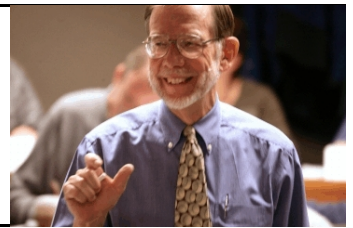


Bob

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 public officials and citizens should beware

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The Beguiling Connecting-the-Dots Metaphor

Connecting the dots. To read the newspapers, a large number of people have in their formal job description the specific responsibility to connect dots. Yet, they can't even do this simple task.

When they don't, others will excoriate them for "failing to connect the dots." And these days, lots of people in the U.S. intelligence community are being criticized for their failure to connect the dots.

How legitimate, however, is this criticism of the intelligence community's analytical work? Is this connecting-the-dots work as simple as the metaphor makes it sound?

Analysts in any field face the challenge of finding patterns in a labyrinth of data. Often, they don't even know what they are looking for. In such circumstances, the failure-to-connect-the-dots metaphor is simplistic and misleading. It suggests that there exists something called dots, that these dots come in a simple, standard form, that they are displayed in a conspicuous format, and that any fool can connect them.

Indeed, behind this metaphor is the connect-the-dots puzzle that five-year-olds solve easily. How come these idiots can't connect their dots?

Metaphors are essential for communication. They quickly convey an idea. Yet, metaphors are essentially simplistic. They lack nuance. Sometimes (to use a metaphor), they miss the target. Or hit the wrong target.

Unfortunately, the dots we want the intelligence community to connect are not laid out on a single piece of paper. They are not numbered sequentially: 1, 2, 3, . . . up to, say, 50.

First of all, there exist a gazillion dots. One or two of the connectable dots may be on one piece of paper (or in one database). But the other dots are spread all over—in various databases, file folders, desks, e-mails, pockets, floors, and (most importantly) inside different people's brains. To connect them, someone has to recognize a variety of unobvious con-

nections. Computers can do some of this work, but only if a human asks them the right questions.

Moreover, the dots are not all dots. Not only are they not numbered sequentially. They aren't even the same thing. What one person perceives as a superfluous pile of fluff, another decipherers as a relevant and revealing dot.

It's much more complicated than looking for a needle in a haystack. This task has two advantages: You know what you are looking for (a needle). And you know where to look (in the haystack). But what if you don't know what you are looking for? What if you don't know where you should look for whatever you might be looking for? That's a much bigger analytical challenge. In fact, it isn't even obvious what the challenge is.

Metaphors are essential for communication. They can convey a common idea very quickly. Metaphors, however, are essentially simplistic. They lack all nuance. Sometimes (to use a metaphor), they even miss the target. Or hit the wrong target.

Recently, in *The Washington Post* David Ignatius wrote of "clues that were lost in a blizzard of information"—in the intelligence community's much-too-big database. But are all of the clues in one database? Moreover, "clues" don't come with labels on their big toe that say "Clue: Pay Attention."

Clues lost in a blizzard of information. This metaphor suggests that there exists a blizzard through which people know (or should know) to search for obvious clues. But analysts looking for the patterns can't just look in one blizzard of information. They also have to look in disparate "galaxies of facts," in multiple "oceans of data," and in myriad "nebula of rumors." Oh yes, and they also have to remember to look under the carpet.

The analysts are looking for a

pattern—a pattern in the data that gives them a warning that something bad is about to happen. But what pattern? In fact, what is a pattern? What is a pattern that might be relevant? How would you recognize a relevant pattern when you saw it? Finally, from this pattern, how do you ascertain what the bad something that is about to happen is?

A simple pattern is an individual's name that shows up on several potential-bad-guy lists. The bad guys have, however, a history of creating aliases. Yes, our passports are now much more secure. But for how long?

Sometimes a pattern is just one data point—one weird data point. A data point so weird that it is easily distinguishable from all of the other data points. A data point that makes you remark, "that's funny."

Such a data point might be people taking flying lessons who have no interest in learning how to land. "That's funny. I thought landing was the most important part of flying?"

Still, is this weirdness important? What does this weird data point tell you? This weird data point itself does not tell you anything specific. Instead, it suggests that, perhaps, there is something underlying this data point—something that can only be uncovered through some additional investigation. After all, the data point could simply be wrong. Our databases are full of inaccurate data points.

A pattern might be multiple people trying to blow up airplanes. So we concentrate our energies on preventing people from blowing up airplanes. Want to take a trip on a train?

Beware the metaphor with jaws that bite and claws that catch. **B**

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