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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.



On why performance managers and analysts need to excel at the art of

“What were they thinking?”
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Data Rummaging

Data. Public managers can't get along without data. If they are going to produce results—if they are going to improve performance—public managers need data.

To produce such results, public managers can use data in a variety of ways. For example, they can use data to tell them how well they are doing at producing results. They can use data to tell them which strategies are producing those results (and which ones are not). They can use data to tell them why and how the successful strategies are working.

Public managers can also use data to reveal what performance deficits are preventing them from producing better results. They can use data to identify which opportunities for improving performance they should try next. They can use data to suggest which leadership strategies they might employ to improve performance.

From where, however, do managers get these data? Silly question. Obviously they get data from a data set. Or from a data bank. Or a data base.

If a public manager doesn't have one of these—preferably a big one of these—how can he or she exercise performance leadership and produce better results?

What data, however, might help? What data might be most useful? How might a manager know what data to use? Where might a manager find useful data? How might a manager know how to analyze what data?

Is the most useful data in a data set? Or a data bank? Or a data base?

Yes. Or maybe yes. Or maybe no.

It isn't obvious where a manager—or the manager's trusty analyst—will find the most valuable data. After all, data are only useful to the extent that they can help answer an important question. Thus, what data are useful depends on the problems the manager needs to address, the questions that he needs to ask, the choices she needs to make.

So how will a manager or analyst find the data he or she needs?

A common response is: “data mining.” Indeed, there are dozens of books with the phrase “data mining” in the title, including (you guessed it) *Data Mining for Dummies*. All the manager needs is to mine data.

Unfortunately, like all metaphors, the data-mining metaphor comes with some (not too subtle) connotations that may—or may not—be helpful.

Data mining: If you are going to mine for data, you will need a mine. You also need to know the kind of ore [a.k.a. data] for which you plan to go mining.

But what if you don't know? What if you don't know what kind of data you need, or want, or might maybe find useful? And even if you did know, where in which mine might you find this valuable ore?

Like all metaphors, “data mining” comes with connotations that may, or may not, help. What data might be useful, and where is the mine in which you might find it? And how do you extract the nuggets from the junk with which it is randomly interlaced?

If you are planning to mine for aluminum, for example, you will need to find a mine. Or you will need to construct one where the geology and geography suggest you could mine for aluminum.

Unfortunately, that place doesn't exist. You can't mine for aluminum. It's not like mining for other metals such as silver or gold. Aluminum does not exist in nature. If you want aluminum, you have to go mining for bauxite, from which you then extract the aluminum.

Still, if you wanted to mine for aluminum, you would know (or quickly learn) that you needed to construct your mine where there is bauxite.

Suppose, however, you don't know what ore you are looking for. Suppose you have no idea whether you should go mining for aluminum, or iron, or francium, or ice cream. It can make a big difference.

Still, deciding where to locate your mine is relatively easy. After all, you are not likely to be ambivalent about whether you should mine for aluminum, or silver, or mercury.

Suppose, however, you don't know what kind of data will, or might, help you. In this case, how can you go data mining? How can you even go data prospecting? How can you go looking for data if you don't know what kind of data might be useful?

It's like when Hawk explains to Spenser, in Robert Parker's *Cold Service*, “we looking for somebody we may not recognize when we find him.”

In such situations, you have to go data rummaging—looking for something—but not knowing what it looks like, let alone where you might find it.

You might have a theory—perhaps drawn from experience with a similar performance challenge. Or maybe you have a guess about what might be important. Nevertheless, unless it hits you on the head with a sledge hammer, you may not recognize it.

Still, when pursuing this theory or following this guess, you will need to be alert for other possibilities: blips in the data; things that don't add up (mathematically or metaphorically); something that doesn't look quite right. As Albert Szent-Györgyi, who won the Nobel Prize in Medicine, put it: “Discovery consists of seeing what everybody has seen and thinking what nobody has thought.” **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.

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