

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 executives must cope with the bureaucratic excuse

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“You Don’t Understand; We’re Different!”

In the spring of 2001, as Rudolph Giuliani neared the end of his second term as mayor of New York, he was riding high on the success of his police department. Crime was down in the city—Giuliani’s big issue when he first ran in 1993—and he gave much of the credit to the CompStat leadership strategy created by Commissioner William Bratton and Deputy Commissioner Jack Maple.

Other city agencies had also adapted the CompStat strategy to improve their performance. The Human Resources Administration had JobStat, and the Department of Correction had TEAMS (call it “CorrectionStat”).

Giuliani wanted to also apply the CompStat approach to the city’s K-12 education system: Why couldn’t the Board of Education do what NYPD had done, with school principals rather than precinct commanders being the managers responsible for improving performance? In the mayor’s office, some called this LearnStat.

School principals, however, did not think this was such a marvelous idea. Jill Levy, president of the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators (the union representing the city’s principals) played up the differences: “We are about education, not about numbers and cases and criminals.”

This is the customary bureaucratic excuse: “*You don’t understand; we’re different!*” As in: Yes, the police can do it. But we in education can’t.

But what is this “it”? What is this thing called CompStat that police can do but educators can’t? Is “it” the brutal questioning?

Yes: If the **purpose** is to improve a school’s performance, maybe brutal questioning of principals might not prove effective. But is CompStat nothing more than a **gotcha game** with brutal questioning?

Evidently that’s what Levy thought: “All this will do is heighten the fear and blame and drive the good principals out of the system.”

Certainly the brutal questioning,

with the “blame” and the resulting “fear” were the most visible, dramatic, and publicized features of CompStat. But is that “it”? The commissioner’s staff yells at precinct commanders and crime miraculously goes down? Is this the “it” that works for police?

But knowing the word “CompStat” is not the same as knowing how a Compstat strategy can work to produce improved results.

When Giuliani was mayor, Correction was certainly using the NYPD style of brutal questioning. HRA’s JobStat meetings were, however, quite different—actually civil. Was there something wrong with JobStat?

Actually, for any **PerformanceStat** leadership strategy to be effective—whether in policing, corrections, human services, or education—the questioning just has to be persistent. It can be persistent and brutal. It can

Every police department is different. So is every school system. Such differences should not prevent executives in education and policing from learning from each other. The differences do mean, however, that such learning always requires adaptation.

be persistent and polite. It can even be persistent and very polite. (In the Los Angeles Police Department, the CompStat questioning is very polite.)

Michael Bloomberg, Giuliani’s successor as mayor, thinks that there are similarities between the city’s police and schools. “Everything that you can tell me that’s a problem in changing the culture of a school system,” he argues, “I’ll tell you the same thing was said about changing our culture in our police department.”

Still, police and teachers, precinct commanders and school principals are different. Thus, to take advantage of a leadership strategy from another organization—even a rather similar

organization—an organization’s leadership team has to deal with the inevitable “we’re different” excuse. This requires the leadership team to:

- (1) Identify the key differences between the two situations.
- (2) Identify what is similar in the two situations.
- (3) Identify the “it” or more likely the “its”: the core principles that they think have proven effective in the first situation.
- (4) Figure out how to adapt these effective core principles from the first situation so that they will prove effective in their own organization.

Then, they have to employ **management by groping along**—adapting, learning, and adapting some more. Then learning some more, and . . .

Yes, change—any change—can drive people (including some good people) out of an organization. But change can also attract people—good people. Of New York’s effort to change the city’s school system, Bloomberg has argued, “If we can make this a success like the Police Department is a success, you will have more people coming and wanting to join this school system.”

Everyone is different. Every police department is different. So is every precinct. Every school system is different. So is every school. Certainly every school is different from every police department.

Such differences mean that **any transfer of knowledge and strategy requires adaptation**. Such differences do not, however, prevent any of these dissimilar organizations from learning from each other. ■

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