

Bob Behn's Public Management Report

An occasional (and maybe insightful) examination of the issues, dilemmas, challenges, and opportunities in leadership, governance, management, and performance in public agencies.

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On the responsibility of helping others to learn:

The Tacit Knowledge of Leadership

Do you *know* how to ride a bicycle? Sure. You may not have ridden one in years. Still, if you were given one, you could easily ride it. Today. Now.

You never lose your knowledge about how to ride a bicycle.

Have you ever taught someone to ride a bicycle? Undoubtedly. How did you do this “teaching”? Could you convey your own well-accumulated knowledge about this simple, human activity? Could you explain in clear, accurate language the skills required to ride a bicycle? Could you give your young friend the best-selling instruction manual to read?

Of course not. Sure, you stressed some basic safety rules: “Always wear a helmet.” You offered some of your knowledge about how to maintain your balance in what, you recognized, were vague phrases. Then, this brief, formal instruction completed, you had nothing left to say. You had to put your student on the bicycle.

Now came the real teaching—your effort to convey your knowledge to someone who was completely uninitiated in the task of riding a bicycle. You tried to help your student develop some personal expertise. So you ran down the street, holding onto the back of the seat, and correcting your student’s wavering, until he or she got the hang of it. Then you let go.

You had to. Your young student would never learn to ride a bicycle—never develop his or her own knowledge—until you let go.

Oh yes. You can buy books and visit Web sites that explain the physics of bicycling. They discuss aerodynamics and torque, and provide the equations for the dynamics of motion. Unfortunately, none can convey the knowledge required to ride a bicycle.

Why? Because the physics of bicycling confers explicit knowledge, while riding one requires tacit knowledge. Explicit knowledge can be conveyed in words and equations. Tacit knowledge, by definition, cannot.

Indeed, explicit knowledge is not required to ride a bicycle—or even to

create one. Nearly two centuries after the first steerable bicycle was invented, the *American Journal of Physics* was publishing an article on “*Steering in bicycles and motorcycles.*” Ordinary humans figured out how to ride bicycles long before the physicists developed the equations.

Knowledge about management and leadership presents the same puzzle. Obviously the knowledge exists. Some people clearly have it. If they have demonstrated success just once, they can be dismissed as lucky. But if they have proven successful multiple times in widely different circumstances, luck is an inadequate explanation. They must know something.

Unfortunately, conveying that knowledge is difficult. Knowledge about management and leadership is not explicit knowledge. It cannot be explained in words and equations.

Knowledge about exercising leadership is similar to knowledge about riding a bicycle. It is not explicit, but strictly tacit. You can no more *teach* someone to be a leader than you can *teach* someone to ride a bike. You can only help them to *learn*.

That is why management books are so simplistic. They consist primarily of vague proverbs that offer no more guidance to a perplexed executive seeking to improve performance than Newton’s equations of motion offer a child seeking to ride a bicycle.

For a child learning to ride a bicycle, the good news is that the instruction comes from a trusted master who offers a veteran’s support, who provides nimble guidance with a steady hand, and who exercises wise discretion about when it is time to let go. Unfortunately, few public executives benefit from such support, guidance, or discretion in letting go.

And obviously, mastering the tacit knowledge necessary to lead a public

agency is much more challenging than mastering the tacit knowledge necessary to ride a bicycle. After all, all bicycles are essentially the same; once you have learned to ride one bicycle, you can ride them all.

Every public agency, however, is different. Even this year, a public agency is different—perhaps quite a bit different—from last year’s version of that same agency. Thus, the tacit knowledge that proved so effective last year may be useless or even counterproductive this year.

Teaching someone to ride a bicycle is like teaching someone to exercise leadership in the public sector. There is no manual. The knowledge that you have accumulated cannot be captured in words or formulas. You cannot explain your knowledge; thus you cannot really *teach* it.

In fact, you have never really *taught* anyone to ride a bicycle. Instead, you helped someone to *learn*. You provided guidance—some helpful (but hardly precise) hints that permitted someone to *learn* the tacit knowledge required to ride a bicycle.

Thus, the tacit knowledge of how to ride a bicycle has been passed down from generation to generation without the help of books or equations—but simply with the thoughtful guidance of a series of mentors.

Someday, perhaps, we will have created some explicit knowledge about leadership and management—knowledge that can be codified in words and equations. Until that is possible, however, we need to do the next best thing: Experienced public executives need to help aspiring leaders learn the tacit knowledge necessary to ride off successfully, without someone else holding on. **B**

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