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Reforming Mandaue City: The Struggle to Implement a Performance Governance System

When he took office in 2007 as the new mayor of Mandaue, the Philippines, Jonas Cortes had a big vision and a big set of problems. In his campaign, Cortes had promised a radical transformation to raise Mandaue's profile and restore its pride. He would rekindle high-quality manufacturing. He would help the poor and the disenfranchised. He would clean up a corrupt and underperforming municipal government.

Only after the new mayor assumed office did he truly realize how difficult the challenges would be.

Municipal employees were wary. A corruption scandal in the previous administration had led to the firing of five employees who were allegedly forced to follow orders while the mayor overseeing them went unpunished. It was charged that city departments did not work together well and did not address the needs for changes.

Cortes tried to mobilize business and citizens. "I laid my cards on the table in terms of what I could do and where I needed help," he said later. Cortes perceived some support, at least in the abstract. But there were few private-sector institutions to galvanize collective action. For some residents, living in Mandaue was incidental; they were from distant communities and stayed in Mandaue for mere convenience. Many of the most vulnerable citizens lived along perilous waterways, easily battered by storms and flooding. Previous programs to help them had failed, leaving a residue of mistrust.

Cortes saw the need for reform, even envisioned Mandaue as a big success. But how could reforms overcome bureaucratic inertia, difficulties of public-private collaboration, and a history of mistrust? And once reforms were under way, how could he and his colleagues ensure their implementation and sustainability?

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