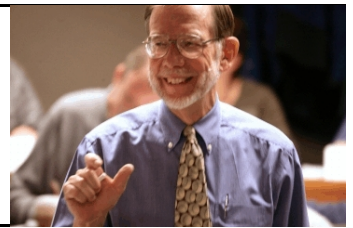


Bob

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 public executives and legislators need to remember that

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Requirements Still Require Leadership

In 1993, Congress enacted the **"Government Performance and Results Act."** Called GPRA, this legislation sought to "improve Federal program effectiveness and public accountability by promoting a new focus on results." It was also designed to "help Federal managers improve service delivery, by requiring that they plan for meeting program objectives."

That's an interesting juxtaposition: "help . . . by requiring." If a manager in any organization (for-profit, non-profit, or public) concludes that improving the delivery of its services would benefit from the creation of a plan (or a target or anything else), can't he or she just do it?

Of course, the word "help" doesn't quite capture the spirit of GPRA. After all, the word "help" is used only once. In contrast, the words "require," "required," or "requirement" appear a total of 20 times. GPRA isn't about helping. It's about requiring.

Thus, GPRA requires each federal agency to create a five-year "strategic plan" that includes "a comprehensive mission statement" plus "general goals and objectives, including outcome related goals and objectives." It requires each federal agency to create an annual "performance plan" containing "performance goals" that are "objective, quantifiable, and measurable." This plan also needs to include "performance indicators" for "measuring or assessing the relevant outputs, service levels, and outcomes."

Finally, GPRA requires each agency to produce a "performance report" that (among other things) includes "actual results for the three preceding fiscal years" plus "actual program performance achieved compared with the performance goals."

Unfortunately, Congress is in a difficult position. It can make federal executives do a lot of very specific things. But it cannot make them take any of these things seriously. Indeed, if an agency's executives took performance seriously, they wouldn't need

legislation to "help" them create goals, plans, and reports. They would simply take these (plus other, more useful) steps all by themselves. Conversely, if agency executives have too many demands and worries—well, they can give all of these **hoop-jumping requirements** to an intern who has nothing important to do.

So, in December 2010, Congress passed and President Obama signed the **"GPRA Modernization Act."** In this legislation, the word "help" disappears. But the words "require," "required" and "requirements" make 55 appearances. Indeed, this is "an act to require quarterly performance assessments of Government programs for purposes of assessing agency performance and improvement."

Producing results requires more than requirements. It requires more than missions and plans, more than indicators and measures. In any public agency, producing real results requires leadership, active leadership, engaged, human leadership.

The new, improved GPRA still requires agencies to create strategic plans, performance plans, performance goals, performance indicators, and performance reports. It also tells the director of the Office of Management and Budget to "coordinate with agencies to develop the Federal Government performance plan."

The modernized GPRA also creates "priority goals." From its "performance goals," each agency has to select its "priority goals."

In addition, the director of OMB is required to "develop priority goals to improve the performance and management of the Federal Government." Indeed, the word "goal" (or "goals") appears 151 times in the 2010 legislation, nearly triple the 56 times it was used in 1993.

Then, for each performance goal (including its priority goals), an agency must identify a "goal leader" who is "responsible for the [goal's] achievement." And, for each of the federal government's overall priority goals, the federal performance plan must "identify a lead Government official who shall be responsible for coordinating the effort to achieve the goal."

Finally, the act calls for quarterly performance reviews during which the director of OMB reviews progress on each government-wide priority goal with its "lead government official." For the same purpose, the head of each agency is required to meet quarterly with the "goal leader" for each of its own priority goals.

In requiring, for each priority goal, the selection of a "goal leader" or a "lead government official," Congress is obviously looking for someone whom it can hold accountable. In the time since GPRA was modernized, public executives may have been tripping over each other to be identified as a "goal leader" or, even better, as a more prestigious "lead government official." Or, they may have gone into hiding, believing that the only possible reward for being a "goal leader" is the chance to be held accountable at a televised Congressional hearing.

Still, Congress has clearly recognized that missions, and plans, and goals, and indicators, and measures do not—all by their miraculous selves—automatically produce better results. If you want to improve performance, you need leadership, active leadership, human leadership.

Unfortunately, Congress cannot require leadership. **B**

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