

Bob

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 all public officials need to follow the basic rule:

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Always Start with Purpose

The Palestinians and the Israelis are cooperating. I am not making this up.

Sure: They are not cooperating about such issues as the future of Jerusalem, or of Gaza, or of the West Bank. That would be too much to ask.

Nevertheless, some Palestinians and some Israelis are cooperating. But it's not the politicians. It's the scientists.

In the middle of the Dead Sea, which borders Israel, Jordan, and the West Bank, scientists have been drilling down into the bed of this lake. For forty days and forty nights (could I make this up?), they have been pulling up a sequence of sediment cores that are nine feet long and five inches in diameter. The objective has been to obtain over 1,500 feet of sediment, which ought to cover half-a-million years of the region's geologic and human history.

For several reasons, the Jordan Rift Valley is unique. It is formed by the boundary between two tectonic plates, the African Plate and the Arabian Plate, which create their own geologic friction and occasional blow-ups. In the middle is the Dead Sea, the lowest land elevation on the Earth, 1,400 feet below sea level. And when we humans decided to leave Africa, we migrated right through this region.

Consequently, these sediment cores will, for decades, provide research opportunities for geologists, seismologists, geophysicists, archaeologists, anthropologists, climatologists, and biologists. (Yes, some bacteria and other microbes can live in the heavily salinated "Dead" Sea.)

So what fostered this cooperation among Israelis and Palestinians, plus other scientists from Jordan, Germany, Norway, Japan, Switzerland, and the U.S.? The answer is obvious: They shared a common purpose. Moreover, this cooperation wasn't just across political jurisdictions. It was also across scientific disciplines, which aren't always known for play-

ing well with each other.

Still, these scientists with quite different world views—both political and academic—cooperated. They did so, however, solely because they shared a common, underlying purpose: pursuing the research opportunities offered by these sediment cores.

Note, however, that these scientists didn't start by observing that the International Continental Scientific Drilling Program had a big rig that they could rent. They didn't start by saying: "What a cool gizmo. I wonder what I can do with it?"

Instead, they started with their multiple scientific purposes and then figured out: If we could rent that tool, it would really help all of us do our research.

When an artisan stands at a workbench, he or she doesn't pick up a

Over a century ago, Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, "Forgetting our objectives is the most frequent act of stupidity." Yet, so often today, managers in all three sectors select a management tool without first asking: "What purpose are we trying to achieve?"

saw, a hammer, and a screwdriver and say: "Now what should I make?" Rather, the artisan starts, logically enough, with a purpose: "I want to build a cabinet for my wine glasses." Having selected this purpose, the artisan can design a cabinet to both store and display wine glasses.

During the design process, the availability of key resources is quite relevant. If the artisan lacks the tools or the skills necessary to implement the design, he or she must modify the design. Thus, to create a workable design, the artisan may have to iterate back-and-forth between the design and the tools—all the while keeping focused on the purpose: to store and display wine glasses.

Only now, having created a design

that can be implemented, does the artisan pick up a tool. Sounds logical enough.

But if you watch the behavior of many managers—in all three sectors: public, nonprofit, or for-profit—you might think this logic is irrelevant to the work of organizations. For many managers start not with a purpose, but with their favorite tool.

That tool might be the Balanced Scorecard. It might be Total Quality Management. Or Six Sigma. It might be PerformanceStat. Or pay for performance. Or 360-degree feedback.

Any self-respecting manager has a large number of tools: multiple saws, hammers, and screwdrivers. Yet, almost every manager seems to have his or her favorite, all purpose, Swiss Army knife.

This tool is, indeed, "all purpose." Without ever thinking about purpose, the manager starts with this tool.

In New England, winter always brings an unwelcome chore: shoveling snow. And in many cities, an ordinance requires home owners to shovel their sidewalks. After a storm ends, homeowners in Boston have six hours to shovel their sidewalks.

If they don't? Boston's Inspectional Services Department may fine them \$50 per day—in some cases, more.

This might be an ideal way for the city to help cover its budget deficit. But that's not how the Department's Lisa Timberlake sees it. "If there are violators, what we try to do once the first snowfall hits is try to educate folks," she says. "We're not out there trying to issue tickets, we're just trying to make sure that folks are safe."

Ah yes: Safety. Always start with purpose. **B**

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