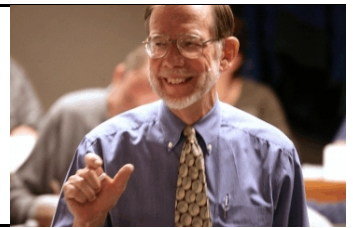


Bob

# 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.



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On why public executives need to remember that

## Spending Time Signals Priorities

John Ehrlichman, President Nixon's domestic policy advisor, worried that cabinet secretaries, once appointed, would fail to remain loyal to the president's agenda. "We only see them at the annual White House Christmas party," observed Ehrlichman. "They go off and marry the natives."

This problem of organizational parochialism of subunit managers did not end with the Nixon Administration. It is not limited to national governments. It is not limited to elected officials. It is common in any organization that is large enough so that the chief executive does not talk with every person in the organization every day.

If the chief executive has a policy priority that is the responsibility of a specific subunit, this unit's people may see the chief executive more frequently than others (or they wish). Or, if the organization has a major crisis, those responding to the crisis may see the chief executive daily.

Otherwise, the chief executive (and his or her entire leadership team) may see and talk with most people in the organization only rarely. Some never.

Little wonder these subordinates marry their natives. They rarely get close enough to the chief executive to even have an affair.

Obviously, this is a problem in large organizations. But it is also common in medium sized ones. If a public executive has a diverse set of responsibilities—including not just operations, but also macro policy decisions, legislative relations, and politics defined very broadly—he or she has a problem: "How do I convince everyone that I am serious about the results I want to produce?"

A chief executive can always delegate to each subunit manager not only the administration of the unit but also significant decisions about purpose, policy, and operations. Alternatively, he or she must find some way to constantly reinforce the results he wants the organization to

produce. Without frequent, personal contact, however, this is hard to do.

Moreover, how can a subunit manager find out whether the chief executive really cares about achieving new levels of performance? Actually, the subunit manager has a simple test to determine whether or not the chief official cares about performance and results:

If and only if a chief executive spends the most valuable resource of any public official—personal time and the personal time of his or her leadership team—does the executive really care.

If an executive fails to invest any time in improving performance, everyone—despite all of the rhetoric—knows: The executive doesn't really care.

Every human has exactly 168 hours in every week: no more; no less. At midnight on Saturday those 168 hours are spent. Gone! Thus, how a public executive spends his or her time sends unambiguous signals about what he or she thinks is important.

That's why the **PerformanceStat** meeting is so important. A public agency or government jurisdiction can call its dashboard **DashBoardStat** or whatever it wishes. But unless the organization's chief executive, its leadership team, and various subunits sit down for regular, face-to-face discussions, they are missing a big part of *The PerformanceStat Potential*.

The meeting is important for several reasons: It gives everyone an opportunity to discuss what they are learning from the data. It gives them an opportunity to discuss different approaches for eliminating or mitigating their performance deficits. It gives them an opportunity to decide who should do what next. And it gives them an opportunity to follow-up on previous decisions and commitments.

Moreover, the meeting gives the chief executive an opportunity to demonstrate that improving performance is a very high priority. How? By spending his or her valuable time—and the valuable time of the leadership team—focusing on the complex task of producing results.

No one likes meetings. Yet, every organization has them. For such meetings serve a variety of purposes: they resolve differences, establish priorities, make assignments, check on progress. . . . The list of reasons for holding meetings is long—and so is the list of meetings that any public manager must attend.

Thus, the performance-focused executive doesn't schedule meetings recklessly. After all, in holding a meeting, the organization is consuming its most valuable resource: the time of its key people. The cost of a meeting—the opportunity cost—is the time that these people could devote to other important purposes.

Every public executive—indeed, every human—has exactly 168 hours in every week: no more; no less. And, at midnight on Saturday, those 168 hours are spent. Gone! No one can put any of these hours in the bank for another week; no one can loan any hours to someone else. Each week, every human has precisely the same time budget to spend: 168 hours.

Consequently, how any individual spends his or her time sends unambiguous signals about what this person thinks is important. If you want to learn the key priorities of any public executive, don't read the memos or listen to the speeches. Just watch how the executive spends his or her most valuable resource: Time. **B**

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