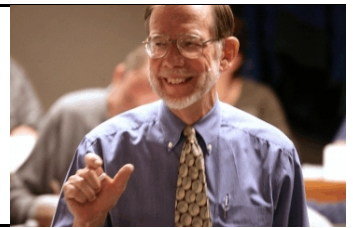


Bob

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 the difficulty of focusing on

Vol. 9, No. 3, November 2010

Copyright © 2010 by Robert D. Behn

Priorities in BlackBerryLand

Who sets *your* priorities? Who determines the activities to which you devote your most valuable resource: Your time? You? Or all of the people who are, at this very moment, sending a blizzard of e-mails and text messages to your BlackBerry?

The next e-mail that you receive has the potential to be life changing. It might announce that you won the lottery. It might report that your rich aunt just died, leaving to you her 10,000 shares of Berkshire Hathaway stock. It might be from the Red Sox telling you to report for spring training at their major-league complex.

Or your next e-mail could help you to ratchet up your organization's performance by a big notch—perhaps by several notches.

How many actually have?

How many interrupted your real work? How many distracted you from the important **public purposes** you and your organization are trying to achieve? How many caused you to hit the delete button with vehemence?

Any effort to produce results—real results—requires focus. You and your organization cannot simultaneously produce the results necessary to achieve a thousand **different performance targets**. Not even a hundred different performance targets. Maybe ten. But only maybe.

For most public agencies, attempting to simultaneously ratchet up performance on ten different dimensions is simply too many.

So you have to choose. You have to decide which one or two **performance deficits** need to be fixed next and then set the targets to get them fixed.

Indeed, Benjamin Franklin argued that two was too many: "He that pursues two hares at once does not catch one and lets the other go."

Your BlackBerry, however, is flooding you with hares. And if one of your organization's key performance deficits is the absence of a hare, you ought to pick one and focus on it. Ignore the others and develop a strategy for catching that particular one.

Unfortunately, your BlackBerry isn't just sending you hares. It's sending you hippos, hornets, haddock, hamsters, hawks, and herpesviruses, plus a few useless humans.

Of course, you could choose to play the BlackBerry lottery, gambling that eventually someone would send you precisely the hare your organization needs. But how long will it take you to find this, very-valuable hare from among all of those hippos and hornets? And how can you be sure that you aren't getting the herpesvirus?

E-mail and the BlackBerry are tools. They are useful for some purposes. But not for others. Yet, as the psychologist Abraham Maslow observed, "it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail."

Suppose, at your next meeting, everyone turns off his or her BlackBerry. Will the world be worse off? Or, after the hour, will everyone have developed a sophisticated and analytical appreciation of what the organization needs to do next and why?

E-mail is the modern world's hammer. Thus, everyone is tempted to treat you as their favorite nail.

Pounding nails can be fun. So your colleagues and friends have decided to pound more messages into you.

Has anyone ever sent you an e-mail from an office twenty-feet away? Eye contact is so passé.

(Please note: *The Behn Report* sent you this e-mail *only* after you explicitly decided to subscribe.)

Ever give the luncheon talk? It used to be that no one looked at you; they were distracted by folks delivering the coffee and dessert. Today, no one still looks at you—but for a different reason. Now everyone is focused on their lap, pretending that you don't know what they are doing.

How about that meeting you chair-

ed yesterday? How many people were thinking seriously about the specific results that your organization needs to produce next? How many were seriously helping to analyze how to overcome the next performance deficit? How many were continuously checking their BlackBerry?

This is what makes the conference call such a fraud. Everyone is on the phone, but just three people do all of the thinking and all of the talking. All of the others answer their e-mail. And if you have a silent keyboard (or put your own phone on mute), no one is sure what you are doing—though (if you never say anything worthwhile) everyone has a very accurate guess.

Suppose, when you chair your next meeting, you ask all of the participants to turn off their BlackBerries. At the end of the hour, would the world have been destroyed? Would the world be worse off? Or, might the discussion have been more focused and more productive?

Indeed, by the end of the hour, would every participant have developed a sophisticated and analytical appreciation for what the organization needs to do next and why?

More importantly, would every participant know exactly what task he or she needs to complete by when? And, again, will they understand why? Will they comprehend how their tasks contribute to the results that the organization is trying to produce?

Or, as usual, will everyone set off to catch two or twenty inconsequential hares? **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*.

P.S. How many times, while you read this single page, did you check your BlackBerry?

To subscribe go to <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/TheBehnReport>. It's free!