

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 performance will not improve with

The Split-Personality CPO

In November 2007, President George W. Bush signed an executive order requiring every agency in the United States government to appoint a "Performance Improvement Officer" (PIO). Naturally, every agency complied. Some gave their chief financial officer or chief budget officer an additional title. Some picked the head of their performance-measurement or strategic-planning staff.

In January, the U.S. Office of Management and Budget gave these PIOs several "**responsibilities.**" One was to "work with implementing partners/grantees and stakeholders, including other agencies to review and improve program performance." At the same time, they were told to "regularly assess progress" and to "help hold managers accountable for results."

Then, last September, presidential candidate Barack Obama released his proposals to "**make government more effective.**" Obama promised to "work with agency leaders . . . to improve results and outcomes." Moreover, he committed to creating "a SWAT team" headed by a government-wide "Chief Performance Officer" (CPO) who "will work with federal agencies to set tough performance targets and hold managers responsible for progress."

Meanwhile, the SWAT team will go into agencies "to reform programs," replace "existing management," and demand "improvement action plans." Obama pledged that his administration would "not just measure performance, but enforce standards."

"I will eliminate the programs that don't work," Obama promised. And he would "**fire government managers who aren't getting results.**"

Which is it? What is Bush's PIO or Obama's CPO supposed to do? Is this individual charged with helping public managers improve their agencies' performance? Or is this person in the evaluation and accountability-holding business? It is not obvious.

Moreover, there is a clear conflict between the two roles: helpful counselor vs. tough evaluator. If a PIO or

CPO is a friendly counselor, helping a department's managers develop and implement their strategies, how tough will this individual be when evaluating the results the department produces? Alternatively, if a CPO or PIO is a department's rigid evaluator—its official accountability holder—how forthcoming will its managers be when describing the inadequacies of their organization's performance?

Both Bush's PIO and Obama's CPO have a split personality that is derived from their two conflicting tasks. And this task conflict is, in turn, derived from how the job of improving performance is conceptualized.

Performance is not a staff function. It is a line job. Staff units do not produce results. Elected chief executives who seek to improve their government's performance need to invest in the leadership and operational capacity of their line agencies.

To Bush and Obama, performance improvement is a staff function. Obviously, goes this logic, line managers can't improve their agencies' performance. They've proven that. So our only recourse is to put over them a high-level staff person who will encourage and/or compel results.

Unfortunately, producing results is not a staff function. It is a line job. Staff units do not produce results. Performance can only be improved by line agencies. If any elected chief executive—president, prime minister, governor, premier, mayor—wants to improve the results produced by a line agency, that chief executive will need to invest in that agency's leadership and **operational capacity.**

The chief executive can appoint the world's most knowledgeable performance staffer. And that staffer can offer brilliant advice and/or brutal punishments. Unless, however, line executives have the leadership ability to

motivate front-line workers to produce real results, the performance staffer will accomplish little.

Yet note the kind of people who have become the Bush administration's PIOs. People with skills in budgeting, or strategic planning, or performance measurement. How might a budget official think about performance? In terms of dollars saved? How might a strategic planner think about performance? In terms of brilliant strategies? How might someone who focuses on the measurements think about performance? In terms of the validity of the measures employed or the accuracy of the data collected?

Line managers might, however, think about performance differently. They might (at least if they aren't being continuously scrutinized by their local performance evaluator) be willing to define their organization's **performance deficit**, specify a strategy for eliminating (or, at least mitigating) that deficit, and develop some informative measures to tell them how much progress they are making. Then, they would develop strategies for motivating their line staff to attack that performance deficit with energy and intelligence,

Performance measurement is important. So is performance evaluation. They are necessary but not sufficient. Indeed, we do have a lot of measures and a lot of evaluations. But neither measures nor evaluations produce any results.

What is really needed is **performance leadership.** And that responsibility—the leadership responsibility of the line executives to motivate their organization to produce results—is not a staff function. **B**

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