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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 to produce significant results, public managers must master

## The Essential Skill of Pattern Recognition

A long time ago in an organization far, far away, I walked into a colleagues office, annoyed by yet another bureaucratic atrocity. My colleague's very young son (call him "Sam") was sitting quietly in his umbrella stroller. I ignored him and launched a diatribe about this latest example of managerial incompetence.

Sam burst into tears.

He obviously did not understand a word I was saying. He certainly did not grasp the reasons for my unhappiness or their significance.

Still, Sam did recognize that I was unhappy—very unhappy. And from experience, Sam had learned that when an adult is unhappy enough to speak in the tones I was using, this was not good (often not good for him).

No wonder Sam cried.

Sam's tears proved that, despite his young age, he mastered an essential skill of human survival: "pattern recognition." Even though he comprehended none of my words, Sam had acquired the ability to distinguish different tones in spoken language—and, for different tones, to recognize potential consequences.

Sam's knowledge of human voices was—by definition—strictly *tacit*. He lacked the language skills necessary to make it explicit. Still, he quickly recognized that I was angry.

Today, the phrase "pattern recognition" conjures up two images. First: A computer is involved. Second: This computer is scanning the shape of a face examining the features of its nose, the specifics of its eyes, the peculiarities of its ears. Then the computer is comparing these features, specifics, and peculiarities with the faces in its data bank—seeking to identify who this person is. (You know all this. You watch TV cop shows.)

We humans are very good at recognizing faces. Walking down the street in a new city, you would instantaneously recognize the pattern in the face of an old friend (though you could never explain how you did it).

Public manager's also need to develop pattern-recognition skills. But the patterns they need to recognize are not found in faces. They are the less obvious patterns of problems, opportunities, and strategies.

If a manager cannot recognize the "shape" of a problem—its key features—how can he or she begin to solve it? And, of course, a manager can't identify a problem's key features if he or she has not accumulated a large mental data bank of experience with a wide variety of problems.

Similarly, in the search for a strategy, the manager needs to draw on experience, attempting to match the features, peculiarities, and specifics of the current problem with the features, specifics, and peculiarities of problems he or she has observed or encountered.

The policy context might be completely different: A manager might be in charge of a large-city health agency. Still, this manager's perfor-

*Effective public managers excel at pattern recognition. They have identified effective management strategies storing them in a mental database. When facing a new problem, they recognize its core features and look in their database for a strategy to adapt.*

mance challenge might have a number of features of a similar though not identical challenge that confronted the manager of an air force base.

The specifics and peculiarities would necessarily be quite different. Nevertheless, from a leadership perspective, the macro features of the two problems could have a number of core similarities.

Recognizing these similarities, the manager of the health department might conclude that some components of the base commander's strategy could—with some *adaptation*—

prove useful in this very different context. Yes: the substance, the organization, and the politics would all be very different. Still, if the core of the base commander's strategy could be *adapted* to the purposes and constraints of the health department, it might well help produce results.

This pattern-recognition approach to ratcheting up performance has four components:

First, identify the core nature of your management challenge.

Second, search your data base for similar challenges for which a manager employed an effective strategy.

Third, identify and understand the causal relationships between this strategy and the results it produced.

Fourth, adapt this strategy to your problem and situation while maintaining its key causal relationships.

Even a managerial neophyte has accumulated a small data bank of problems, strategies, outcomes, and causal relationships. This data bank includes: management cases discussed in graduate school; youthful experiences managing the college chess club or a rock band; and observations of the strategies that experienced executives employed to solve their managerial challenges. (The neophyte's cause-and-effect theories might, however, be quite superficial).

To become effective, public managers need to build their personal database of problems, strategies, outcomes, and causal relationships. Only then, when faced with an apparently unique problem, can they recognize its key features and (drawing on their cause-and-effect database) *adapt* a results-producing strategy. **B**

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