

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 remember that

Leadership Is a “Generative” Activity

Language, cognitive scientists tell us, is a “generative” activity. We can’t just copy a sentence used by others; we have to *generate* our own.

This is because the sentences that others have spoken or written—although each may have been a very appropriate and extremely useful sentence—do not quite apply in our situation. The circumstances might be similar, but they are certainly not identical. Thus, someone else’s sentence does not work. It misses something—maybe something trivial, maybe something very important.

Still, we humans are able to create a brand-new, never-used-before sentence—one that conveys our precise meaning because it perfectly matches our specific circumstances. We can do this because, when seeking to generate a new sentence, we rely upon the principles of our language. We learned these principles in early childhood by listening to our parents talk and practicing their language. Then, throughout the rest of our lives, we are able to apply these principles without much conscious thinking about what we are doing.

In English, for example, we add an “ed” to the present tense of a verb to create the past-tense equivalent. Thus, the past tense of “walk” is “walked.” Simple enough.

But not always. For example, the past tense of “run” is neither “runed” nor “runned” but “ran.” Every collection of principles has its exceptions. Language is no different. Applying its principles is complicated. (And you thought that all your toddler had to worry about was falling down.)

Despite our knowledge of our language, we humans do occasionally resort to copying someone else’s words. Usually, these purloined words are little more than a cliché—a well-known phrase or sentence that we find convenient to repeat in a variety of circumstances. We hope that the cliché will call up in others’ minds some past experience, generate a chuckle, and thus disguise our inability

to respond intelligently to the current situation.

A cliché is, by definition, preprogrammed. It is not an original idea thoughtfully responding to the current situation. A cliché doesn’t move the conversation along. It doesn’t improve anyone’s understanding. It doesn’t provide a penetrating insight.

Yet, we need to say something—anything. Thus, because we are unable to generate an appropriate thought conveyed through appropriate words (or simply because we are lazy), we offer up from memory someone else’s words with which everyone else is, regrettably, all too familiar.

Like a verbal cliché, a leadership model is a preprogrammed convenience that permits an executive to avoid the complicated task of generating a leadership strategy that is explicitly designed to address the organization’s current performance deficit.

A cliché is a poor substitute for real thinking. Anyone who employs a cliché is confessing their inability to think clearly—or, at least, quickly.

Leadership is also a “generative” activity. A public executive who aspires to be the leader of his or her agency can’t rely on a strategy employed by someone else. Damn. If only we could copy precisely the various components of a strategy crafted by others. This would make leadership—and life—so much easier.

Inconveniently, someone else’s leadership strategy—even the most ballyhooed strategy—is nothing more than an operational cliché. When you announce that you are planning to employ your DAF strategy, you can get a lot of people to nod their heads knowingly. People do so to suggest, “Yes. I am well aware of the famous FAD strategy.” “I understand its myriad and sophisticated components.” “I know all of the places that it has

proven successful and why.” “I immediately discern your brilliance for recognizing how the FAD strategy will work in your organization.”

But are you talking about the subtle DAF strategy that you have created based on the principles of leadership while they are thinking about the (in)famous FAD strategy? Did they simply make a transpositional mistake? Or did you? In either case, if you want your organization to implement your brilliant and creative strategy, you need more than an acronym. You need to explain—in detail—what you are trying to accomplish and how you think your organization needs to go about getting this done.

Unfortunately, the language of leadership is full of head-nodding clichés. These are usually called “models”—“systems” that you can (presumably) drop into an organization just like you can drop a verbal cliché into a conversation.

Fortunately, the practice of leadership does contain some core principles. These are principles derived from our knowledge of human behavior; principles supported by our understanding of the subtleties, perversities, and opportunities of organizational behavior; principles based on our appreciation of how people respond when effective leaders articulate a vision and then manage symbols to reinforce their vision.

To develop an understanding of the principles of leadership requires both study and practice. Then, as always, applying these principles is complicated. All of this is real work.

Unfortunately, you were unable to learn to apply these principles by just copying how your parents talked. **B**

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