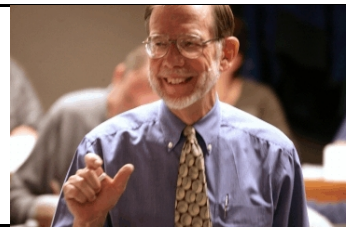


Bob

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 officials need to recognize the difference among

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The Cynics, The Idealists, and The Realists

At a meeting a while back, someone from the central administration of a large, well-known university was reporting on how many faculty members from different university units had filled out their evaluation form for their staff assistant—a form that had proven notoriously difficult to get faculty to complete despite much publicity and a very specific deadline. This administrator explained that several units had reported more than an 80 percent completion rate.

And, continued this administrator, “the rest . . .”

At which point I blurted out: “The rest are telling the truth.”

For such spontaneous interjections (I can't help myself), I get labeled a “cynic.” Yet, when it comes to how humans behave in organizations, I consider myself to be a “realist.”

After all, university faculty flagrantly fail to fill out all sorts of forms. And in this case, most faculty saw absolutely no personal benefit to completing this form.

Here's why: In many universities, each faculty member shares a staff assistant with several colleagues. Thus, each faculty member is competing for the time of his or her (shared) staff assistant. And for whom will the staff assistant provide the best work? The faculty member whose rating is high? Or the one whose rating is low?

Thus, for a faculty member who does fill out the form, only two possible boxes make any sense. The dominant incentive is to check the box labeled “super-exceeds all possible expectations.” When, however, a faculty member wants to get rid of the existing assistant, the incentive is to check the box labeled “grossly horrible.” For this **performance appraisal system**, no other box makes sense.

Yet, whenever I explain this to anyone from human resources, I am inevitably labeled a “cynic.”

So what exactly is the difference between a “cynic” and a “realist”?

Both cynics and realists observe precisely the same human behavior.

Both note that the consequences of this conduct are dysfunctional (certainly for the organization but perhaps not for the individuals or for their small subunits). Yet the cynics and the realists interpret the available data quite differently.

The cynics observe what people are doing and conclude that the behavior is weird, bizarre, mysterious . . . simply inexplicable.

Okay: That's not quite right. The cynics do think that the dysfunctional behavior is explicable. They explain it by asserting that those involved are stupid or irresponsible or both. These narrow-minded, self-centered morons, the cynics assert, are putting their own personal concerns above the important purposes that the organization is seeking to achieve.

The cynics observe how people behave in an organization and conclude these self-centered morons are stupid or irresponsible. In contrast, the realists recognize that organization's own systems, rules and rewards have motivated the dysfunctional behavior.

In contrast, the realist explains the behavior in terms of the incentives and motives that are inherent to organizational life. Many of these incentives are common to most, if not quite all, organizations: large or small; public, nonprofit, or for-profit. Sometimes these incentives are unique to the organization, having been shaped by its own unique systems, specific rules, and particular rewards.

Of course, there are also the idealists. They completely disregard the data about organizational behavior. They believe that good humans should always do the “right thing.” Thus, the idealists ignore the influence of systems, rules, and rewards.

Idealists are even more dangerous than cynics. For while cynics simply accept that human behavior is per-

verse and leave it at that, idealists assume that human behavior is, well, ideal: Humans are good and thus should (and will?) do the obviously “right thing.” They do not bother to think about how to structure the organization's systems, rules, and rewards to motivate this desired behavior.

Nothing quite captures the idealist's world as does Steve Kerr's classic article, “**On the folly of rewarding A, while hoping for B.**” Kerr, who later served as chief learning officer for both GE and Goldman Sachs, cited examples from government, business, politics, and sports. Observed Kerr: “Managers who complain about lack of motivation in their workers might do well to consider the possibility that the reward systems they have installed are paying off for behavior other than what they are seeking.”

The realist, recognizing that every organization automatically creates incentives, seeks to eliminate or neutralize the systems, rules and rewards that promote dysfunctional behavior, and to foster ones that help achieve the organization's purposes.

If you want to accomplish anything in any organization, you need realists who understand how real humans really behave in real organizations. You need realists who can predict how ordinary humans will respond to any change in the organization's formal systems or informal practices. For if you don't, you will be abetting behavior that everyone (realists, cynics, and maybe even idealists) recognizes as dysfunctional.

Without a few realists to explain the incentives that your organization is creating, you will end up begetting a very large number of cynics. **B**

Robert D. Behn is a lecturer at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government where he chairs the executive-education program “**Driving Government Performance: Leadership Strategies that Produce Results.**” His publications include: *Performance Leadership: 11 Better Practices That Can Ratchet Up Performance.*