

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 all public executives must remember

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## The Difference Between Naming and Knowing

When Richard Feynman, the Nobel-winning physicist, was a boy, his father took him on long walks in the woods. Feynman's father could tell him the name of the brown throated thrush not just in English, but also in Portuguese, Italian, Chinese, and Japanese. Nevertheless, Feynman's father would emphasize: "When you've finished with all that"—when you know the bird's name in multiple languages—"you'll know absolutely nothing about the bird."

Later in life, Feynman recalled that his father "knew the difference between knowing the name of something and knowing something."

In science, the failure to make this distinction is called the "nominal fallacy." It is the assumption that because you have named something you understand it—that the name itself explains it.

For public executives, this is a nasty problem. They are constantly admonished to employ this management tactic, to adopt that new concept, to use an approach that someone has made work somewhere else.

You need: change management; performance measures; a balanced scorecard; an action plan; customer relationship management; a blue ocean strategy; a learning organization; benchmarking; earned value management, strategic alignment . . . Public executives are constantly told to use this or that new idea.

Any of these approaches to management might, indeed, help an organization. But merely stating the concept's name and telling an executive to employ it is completely useless. The name explains nothing.

In executive-education sessions, I often ask: "What is CompStat?" Given that CompStat, which was created in the New York Police Department, has traveled around the world, lots of public executives have heard of it. (Besides, I give everyone some advance reading on CompStat.) In response, I get a lot of answers—usually

a name or descriptive phrase: CompStat is an "accountability system" . . . "computerized statistics" . . . a "management philosophy" . . . a "management tool" . . . a "performance measurement database."

Occasionally, someone will remember the "four principles" developed by Jack Maple, who as Commissioner William Bratton's deputy, developed NYPD's original CompStat:

1. Accurate, timely intelligence
2. Rapid deployment
3. Effective tactics
4. Relentless follow-up and assessment

Indeed these eleven words are posted on the walls and Web sites of police departments. They are also on the walls and Web sites of municipalities that are employing CitiStat, and other agencies that have created their own PerformanceStat.

Richard Feynman learned "the difference between knowing the name of something and knowing something." For public executives who are bombarded with lots of management names, the challenge is to learn the knowledge disguised by the name.

But how much useful information do these "principles" convey? Not much. Who is opposed to "effective tactics"? How does "relentless follow-up" help to produce results? And will it help if it isn't aggressively relentless but just seriously persistent?

A police executive can know all of these words and still know nothing about how CompStat might reduce crime or what to do to create CompStat in another police agency. And certainly these words provide little guidance for an executive who seeks to adapt the CompStat approach outside of the world of policing.

I've spent years trying to figure out what CompStat, CitiStat, and the

other adaptations, which I call "PerformanceStat," really are. What are the key components of this leadership strategy? My answer (unfortunately) is rather long-winded:

A jurisdiction or agency is employing a PerformanceStat *leadership strategy* if, in an effort to achieve specific public *purposes*, its leadership team *persists* in holding an ongoing series of *regular, frequent, integrated meetings* during which the chief executive and/or the principal members of the chief executive's leadership team plus the director (and the top managers) of different subunits use *current data to analyze* specific, previously defined aspects of each unit's recent *performance*; to provide *feedback* on recent progress compared with *targets*; to *follow-up* on previous decisions and commitments to produce *results*; to examine and *learn* from each unit's efforts to improve *performance*; to identify and solve *performance-deficit* problems; and to set and achieve the next *performance targets*.

Obviously, PerformanceStat isn't just one thing. It is a lot of things. After all, if the leadership team of a public agency wants to ratchet up performance, it will not be able to get away with *doing merely one thing*. It will have to do many things.

Yet even these 100+ words don't explain how this leadership strategy can work or how to adapt it in a new organization. That's why I've devoted too many years to writing a book on *The PerformanceStat Potential*. It will be out any decade now. **B**

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