

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 the necessary — yet impossible to fully resolve — question:

“What were they thinking?”
Vol. 13, No. 1, September 2016

Where Should We Focus Our Attention?

Every time I go hiking in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, I have a problem—an annoying problem.

Yet, when I am hiking on the trails of the National Forests in the Rocky Mountains, this problem disappears.

Why? Because the National Forest Service has designed its trails to accommodate the outfitters who take the city slickers out to their back-country campsite for a fishing or hunting expedition. And to ensure that their clients have an enjoyable “outdoor” experience (all of these outfitters want repeat business and referrals) they bring along lots of equipment, and food, and beer.

To transport these necessities, the outfitters need mules or horses. Thus these trails are wide and gently graded. When I hike up even a small mountain, the trail will have a number of **switchbacks** making my ascent pleasantly gradual.

New Hampshire, however, is not called “The Granite State” for nothing. Neither the terrain nor the trails are designed to accommodate horses. Too many rocks!

Yes: there is the Old Bridle Path that runs from Franconia Notch up to the Appalachian Mountain Club's Greenleaf Hut, with another trail continuing on to Mount Lafayette. When there was a **Summit House** at the top (all that is left is the foundation) horses provided the city slickers with an easy ascent.

Indeed, when I first hiked the Old Bridle Path decades ago, it was wide, well graded, and quite straight. It was then a real bridle path designed for real horses. But as the AMC has sought to reduce erosion, sections of the trail have been moved (sometimes more than once). Today, no horse would find the rocks on this “bridle path” very accommodating.

As a result, whenever I hike in the White Mountains—whether it is on the “Old Bridle Path” or anywhere else—I face the same dilemma:

❖ *Where should I focus my eyes?*

Sadly, I have two conflicting choices.

Choice #1: Focus on where I will place my foot for the next step? If I fail to concentrate on this, I am apt to become painfully aware that the rock on which I had planned to put my foot wasn't quite where my brain remembered it was.

Choice #2: Focus ten steps ahead. If I fail to concentrate on this, I might suddenly discover that I am stuck on the wrong part of the trail with no obvious place for my next step. Even worse, I might discover that I have hiked off the trail and thus have to figure out where it really is and then bushwhack back.

Unfortunately, even though I have two eyes, I can't simultaneously focus on the rocks two feet in front of me *and* on the trail ten feet ahead. Thus, I can easily twist an ankle or find myself looking for the trail. Or both.

Once the members of a public agency's leadership team have chosen their purpose, on what should they focus their attention? On the precise steps they need to take today? Or on the steps that they will have to take next week or next month?

All public managers—even if they have never hiked up a path more physically challenging than their local Capitol Street—face a conceptually similar problem.

Certainly, every public manager should **always start with purpose**. But once an agency's leadership team has chosen its purpose—and gained the support necessary to begin pursuing it—on what should the members of the team concentrate their attention?

- ❖ *Should they focus on the precise step that they need to take today?*
- ❖ *Should they focus on thinking about steps that they will need to take next week or next month?*

The good news, of course, is the leadership team has multiple sets of eyes. They could assign some team members to focus on what needs to be done today, while asking others to think about what they will need to be doing next week, or next month, or at some critical time—or times—in the future.

Still, there will always be the crisis of the day: Oops, yesterday we twisted an ankle; how do we recover? Or what should we do to ensure that we don't lose our way?

If the leadership team isn't careful, the challenge (or anxiety) created by the very careful focus on today's foot could mean that in a week or three, the team could find itself off the trail—lost in a confusing muddle of bushes, trees, boulders and a meandering stream that might, or might not, actually be the trail.

Unfortunately, we humans find it is difficult to simultaneously focus on two different tasks. We flit back and forth between them. Indeed, how can anyone concentrate effectively on two different and fully demanding chores? And how do we cope when the number of demanding chores escalates to three or thirteen?

All public managers have to focus attention on both the next step for accomplishing their purpose and—simultaneously—on the steps that their organization will have to take ten days, ten weeks, and ten months in the future. Both are necessary to accomplish their public purpose.

Unfortunately, the National Forest Service is not going to ride to the rescue with a broad, smoothly graded, easy-to-follow trail. **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.

To be sure you get next month's issue, subscribe yourself at: <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/TheBehnReport>. *It's free!*

For the inside secrets about **Driving Government Performance**, go to: <http://hks.harvard.edu/EE/BehnReport>.