

Bob

Copyright © 2016 by Robert D. Behn

# 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 all public executives need to focus on:

"What were they thinking?"  
Vol. 13, No. 6, February 2016

## Obliterating Worst Practices

Is your organization focused on implementing best practices? I'm sure it is. (If it was not, you certainly would not confess to this failure.)

If, however, you need some help doing so, just Google the three magic words: "implementing best practices." You'll get nearly a quarter of a million hits. All sorts of wonderful advice.

But what about "worst practices"? Does your organization have any of those? If so (I'm not accusing you), what are you doing about them?

Unfortunately, if you do have a few, you aren't apt to get much help. If you Google "eliminating worst practices," you are told there are 175 hits, but only 40 are unique.

This makes sense. No manager gets credit for eliminating a worst practice, let alone identifying one. People will wonder: "Shouldn't you have done that years ago?"

In contrast, if you implement a best practice, you might win all sorts of kudos. Today, if you want to be considered an *avant-garde* manager, you have to be implementing best practices. The more, the better.

Unfortunately, your worst practices might be undermining your best ones. The worst ones can be costly and time consuming. They can be inefficient, useless, actually counterproductive.

Even more unfortunately, your worst practices might be imbedded in your organization's standard operating procedures. Everyone has been following these worst-practice SOPs for years. Everyone knows how to do them. They don't know any other way. In fact, they might not even think there could be any other way.

At the Boston campus of the University of Massachusetts, The Collins Center for Public Management runs a Government Analytics Program. Among other things, GAP helps the state's 351 municipal governments use data and goals to improve performance. GAP's analytic staff helps mayors and city managers examine a variety of problems with performance,

data, finance, and human resources—the kind of issues that many municipalities lack the analytic capacity to examine themselves.

Most municipalities, however, don't just want to solve problems. They want to solve them with an "innovation." The municipality's leadership team wants to be known for being on the cutting edge. That's what creates a reputation as a state-of-the-art municipality.

In reality, however, many municipalities will not get a very big boost by creating a new innovative practice. They will not get a significant benefit from adopting a "best practice" being employed by other governments.

That's why GAP is pushing municipal managers to move beyond the buzzwords of "best practice" and "innovation." Instead, GAP helps them to recognize when they could gain better and bigger benefits by eliminating their own worst practices.

*Let's get real: All organizations have multiple "worst practices." Everyone knows what they are. They've been complaining about them for years. They are not just hurting performance. They are also hurting morale. Now is the time for all worst practices to go.*

Sometimes, such SOPs were created to prevent unethical behavior, thus requiring multiple double checks by multiple people. Sometimes, they are remnants of once essential paper processes that have been merged with new, electronic ones. Often, they require multiple people to fill in multiple pieces of paper (while entering the data electronically too).

In one municipality, a GAP analyst discovered, Department of Public Works employees sign in *every* morning. On paper! The foreman scans these pages and forwards them to the DPW's payroll clerk, who enters the

information onto a spreadsheet. On Friday, this clerk prints out the weekly report, which she inserts into a binder containing all of these previous reports. And, just to be sure, the DPW's payroll clerk also sends it back to the foreman to double check.

On Friday, DPW's payroll clerk forwards the week's record of work to the municipality's payroll clerk, who re-enters it—again, manually—into the financial software. This is the only step in the long process that is actually required to get employees paid.

Of course, if the purpose of all this manual bookkeeping is to prevent employees from getting paid for work they did not do, the process isn't very useful. If the foreman isn't keeping careful track of how many hours DPW employees are working, or if no one is checking on the information that the foreman enters and later confirms, the system is accomplishing little. The municipality might as well simply ask its employees to send an e-mail to the municipality's payroll clerk every Friday afternoon reporting how many hours they worked that week.

Usually, such worst practices are not just formalized in SOPs. They are also ingrained in the organizational culture.

This means that any effort to "eliminate worst practices" is not apt to be enough. If these routines are really hurting performance, yet everyone is perfectly content to continue to do them, public managers can't simply get rid of their inefficient and counterproductive SOPs.

In an organization that has some certifiably worst practices, the managers have to *obliterate* them. **B**

Robert D. Behn, a lecturer at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, chairs the executive-education program "Driving Government Performance: Leadership Strategies that Produce Results." His book, *The PerformanceStat Potential*, is available in paperback.