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# 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 all public executives must, like Sherlock Holmes,

## Both See and Observe

In *"The Adventure of Silver Blaze,"* Sherlock Holmes solves the mystery—the disappearance of the race horse Silver Blaze and the death of its trainer—by observing what did *not* happen. In a brief exchange with a Scotland Yard detective, Holmes explains:

Detective: "Is there any other point to which you would wish to draw my attention?"

Holmes: "To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time."

Detective: "The dog did nothing in the night-time."

Holmes: "That is the curious incident."

For the failure of the dog to bark—such a trifle—revealed that the night-time culprit was not a stranger.

"You see, but you do not observe," Holmes pointed out to Watson in *"A Scandal in Bohemia."* To Holmes, "the distinction is clear." Yet most of us are, unfortunately, more like Watson than Holmes. We may "see" a lot, but we are not aware of how little we truly "observe."

This is, particularly, a problem for public executives. Obviously they see a lot. They hear a lot too. But how much do they observe from all that they see? How much do they learn from all that they hear? How much insight into what is really happening in their organization do they gain from all that they see and hear?

After all, in almost every organization, bad news does not travel up. The top executives will hear what everyone else thinks they want to hear. And what every executive wants to hear—deeply desires to hear—is that everything is functioning just fine. For if that is the case, if performance is fine, if the results are all on target, the executive does not need to change much. He or she certainly does not need to lose any sleep.

Thus, an executive who wishes to learn what is really happening within the organization has to be particularly active in observing—and learning

from—what he or she sees (and hears) is really happening.

This suggests the value of *Hewlett Packard's "Management By Wandering Around."* If managers wander around, they will see more—goes the theory—and they may also observe more. They might observe what is really going on.

Of course, this is just a theory. Yes, in their wandering, the managers will see more. But will they *observe*? There is no guarantee.

Einstein once noted that "our theories determine what we measure." Robert Shaw, also a physicist, similarly noted: "you don't see something until you have the right metaphor to let you perceive it."

If the theory held by an organization's leadership team—if their operational metaphor—is that the organization is functioning smoothly, that is

"You know my method," said Holmes to Watson. "It is founded on the observance of trifles." Unfortunately, Holmes still found it necessary to point out to Watson—as he undoubtedly would to all of us—"You see, but you do not observe."

what they will observe. They won't bother looking for data that undermines their theory that performance is wonderful. Yes: They may see some evidence—trivial it will seem—of poor performance. They may even see some evidence illuminating the causes of this inadequate performance. Yet they will not observe.

In Sherlock Holmes, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle created a detective who is amazingly effective precisely because he observes what others miss. And often they miss it because it is so small, so trivial. Yet, as Holmes tells one of Scotland Yard's best in *A Study in Scarlet*, "to a great mind, nothing is little." Indeed, he reminds Holmes in

"A Case of Identity," "It has long been an axiom of mine that the little things are infinitely the most important."

Occasionally, these little things do get some notice: *"That's funny,"* executives will sometimes note about something they see or hear. Only later will they recognize the hint behind the *"that's funny."* Only later will they realize that, if they had been willing to pause and question what they saw or heard, they might have learned something important about how their organization was really functioning.

Yet a single "that's funny," seems such a little thing—so trivial.

"You know my method," Holmes reminded Watson in *"The Boscombe Valley Mystery."* "It is founded upon the observance of trifles."

Trifles? Public organizations are charged with producing results that are significant for citizens. The performance of public executives and their agencies are consequential.

Who has time to pay attention to a dog that doesn't bark? Only those who practice the art of observation.

Holmes is, of course, a purely fictional character of Victorian London. That, however, does not mean that Doyle's ideas on the distinction between seeing and observing do not provide useful lessons for today's public executives.

Still, if you need some support from living executives, you can certainly find it. As one manager told the members of his staff, who were not paying attention, *"You can observe a lot by watching."*

That was in the 1964 World Series. The frustrated manager was the New York Yankees' Yogi Berra. **B**

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