

# 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 remember:

## The Imperative of Adaptation

The **Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation** at Harvard's Kennedy School gives a series of annual awards for **Innovation in American Government**, based on four criteria: novelty, effectiveness, significance, and transferability.

In seeking to recognize and promote "excellence and creativity in the public sector," the Ash Institute looks not only for original programs that produce important results. It also looks for programs that can be "replicated in other jurisdictions." In fact, the winners are charged with helping others to replicate their innovation.

Replication, however, is not easy. The original innovation is not a simple idea. It evolved over time, as people experimented, experienced successes and failures, learned, modified their approach based on this learning, and then experimented some more. Moreover, the agency experimented not in a sterile laboratory but in its own complex, constitutional, legal, organizational, and political environment. Thus, the specific program that wins an innovation award has evolved through the work, decisions, and conflicts of a group of unique people seeking to solve their unique problems in their unique circumstances.

This means that, by definition, this innovation is not designed for the equally unique and quite different circumstances of any other

jurisdiction. Consequently, no organization can simply import the innovation any more than you can simply import a computer program written for Windows into a computer running the Mac operating system. The environment is different and thus some significant adaptation is required.



We humans would, of course, prefer every innovation to come with a template. This would make replication easy: just apply the template. Actually, in most organizations, templates are less applied than they are imposed.

Consider the templates with which you work every day—the templates created by your own IT department. Whether these templates are for e-mail, databases, or Web pages, they are very inflexible. They are, of course, extremely useful. They provide consistency (which is important for the IT department). And, they make life easy (which is important for you).

Except when you want to do something slightly different. Then the template is a pain. It may work well in the broad, general, average situation. But it won't work well for your specific, unique, and different purpose.

I know a college student who wanted to major in three different subjects: geology, physics, and math. The registrar's office said it couldn't be done. Why? Anyone familiar with

organizational behavior is apt to guess: “Because no one has ever triple majored before.”

In fact, however, this was not the case. Students had triple majored before, though that was a long time ago. So why could a student not have a triple major now?

Anyone familiar with IT systems is apt to guess: “Because the registrar’s computer template only had two fields: one for the first major, the other for a second major.” In the days of paper records, creating a third major was easy. Even if the official form had only two lines—one for the first major, the other for a second—someone could easily write in a third major on the margin.

Unfortunately, templates are not just technologically attractive. They are also mentally attractive. If we can design a template—or, even better, borrow someone else’s template—we seek to apply it universally. If we can take an innovation that has worked in another organization, codify it into a template, and call it a “**best practice**,” we can import it into lots of other organizations.

Unfortunately, even though the new organization appears to be virtually identical to the original, it isn’t. It may be trying to accomplish the same public purpose. It might even have precisely the same mission statement—word for word. Still, the replicating organization is different. Its people are different; its culture is different; its legal mandate and regulatory constraints are different; its political circumstances are different.

Thus, any replication requires adaptation. Moreover, this adaptation requires real work. Indeed, this adaptation requires serious thought.

For to adapt a replication, the adapting organization has to decide what is the core idea and what are the implementation particulars. Unfortunately, this may not be obvious.

It might not even be obvious to those who developed the innovation. After all, they did a lot of experimenting. The innovation evolved—in some ways very consciously, in other ways quite unconsciously. The final innovation might not even have been what its originators initially set out to accomplish.

Consequently, the would-be replicators need to specify the core idea of the innovation—the **operational theory** that connects an agency’s actions to its desired results. They need to determine what features of the original innovation they need to replicate faithfully, and what features of the innovation they can—indeed, should—adapt to their unique circumstances.

This is the imperative of adaptation. It is an intellectually and operationally demanding chore. For it requires the replicators to distinguish, from among all of the multiple different aspects of the innovation, what is really creating the benefit.

Until you have figured out how to adapt an innovation—whether this is a new public policy, a new procurement system, or a new motivational strategy—to a new situation, and then actually done it, you do not really understand what the innovation truly is. **B**

Robert D. Behn is the author of *Performance Leadership: 11 Better Practices That Can Ratchet Up Performance* 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, Bob chairs “**Driving Government Performance: Leadership Strategies that Produce Results**.” He also conducts **custom-designed executive programs** for public agencies, most recently for the California Air Resources Board and Miami-Dade County.

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