



On why all public managers need to remember that

“What were they thinking?”  
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## “You Can’t Manage What You Can’t Message”

This phrase is, of course, a play on the old line attributed to Peter Drucker, to W. Edwards Deming, to Robert Kaplan and David Norton, and to your favorite management guru. You know the original phrase:

*“You can’t manage what you can’t measure.”*

Unfortunately, the similar seven-word phrase that ends with the verb “message” has received far less attention. Still, this second phrase is at least as relevant as the original. It too emphasizes the importance of an obvious and essential leadership behavior that is too often overlooked.

Indeed, I think this second point is actually **Leadership Behavior #1:**

**“Clarifying and reiterating the [organization’s] purpose can keep everyone focused on what is to be accomplished.”**

A public manager who seeks to mobilize people to accomplish a public purpose, needs a clear strategy plus words that explain:

- (1) *the purpose* we are all trying to accomplish,
- (2) *how* we are trying to accomplish this purpose, and
- (3) *the difference* this accomplishment will make to citizens.

To convince employees, collaborators, and citizens to devote serious effort and resources to achieving this purpose by implementing this strategy, a public manager needs a clear message that explains (1) purpose, (2) strategy, and (3) consequences.

Moreover, this message has to start with purpose. Thus, in *The PerformanceStat Potential*, I argue:

**By repeating and repeating the public purpose that the organization is responsible for achieving, the leadership team can ensure that, in their pursuit of detailed tasks and specific targets, people do not forget their overarching mission.**

Merely repeating the message is, however, not enough. The manager

—and the message—have to be convincing. After all, everyone already has a series of daily tasks, each of which comes with a deadline. These tasks and deadlines can easily dominate everyone’s attention and effort.

Yet how important are these daily tasks? Are they essential to achieving the organization’s public purpose? Or are these tasks direct descendants of those that **Imhotep** created when he built the Pyramid for King Djoser? Or are these tasks primarily designed to keep the organization and its people out of trouble?

For front-line employees, the purpose behind many tasks may not be obvious. It may not be obvious to front-line managers or even to middle managers. Maybe only those on the leadership team—those who designed the strategy—appreciate the public purpose or the strategy. And without a purpose plus a strategy for achieving it, the work of public employees deteriorates into a series of unrelated tasks and their deadlines.

**Every public manager needs to deliver a clear message that explains to employees, collaborators, and citizens: (1) the purpose to be accomplished, (2) the strategy for achieving this purpose, and (3) the difference this will make in the lives of citizens.**

Still, like most of the principles of effective leadership, the link between purpose, message, work, and accomplishment seems obvious. Yet it is rarely mentioned. As far as I can tell, these seven words are the invention of **Richard T. Cole**.

I met Rick Cole when he was the chief of staff to James Blanchard, who served as governor of Michigan from 1983 to 1990. Cole had previously been Blanchard’s press secretary, a responsibility that certainly required him to deliver a clear, com-

prehensible message.

Cole, however, was not a professional wordsmith. He had never been a journalist, which rankled some in the profession who thought one of their own was more qualified to be a press secretary.

And although later in his career, Cole chaired the Department of Advertising and Public Relations at Michigan State, his professional life included work as senior vice president of Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Michigan and as executive vice president of the Detroit Medical Center.

So why do Cole’s seven words require our attention? Aren’t they obvious? Doesn’t every public manager have his or her version of “the message”? Can’t they all explain simply and clearly their purpose, their strategy, and the difference that this will make for citizens?

Unfortunately, no. As Nietzsche emphasized: **“Forgetting our objectives is the most frequent of all acts of stupidity.”** Or maybe this should be updated to say: “Not having an objective is the even more frequent of all acts of stupidity.”

A foundation officer once visited a public agency and, when he asked what the agency was trying to accomplish, he got identical answers from the leadership team and from front-line employees. He was surprised. Impressed. How did this happen?

Yes: the leadership team had a clear macro purpose, with clear targets for each unit, all of which they explained in a careful and clear message. Moreover, they followed the basic rule for all important communications: **Repeat! Repeat! Repeat!** **B**

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