

# 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.

Vol. 6, No. 12, August 2009

Copyright © 2009 by Robert D. Behn



On why public executives need to create

## The Face-to-Face Buzz

"After the layoff, the energy—the buzz—was gone in the office," William Aalerud, president of A. J. Martini, a construction management firm told *The Boston Globe*. The firm wanted the buzz back. They needed the people back.

So, given that it didn't have enough business to fill the office, the firm offered free space to members of the Boston Society of Architects. For just \$30 per month for utilities (including Internet access) architects who had been laid off, or who worked from home, lined up for the chance to work in a real office with real people.

What about telecommuting? You know: E-Work Get up in the morning, have coffee, and—still in your pajamas—sit down at the keyboard. Aren't these people Green? Why do they need an office? That's so 1950s.

Alain Perry has created a Web site, [racemenu.com](http://racemenu.com), for "running, cycling, and multisport events." Ideal work to do in your PJs. But Perry has taken up an offer for free space from BuzzAgent, a Boston marketing firm, because "being in this environment breeds productivity." No PJs for Perry.

Did you notice a trend that hasn't happened? We were all supposed to move to Montana, build our log cabin with a gorgeous view of a mountain or a lake, and telecommute from there. After all, if we can telecommute from home, home can be anywhere.

Yet, having a phone and Internet access isn't quite enough. Sure, you and your colleagues can telecommunicate with conference calls. You've done it. At the prearranged hour, a dozen people get on the line. Three do all the talking. The others cope with their e-mail (being careful to turn off their microphone so the others don't hear the tap, tap, tapping).

Somehow, however, telecommunication misses the subtlety. Sure, you get the words, even the inflections in tone. It's less sterile than an e-mail. But it's not as good as a face-to-face conversation complete with all of the nonverbal signals.

They don't call it body *language* for nothing.

Over a decade ago, many businesses were moving out of skyscrapers and into "shorter, wider buildings." The objective, reported *Fortune*, was "to create more spontaneous face-to-face contacts"—particularly with people whom you would not normally bump into.

Also, did you notice: Distance learning hasn't quite taken over either. Yet, it's been around for a while.

When I was in high school (you know, shortly after Benjamin Franklin discovered electricity), my father would get me up at 6:00 in the morn-

Can you e-manage from Montana in your PJs? Not if you are trying to motivate people to creatively develop effective strategies for producing better results. To exercise performance leadership public executives have to create the face-to-face buzz.

ing to watch a physics course on "Sunrise Semester." It was boring. I don't remember learning anything (but, then again, I'm not good at learning anything at 6:00 a.m.) I got much more interested in physics by reading George Gamow's great book, *One Two Three . . . Infinity*.

But why was it boring? Because the instructor had no human audience. The instructor was teaching a camera. So he couldn't tell who was watching, whether they were awake or not, whether they were completely mystified, or when he was moving too fast or too slow.

He couldn't even tell a joke. How do you tell a joke to a camera? It isn't going to laugh, so you'll feel pretty silly laughing all by yourself. It was predestined to be boring.

I have a rule: I can't teach unless I can see people's eyebrows move. That is, I need to see how different individuals are reacting. Who wants to chal-

lenge the latest provocative point? Who is still thinking carefully about what someone said? These people—I need to get them into the discussion.

Of course, I'm not lecturing about the Second Law of Thermodynamics or the photoelectric effect. I'm not trying to impart explicit, scientific knowledge—concepts that can be fully captured in words or equations.

Rather, I'm trying to stimulate an analytical discussion about how to improve the performance of a specific public agency. And, in the process, I'm trying to prompt the group to develop its own **tacit knowledge** about leadership and performance. Through discussion and debate, I'm seeking to help everyone—as well as the group as a whole—improve their capacity to exercise performance leadership.

For that purpose, you have to get people together. Doug Henton of Collaborative Economics argues that "creative work occurs primarily in face-to-face exchange within teams, where people live and work in close proximity."

Can you e-manage from Montana in your PJs? Not if you are trying to motivate people to creatively develop innovative strategies for producing better results. LocaModa, a mobile technology business, has also offered vacant space to some software engineers. Moreover, says the CEO, "we bring them into meetings and bounce ideas off them." After all, continued the CEO, "one insight from these guys could be worth \$1,000 to us."

Even the most skilled manager can't exercise performance leadership from a log cabin in Montana. Effective public executives figure out how to create the face-to-face buzz. **B**

Robert D. Behn 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." His latest publication is: *What All Mayors Would Like to Know About Baltimore's CitiStat Performance Strategy*.