

Bob

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# 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.



"What were they thinking?"  
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On why public executives need to remember that

## People Are Watching (And Often Laughing)

On the ride from Reykjavik back to Keflavik International Airport, the cabbie asked us, "Please, don't tell your friends about Iceland." The 330,000 residents of this island nation, he complained, have too many tourists.

Indeed, on the Reykjavik waterfront is a big hole, out of which will rise a 250-room, luxury hotel for even more tourists. Moreover, Icelanders fear that, when completed, the hotel will block the view of the city's dramatic Harpa, the concert hall and conference center that is Iceland's answer to the Sydney Opera House.

Our cabbie may not, however, need to worry. The first foot that Iceland puts forward—and its last foot too—is the anything-but-welcoming Keflavik Airport. In 2015, almost 4.9 million passengers passed through the airport. Through the first six months of 2016, passengers have totaled 2.7 million. That's sixteen passengers for every resident of the island—a jump of 25% over 2014.

Indeed, from 2012 to 2015, passenger traffic at Keflavik nearly doubled. Both Icelandair and WOW offer cheap, one-stop flights between the U.S. and Europe with the option of a few-day layover in Iceland. Little wonder that passenger traffic is up, up, and away.

Unfortunately, Keflavik's facilities have not made any great leap forward (or even a small hop). Two-and-half years ago, the airport signed a contract for the latest, **high-tech, state-of-the-art, baggage-handling system** to be completed by the end of 2014.

I don't think that system handled our luggage.

When we arrived at Keflavik, we found a few short, narrow, crammed-together carousels the likes of which I had not seen in a decade, each surrounded by a crowd of passengers at least half-a-dozen deep. After an hour jostling other passengers for a peek at what bags were coming down the line, we were out of the airport.

All this is, however, quite predictable. The airport's rush hour is literally one hour. Between 11:00 pm. and 12:00 midnight, 13 planes (including ours from Boston) are scheduled to land at Keflavik (though some don't make it until early the next day). That is 15% of the entire day's landing in one hour.

Another way to look at it is: Every five minutes during this rush hour, another plane lands with 100 to 150 passengers and 200 to 300 bags. This means that around midnight, there could be nearly 2,000 very tired passengers competing with each other to find their luggage.

Little wonder that, a few weeks after our trip, when fifteen planes arrived between 11:00 pm and 2:00 a.m. **passengers waited for hours for their luggage.**

**When the service provided by a business or public agency gets bad, people complain. When, however, the service gets atrociously bad, people give up. There is no point in complaining. They simply laugh at the organization's obvious incompetence.**

Arriving at any airport and trying to find your luggage is never a great customer experience. But our arrival at Keflavik was better than our departure. Showing our passports, checking our luggage, and getting through security was pretty standard. But then, after security, the lines continued and, at the end of each line, someone asked to see your passport, again. Later, when I bought a snack, I asked at check out whether I needed to show my passport.

We followed the signs towards our gate, and then we hit a wall. Literally. There was a glass wall, with our gate (or so it seemed) somewhere on the outer side. But where? And when would someone open a door in the

wall? No announcement. No clue.

There was the usual airport collection of Millennials sitting on the floor charging their phones. But there were Baby Boomers sitting on the floor too. Because there were no chairs. Zero.

Also, there were no announcements. Not that anyone can comprehend the information or instructions that an airport announcement is providing. Still, it would have been comforting to hear your flight number and a time. After all, we were getting close to departure time, and (given that airports have a habit of occasionally switching gates), even a garbled message in which we could detect our destination, our flight number, our departure time, and something that sounded sorta like our gate would have been a little reassuring.

Then a person arrived, opened the glass wall, and we streamed through to what we took to be the place where our boarding passes would be checked. After all, there was a real person here (though you couldn't be really sure, since this real-looking person said nothing).

Eventually, she began to check our passports (again). While we waited for this final check, I looked through another glass wall, where (again) no passengers were permitted to go, though there was an escalator that might have taken us to a few chairs.

Here was the final irony. For on the other side of the wall were two hard-working airport employees. They were meticulously polishing the brushed aluminum on the underside of the (unuseable) escalator.

I pointed this out to my fellow passengers. We all laughed.

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