



"What were they thinking?"

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On the challenge faced by all public executives:

How Do I Learn What Is Really Going On? [II]

Public executives and the parents of teenagers face a similar problem: They have a difficult time figuring out what is really going on in their organization—be it an agency or a family.

Public executives can't observe what an employee is doing every minute. And parents can't observe what a teenager is doing every minute. Both worry. Despite all of their instructions and admonitions—not everyone is guaranteed to be behaving properly.

Thus—maybe, just maybe—parents and executives might find some common approaches useful:

Repeatedly Ask: "What Are Our Vulnerabilities?"

Due to their common inability to constantly observe everyone's behavior, both executives and parents have vulnerabilities. A family is vulnerable to what teenagers do on-line. A public agency is vulnerable to employees who falsify performance data.

When such things happen, neither parents nor executives should be surprised. Yet, if they fail to identify their vulnerabilities, they may be surprised—very unpleasantly.

Be Aware (and Beware) of Campbell's Law

One vulnerability comes from setting performance targets. If people are pressured to achieve specific targets—but lack the resources or operational capacity necessary to do so—neither executives nor parents should be surprised when people cheat.

Donald Campbell, explained this in what is known as "Campbell's Law":

The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor.

Whenever executives set targets for people in their agency or parents set targets for the teenagers in their family, they should be alert for the behav-

ior predicted by Campbell's Law.

Recognize the Hint Behind "That's Funny"

All of us—including executives and parents—have said to ourselves "That's funny." Not "that's funny, ha ha," but "that's funny, weird." This is a hint—a subtle yet clear suggestion that something isn't quite right.

Yet, we are all busy. We don't have time to think through the possible implications of our own, very astute (and perhaps very prescient) observation. Instead, we simply go on with our own, very important work.

Until, that is, something happens—something bad that we could have anticipated had we taken the time to follow-up on our own observation. Only then, however, do we recognize this insight: "Oh yes. That's why I said 'That's funny.'"

Public executives and parents of teenagers face a common problem: "How do I learn what is really going on?" Thus, it might be that an approach that helps public executives with this problem might also prove useful for parents—and vice versa.

Both See and Observe

In "A Scandal in Bohemia," Sherlock Holmes says to Dr. Watson, "You see, but you do not observe."

No real human—executive or parent—possesses the powers of observation that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle gave to Sherlock Holmes. After all, Holmes saw many things that were "funny"—things to which most mortals (not just Watson) would never give even a first thought.

One way to see more is to practice Hewlett Packard's "Management by Wandering Around." Executives can wander around the places where front-line employees are working. Parents may not find this so easy, but volun-

teering to coach a sport or supervise a school trip may create an opportunity to see quite a lot.

Still, even if they do see a lot, executives and parents may still not observe very much. They may be stuck with Watson's limited observational skills. They need to be alert to their own under-their-breath mumbling of "that's funny." They also need to use their grade-school skills of arithmetic.

Cultivate The Skill and Habit of "Short Division"

One way to enhance our powers of observation is with "short division." When we identify a number—an important indicator—we need to ask: "Is this number big or small?" When we see a number, we can enhance our power of observation—our ability to understand the significance of this number—with the simple, arithmetic act of short division.

Always Start with Purpose

Both executives and parents have purposes. Executives seek to produce results that citizens value. Parents seek to help their teenagers grow up to be responsible, creative, loving adults. In any effort to learn what is really going on, both need to keep their purpose in mind.

Executives and Parents

A colleague once suggested that the test of any management strategy was whether it was effective in coping with teenagers. But the reverse might also be true. If a strategy helps parents learn what is really going on with teenagers, it might also prove useful for public executives. **B**

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