

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 the need for all public officials to

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Reduce “Notification Fatigue”

When my son was born, he was briefly in intensive care. When I first walked in to the ICU nursery, I was immediately struck by how small the babies were. My son, however, was in a different category; he had weighed in at 9 pounds 10 ounces.

Still, like all of the others, he was all wired up. So, I couldn't pick him up, even if I had possessed any idea about how to handle a newborn.

There was, however, something that I did know about. Next to him was a rack of electronic monitors, to which his wires were connected. So I, having spent four undergraduate years at an engineering school, immediately focused on something I understood: electronic monitors.

And, as I scanned them, I noticed that, on the face of one, the electronic trace had flat-lined. Obviously, my son wasn't dead. Even in my naivete, I could figure this out. Still, this flat line did not seem like a good sign, so I called over the ICU nurse.

She took one look at the monitor and simply turned it off.

Today, of course, such a monitor doesn't just activate a visual display panel to indicate that a patient has (or might have) a problem. Today, it is connected to an alarm.

Indeed, each ICU patient is connected to numerous electronic gizmos that monitor numerous indicators (such as blood pressure and heart rate) that reveal how a patient's organs and systems are functioning.

Moreover, each monitor is connected to an alarm. When an indicator exceeds or drops below a specified threshold, the alarm sounds.

Logically, these monitoring thresholds are set to ensure that the ICU staff are alerted to every possible problem. The result is lots of false alarms. **One study found that “up to 94% of the [ICU] alarms are false.”**

Thus, the alarms go off frequently. **Another study of an ICU at a children's hospital found that alarms went off 2,942 times in 298 hours—**

or once every ten minutes.

In ICUs everywhere, the result is “alarm fatigue.” Consequently, the ICU staff may never “hear” an alarm. Or they may ignore an alarm. Or as when my son was in an ICU, they may simply turn it off.

Actually, we all suffer from such “notification” fatigue. If you subscribe to a magazine, you get monthly notices that your subscription is about to expire, even though you paid for three years. At the airport, you ignore the incomprehensible gibberish coming over the loud speaker.

Recently, while seated at my flight's gate waiting to board, I figured out that the announcement for “Ben Robot” was for me. (Obviously, I have no idea how many times this announcement was made. Maybe two. Maybe 20.)

In an intensive care unit, “alarm fatigue” can be fatal. The “notification fatigue” that infests public agencies is not as deadly. Still it can poison organizational health. Public officials could earn much good will by controlling their own plague of too frequent notices.

When at the counter, I was told that I needed to check in. I pointed out that I already had my boarding pass and had already made it through security. Obviously, I had checked in. This confused the person at the counter who, after numerous interrogations of a computer, concluded that I had indeed checked in. Ignoring airport gibberish is clearly a sensible strategy.

It is sensible because all of the alarms, all of the warnings, all of the announcements, all of the notifications are never quite as important as is suggested by the urgency with which they are delivered. The false-alarm rate might not be 94%. But it isn't zero. Or 6%. Most of the time,

when we ignore such a notification, nothing bad happens.

But not always. **Sometimes a patient dies. Indeed, more often than sometimes.**

Of course, no one in your organization dies from the blizzard of notices that it sends out. Usually, everyone has learned, the notification is driven by some kind of legal or regulatory requirement. It can be safely ignored.

And if the notification is really important—if people really have to take some action—they know they will be notified again. And again.

All public organizations have a policy and procedures manual. Traditionally a big binder, it contains all of the rules and regulations that people have to follow. Periodically—often frequently—new rules replace old ones, and thus some revisions must be distributed.

And, traditionally, employees stuff the revisions inside the binder. Then everyone ignores them. (Now, of course, the manual isn't in a binder. It's on a Web site, making it even easier to ignore.)

When Thomas Glynn became deputy commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Public Welfare, he discovered that employees were bombarded with very frequent changes in federal and state policy. He invented an innovation. The department would send out updates only once a month. And, on page one of this update would be a description of the changes that were actually important.

Now there's an innovation—and an antidote to notification fatigue—that all public agencies would benefit from replicating. **B**

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