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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.



"What were they thinking?"

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On why every governmental jurisdiction and public agency needs a

Chief Management Officer

Forty years ago, Henry Mintzberg, of McGill University, asked the simple question: "What do managers do?"

To Mintzberg managers were not just corporate CEOs but also "vice presidents, bishops, foremen, hockey coaches, and prime ministers"—people with "formal authority" for some kind of "organizational unit."

Mintzberg was looking for what these people did that was "common to the work of all managers." From his research, he identified ten managerial "roles" or "behaviors":

Three Interpersonal Roles:

figurehead
leader
liaison

Three informational roles:

monitor
disseminator
spokesperson

Four decisional roles:

entrepreneur
disturbance handler
resource allocator
negotiator.

Mintzberg's list is rather short, but his ten roles do cover a diverse range of responsibilities. Indeed, the list is intimidating. How could any human do a half-way credible job on all ten roles in a mere 168-hour week?

Consider, for example, your average elected public executive: mayor, county executive, governor, or president. Yes: It takes a lot of determination to get yourself elected to one of these executive jobs. Every day, the most winning candidates figure out how to handle multiple responsibilities. If they don't, they lose.

Still, once they are sworn in, their obligations jump in complexity. A candidate has one very specific, very narrow task: get elected. As chief executive, however, the former candidate's responsibilities are more complicated. And although a cabinet secretary or department head has a narrower portfolio, his or her responsibilities are still quite complex.

Consider the roles of figurehead,

liaison, spokesperson, disturbance handler, and negotiator. These five roles include internal responsibilities. But for a public executive (elected or appointed), they also have an external component that is more demanding than for most private-sector CEOs.

As the obvious figurehead, the public executive personifies the government or agency to the world. He or she is its definitive spokesperson.

If a disturbance is small and internal, a subordinate manager can handle it. But if the disturbance is significant enough, or if it involves people outside the government, the public executive may need to get personally involved. The same applies to negotiations with people or groups outside of the executive branch.

Presidents, governors, mayors, and agency heads often focus exclusively on policy. And despite all the evidence to the contrary, they believe their policies are self implementing. To convert their policies into reality, each needs a chief management officer.

A public executive who delegates to subordinates any of these five roles—figure-head, liaison, spokesperson, disturbance handler, or negotiator—may quickly antagonize key stakeholders. Unfortunately, handling these five roles for situations primarily involving people outside of the executive branch can consume all of any public executive's time.

If so, what happens when these five roles also involve insiders? And what happens when the role is leader, monitor, disseminator, entrepreneur, or resource allocator? How much time is left for these responsibilities? Often, not much. All too often, none.

Yet, the public executive is supposed to be the [internal] leader of the jurisdiction or agency, establishing purposes, motivating employees, au-

thorizing projects, and encouraging initiatives to better achieve key public purposes. But how much time does the executive have for this? After all, handling internal disturbances and allocating resources can quickly jump to the top of the must-do-today pile.

Thus every public executive—appointed or elected—needs a chief management officer, chief operating officer, chief performance officer. I don't care what the title is. I do care, however, that this person is responsible for ensuring that the jurisdiction or agency is operating competently—for keeping everyone focused on achieving the chief executive's purposes. This person is responsible for the operational roles to which the top executive cannot devote sufficient attention. All governors need a chief operating officer. All mayors need a chief administrative officer. All cabinet secretaries need a chief performance officer.

The president, governor, mayor, or agency head also has responsibility for setting policy—for establishing macro purposes. Yet, too often, these executives focus exclusively on policy. And for some mysterious reason (and despite all the evidence to the contrary), they believe their brilliant policies are self implementing?

The chief operating officer's job is to make the policies work. Thus this person needs more than a title. He or she needs an official, public delegation of authority. The elected or appointed executive needs to say, as Mayor Joe Curtatone of Somerville, Massachusetts often says about his chief performance officer: "My director of **SomerStat** speaks for me." **B**

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