

# 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.

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On why public executives have:

## The Responsibility to Craft Purposes

In his book *Certain Trumpets: The Nature of Leadership*, Garry Wills writes: "Lincoln had no clear expression of the popular will to implement. He had to elicit the program he wanted to serve, and that always involves affecting the views one is consulting."

The same is true for today's public executives. Many of the issues that they face are not quite as polarizing or explosive as Lincoln's challenges of slavery and the preservation of a nation. Still, most public executives are given "no clear expression of the popular will to implement."

The legislature does not do this. Rather, the legislature needs—if it is to pass anything—to obscure a variety of tensions. Despite all of the whereases in the preamble—indeed, precisely because of all of the multiple and conflicting whereases—public executives lack definitive guidance about what specific purposes they should pursue. Further, a 51-49 agreement, even when it is enacted into law, is hardly a "clear expression of the popular will."

So what is a public executive to do? One obvious answer is to mimic the legislature—to reflect in words and deeds the bundle of contradictions and obfuscations reflected in society and the law. This, however, is not necessarily a safe choice. Despite the ambiguity and abstruseness of the legislation, each individual legislator has some very clear ideas.

At a legislative hearing, the public executive can be confronted with a series of very pointed questions that reflect very different purposes. The same can happen at any public forum, at which stakeholders with very specific objectives will again confront the public executive with definitive but conflicting demands. A public executive may try—with a variety of individualized, targeted initiatives—to mollify every individual interest. This, however, does not guarantee success, or even survival.

An alternative to dexterous mollification is active leadership. This strat-

egy also comes with no guarantee of survival. But it does bring the potential to accomplish something.

To exercise such leadership, public executives craft a purpose and then mobilize the means to achieve it. Today's public executives cannot, any more than Lincoln, choose alone. Their choice must be acceptable to others—perhaps to only a few others, perhaps to many different others.

The leader needs followers, and to create such followers, argues Wills, "agreement on a goal is necessary." In fact, that is what Wills argues leaders do: "The leader is one who mobilizes others toward a goal shared by leader and followers." And lest his readers miss his point, Wills reiterates it: "the goal must be *shared*."

As leaders, public executives not only craft purposes to reflect and affect the views of others. They also pursue these purposes with a strategy that produces some initial small wins from which they can learn and influence the thinking of still others.

And, if a goal is, indeed, to be shared, the public executive must (as Lincoln did) affect the views of the followers. Thus, leaders must listen to these potential followers. In fact, while consulting these possible followers, the leader has the opportunity to influence their thinking.

Public executives have to "elicit the program" that they, the people who work in their organization, and a lot of citizens want "to serve." This requires the subtle kind of political leadership that Wills advocates. Such leadership is neither dictatorial nor subservient. Rather, it requires both conviction and convincing.

Leaders set direction and assure others that this direction makes sense. They describe an alternative vision of the future and convince others that it is both desirable and

achievable. And although such others are inevitably labeled "followers," they are really more than that. For they not only accept direction but also shape it. Still, it is the leader (whether by exercising formal authority or by taking the initiative) who molds people's beliefs, thoughts, and desires into a coherent whole—a strategy that they can collectively pursue.

Most of the time, the leader does not need full agreement. Public executives in particular may need agreement only from some people within the organization and some in their authorizing environment. Perhaps one or two people—the chair of the House Ways and Means Committee, or the president of a key stakeholder organization—must give their consent. Or it may only be necessary to deter their active opposition.

Initially, the public executive may not need the support from even a majority of citizens or of those within the organization. A small, dedicated group can accomplish the first small wins. These small wins provide an opportunity for learning and adjustments. And they can help to convince others that both the purpose and the strategy are desirable and prudent. Some will continue to dissent or disagree but, as the momentum builds, many will sign on. Others will remain quiescent or leave.

As leaders, public executives not only craft purposes judiciously to reflect and affect the views of others. They also pursue these purposes with a strategy that produces some initial successes. Then they use these successes both to learn how to adjust the strategy to produce more success and to affect the views of those whom they continue to consult. **B**

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