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On Benchmarking

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Benchmarking is one of the most popular sports in emergency services leadership circles these days. Organizations are joining benchmarking groups, NHTSA is taking yet another shot at defining a national data set, and systems are installing elaborate data systems so that they can benchmark.

The leaders I've talked with usually share one of two mental models about benchmarking. One, we need to measure the same thing the same way and then compare it to someone else to see whose is better. Two, some "official group" needs to set a benchmark (standard) so that we know if we are meeting the goal or not.

Benchmarking is also a popular concept in the rest of the business world. However, if you talk with leaders from Xerox or the Ritz Carlton, their mental model of benchmarking would be, "We identify a process that we want to improve and find the organization that is the best in the world at that process. Then we visit that organization and probe deeply into that process, learning everything we can about it. We take what we've learned back to our organization and then figure out ways to implement it."

Why would organizations spend all the time and money to do this? The best answer to that question is that leaders want to learn something so that they can change something and improve performance. I have no idea why emergency services organizations seem to be stuck in the measure-and-compare-to-other-emergency-services model of benchmarking, unless they are doing clinical research. In my experience, it's the most expensive, most time-consuming, most frustrating, lowest yield approach that one can take.

On the other hand, identifying a process that you want to improve, such as fleet reliability, and identifying and visiting an organization with best practices in this domain is easy, low cost, fun, and likely to produce dramatic improvements.

Last month, I had this discussion with a group of EMS QI folks and asked them, "If you wanted to decrease critical vehicle failures and improve your fleet maintenance process, who would you benchmark?" They said FedEx or UPS. I asked them to think harder: Whose fleet performance could you easily assess and who you know does a remarkable job?

The best answer I could come up with is Southwest Airlines. All of their critical vehicle failures will be news stories. If an ambulance fails, there is potential for someone to die. If an airplane experiences a critical vehicle failure, the consequences are obvious. I believe that your organization could learn something about fleet maintenance from Southwest, or something about customer service from the Ritz Carlton, or something about managing terrorism from the Israelis. Organizations that use this approach will blast past those who are stuck only comparing data to data.

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