

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.

Copyright © 2015 by Robert D. Behn



On why all public executives need to remember:

"What were they thinking?"  
Vol. 13, No. 4, December 2015

## You Have to Get Your Own Basics Right

On the morning of January 6, 2002, I walked downstairs, looked at the front page of the *Boston Sunday Globe*, and said one word: "Pulitzer." The banner headline read: "Church allowed abuse by priest for years."

Indeed, over the last half century, *The Globe* has won over twenty Pulitzer Prizes, many for public service for its investigations into government corruption and incompetence.

In 2015, the paper continued this tradition. When a record of 108 inches of snow fell on the city, *The Globe* focused attention on inability of the MBTA to keep its transit system working. When parents and others abused or even murdered children, *The Globe* covered in detail the failure of the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families to keep children safe. When citizens were unable to buy health insurance through Massachusetts Health Connector, *The Globe* made sure that everyone—not just those affected—knew.

Then on Monday, December 28, disaster struck. In an effort to cut costs and improve service, *The Globe*, with its home delivery contract costing more than most of the country's papers, had decided not to renew its contract with PCF. Instead, it switched to ACI, which delivers over a dozen papers including the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *The Orange County Register*, and the *Los Angeles Times*.

ACI brags that it has "lower costs due to unique operating efficiencies," and employs "innovative technology for routing and reporting." In metropolitan Boston, however, ACI's strategy did not work.

It had failed to hire enough drivers. Moreover, it's routes were too complicated and too long. Drivers couldn't follow them and couldn't finish them. Many had other jobs, so they simply quit. Thousands of newspapers did not get delivered. Subscribers who tried to complain to *The Globe's* call center—calls jumped from 2,000 per

day to 16,000—got only a busy signal.

And as drivers quit, delivery got even worse. When some subscribers did get through to the call center, they simply canceled the paper.

Obviously, this was a problem on *The Globe's* business side. The paper's reporting and editorial staff had not caused (or even contributed to) the problem. Yet any newspaper's journalists are the most visible representatives. They were embarrassed.

The first Sunday into the new contract, many reporters plus staff from advertising and IT got up early to help deliver the paper. But on Monday, they returned to their regular jobs.

With no improvement in sight, *The Globe* negotiated a deal to bring back PCF to cover many of the routes.

Obviously, the business side of the paper had thought of home delivery as a routine, logistical task and its

*The Boston Globe* has won praise and Pulitzers for its investigations of government corruption and incompetence. But it can't criticize public agencies for their inability to deliver complex public services, when it can't even deliver a daily newspaper

negotiating and contracting responsibilities as—if not routine—certainly nothing unusual.

But delivering a newspaper in eastern Massachusetts where the roads were laid out not by city planners but by the "country-folk" (as Longfellow called them) and their cows is not the same as doing this job in San Diego or Los Angeles. Both ACI and *The Globe* underestimated the complexity of route design.

*The Globe* didn't bother to vet ACI's route design. Why would it? Planning delivery routes is a technical job. That's why a newspaper contracts out home delivery: Hire professionals and let them do their job. Don't micro-

manage them.

Yet, the deliver of the newspaper had not been foiled by a snow storm. Indeed, during the previous winter, delivery to my home was better than one would expect. Unlike those people who work in child protection, the delivery staff do not have to convince unhappy (and often antagonistic people) to open their door, and then try to determine if one of the residents was a secret arsonist who was planning to use the paper to start a fire.

Over two millennia ago, with little advance mapping of his route or knowledge of what he might find, Alexander the Great took his army of roughly (no one really knows) 30,000 on a decade-long tour of what is now Turkey, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, and India). Now that is a logistical challenge.

In comparison, delivering a daily newspaper looks trivial. It isn't, of course. But it isn't as complex as running a century-old transit system or protecting children from abuse.

A week into its delivery debacle, *The Globe* ran a story about a contract Raytheon had to upgrade the nation's GPS system. It was year's behind schedule and running almost four times its \$1.5 billion budget. That's the kind of reporting for which the paper has often won kudos.

Yet it has to be embarrassing to criticize Raytheon for failing to create the "Next Generation Operational Control System," when it can't deliver a newspaper on the ground.

For any organization to establish and maintain its credibility, it has to get it's own basics right.. **B**

Robert D. Behn, a lecturer at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, chairs the executive-education program "Driving Government Performance: Leadership Strategies that Produce Results." His book, *The PerformanceStat Potential*, is available in paperback.

To be sure you get next month's issue, subscribe yourself at: <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/TheBehnReport>. It's free!

For the inside secrets about Driving Government Performance, go to: <http://hks.harvard.edu/EE/BehnReport>.