

Bob Behn's 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.

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On why every executive should hand out cards for:

Buzzword Bingo

Meetings are boring. It's a fact of organizational life—be that organization in the for-profit, nonprofit, or public sector.

Meetings are boring because they contain little thinking. The discussion oscillates between the obvious and the vacuous.

People stating the obvious declare what some future should be like, a future that everyone agrees would be desirable. People stating the vacuous employ a cliché that everyone else in the room has used in the past.

Unfortunately, those who proclaim the obvious desirability of some wonderful outcome, never quite explain how those in the meeting will produce this nirvana. There is no strategy—simply some fantastic future that everyone in the room recognizes as paradise.

Similarly, those who employ the vacuous cliché never quite explain what it means. They don't have to. Everyone in the room gets to interpret the cliché as he or she thinks most appropriate. The cliché contains words that capture some widely worshiped if rarely implemented principle—"our employees are our most important asset" or "we provide excellent customer service." Because, however, the cliché is devoid of any specific operational implications, everyone in the meeting accepts its wisdom.

Indeed, both the obvious and vacuous generate little dissent or debate. No one in the room can argue with nirvana. No one believes that it is unacceptable. No one in the room can argue with the cliché. No one knows what it means.

Consequently, by advocating an obvious nirvana or by uttering a vacuous cliché, anyone is **"guaranteed to start a lot of heads nodding."**

This nodding creates some positive feedback that rewards people for offering the obvious or the vacuous.

And you thought people behaved this way because they were stupid.

I don't know how to curtail obvious

statements about some wondrous future, except to persistently ask "how?" "How can we get to your marvelous future?" "Who has to do what?" If the executive conducting the meeting asks the "How?" question incessantly, people may eventually decide not to proclaim what the obvious future should be without having some hint of a strategy about how the group might produce this nirvana.

For the executive running the meeting—indeed, for everyone participating in the meeting—this won't be much fun. Eventually, however, it might curtail (though never eliminate) the propensity of people to proclaim the obvious.

To curtail the curse of clichés, however, there is a simple and fun solution: Buzzword Bingo. The concept is simple—and might even prove effective. For it replaces peer endorsement of the vacuous cliché with peer ridicule.

Buzzword Bingo can embarrass the jerk who mindlessly utters a vacuous cliché rather than attempt the difficult task of explaining the underlying idea. Of course, the jerk may have had no underlying idea; the cliché was a substitute for real thinking.

You know, of course, how to play ordinary bingo. Every player gets a square bingo card containing 25 boxes. Each box contains a number. A number is drawn randomly, and if you have the number in one of your boxes, you check it off. Then, once you have checked off five boxes in one row, or five boxes in one column, or five boxes in either diagonal, you yell "Bingo." You just won.

Buzzword Bingo is conceptually the same. The only difference is that each box contains not a number but a well-used buzzword. As in ordinary bingo, each card is different. You would, of course, like to get a card

with "accountability," or "empowerment," or "transparency" in the center box. How many meetings can run more than ten minutes without someone using one of these words?

Then, once you have checked off five boxes in a row, you yell "Bingo."

Which immediately embarrasses the jerk who just mindlessly employed the vacuous cliché rather than attempt the difficult task of explaining the underlying idea.

Of course, the jerk may not have had an underlying idea. The jerk might simply have felt compelled to say something, anything. And, if you have nothing valuable to say, the easiest words to utter are some well-known cliché. It is a well-practiced substitute for real thinking.

With Buzzword Bingo, however, the jerk might decide that saying nothing is much better than having someone else punctuate the cliché with "Bingo." That won't get everyone nodding. That will get everyone laughing.

Anyone running any meeting faces the challenge of keeping people on task. Sure, there need to be opportunities to update everyone on the progress of ongoing projects and to recognize people for recent accomplishments. Meetings serve lots of purposes. Still, if you want people to turn off their BlackBerries and concentrate on the problems to be solved and strategies to be worked through, you have to give them a reason to pay attention. Otherwise they will infrequently lift up their eyes to offer some obvious or vacuous words, only to return to their e-mail.

So the next time you run a meeting, start by handing out the cards for Buzzword Bingo. **B**

Robert D. Behn is the author of **Rethinking Democratic Accountability** (published by Brookings). He is a lecturer at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government where he chairs the executive-education program **"Driving Government Performance: Leadership Strategies that Produce Results."**