

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 all public executives must remember Garrett Hardin's words:

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"We Can Never Do Merely One Thing"

In 1935, Australia imported a hundred cane toads under the theory that they would (as they had done in Hawaii) eat the Greyback cane beetles, which were destroying sugar cane, a major export crop.

Unfortunately, the cane toad did not have much of an effect on the population of these beetles. More unfortunately, the cane toad did have an effect on other species. For the toads themselves are quite poisonous. Thus predators (including turtles and crocodiles) who eat the toads end up dead. Today, Australia has a couple hundred million cane toads—and still a lot of those cane beetles.

In just seven words, ecologist Garrett Hardin explained this reality: "You can never do merely one thing." You may think you are importing cane toads to have just one, specific effect: to control cane beetles. But because *your one thing* is acting on a very large and quite adaptive system of multiple, interconnected components, you will not have just one impact. Inevitably, *your one thing* will ripple through the entire environmental system with multiple impacts.

Effective public executives recognize that Hardin's words also describe their reality. They work within a bureaucratic and governance system in which everything is connected to everything else. Anything they do will never have one, isolated impact. Instead, every time public executives take any action—every time they make just one little tweak designed to have just one little effect—that tweak can ripple through their entire system.

Moreover, there is no guarantee that all of these ripples and adaptations will produce the desired effects. Indeed, insightful executives will—with just a little thinking—easily anticipate some negative adaptations and devise tactics to neutralize them.

Thus, Hardin himself extrapolates from his description of reality to a prescription for dealing with intercon-

nected and adaptive systems:

We can never do merely one thing, *therefore we must do several* in order that we may bring into being a new stable system."

For example, public executives who employ a PerformanceStat leadership strategy seek to replace their organization's quite stable underperforming system with a new, higher performing one. To do so, they recognize they will have to do a large number of things. And they recognize that these several actions will not have independent effects. Thus, they seek a series of actions that will interact with each other in a way that has a greater impact than might be predicted by simply adding up their projected individual influences.

Initially, they seek to merely move their organization's stable and under-

"You can never do merely one thing," observed ecologist Garrett Hardin about the environment's complex and very adaptive system. "Therefore," he continued, "*we must do several* in order that we may bring into being a new stable system."

performing system to a new, stable, but higher performing one. In doing so, however, these executives hope to learn what works and what doesn't, and to use this knowledge to do several more things to bring into being a higher level of stable performance.

Initially, they aren't sure what will work. They have some hunches—theories that they have derived from their own experiences plus theories that they discern from the work of others.

They know, however, that they cannot rely on just one tactic. To have any impact on performance, public executives have to employ a wide variety of different, micro tactics—

several things they combine together to form a coherent, macro strategy.

But which tactics? What combination of tactics? How do they put a coherent package of tactics together? They don't know. They have to guess. They try to guess intelligently. Nevertheless, the combination of tactics that they meld into their own, unique leadership strategy in their own, unique situation is always a guess.

Then, as they get feedback—as they collect data—they learn. Some of the things that they have chosen to include in their combination are having an impact. For other things, the impact is not so desirable. And they learn that some things are working together to have a synergistic impact. In the process, they evolve and modify their own (strictly implicit) cause-and-effect theories—and thus the tactical components of their macro strategy.

Still, this learning and the derived theories are only a guess. Public executives can never be sure. Because their leadership strategy consists of so many different tactics and activities, they can never be sure which ones are making a positive individual contribution, let alone how two or more of them are interacting to have a positive impact. And they can never be sure whether that impact is positive or negative. And, certainly, several of the tactics in the strategy may be having no impact at all (while some may be neutralizing others).

Effective executives are always trying to figure out what works, and in this search they are quite ecumenical, willing to borrow and adapt promising ideas from anyone.

Even from an ecologist. **B**

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