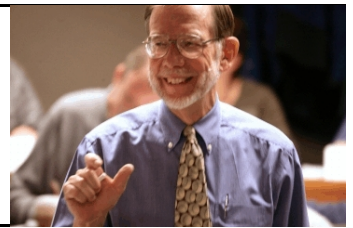


Bob

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 public executives & management scholars need to remember

Vol. 8, No. 9, May 2010
Copyright © 2010 by Robert D. Behn

Leadership Is Not A Reductionist Endeavor

Bureaucracy is a reductionist's ideal. It functions as a machine, with each distinct component doing its own distinct, specific task. The hard drive on your computer does not try to do the monitor's task; similarly, one component of the bureaucracy doesn't try to do another's task.

When the monitor fails, you get a new one. You don't have to redesign your computer from scratch. You don't have to figure out how the new monitor will work with the old hard drive. There is no ambiguity about the tasks assigned to the monitor, or the code that specifies how it should be done. The new monitor, programmed to perform the same tasks, can simply replace the defective one. You may need to run a few diagnostic tests to ensure that the old hard drive's code can talk to the new monitor's code, but once these links have been verified, the computer will work as before.

Any machine can be reduced to its discrete parts. If each part does its assigned task, the machine works fine. Indeed, the machine is nothing more than the sum of its parts.

Max Weber, the German sociologist, believed that bureaucracy was the best form of organization because of "its purely technical superiority." The bureaucracy's hierarchy, rules and rationality gave it, he argued, the advantages of "unambiguity." Indeed, wrote Weber, "bureaucracy is like a modern judge who is a vending machine into which the pleadings are inserted together with the fee and which then disgorges the judgment together with the reasons mechanically derived from the Code."

The Code. It might be computer Code or bureaucratic Code. It works the same way. Every component does its assigned tasks—and only its assigned tasks. No ambiguity. A machine is perfectly reducible to the sum of its parts. So is a bureaucracy.

Thus, you design a bureaucracy the same way you design a computer. A team of engineers—be they computer engineers or bureaucratic engi-

neers—are given an assignment: Design this machine to perform these specific tasks. The team decides what components the machine needs to perform these tasks and how these components will interact.

Then smaller groups design each component, seeking to maximize its efficiency. Finally, the team puts the components together, and tests their ability to interact properly for the inevitable glitches. But once the machine passes these tests, no one needs a team of engineers hovering over the machine. If each component of the machine works efficiently, the entire machine works efficiently.

This reductionist ideal became known as "scientific management." To Frederick Winslow Taylor, managers had the burden "of classifying, tabulating, and reducing" the knowledge

If human activity were perfectly reductionist, we could all move to Vermont or Tahiti and communicate solely via e-mail. There would be no ambiguity. Everyone would follow the code. No human contact, no eyeball-to-eyeball conversation would be required.

about how work gets done "to rules, laws, and formulæ." He focused on "the task," which he called "perhaps the most prominent single element in modern scientific management." The task "specifies not only what is to be done but how it is to be done and the exact time allowed for doing it."

Woodrow Wilson, in his academic writing, provided a third tenet to the reductionist ideal of bureaucratic government: Administration should be separated from politics.

"The field of administration is a field of business," wrote Wilson. "It is removed from the hurry and strife of politics." Wilson argued that "the broad plans of governmental action are not administrative." In contrast, "the detailed execution of such plans

is administrative." To Wilson, "this discrimination between administration and politics is now, happily, too obvious to need further discussion."

Were that so. If only the strife of politics would establish the broad plans so that all that is left for public executives is to specify the means.

But the reality is quite different. Improving performance in the public sector cannot be achieved by relying on the reductionist ideal. Wilson's "politics" fails to provide the "general plans"—let alone any kind of performance targets—that the bureaucratic machine can administer with mere "detailed execution."

Thus, to improve performance, there exists no bureaucratic "code." There is no organizational machine that, by following Weber's unambiguous hierarchy and precise rules, will ratchet up performance. Improving performance cannot be reduced to Taylor's "task" that specifies how better results are to be produced.

Instead, the leaders of public agencies who seek to improve performance have to identify significant **performance deficits** and set specific **performance targets**. They have to craft a macro strategy for motivating employees and collaborators to employ energy and creativity to produce results.

If human activity were perfectly reductionist, if there were no ambiguity, we could all move to Vermont or Tahiti and communicate solely via e-mail. There would be no ambiguity. Everyone would follow the code. No human contact, no eyeball-to-eyeball conversation would be required.

That explains why performance leadership can never be a reductionist endeavor. **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*.