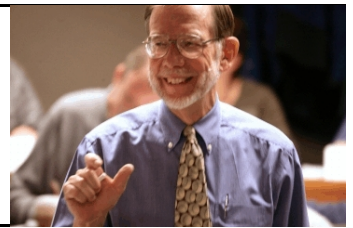


Bob

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 how citizens and legislators (and journalists too) can

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Nudge Leadership with Four Questions

A public executive gets a title. And with this title, come responsibilities.

The executive has the legal responsibility to follow the jurisdiction's rules for budget, procurement, and personnel. He or she also has the operational responsibility to administer the organization's programs and to implement its policies.

All this, however, is not enough—at least it is not enough to produce some real results. Everyone in the organization can obey all of the rules, administer all of the policies, and implement all of the programs and still accomplish little of significance.

If a public agency is to produce real results, its executives will have to exercise **performance leadership**.

Unfortunately, performance leadership is conspicuously different from procedural compliance. To comply, all the organization need do is jump through the specified hoops: Follow the enumerated steps. Fill out the designated forms. Comply with the detailed rules. Doing so may well keep the **accountability holders** at bay.

Such nimble **hoop jumping** is not, however, leadership.

For citizens and legislators who seek more than compliance, this creates a dilemma. Yes: they can require executive-branch employees to jump through numerous hoops. Yet, few of these hoop-jumping exercises achieve significant results. Instead they create, within public agencies, a rule-obsessed culture.

What are citizens and legislators to do? How can they encourage public executives to develop a results-driven culture? How can they encourage the exercise of real leadership?

Certainly not with yet another set of rules. No legislature—not the U.S. Congress, not a city council—can require leadership.

They could, however, in the spirit of *Nudge*, the insightful book by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, give public executives a gentle—if not too subtle—push.

How? Instead of constantly complaining about an agency's failure to follow yet another arcane rule, legislators and citizens could repeatedly ask every public executive four very specific questions:

Question 1: What is the purpose of your agency? (**Always start with purpose.**)

Question 2: What key **performance deficits** are currently hindering your ability to achieve this purpose?

Question 3: What **performance targets** have you established for eliminating (or at least mitigating) these performance deficits?

Question 4: What is your strategy for achieving these targets and thus bringing your agency closer to achieving its purpose?

Citizens and legislators cannot require public executives to exercise performance leadership. They cannot compel executives to replace an obsession about rules with a focus on results. They can, however, nudge them by asking four specific questions.

These four questions will not automatically or quickly convert a rule-obsessed administrator into a performance leader. Still, they can nudge a public executive to think about performance and then, perhaps, to act to improve performance.

None of this will happen automatically. It will happen only if citizens and legislators ask these four questions repeatedly and persistently. Once is not enough. Neither is twice. I suggest that *every* legislative hearing begin with these four questions.

After three, or maybe seven, sessions, some executives will get the hint. They will come prepared to answer these questions. Indeed, they may come so prepared that (after the

formal introductions) they will begin their prepared remarks by answering these four questions immediately.

This itself is progress. But it is not enough. For an executive could conclude that this is yet another hoop-jumping exercise—a cute trick that will inevitably (and swiftly) be replaced by another obsession.

This is why persistence is essential. For if legislators do not ask these four questions at the beginning of every interaction with an executive, their impact will atrophy.

If, however, they ask these questions consistently and repeatedly, executives will have to be prepared to answer them. And, this preparing (not the answering) is the key activity.

To answer Question 1, the executive will need to develop a clear statement of purpose.

To answer Question 2, the executive will need to analyze where along the agency's value chain (from inputs, to processes, to outputs, to outcomes) are serious problems that need fixing.

To answer Question 3, the executive will need to create performance targets—specific improvements to be achieved by a specific date.

To answer Question 4, the executive will need to develop a creative, realistic strategy for achieving the agency's targets, thus eliminating or mitigating some of its performance deficits so as to move closer to achieving its purpose.

To answer all four questions, a public executive will begin to recognize that with the title comes another, more subtle responsibility: to figure out how to develop the ability to exercise performance leadership. **B**

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