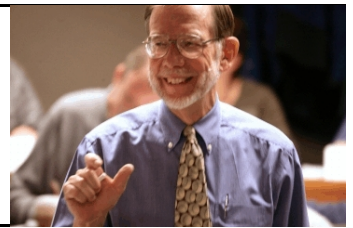


Bob

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 executives should

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Treat “Comprehensivitis” with Small Wins

Jim heads a task force with a big problem, perhaps the biggest problem facing the city of Yazville. And as I listened to Jim tell his story, I was overwhelmed by the number of issues for which his task force needed to develop ideas and recommendations.

There was, of course, the big issue. Yazville was an old run-down mill city with a large immigrant population. This included children—children who were not doing very well in school.

(This story is real, but the names and context have been fully disguised. Still, this fictitious story captures everything that “Jim” told me.)

Actually, you already know Yazville’s story. Half a century ago, the textile business left this New England city for the South. The textile magnates left too, followed soon by the mills’ managers and by the employees with transferable skills.

Soon, Yazville’s economy was in the dumps. And it stayed that way. But the empty real estate drove down rents so the city was attractive to immigrants. They moved in but could not find employment. They could not contribute much to the city’s economy—or to its tax base.

But the immigrants contributed a lot to Yazville’s schools—a lot of children. These students didn’t speak English at home and didn’t get much help with their homework. Test scores went down. Dropouts went up.

Jim’s task force was charged with fixing this obviously big problem. And as I listened to Jim explain the recommendations being developed by his task force, it was easy to be overwhelmed. In addition to the English-language problem, the homework problem, the test-score problem, and the drop-out problem, there was the coming-to-school hungry problem, the after-school gang-fight problem, the narcotics problem, all of the . . . you-can-fill-in-the-blank problems.

Jim and his task force were working on a strategic plan. Jim didn’t use that phrase, but it captures his approach. Jim’s task force report would

be comprehensive. It would cover every aspect of Yazville’s education system—and a lot of other aspects of the city’s social and economic circumstances that affected indirectly (even very indirectly) the education of its students. Nothing would be left out. Jim would make sure of that.

“Don’t forget gangs,” Jim said, launching into a long description of the city’s gangs. “We need to develop some key recommendations to counter them.” “And remember that the parents don’t speak English,” just in case someone in the room forgot that most of the parents came from Vietnam or Haiti. The task force needed detailed proposals for this too.

As I listened to Jim, I identified two diseases that I had diagnosed multiple times before.

A task force inevitably creates a comprehensive report designed to solve the massive problem in the long-term but fails to fix any one of the immediate problems in the short-term—and thus fixes no problem in the long-term.

The first was “comprehensivitis.” Jim was going to ensure that his task force left nothing out. Nothing!

This is very predictable. No task force wants to be accused of ignoring any problem (or subproblem). Why annoy a task-force member when it is easy to include his or her problem and favorite proposal? Why antagonize a key constituency, when it is easy to win its support by including its favorite ideas?

The second disease was “long-termitis.” The task force wasn’t going to waste any effort on quick-fixes. It was going to concentrate on solving this problem completely, thoroughly. This means solving it over the very long-term. Indeed, Jim emphasized, the problem could not be solved in the short-term. The task force’s rec-

ommendations would be both comprehensive and long-term.

Clearly, Jim had never heard of Karl Weick’s “strategy of small wins.” In his presidential address to the American Psychological Association, Weick analyzed why public problems are so unsolvable. “People often define social problems in ways that overwhelm their ability to do anything about them.”

Instead, Weick proposed that we reformulate “social issues as mere problems . . . as a series of controllable opportunities of modest size that produce visible results.” These successes “may seem unimportant,” he wrote. Still, “a series of wins at small but significant tasks,” he continued, “reveals a pattern that may attract allies, deter opponents, and lower resistance to subsequent proposals.”

Lowell, Massachusetts has Yazville’s demographic attributes. No: Lowell is not Yazville. And certainly none of its leaders are Jim. How did Lowell attack its education problem?

It identified one small significant aspect of the problem: truancy. It focused on getting 200 chronically absent students to actually come to school. Three police officers identified their parents and called the students at 6:00 in the morning—all to make sure that they went to school. And they rewarded good attendance with computers, backpacks, and bicycles.

Surprise: Test scores went up.

The theory behind this small, quick win is obvious: Students can’t learn if they aren’t in school. Yes, Lowell did not fix the gang problem or a lot of other problems. But they did fix one important problem. And this small win had a significant impact. **B**

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