

# Bob Behn's Performance Leadership Report

An occasional (and maybe even insightful) examination of the issues, dilemmas, challenges, and opportunities for improving performance and producing real results in public agencies.



On why public executives need to focus on their

Vol. 9, No. 11, July 2011  
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## Leadership Responsibilities Not POSDCORB

In 1937, Luther Gulick and Lyndall Urwick published their classic collection of *Papers on the Science of Administration*. Gulick was the president of the Institute of Public Administration and a leader in the effort to make public administration more, well, scientific.

In the opening essay in this collection, Gulick asked the question: "What is the work of the chief executive? What does he do?" Gulick summarized his answer in the acronym POSDCORB, which stands for: **P**lanning, **O**rganizing, **S**taffing, **D**irecting, **C**Oordinating, **R**eporting, and **B**udgeting. Indeed, into these seven "functional elements," Gulick argued "can be fitted each of the major activities and duties of any chief executive." Impressive, huh?

Still, Gulick's list of the chief executive's activities and duties is missing something—something important. It ignores leadership. This vision of the public executive is quite mechanical: "Organizing," for example, is about "formal structure of authority through which work subdivisions are arranged, defined and co-ordinated" (with no recognition of the multiple, informal relationships upon which even the most hierarchical of organizations must rely to get things done).

"Directing" is "the continuous task of making decisions and embodying them in specific and general orders and instructions and serving as the leader of the enterprise." This "leader" does not set targets and certainly would never delegate discretion; he issues orders and gives instructions.

It's all very clinical, very sterile. Gulick's organizations seem to be populated not by humans but by automatons, in which case, of course, leadership is unnecessary.

Gulick's administrative functions are clearly important. Still, they focus on generic processes, completely detached from the leadership challenge of producing real results.

Indeed, to Gulick "planning . . . is working out in broad outline the

things that need to be done and the methods for doing them to accomplish the purpose set for the enterprise." Apparently, Gulick's chief executive has no role in thinking through any of the nuances of this purpose. The purpose is set—given by others, clear and obvious. Thus the chief executive's sole job is to focus on the methods for accomplishing it (which will, presumably, be communicated through orders and instructions).

Unfortunately, in many public organizations today, these administrative functions have deteriorated into exercises in compliance—dominated by the need to follow formal procedures and abide by reporting requirements—with little attention paid to how they might help (or whether they might hinder) the organization's ability to produce results.

Luther Gulick's POSDCORB is all about process—about seven administrative functions that, today, have deteriorated into exercises in compliance. Moreover, this list completely misses the chief executive's responsibility to exercise leadership.

Moreover, although Gulick describes the chief executive as "the leader of the enterprise," his list offers no hint about *how* this chief executive might exercise leadership.

Still, there are leadership "responsibilities"—things that public executives should do; activities in which they should participate; practices in which they should engage—that can help everyone understand and appreciate the purposes to be achieved and the results to be produced. By undertaking these responsibilities, a chief executive can also help to motivate employees, collaborators, and citizens to pursue these purposes and results with intelligence and commitment.

For example, there is the responsibility for **L**eading and thus **A**iming the

work of the organization to accomplish specific purposes. In the abstract, these purposes might (or might not) be obvious. Regardless, translating any purpose into a specific target at which the organization needs to aim is clearly a leadership responsibility.

Next comes the responsibilities of **M**otivating and **D**elegating. To achieve the target, the chief executive needs to motivate people to pursue the target with energy and creativity. And this, in turn, requires the leader to delegate responsibility for achieving the target and (thus) for developing new strategies for doing so.

Then, are these strategies working? And if so, why? This introduces another set of leadership responsibilities: **A**nalyzing and **L**earning from the data on successes and failures.

Of course, purely-hierarchical, process-driven organizations have a difficult time producing results. Thus, the leadership needs to unleash the powers of **I**nnovating and **C**ollaborating. When delegating responsibility for achieving specific targets, the chief executive needs to also delegate the authority to experiment with innovative strategies. Further, the leader needs to encourage collaboration across the multiple (and often rigid) organizational boundaries.

Two more leadership responsibilities are **P**erforming and **A**ccounting. Chief executives need to ensure that their organizations are improving performance. And, they also need to provide their **a**uthorizing **e**nvironment—elected officials, stakeholders, and citizens—with an accounting of what they have accomplished.

To acronym acolytes, this could be called LAMDALICPA. Or you could simply think of it as "leadership." **B**

Robert D. Behn, a lecturer at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, chairs the executive-education program "Driving Government Performance: Leadership Strategies that Produce Results." He is working on a book tentatively titled *The PerformanceStat Potential*.