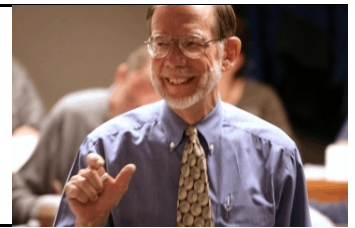


Bob

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.



Vol. 8, No. 7, March 2010
Copyright © 2010 by Robert D. Behn

On why public officials and citizens need to recognize the link among

Reciprocity, Corruption, and Performance

It's called "the norm of reciprocity," "the law of reciprocity," "the rule of . . .," "the code of . . ." Regardless of the phrase, the idea is obvious: Reciprocity makes the world go round.

We humans have managed to survive because we understand the personal and societal benefit of reciprocity. If you offer me a benefit, you expect a benefit in return. Individual reciprocity creates a web of obligations that fosters social cooperation. No wonder the normative version is called the "golden" rule.

If you offer a trivial benefit (e.g., holding a door), you don't expect very much. If, however, the benefit is significant (e.g., box-seat tickets to a Red Sox game), you expect something equally significant in return.

Indeed, the norm of reciprocity obligates me. I am bound to return the favor. I don't have to reciprocate tomorrow. I don't have to reciprocate with Red Sox tickets. Still, we both expect that eventually I will reply with something of roughly equal value.

Moreover, if you ask me for a favor—particularly if your request is less demanding than your original favor—I almost have no choice. I can claim that I can't comply with your request because I have to be at my son's college graduation. But this competing obligation had better be significant.

Unfortunately, reciprocity also has a down side. It is called corruption.

Reciprocity doesn't just make the world go round. It also corrupts it. For the request for a return favor may not be quite right. An initial request may be only slightly improper. Nothing illegal or unethical. Indeed, compared with the original favor, this request is small. How can I say "no"?

Still, neither of us is naive. Both of us know what has transpired.

It's the next proffered favor that is the test. Can I turn it down? For if I don't, I may find myself (after this next favor) obligated to something bigger—and less legitimate.

A century ago, the United States and other nations created some reme-

dies for the corruption problem. They designed several institutions—civil service, in particular—to take reciprocity out of the delivery of public services. No longer would people get public-sector jobs as a favor; no longer would executive-branch employees be obligated to patrons for their jobs. Now, when making decisions or delivering services, public employees would owe a favor to no one. Now, these civil servants would follow the rules. The result was bureaucracy.

Max Weber, the German sociologist, viewed this shift to bureaucracy as both inevitable and desirable. Bureaucracies, he wrote, were not motivated by personal reciprocity; they were built on impersonal rationality—on "the emotionally detached, and hence rigorously 'professional' expert." Moreover, Weber emphasized, a bureaucracy "follows general rules, which are more or less stable, more or less exhaustive."

To develop specific strategies to solve specific performance problems requires experimentation and adaptation. This, in turn requires discretion, which opens the door to reciprocity. And reciprocity has its down side. It is called corruption.

A century later, we are unhappy with our bureaucracies. Their rules are designed to deal with the average problem. This helps create a floor of operational consistency. Unfortunately, the average problem for which these rules are designed is quite uncommon. Each specific problem has too many disparate components to be captured by some rational average. We appreciate that, to produce real results, general rules and impersonal rationality have limitations.

To improve performance, public agencies have to adapt general principles to local circumstances. We don't expect the police to use precisely the

same crime-fighting tactic in every precinct. We don't expect every school to teach precisely the same lesson on the third Thursday of May. We know that different precincts have different crime problems, that different students in different schools have different educational needs.

We recognize that, to improve performance, public employees need to employ not impersonal rules but their personal knowledge of the specifics of the local problems and the local conditions. We don't want them to be emotionally detached; we don't want them to be indifferent to the victims of crime or the education of children.

To reduce crime or educate children in specific circumstances, we expect public executives to exercise leadership in identifying what principles to apply and how. We know that an effective strategy for a specific problem is never fully described or prescribed in even the thickest textbook. We know that identifying an effective strategy will require experimentation and adaptation.

From public executives, we don't want impersonal, stable rationality. We expect personal, subtle discretion.

But discretion opens the door to reciprocity—and thus to corruption. This is why any governmental jurisdiction that seeks to improve performance must first eradicate corruption from its bureaucracy. Otherwise, any effort to improve performance by giving public executives the flexibility to experiment with different strategies that might (or might not) work in different circumstances is little more than an invitation to experiment with the personal benefit to be gained from the norm of reciprocity. **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*.