

Public Management Report

An occasional (and maybe insightful) examination of the issues, dilemmas, challenges, and opportunities in leadership, governance, management, and performance in public agencies.

On the ubiquity of:

Dumb Rules

At Fenway Park, the green cathedral where the Boston Red Sox are opening the 2004 baseball season, Rob Barry is at the top of his game. Barry specializes in the long toss. Yet, he is not another young phenom whom Boston found on its Double-A farm team. He's been demonstrating his control at Fenway Park for decades.

Rob Barry doesn't throw his long toss between starts or when he's warming up for another game. Barry is not a pitcher. Barry doesn't even throw baseballs.

Barry specializes in peanuts—tossing bags of them high over the heads of fans, straight into the hands of his designated customer. The crowd loves it. Even people who don't like peanuts buy them from rows away, just to catch Barry's long toss. And then other fans—captivated by the control that some of Boston's pitchers could envy—buy more peanuts. For decades, Barry has been delighting Red Sox Nation and selling tons of peanuts.

Barry's managers are not, however, always delighted. Aramark, the Fenway Park concessionaire, has reprimanded Barry several times. Indeed, a while back, they actually fired him. Why? Because he throws the peanuts.

Every time Barry throws a bag of peanuts, he violates one of Aramark's rules. And you thought government—indeed, your own jurisdiction—had a monopoly on dumb rules.

Dumb rules are not just a government problem. They are a large-organization problem. Once organizations become large enough that their leaders cannot communicate personally with everyone, they create rules.



These rules do have a rationale. They ensure that everyone in the organization behaves properly—that all of them do the right things; that none of them do the wrong things. Every time an organization discovers something that everyone should do—or should not do—it creates another rule.

Some rules are designed to guarantee that people behave consistently—to ensure, for example, that all peanut vendors charge the same price. Because government needs to treat everyone consistently—because it needs to be fair to all employees and citizens—it has lots of rules to guarantee this consistency. One of the public sector's cardinal imperatives is: be absolutely fair.

Other rules are designed to prevent people from doing bad things—to ensure, for example, that peanut vendors don't wound fans with airborne peanut bags. After all, someone could sue. And once an organization finds itself vulnerable to potential law suits, it immediately creates new rules to insulate it from such a threat. If an organization fears that a fan might get hit by a bag of peanuts and sue, it responds—with a rule.

Telling peanut vendors not to throw the peanuts is like telling the fans not to drop the shells on the floor. Sure, the vendors could pass the peanuts sedately down the aisle. And the patrons might expect that at Symphony Hall. At Fenway Park, however, the fans want to see the peanuts thrown—rule or no rule.

Moreover, the purpose of the Boston Red Sox—of its ball players and of its peanut vendors—is to entertain. Sometimes this entertainment comes from a well-turned double play. Sometimes it comes from a well-thrown bag of peanuts.

Rules are not the only way to affect the behavior of people in organizations. In fact, they are a poor mechanism for ensuring that people do the right thing while preventing them from doing the wrong thing. Two, much more effective strategies are purpose and culture.

Rules are not the only way to affect organizational behavior. To convince people in a public agency to pursue their mission with intelligence and creativity, the leadership has two much more effective strategies: purpose and culture.

After all, even the most dedicated ruler cannot create a rule for every possible circumstance. And when faced with a situation for which there is no rule, the organization needs people who can respond intelligently—people who will pursue the organization's basic purpose—whether it is to sell peanuts or protect the environment—without doing anything really stupid.

This is the role of purpose and culture. They provide the basis on which people throughout the organization can make intelligent choices—choices that further the organization's purpose. They provide the basis on which people can avoid making mistakes. Indeed, an organization's purpose provides the basis for its culture. The culture only makes sense to the extent that it helps the organization accomplish its purpose.

All public agencies have a mission. Often it is posted on the wall of the lobby and printed on the back of business cards. Operationally,

however, this vague definition of purpose has little impact. Employees view the mission statement as just more boiler plate.

The challenge for the leaders of any public agency is to embed that mission in the culture—in the operating norms and informal procedures that everyone implicitly follows. The leaders need to create an ethic built upon the public purposes their agency was created to pursue—an ethic that guides the behavior of individuals in a wide variety of situations for which there is no precedent.

Of course, it is easier to establish another rule than to foster a culture dedicated to a purpose. And it is much easier to create yet another rule when the organization has failed to figure out what its real purpose is. If the leaders of any organization—public or private—are unable to define clearly the purpose they are trying to achieve, they cannot create a consistent, mission-driven culture. Thus, they resort to rules.

Yet, if an organization creates too many rules, it soon has incompatible rules—rules that contradict not only each other but also the purpose for which the organization exists.

Rules such as: Don't throw the peanuts. **B**

Robert D. Behn is the author of *Rethinking Democratic Accountability* (Brookings) and a lecturer at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

As a member of the team of Kennedy School faculty who lead executive-education programs for the public sector, Behn chairs "Driving Government Performance: Leadership Strategies that Produce Results." He also conducts custom-designed executive programs for public agencies.