

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.

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"What were they thinking?"
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On why public executives need to consciously focus themselves on

Resisting the Sirens of Micromanagement

In Britain, it's labeled as the Sandhurst Test. In the United States, it has been called the second-lieutenant promotion test. This test is based on one specific problem:

You are a second lieutenant. Your platoon consists of a sergeant and a dozen privates. You have three twelve-foot poles, 300 feet of rope, five stakes, a shovel, a knife, two clips, and a flag. Your task: Put up the flag.

This is an engineering and an organization problem. What is the proper way to lash the three poles together? What is the proper way to secure the poles? What is the proper way to organize the platoon to get it done?

This task can take a lot of thinking. And, yet, the official answer to the problem is quite simple. The job of the second lieutenant is to say:

"Sergeant. Put up the flag."

These five words are then followed by an exchange of snappy salutes.

How can this be the right answer? For three reasons: The purpose is clear; the necessary resources are available; and the sergeant couldn't have advanced up the ranks from private without having acquired the necessary engineering and organizational skills.

The second lieutenant is tempted, of course, to figure out precisely what should be done—down to how to tie the knot that will attach the flag clips to the rope. After all, this officer is the smartest guy in the platoon. By definition. This lieutenant has the highest rank, commanding a salute from everyone else.

Thus, the lieutenant is in charge, with the responsibility to make sure that the flag pole gets put up correctly. This lieutenant is the person—**Frederick Winslow Taylor** made this clear a century ago—who is tasked with figuring out the "one best way" to put up the flag pole. The rest of the platoon is dependent on the lieutenant's wisdom to make sure that the

flag pole gets put up correctly.

But who says there is just one best way to put up a flag pole—and thus the flag? Maybe there are several, equally good ways.

And what would it mean to say that this flag pole is better than another. The flag pole has to support the flag, and stay up in the current weather. That's it.

Maybe there does exist one best knot for securing the clips to the rope. But I bet that there can be a debate about this. Indeed, I bet different sergeants have different favorite knots. But does the lieutenant care whether the sergeant uses an alpine butterfly loop or a lark's head?

All the lieutenant cares about is whether the knot holds. If it holds, it's a good knot. If it doesn't, the knot is useless.

The flagpole test examines the lieutenant's proclivity for micromanagement. People who believe that they are the smartest guy in the room naturally take charge—complete charge. In the process they undermine everyone's motivation and morale.

The flagpole test examines a lieutenant's proclivity for micromanagement. This is a natural, inherent, human propensity especially for people who believe that they are the smartest guy in the room. After all, if you are the smartest guy, you have a moral obligation (or so it would seem) to micromanage everybody else. Otherwise, things will get done badly—or, at least, sub-optimally.

There is, however, a downside to micromanagement. It saps motivation and undermines morale. Who wants to work hard to prove the boss's idea was brilliant? Few of us. But we are quite prepared to work very hard to prove that our own ideas are both smart and effective.

Furthermore, micromanagement drives away talented people who are looking for an opportunity to make real use of their knowledge and skills.

Yet, if the purpose is clear—if everyone understands what it means to put up the flag—it makes little difference how they achieve that purpose.

The young Al Gore, the future vice president, grew up in Washington where his father, Al Gore, Sr., was a member of the United States Senate. As a child, reported David Maraniss in *The Washington Post*, the young Gore "sat, awe-struck, in a Senate hearing room and watched his father's committee mark up the interstate highway bill, voting on how wide the lanes should be and what color to make the road signs."

Bizarre. Why did members of the U.S. Senate think they were the best qualified to determine the width of the lanes let alone the color of the signs? Answer: Because they were the smartest guys in the room—indeed, the smartest guys in Washington. Moreover, they knew it. After all, they had the highest rank.

Yet when it comes to the technical judgments about highway-lane width or road-sign color, U.S. senators certainly possess less expertise than a green lieutenant has when it comes to the less technical task of putting up a flag pole.

The sirens of micromanagement are hard to resist. Public executives need to find some way to tie themselves to Ulysses' mast. Actually—given that the micromanagement sirens sing no music let alone alluring music—public executives should simply stuff wax in their ears. **B**

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