

Bob Behn's 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.

Vol. 6, No. 4, December 2008

Copyright © 2008 by Robert D. Behn

On why public executives should start

Drafting A Final Report Years Early

In the United States, for sixteen of the fifty state governors, their job ends in two years. State law requires it. The same is true for the cabinet secretaries, department directors, and agency chiefs who are gubernatorial appointees. On December 31, 2010 (or some day very close to it), they will walk out the door for the last time.

As these public executives say goodbye to their employees, to legislators, to journalists, and to citizens, what will they declare that they have achieved? What successes will they list on their resume? What accomplishments will they publish in their final report?

A few of these executives have already thought about these questions. Most have not.

After all, they are much more worried about today. They are confronted with too many immediate and very pressing problems: How much will their FY 2010 budget be cut? How much will they still have to cut from their FY 2009 budget? What programs will they need to cut? To terminate? Who will they have to furlough? To lay off?

"Worry about my final report? That's two years away. I have to deal with today's realities—not some hypothetical, maybe future." Most public executives assume (that is, if they think about this at all) that they might ponder this some day, sometime over the holidays.

This is a mistake. If public executives wish to go out the door with a list of specific results produced, they need to start thinking now—two years ahead of time—about the significant accomplishments that their final report will contain. They need to draft their agency's final report today.

After all, how can the executive—and the organization—produce these accomplishments if no one knows what they are actually supposed to accomplish? Writing down these to-be-achieved accomplishments is, itself, a disciplining process. It forces the executive to think ahead, to imag-

ine the future—and the results that the organization *will have* produced between now and then. It requires the executive to think in the future perfect tense: By December 2010, we *will have* produced these specific results.

Okay: Ignore this flashback to ninth-grade English. Don't worry about the proper tense. Worry about what you are going to get done—*what* your agency *will get done* by *when*.

Having decided what the organization will have accomplished, the executive can think backwards to the present and develop a strategic timeline for getting from here to there: If we are to achieve our December 2010 **performance targets**, what should we be doing in the last quarter of 2010? In the third quarter? In the second quarter? In the first quarter?

Public executives who wish to go out the door with a list of specific results produced need to start thinking now—years ahead of time—about the significant accomplishments that their agency's final report will contain.

Then, continuing to work backwards, what should we be doing in the fourth quarter of 2009? In the third quarter? In the second? Finally, what should we be doing in the first quarter of 2009, so that we will be in the position to do all of those other things in the second quarter of 2009, in the . . . and ultimately in the fourth and final quarter of 2010?

Naturally, things won't work out exactly this way. What you decide your organization needs to do in the first quarter of 2009 will not be strictly what it does. Certainly, what you decide your organization needs to be doing in the final quarter of 2010 will not be precisely what it does. It might not even be close.

Along the way, you and your organization will undoubtedly have to

make some adjustments—many adjustments. This is true in ordinary times. Today, everything is in flux.

Still, if you are going to get somewhere—if you are going to try to get somewhere—you need a clear idea of where that somewhere is. The alternative is pure confusion. That great American philosopher, Yogi Berra, explained it best: "You've got to be careful if you don't know where you're going 'cause you might not get there."

Today, public employees need to know where they are going. They are worried—worried about their agency, worried about themselves. Without a sense of purpose, they will simply hunker down. Without something significant to accomplish, they will concentrate on survival.

To you, December 31, 2010 is two *long* years away. To some civil servants, however, you have *only* two years left. To them, you may already be a lame duck—if not "lame," nevertheless a little impaired. Thus, some people may be beginning to think about how they will look to your successor. You need to keep them focused on what needs to be achieved during these final two years.

Fortunately, you can help them look good to any future boss by helping them to achieve something significant. After all, the next boss will need to quickly figure out who has the personal and operational capacity to produce real results. By naming in your final report those who contributed the most to your agency's performance, you can both reward them and help your successor.

Today is the opportune time to write the first draft of your December 31, 2010 final report. **B**

Robert D. Behn is a lecturer at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government where he chairs the executive-education program "Driving Government Performance: Leadership Strategies that Produce Results." His latest publication is: *What All Mayors Would Like to Know About Baltimore's CitiStat Performance Strategy*.

