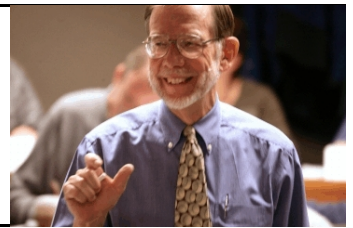


Bob

# 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 officials need to accept that

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## Accountability Cannot Coerce Competence

For over a quarter of a century, Robert Samuelson has written a column on economic affairs for *Newsweek*. Yet this award-winning journalist has made it clear that he has absolutely no desire to be a manager. Indeed, he once wrote, it “baffles me why people want to be managers.”

Managers, wrote Samuelson, are “supposed to get results—to maximize profits, improve test scores, or whatever. Everyone must ‘perform’ these days and be ‘accountable’ (which means being fired, demoted or chewed out if the desired results aren’t forthcoming).” All that managers get, he wrote, is “resentment from below; pressure from above; loud criticism of failures; silence over successes.”

So who becomes a manager? Often, the top professional. For example, the fire department’s best fire fighter eventually gets promoted to be the fire chief. Then, what does he or she do? How long does it take this person to understand that he or she is no longer supposed to fight fires?

The new chief has a different job: to ensure that everyone else in the department does an excellent job at fire fighting. If the chief is doing the job right, he or she would never even have to show up at a fire (except to provide pithy quotes for journalists). If the new fire chief is doing the job right, he or she will have developed in the department’s management team the operational capacity to fight fires.

Of course, the fire department could have planned ahead. Someone could have recognized the leadership potential of this future fire chief. Thus, thinking about the future, the city could have sent this budding talent off to the National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg, Maryland for a six-day course in “Management Strategies for Success,” or a ten-day course in “Effective Leadership Skills for Fire and EMS Organizations.”

Unlike the private sector, however, government is reluctant to invest in the development of even its most potentially valuable talent. Who

wants to be criticized by a crusading journalist or political opponent for sending a government employee off for a vacation in Emmitsburg?

Maybe, however, government does not really need to make an explicit effort to develop their employees managerial or leadership competences. Maybe it can motivate accountability—with “loud criticisms of failures.”

In the British Royal Navy, motivational accountability involved more than criticisms of failures. In 1756, when Admiral John Byng failed to prevent the French from capturing Port Mahon, he was court martialed and executed by firing squad. In *Candide*, Voltaire explained the Admiralty’s approach to accountability and motivation: “In this country, it is wise to kill an admiral from time to time to encourage the others.”

If public agencies are to produce real, significant results, they need real, operational competence. Imposing the pressure of accountability isn’t enough. Like any organization, public agencies need to develop their people through training and mentoring.

Today, motivational accountability is more civilized. Still, as Samuelson notes, this pressure is supposed to ensure that managers “get results”—for example, “improve test scores.”

Richard Elmore of Harvard’s Graduate School of Education is skeptical that this accountability pressure will—all by its magical self—produce better test scores. He notes the common belief that “school performance will increase to the degree that schools and school systems ‘implement’ accountability policy”—that “delivering clear information to schools and their communities about their performance will have a galvanizing effect on the people who work in them, and will cause them to do something they would not otherwise

have done to improve teaching and student performance.” How, Elmore wonders, will this happen?

So Elmore suggests a *Gedankenexperiment*: “Imagine” he says, a school, “in which teachers have systematically squirreled away in their classroom closets all their best and most powerful instructional ideas and practices, saving them for the day when the accountability system smacks them on the head. Then, magically, the good ideas come out of the closet and school performance, just as magically, increases.”

Actually, Elmore argues, “people in schools are working pretty reliably at the limit of their existing knowledge and skill.”

For education, Elmore’s lesson is obvious: If we want to improve the learning that happens in our schools, we had better improve the knowledge and skills of the teachers. Indeed, for any organization, his lesson is equally obvious: If we want to improve results, we had better improve the knowledge and skills of the people who produce these results.

W. Edwards Deming was the father of total quality management, the person who, after World War II, taught the Japanese how to be Japanese. Yet, Deming observed, “I have yet to see a quota that includes any trace of a system by which to help anyone to do a better job.” And, don’t forget, Deming was talking not about government but about the private sector.

Government jurisdictions that seek to produce results cannot use accountability pressure to coerce competence. If they want better performance, they need to develop the operational capacity to produce it. **B**

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