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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.



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On why all public executives need to repeatedly ask everyone:

“What Are Our Vulnerabilities?”

Penn State is a football team with a university attached. It isn't a university that has a football team. It is a football team that has a university.

But this inverted relationship created a big supervision problem. For it meant that the university *did not* oversee the football team. The university apparently *could not* oversee the football team.

As a consequence, a discovered incidence of sexual abuse of children was repeated, and repeated, and repeated. Eventually, it was revealed. Now, the football coach has died. The serial abuser will spend the rest of his life in prison. And three of the university's executives—including the former president—face criminal charges.

How did this happen? As always, if incompetence is an adequate explanation, no other is necessary. Yet what might be the nature of this incompetence?

It may have been a failure of all of these executives—from football coach to university president—to ask an uncomfortable but necessary question: “What are our vulnerabilities?”

Every organization has vulnerabilities. These might be financial vulnerabilities. The organization might not have adequate cash reserves for emergencies. It might be consistently spending more than it is taking in.

The organization might have competitive vulnerabilities. A firm's products or services might be on the verge of obsolescence—forced from the market by competitors that are more effective, or more efficient, or conceptually different and thus better. Even a public agency might have competitive vulnerabilities—exposed as irrelevant, or simply too expensive and thus vulnerable to contracting out.

Every organization also has operational vulnerabilities—things that aren't working quite right; things that are going acceptably now but, with the intervention of some small glitch, might spiral into disaster.

And, every organization is vulnera-

ble to scandal—to a wide variety of scandals: financial scandals; patronage scandals; contracting scandals.

The good news is that governments have created numerous systems to catch these scandals. These do not completely deter every would-be thief and abuser. Some people will always think they can beat the system. Still, if used, such systems can catch a lot.

Unfortunately, there are no systems to expose operational vulnerabilities. These are harder to detect because there exists no comprehensive catalog of them. For each organization, the list of potential vulnerabilities is different.

Because every organization is vulnerable to embezzlement, each one does (or should) create a system to catch the embezzlers. But no one can create a system to catch vulnerabilities that no one knows exist.

The first “better practice” of performance leadership is to articulate the organization's purpose—to clearly explain what the organization is trying to accomplish. But even before doing this, a new executive needs to ask: “What are our vulnerabilities?”

This is why public executives have to go looking for their vulnerabilities. They need to do so before anyone ever defines a potential problem. They need to repeatedly ask: “What are our vulnerabilities?”

The first day on the job, the first question that a new executive should ask is: “What are our vulnerabilities?”

[Yes: every public executive should “always start with purpose”—clearly articulating what the organization is trying to accomplish. But executives who have not identified and taken steps to mitigate (if not eliminate) their vulnerabilities, are not likely to be able to accomplish very much.]

Actually, I would argue that a new

executive should ask this question *before* he or she takes the job. A friend reported learning—but only after starting a new management job—that she should have first asked for an independent audit of the organization's finances. For, it turned out, the financial situation was not quite what she had been led to believe. As a result, the job—and her primary responsibilities—were also not what she had been led to believe.

The about-to-be-hired executive will naturally be told that the organization has no significant vulnerabilities. This is not true. It can't be. No serious candidate for a management job should believe it. And if no one in the organization is willing to confess that some vulnerabilities exist, the candidate should not take the job.

For the candidate has just learned that no one in the organization is able or willing to tell the truth. This may be because they recognize some vulnerabilities but believe they are all minor—though perhaps big enough to scare off a potentially excellent manager. It may be that they are not sufficiently familiar with the operations of their own organization to see the (rather obvious) evidence of vulnerability. Or they may see the evidence but fail to observe the problem.

It makes no difference whether these people are incompetents or liars. The potential executive cannot expect any help from them in identifying and fixing the obvious (let alone the subtle) vulnerabilities.

“What are our vulnerabilities?” A lot of managers at Penn State (and the BBC) wish they had asked this question. ■

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