co-created by a leader and team member that describes what needs to be done and why it matters (clarity and strategic narrative).

The CSD™ defines three elements:

- 1. Significance** Why the team member's role is significant and meaningful (strategically, culturally, operationally, and from a stakeholder value perspective).
- 2. Standards** Concrete, actionable steps that clarify expectations and define the essential actions for success. These standards are contextualised and understood in a way that creates professional pride and a desire to exercise discretionary effort. Productivity and capacity gains make the effort worth it.
- 3. Success** How the outputs and performance metrics will be measured against outcomes and results, clearly linked to standards, in ways that enhance professional pride and expedite strategic priorities.

The CSD™ is focused on what success looks like, not how it will be achieved. The team member obtains much clearer insight in terms of what is needed for them to succeed, with flexibility and their own ingenuity on how they execute.

The benefit is immediacy: both parties can see whether current effort is pointed at the organisation's most material priorities without waiting for a biannual or annual reset. It provides a dynamic, context-rich view of what success looks like in real time, evolving with the person and the strategy, enabling more intuitive and targeted coaching and informal conversations that support development.

The CSD™ complements existing processes by providing a mechanism for managing performance in real-time.

2. The Contribution Matrix and check-in

The Contribution Matrix is a light-touch approach for regular check-ins, formal and informal. Its simplicity helps create opportunity for deeper conversation, reflection and momentum. It gives an opportunity for what we call 'feed forward', focusing on what someone can do next to succeed. For instance 'Here are the three things that I'd like you to focus on this month; let's discuss what good looks like on those and where I can help.'

These conversations are designed to tackle and reduce the key causes of failure we've consistently identified in our work. They position people for success by removing the reasons that cause underperformance or failure. Through this process, leaders are equipped to address these three universal barriers to success:

- Lack of clarity; What does success look like in my role?
- Lack of capability; How do I get it done and execute it well?
- Interference factors; Why am I experiencing barriers or blocks?

The framework help leaders shift from oversight to enablement, fostering environments where clarity, coaching, and strategic alignment are part of everyday practice.

The Contribution Matrix compares the standards, or actions taken, alongside the successes, or outcomes achieved. This approach enables clear and informative conversations that help drive contribution. The questions posed comprise:

- Are you executing the standards as specified in the CSD™?
- Are you realising the successes and outcomes we anticipated?
- What's getting in the way or interfering with your motivation or ability?
- Is there anything else you, I or we can do to support your efforts to succeed?

Short, human conversations recorded in a simple one-page log create an individualised narrative of progress and deal with interference factors which inevitably arise in organisations. These conversations are invaluable for development, mobility, and any formal processes when needed or wanted. We find that for most team members, a 30-minute check-in every four to eight weeks is enough to keep contribution current, anxiety low, and trust and transparency high.



Enhancing existing processes

Contribution Management (CM) does not replace existing public sector performance processes. It strengthens them by sitting alongside Position Descriptions and mandated PRD frameworks and providing the real-time support those systems lack. The CSD and Contribution Matrix operate as a practical layer that keeps expectations current, improves clarity, and creates accurate records of effort, support, and outcomes. Leaders and employees arrive at formal review points with shared understanding, clearer documentation, and fewer surprises, which makes the existing process more effective and less burdensome.

At the same time, CM improves the lived experience of performance management by complementing Position Descriptions with dynamic, context-rich conversations that translate high-level role statements into practical actions and outcomes. Short, meaningful check-ins every four to eight weeks focus on contribution, barriers to success, and alignment to what matters most. Employees still complete the formal PRD cycle, but with clearer expectations and more relevant conversations that feel grounded in real work and real priorities. CM does not compete with existing requirements. It makes them work the way they were intended, with greater trust, fairness, defensibility, and impact.

For CM to take root, it must align with broader policy and governance frameworks. This includes integrating CM principles into workforce strategies, performance frameworks, and capability development plans.



What changes for leaders?

CM redefines accountability in ways that better support the public sector environment, moving from::

- **From ratings to relationships:** the unit of impact becomes the quality and cadence of conversations anchored in real work. It links trust and performance.
- **Measurement to contribution:** Measures matter, but they are agile and renewed as context shifts. This is essential where priorities evolve faster than annual cycles.
- **Process to success:** Leaders spend less time scoring and adjudicating and more time removing barriers.
- **Jargon to real talk:** using specific, non-judgmental, language (“Here’s what good looks like next month and the support I’ll provide”) reduces anxiety and increases clarity. Over time, this builds trust between people and confidence in the system.

What changes for public sector roles?

Policy Officer, Government Department

- **Before:** Objectives set mid-year; priorities pivot with new Cabinet directions; appraisal months later reflects a plan overtaken by events.
- **With CM:** The CSD™ highlights current contribution (for instance, cross-agency reform deliverables), refreshed quarterly. Six-weekly check-ins unblock risks and adjust work allocation. The leader's notes record expectations, support given and outcomes achieved – informing development and any formal processes when needed.

Team Leader

- **Before:** A Team Leader's Position Description includes "build a great culture" as a KPI, with no guidance on what that means in the organisation, or how it will be measured.
- **With CM:** Clear and co-designed actions which clarify expectations and define the steps needed to build and sustain a strong working culture. Shifts from amorphous phrases which are open to interpretation, to specific actions which can be understood, measured, and improved.

Operations Manager, Public Hospital

- **Before:** Annual appraisal collides with winter surge; paperwork crowds out coaching.
- **With CM:** Fortnightly mini check-ins during peak periods; leaders broker swift support (rostering flexibility, IT fixes), documented against the CSD™ so success is visible and lessons carry forward.

Mitigating risk and driving defensible decisions

CM supports compliance by improving the quality and consistency of documentation and ensuring performance conversations meet policy and legislative standards. It helps leaders generate contemporaneous, factual notes that show expectations were set, support was provided, and barriers were addressed. This level of clarity and evidence strengthens fairness for employees, improves defensibility for leaders, and aligns naturally with Position Descriptions, capability frameworks, and formal PRD requirements.

In our experience, this approach also strengthens risk management by making expectations clearer and elevating issues earlier. The CSD gives leaders and team members a shared understanding of what matters most right now, reducing ambiguity and the risk of misunderstandings about what success looks like. Regular check-ins create an ongoing record of expectations, support, and progress, which means risks around underperformance, role clarity, capability gaps, or shifting priorities are identified and addressed in real time rather than surfacing months later in an annual review.



From Performance Management to Contribution Management

Performance Management	Contribution Management
Annual/biannual reviews, heavy on documentation and process.	Short, regular check-ins anchored to a living CSD™
Backward-looking scores	Forward-looking discussion and support
Static Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) assumed to last 12 months	Dynamic contribution aligned to shifting priorities
Leader as process administrator	Leader as enabler and success coach
Employee as subject of assessment	Employee as active contributor and co-author of their own success
Compliance driven	Clarity, trust and purpose driven
Defensive documentation	Real-time evidence of expectations, support and progress

So, what can you measure?

You can measure the conditions for contribution, the quality of conversations, and the outcomes that matter. A simple dashboard might include:

Cadence

Percent of staff with a check-in during the past eight weeks.

Clarity

Pulse check across organisation with one question "I am clear on the expectations for this quarter and what success looks like."

Barrier busting

Number of obstacles or interference factors removed by leaders each month (and average time to action).

Contribution signals

Outcome-focused examples tagged to the CSD™ (e.g. employee engagement scores, customer churn reduction, sales pipeline value, stakeholder value created).

Embedding CM into organisational culture demands a mindset shift. Leaders must model the behaviours they wish to see: regular check-ins, transparent feedback, and a genuine interest in team development.

Success stories

We've used CM in a range of public sector contexts with encouraging results. It has consistently helped restore trust, sharpen individual and collective contribution, and unlock the strategic alignment essential for success.

These outcomes mirror what large organisations have seen when shifting from annual reviews to continuous, developmental conversations; less bureaucracy, more coaching, and better alignment to current work^{5,6}.

A regulator's legal and executive teams moved to CSDs™ and six-weekly check-ins.

Leaders reported fewer surprises at formal reviews and faster escalation of systemic barriers (for instance, fewer data lags), with visible reduction in rework. Staff reported clearer priorities and more timely support.

The Operations Director reported the onboarding process for a senior lawyer went from three months to three weeks, dramatically improving the employee experience and delivering immediate value to the team.

A policy division used CSDs™ to clarify cross-agency deliverables and "what good looks like" for complex briefs.

The Contribution Matrix helped uncover where approval pathways were slowing progress and delaying decision making. Leaders could intervene quickly and weekly steering committees across agencies hastened decision making. The agency noted the quality and effectiveness of annual PRD conversations was a direct result of both parties using the evolving CSD™. Short check-ins helped people prepare and come to the table for a more constructive and forward-looking conversation.

⁵ Cappelli, P., & Tavis, A. "The Performance Management Revolution." Harvard Business Review, Oct 2016. <https://hbr.org/2016/10/the-performance-management-revolution>

⁶ Adobe. "How Adobe continues to inspire great performance and support career growth (Check-in)." <https://www.adobe.com/check-in.html>



A Police Chief in Dallas, Texas used Contribution Management to clarify expectations of their police officers.

The Position Description of a Police Officer stated 'maintain the public peace and help the community feel safe'. With no further guidance, this was open to interpretation.

The Chief wanted their officers walking the streets and building relationships with the community. The officers thought it meant observation from their cars.

The team co-created The Standards in the CSDs™ to reset expectations and create a common view of that success looked like. The Chief reported improved outcomes, safety metrics, and feedback from the community the force protected.



A thoughtful step forward

CM offers a practical, human-centred alternative to systems many of us experience as no longer fit for purpose.

It invites leaders to focus their attention on the humans they lead, enabling contribution, expediting and fulfilling the high performance of their people and their teams. It engages our people in a different way to the traditional PRD approach by focusing on real time feedback through genuine coaching conversations, giving the organisation a framework for aligning individual effort with collective purpose.

The shift from performance to contribution is a strategic imperative. As public sector leaders navigate uncertainty and complexity, they need systems that support agility, trust, and impact. Contribution Management provides a practical pathway to reimagine how we lead, develop, and deliver public value.

This approach was developed to help leaders stop simply measuring the past and start mobilising for the future.

For public sector leaders navigating complexity and change, the path is clear, the evidence encouraging, and the tools simple enough to start today. What change will you make today, to make tomorrow better?

How does your organisation stack up?

Establish where your agency sits on the continuum. The more you tick to the right, the more you demonstrate well-embedded performance review and development practice. The more you tick to the left, the more your agency should be seriously considering adopting Contribution Management approach.

1. Our performance review and development process is highly anticipated, experienced positively, and results in engaging and honest conversations.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neither agree nor disagree Agree Strongly agree

2. Our teams trust the process is fair, consistent, evidence-based, and that it facilitates and supports meaningful professional growth.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neither agree nor disagree Agree Strongly agree

3. Our teams feel empowered, as clear expectations and direction positions them to optimise their success by aligning individual growth and organisational priorities.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neither agree nor disagree Agree Strongly agree

4. Our frameworks and system equip leaders with clear, specific tools that foster purposeful, targeted and meaningful conversations with their team members.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neither agree nor disagree Agree Strongly agree

5. Our performance review and development cadence is flexible, responsive and impact-focused, minimising compliance burdens and unnecessary documentation.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neither agree nor disagree Agree Strongly agree

6. Our agency fosters a culture of regular, real-time reflection, balancing 'feedback and feedforward', to position for high performance and delivery of better outcomes.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neither agree nor disagree Agree Strongly agree

7. The time we invest in the process releases new capacity, directly improves engagement and motivation and results in measurable performance uplift.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neither agree nor disagree Agree Strongly agree

8. Our performance metrics provide clear, actionable insight to organisational and personal expectations, and leaders committed to their teams success.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neither agree nor disagree Agree Strongly agree



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