

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 why public managers need to:

Learn from Dissimilar Situations

The Japanese are again learning management from an American. In the late 1940s, that American was W. Edwards Deming who taught Japanese firms how to use his quality principles to manage manufacturing processes by using statistical quality control. One result was the world-wide success of Toyota and other Japanese automobile firms.

Now the American is Bobby Valentine who led the Chiba Lotte Marines—think of them as the Milwaukee Brewers of Japanese baseball—to their first championship in over 30 years. Valentine did this by—are you ready for this bit of management wisdom?—not being abusive. And, in Japanese management, this means both psychological and physical abuse.

In Japan, a common practice—both in baseball and in business—is to berate failing subordinates harshly and publicly. So naturally, when Valentine took over as the Marines' manager two years ago, many Japanese doubted whether his style would work in their country. Valentine didn't censure his players for small errors; instead, he tried to build their self-confidence. He didn't employ the Japanese practice of "reeducation"—forcing employees who have made even minor mistakes to engage in numerous menial chores until, sufficiently humiliated, they have learned the errors of their ways. Instead, he praised them in public and reproached them only in private.



Bobby Valentine has never been the most beloved person in American baseball. He hardly would have been described as a manager who focused on building up his players self-esteem. Yet, in Japan, he is revered for his gentler style—gentler, at least, compared with the traditional approach.

And just as some Japanese managers were willing to learn from Deming, so some seem to be willing to learn from Valentine. The president of Nippon Metal has suggested that Japanese businesses should begin "treating our employees in the same way that Bobby does."

This suggestion that the managers of Japanese corporations could learn something from an American baseball manager is startling. After all, most managers are so caught up in the uniqueness of their organization and its environment that they conclude they simply cannot learn anything from anyone who is operating in different circumstances.

As Tony Bovaird and Elkie Löffler of Governance International in the United Kingdom observe, too many managers believe that "we can only learn from places that are *just like us*." From their efforts to convince local authorities in the U.K. to adapt innovations employed elsewhere in Europe, they have found that "people are astonished at the idea that much interesting happens anywhere else

and even more surprised at the idea that ‘we’ could learn from ‘them.’”

Bovaird and Löffler’s favorite excuses for this refusal to learn from “them” include: “Things are very different there . . . they don’t have our financial problems . . . staff problems . . . social problems . . . legal context . . . difficult members of the public . . . difficult chief officers . . . difficult politicians.” Many public managers, they continue, believe that “nothing new works and, if it works somewhere else, it must be because they are weird!”

This is, of course, a brilliantly convenient excuse. If an innovation depends upon the weirdness of the circumstances or the people, then they can’t be just like us. So why bother even trying to learn from “them.” Whatever they might be doing would never work for us.

Yet, Bovaird and Löffler’s experience suggests that “only the comparison with different organizations yields new insights.” In fact, they continue, “comparison with similar organizations typically doesn’t help at all in identifying radical innovations.”

Moreover, when looking to learn from different organizations, public managers need to search not only across other geographical jurisdictions; they might also search across other eras. Henry Petroski of Duke University’s School of Engineering has written numerous books about civil engineering design. In many, he devotes each chapter to a specific engineering case—for instance, the twin skyscrapers of the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. In his search for lessons about contemporary engineering design, however, Petroski doesn’t just employ modern examples. In his book *Design Paradigms*, Petroski goes back to the time of Galileo, back to the time of the Romans.

“There is no obsolescence in individual case studies that reveal flaws in the logic or practice of design,” writes Petroski in *To Engi-*

neer is Human. “Indeed, the more distant the case study in time, the more objective our analysis can be.”

Yes: Learning requires objective analysis. To learn, managers need the ability to look beyond the specifics of the situation to understand the underlying principles—principles that can be adapted and employed in a variety of circumstances.

This is why learning is always hard work. To learn, you have to separate out the core idea from the clutter of deviant personalities, strange organizations, and peculiar politics. What, exactly, is the innovation? What exactly caused what? What from this case can be adapted and applied in other—perhaps not even similar—circumstances?

Moreover, because no two organizational situations are identical, this learning must come from places that are clearly *not* “just like us.”

In the U.S., manufacturing firms figured out that they could learn from Toyota. Now, in an attempt to improve the health care that they provide, American hospitals, including Virginia Mason Medical Center in Seattle and Allegheny General Hospital in Pittsburgh, are also adopting some of Toyota’s management principles. How weird is that? **B**

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No two organizational circumstances are identical. Thus, all learning must come from dissimilar situations, which requires the ability to look beyond the specifics of a situation to understand the underlying principles.