

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.

On why public managers need to practice:

Management Noir

Casablanca has more lines worth remembering than a whole year's worth of today's films: "Here's looking at you, kid." "Round up the usual suspects." "I'm shocked, *shocked*, to find that gambling is going on in here." "You played it for her; you can play it for me." And, "We'll always have Paris."

Yet, one of the film's most important "lines" is never spoken. It is just a nod.

In the Café Americain, owned and operated by Rick Blaine [Humphrey Bogart], a group of Nazi soldiers launch into a chorus of *Die Wacht am Rhein*. In response, resistance leader Victor Laszlo [Paul Henreid] directs the house band to respond with *La Marseillaise*. The band leader waivers. It is then that Rick, the quintessential tough-guy who survives by balancing the needs of his drinking and gambling patrons with the demands of the occupiers from Vichy France, grants his approval. With a mere nod.

(In the film's climax, however, Rick doesn't just nod at the Gestapo Major, Heinrich Strasser [Conrad Veidt]. Rick shoots him.)

Cinema critics do not catalogue *Casablanca* as film noir, though they include other Bogart films such as "The Big Sleep" and "The Maltese Falcon." Rick Blaine isn't noir enough. Bogart's Rick is undeniably cynical and tough, yet he suffers from too many principles.

Film critics cannot agree on a definition of film noir. Nevertheless, some themes are common: despair, greed, injustice, manipulation, betrayal. There are no heroes, only anti-heroes—no happy endings, only more misery.



Thus, my idea of management noir is not a pure analogy to film noir. In management noir, people do possess admirable values. They may not be perfect heroes; like all of us, they have some less-than-noble qualities. Still, our management hero understands that, to achieve important public purposes in a noir world, he or she needs to learn how and

when to practice the arts of noir.

Rick is as good at them as anyone; he knows to whom to suck up and whom to threaten. He knows when to fight and when not to fight. More importantly, he knows that, to function effectively, it is often better neither to fight nor not to fight but to use a shrewd, indirect strategy. Still, Rick never loses his decency—his concern for people, whether it is Laszlo or Ilsa Lund [Ingrid Bergman]. We honor Bogart's Rick not just for his values but also for his effective (if often noir) means.

This suggests my definition of "Management Noir":

Real public executives are driven by the desire to accomplish important

public purposes yet recognize that, to achieve these purposes, they must function effectively in the world of noir.

In this world, some people are not toiling to achieve important societal values. Some seek personal power or wealth. Some seek who knows what, though it certainly isn't an important public purpose. In this world, warm-puppy management is not very effective. In this world, it takes more than a few scratches behind the ears to make friends, let alone to produce real cooperation. In this world, to accomplish anything of value, the public executive has to practice management noir.

Sometimes, management noir is not required. Everyone—from stakeholders, to legislators, to political appointees—is driven by the same public purpose.

Sometimes, everyone has signed on to the purpose, except some are not quite willing to appropriate the funds, to delegate the required authority, or to appoint anyone but political allies.

Sometimes, everyone has signed on to the purpose, except some need something first. Perhaps it is a job for a cousin. Perhaps it is a kickback, which might be cash in a shoe box, an honorarium, or an all-expense-paid trip to a conference at a resort. Perhaps it is a kind word—or only a nod—for a quite worthy but low-priority undertaking. Of “the strategic use of pork,” John Ellwood of the University of California and Eric Patashnik of the University of Virginia wrote a while back, “favoring legislators with small gifts for their districts in order to achieve great things for the nation is an act not of sin but of statesmanship.”

To some, this is immoral. To others, it is simply practical. In the noir world of public management, the legal lines are explicit, but the ethical lines can be very blurry indeed.

In the history of American (if not global) management, the nod has a bad reputation.

When a business executive wants to approve a sleazy activity, words are inappropriate. The approval comes only with a nod.

The same has been true in politics. As Martin Lomasney, Boston's “Czar of Ward Eight” in the era of Mayor James Michael Curley, observed, “Never write when you can speak; never speak when you can nod.” Today, he would stress: “Never put it in an e-mail.”

James Fallows, a speech writer for President Jimmy Carter, admired Carter's “gift of virtue.” Yet, Fallows rebuked him for lacking “the passion to convert himself from a good man into an effective one, to learn how to do the job.”

That is the challenge facing every public executive: *To develop the passion to be both good and effective.* For the manager faces two temptations. The first is to claim

the high moral ground, asserting that somehow this virtue excuses the failure to be effective. The second is to succumb to the allure offered by the world of noir—to settle for being “effective” yet accomplishing nothing of value.

If you need an executive who can produce real results in a public agency, you ought to hire Rick. **B**

Robert D. Behn is the author of *Performance Leadership: 11 Better Practices That Can Ratchet Up Performance* and a lecturer at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

As a member of the team of Kennedy School faculty who lead executive-education programs for the public sector, Bob chairs “*Driving Government Performance: Leadership Strategies that Produce Results.*” He also conducts custom-designed executive programs for public agencies, most recently for the California Air Resources Board, Miami-Dade County, and state agencies in Ohio.

Public executives face the challenge of “management noir.” To achieve public purposes, they have to function effectively in the world of noir. This requires them to develop the passion to be both good and effective.