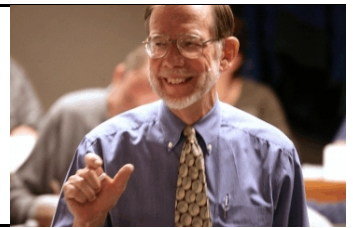


Bob

Behn's Performance Leadership Report

An occasional (and maybe even insightful) examination of the issues, dilemmas, challenges, and opportunities for improving performance and producing real results in public agencies.



On why today's public executives must focus on motivating

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Homo Recognicus not Homo Economicus

A few years back, I was chatting with Martin O'Malley, former mayor of Baltimore, now governor of Maryland.

O'Malley had recently been meeting with a group of business executives from the city, when one of them commented: "Mr. Mayor, it looked like there were garbage men in your box the other night." To which O'Malley replied, "That's right."

The mayor of Baltimore has a box for all games of the **Baltimore Orioles** baseball team and another for all games of the Baltimore Ravens football team. And what did O'Malley do with his box? He used it to recognize the work of particularly effective, or uniquely innovative, or just damn good public employees.

These city employees could, of course, have easily purchased tickets to any Orioles baseball game they wanted to attend. The team was terrible and the days when their Camden Yards ballpark sold out every game had long since passed. Still, for the members of this excellent sanitation crew, these tickets were, for two reasons, a significant reward.

First, the mayor's box is not merely a group of seats located next to the dugout. No. High above the field, with a collection of cushy, tiered seats, the box offers a great view. And behind the seats is a small room with catered food (and drinks).

Second, do you think the crew kept quiet about this recognition? Of course not! They told all of their friends—both their personal friends as well as fellow city employees—about the game. About the seats. About the food. And about the drinks.

They also told everyone why they were there. Soon everyone in the Bureau of Solid Waste knew that this crew had gone to the game. And why.

Moreover, the crew and their friends knew that the mayor knew that they were doing an excellent job.

"The mayor knew? I didn't think he even knew we existed."

Despite the conventional wisdom, **Baltimore's CitiStat** meetings aren't

just a **Gotcha Game**. At every CitiStat meeting, the mayor's staff is always looking to identify city employees who deserve recognition.

You might think that this is common behavior for all public executives. I haven't observed it.

Today, government officials believe that all public employees are all from that uniquely motivated species: **Homo Economicus**. And from their reading of the motivation strands on this species DNA, public officials believe that every government employee is hard wired to appreciate monetary rewards—and only monetary rewards. How else can you explain the obsession with **pay-for-performance**?

The assumption is quite explicit: If I can't pay my staff people more, I can't motivate them.

The human species *Homo Economicus* needs adequate pay. But *Homo Recognicus* craves recognition. Effective public executives invent multiple ways to publicly recognize particularly effective, uniquely innovative, or just damn-good public employees.

Unfortunately, in a time of fiscal contraction, finding the funding to provide anything but token raises to an agency's best staffers is difficult. No, it is impossible.

Fortunately, *Homo Economicus* is extinct. The psychologists have long known this. Now the economists—or, at least, the **behavioral economists**—recognize this too.

Thus, all is not lost. A lot of the people who work for government are from the species *Homo Recognicus*. They want to do a good job. But that's not all. They also want to be recognized for doing a good job. And they want that recognition to be public—very public. They want their recognition for doing a good job to be dramatized widely and magnified significantly.

Actually, even people who work for the private sector are from *Homo Recognicus*. "On a number of occasions, I've forgotten to pay out the small cash prizes we have at Google, and nobody noticed," recalls Bo Cowgill, a Google product manager. "**But everyone notices when the T-shirts that show who won don't come.**"

Of course, the people who work for Google are well paid. If a group wants to buy a set of box-seat tickets, they might easily do so. So the bonus may not mean all that much. Still, they damn well better get their T-shirts.

The members of *Homo Recognicus* who work for government do like their pay. And if they and their family are on food stamps, they do need more pay. Public executives do have to fight to ensure that everyone on their staff is paid at an adequate level.

But they also need recognition.

Sure, you don't control a set of fancy box seats at a major sports arena (or even two seats at a minor sports arena). If you are imaginative enough, however, you will discover that you can create a variety of perks—symbolic gestures that dramatize to the folks who work in your organization that *you* know who is doing an outstanding job and that *you* appreciate their creativity and effort.

Yes, the people who work in your organization have some DNA strains from the species known as *Homo Economicus*. But you need to recognize that they are truly from *Homo Recognicus*. When they do a good job, they want to be recognized for it.

Moreover, the members of *Homo Recognicus* don't just love box seats. They also love T-shirts. **B**

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