

# Public Management Report

An occasional (and maybe insightful) examination of the issues, dilemmas, challenges, and opportunities in leadership, governance, management, and performance in public agencies.

On the perverse yet inevitable obsession with:

## Avoiding All Mistakes

Several years ago, I was a member of a task force charged with analyzing the operation of a large public agency and making recommendations for improvements. In our meetings with agency executives, one member of the task force asked every deputy, "How does [the agency head] evaluate your performance?"

This question was most embarrassing. Every deputy knew that he or she should have an answer that was thoughtful, analytical, and operational. Yet they had none. Some avoided eye contact. Some shuffled their feet. They all lacked a clear explanation of how they were evaluated or how their division's performance was measured.

They each knew that the agency head should have created some standards by which to judge whether the deputies and their divisions were doing a good job. Yet, they also knew, such standards simply did not exist.

The only answer offered by more than one deputy was: "I guess if I keep my name out of the newspaper, I'm doing a good job."

What a damning commentary on this organization. And yet, this answer does reflect the ten commandments of public service: "Thou shalt not make a mistake. Thou shalt not make a mistake. . . . Thou shalt not make a mistake."

Indeed, in the absence of any explicit measure of performance, the default standard of evaluation is clear: Avoid All Mistakes. Or, at least, avoid all mistakes that might get reported in the newspaper (or on someone's well-read blog).



Yet for at least two reasons, this (usually unspoken) evaluation standard has some operational validity. First, it is much easier to identify a failure than a success. Second, the penalty for even a minor failure is usually much greater than the reward for a significant success.

In government, different people judge success by different—and often conflicting—criteria. Thus, what is a success to some is not a success to others.

In contrast, a failure can be very obvious. Something very bad has happened. We can all see that.

Moreover, a journalist or some other **accountability holder** can, by tracing back a series of events, actions, and decisions, easily identify a "cause" of this bad thing.

In reality, however, if something very bad did happen, there is rarely only *one* "cause." A number of minor errors, seemingly inconsequential choices, and small incidents had to come together in a unique way to permit the bad thing to actually happen.

On March 28, 1979, the Three Mile River nuclear power plant in Pennsylvania experienced a major failure: a partial meltdown of the reactor core. Yet, what was the “cause” of this accident?

The proximate initial cause was a series of individually small but collectively major equipment failures. But these failures themselves might not have induced an accident. In the control room, however, some instruments gave inaccurate information which led the operators to take actions that compounded rather than mitigated the equipment breakdowns. Still, all of this—equipment failures and operator errors—might have been avoided if the engineers who planned the facility had made a different set of design choices.

The nuclear accident at Three Mile Island was big. It generated investigations and books, many of which analyzed the multiple contributing factors in detail. Only a few newspapers, however, covered the complexity of these cause-and-effect relationships.

Indeed, the existence of many possible causes makes the journalist’s work easier. To produce a first draft of history, a journalist need not examine the countless complexities of causation. All the journalist needs to do is uncover, from among multiple possibilities, a single, plausible cause. This is enough to write a story—perhaps even a front-page story.

Success, of course, has multiple causes too. And one of these causes is “dumb luck.” If you don’t want to give an individual, a team, or an organization credit for a success, you can always claim that they were “just lucky.” So even if a public manager has a success—even if almost all of the stakeholders agree that it is a success—the manager and the organization may not gain much credit.

Moreover, even when there is credit to be gained from a success, that credit is much

less significant than the blame for a failure. The failure is reported on page one. The success may be known only by the cognoscenti. Little wonder that public officials measure their success by their ability to keep their name out of the newspaper.

Yet, this is not exclusively a government problem. It is fundamentally a human problem.

Pete Palmer, the co-author of *The Hidden Game of Baseball*, has observed that for baseball managers, “the pain of looking bad is worse than the gain of making the best move.” Consequently, Palmer concludes, baseball “managers tend to pick a strategy that is least likely to fail rather than pick a strategy that is most efficient.”

All of this suggests that one of the challenges facing public executives (perhaps all executives) is to raise the level of reputational rewards that can be earned by producing a success, while lowering the reputational costs incurred by contributing to a failure. Public employees have chosen to work for government because they want to accomplish something. They need to be able to earn the **esteem** that comes from their successes. **B**

Robert D. Behn is the author of *Performance Leadership: 11 Better Practices That Can Ratchet Up Performance* and a lecturer at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

As a member of the team of Kennedy School faculty who lead executive-education programs for the public sector, Bob chairs “**Driving Government Performance: Leadership Strategies that Produce Results.**” He also conducts **custom-designed executive programs** for public agencies, most recently for the California Air Resources Board, Miami-Dade County, and state agencies in Ohio and Washington.

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