

# 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 need to avoid

## Dashboards as Data Dumps

Are you in favor of transparency? Of course you are. Everyone is in favor of transparency in government. Citizens ought to have a right to know what their government is doing. Public agencies ought to tell citizens what they are doing, what they are spending, what they are accomplishing.

Moreover, the more transparency the better. Public agencies ought to provide citizens with as much information as possible.

As a result, a variety of government jurisdictions and public agencies (and nonprofit organizations too) have created “dashboards.” On a pretty Web site, they post tables, bar charts, pie charts, even gauges that look like those on your car’s dashboard.

Moreover, these dashboards can be quite extensive—containing a variety of data: expenditure data, personnel data, output data, even outcome data.

How, however, should a citizen interpret such dashboard data? What story do these data tell? Do they suggest that performance is improving? Or is it deteriorating? How would a citizen know?

Too often, the dashboard contains only raw information—every category of data that the organization collects. There is so much data, that the citizen doesn’t know where to begin. Even the analyst for an active stakeholder group may not know where to find the relevant data, let alone the comparative data that would permit a meaningful interpretation.

The data dashboard is a metaphor, suggesting that it provides the information necessary to operate the organization, just as the data on an automobile dashboard provides the data necessary to operate the car.

But note that your car’s dashboard offers only a few pieces of data. It includes your speed and miles driven. It tells you your engine’s oil pressure, though, today, most cars have only an idiot light that goes on when the oil pressure is too low. After all, how many drivers know what their oil pressure should be. It might also

display your engine’s RPMs, though do you ever pay attention to that? (And the inscrutable check-engine light only tells you to go to an expert.)

Despite the variety of information displayed on your dashboard, 99 percent of the time, you pay attention to only one piece of data: your speed.

And what should your speed be? What is a good speed? What is a bad speed? You can’t answer these questions by only looking at your dashboard. You need to understand the context in which you are operating.

Fortunately, that context is easy to obtain. Just look out the window. Doing so, you see the official speed limit which is posted on a sign, and how fast the traffic is moving.

How can an agency obfuscate while at the same time respond to the demands for transparency? Simple. Don’t just provide the requested data. Don’t just provide the key data. Instead, provide all of the available data. This is obfuscation by disclosure.

Is driving 50 miles per hour too fast or too slow? That depends. And it doesn’t depend upon anything that you can see on your car’s dashboard. It depends upon what you see outside. To determine whether your speed is too fast or too slow, you need a basis of comparison.

Moreover, the speed displayed on your dashboard is simply your speed at this very moment. It doesn’t reveal whether your speed is going up or down. Fortunately, you already possess this contextual information. And, again, you don’t get this information from your dashboard; you have it because you know what you have been doing with your foot on the accelerator pedal.

The same is true for the data on any governmental dashboard. To interpret the information on the dashboard—let alone to understand

what actions the dashboard’s data suggest you should take—you need some contextual information. But what information would provide a useful comparison?

Here are three possibilities: (1) last year’s, last quarter’s, and last month’s data. (2) similar data from similar organizations. (3) this year’s **performance targets**, which suggest the **performance deficits** that the agency is trying to fix. A dashboard that contains such data, permits citizens to make some intelligent comparisons and useful judgments.

In *The New Yorker* of January 8, 2007, Malcolm Gladwell wrote an article titled, “Open Secrets: Enron, intelligence, and the perils of too much information.” Gladwell argues that the data required to understand Enron’s financial manipulations were available in the firm’s public reports.

The problem was not a lack of transparency. The problem was the inability of analysts to dissect the existing data in a way that revealed what the company was doing and thus the firm’s perilous situation. Eventually, however, several journalists did. So did a class of six MBA students at Cornell.

How can a public agency obfuscate while at the same time pretend to respond to the demands for more transparency? Simple. Don’t just provide the requested data. Don’t just provide the key data. Don’t just provide the revealing data. Instead, provide every tiny piece of available data. This is obfuscation by disclosure.

When dashboards are mere data dumps, they don’t create transparency. Too many dashboards create nothing but confusion. **B**

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