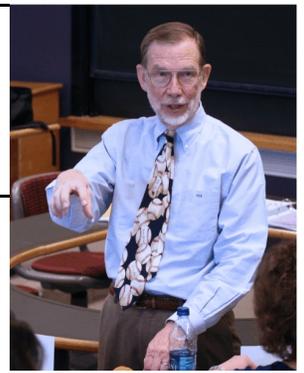


# Bob Behn's Public Management Report

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 recognize

## The Hint Behind “That’s Funny”

Do you know how we humans discovered Neptune? It all started because Uranus was behaving badly.

In 1781, the British astronomer William Herschel discovered Uranus—the seventh planet in the solar system. This was nearly a century after Isaac Newton had published his three laws of motion, so astronomers could easily use Newton’s equations plus the positions of the sun and the other planets to calculate Uranus’s orbit.

Oops. Uranus failed to follow its predicted orbit. As Tom Standage explains in his book, *The Neptune File*, Uranus was a “notoriously badly behaved planet.” All the other planets comported themselves properly—that is, according to Newton’s laws. But not Uranus. Astronomers collected more data on Uranus’s orbit, and mathematicians recalculated its future orbit. But Uranus refused to cooperate. John Pringle Nicol, a Scottish astronomer, called Uranus “the puzzle of our science.”

To solve this puzzle, scientists offered a variety of theories. Maybe Uranus had been hit by a comet. Maybe space contained some kind of resistive medium that slowed Uranus down. Maybe Uranus was orbited by some undetectable moon. Maybe the mathematical calculations were wrong. Maybe, for some reason, Newton’s laws didn’t apply to Uranus. Scientists never like this kind of explanation. Indeed, none of these explanations were satisfactory.

There remained one more possibility. Numerous astronomers concluded that there must exist another planet beyond Uranus that was also influencing its orbit. Two mathematicians, John Adams of the University of Cambridge and Urbain Le Verrier of the Paris Observatory, calculated where this unseen planet should be. Adams was unable to convince the head of the Royal Observatory in Greenwich to look for the planet. Meanwhile, Le Verrier published his calculations and sent a copy to Johann Galle at the Berlin Observatory asking him to look

for the planet. Galle did so that very evening. There it was. Eureka!

But as Isaac Asimov is often quoted as saying: “The most exciting phrase to hear in science, the one that heralds the new discoveries, is not ‘Eureka!’ but ‘That’s funny.’”

Astronomers eventually discovered Neptune because they kept observing that Uranus was doing something funny. Something very funny. Something so funny that, eventually, several scientists decided that this funniness required some serious thought.

Scientists, however, are not the only ones who stumble across things that are “funny.” All of us do so all of the time. Unfortunately, we are so busy that, whenever we find ourselves commenting, “that’s funny,” we ignore our own, very astute (and perhaps prescient) observation, and continue on with the moment’s urgent task.

How can we—harried humans all—recognize novelty? By stopping whenever we hear ourselves saying, “that’s funny,” and asking: “Why?” “Why did I say that?” “What was funny?” “Why was it funny?” For the funniness suggests there is something to learn.

This is a mistake. Hours, days, weeks or months later, we will realize why. Something will happen—something that we could have anticipated, something that we might have influenced had we paid attention to our own observation. For then, we recall, “Oh yes. Now I understand. That’s why I said ‘that’s funny.’”

My Kennedy School colleagues, **Arnold Howitt** and **Herman Leonard**—both in their book *Managing Crises*, and in their executive-education program, *Leadership in Crises*—distinguish between common, *routine* crises and *emergency* crises, which are novel. An emergency crisis is one that we have never experienced before. Thus, they continue, **the challenge of**

**recognizing novelty.**

But how can we do that? How can we recognize novelty? By stopping, whenever we find ourselves saying “that’s funny” and instantly asking: “Why?” “Why did I say that?” “What was funny?” “Why was it funny?”

For whenever you say to yourself “that’s funny,” you are telling yourself that you have seen or heard something unusual, something that you didn’t expect to see, something novel.

And that novelty is a hint. It suggests that you have something to discover—that, if you pay attention to the hint, you are about to learn something new. Maybe you are about to learn that your subordinates are not following your sage advice. Maybe you are about to learn that your organization is not following critical safeguards. Maybe you are about to learn that your organization’s brilliant policy isn’t producing the desired results. Maybe you are about to learn that your organization faces an emergency crisis. The novelty revealed by your own observation, “that’s funny,” is a hint that there is a puzzle to be solved—maybe a puzzle that needs to be solved immediately.

Public executives lead complicated lives. They are subjected to constant pressures. They confront numerous emergencies—usually very routine emergencies that can be resolved using existing organizational routines.

Public executives never have time to think. Yet, whenever they say to themselves, “that’s funny,” they ought to recognize this as a signal that they need to stop and think.

Who knows? Maybe the next time you say to yourself, “that’s funny,” you will discover a new planet. **B**

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