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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.



On the challenge faced by all public executives:

"What were they thinking?"
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How Do I Learn What Is Really Going On?

The soap was stylish—perfectly round, the size of a golf ball, but without the little dimples that help it fly straight. This was a very stylish hotel, so you would expect that everything—bathroom included—would be stylish.

The sink, for example, was shaped like a wok. Thus, when the soap landed in the sink, it circled around and around just like the balls do in one of **George Rhoads's audiokinetic sculptures**. If, however, the ball's initial orbit was too big for the sink, it ended up on the floor.

This would not have been a problem if the sink came with a soap dish. But it didn't. Thus the soap easily ended up on the floor—very easily.

The shower didn't have a soap dish either. This was another challenge. So when I finished a shower (having dropped the soap several times), I leaned out and flipped it into the sink, hoping that it didn't orbit out and onto the floor.

What were these people thinking?

A couple of weeks later and on the other side of the planet, I entered another hotel room. It was a little cool, and I wanted it a little warmer. There was no thermostat on the wall, but I quickly found the room's HVAC remote. It had ten buttons, one of which had "+" on one end and "-" on the other. I pushed the "+" button a few times and went about unpacking.

Nothing happened. The room did not warm up. The unit under the window continued to pump out cold air. So I pushed the "+" button a few more times, and began to set up my computer. Still nothing happened.

Then I see it: a small flier labeled "Air Conditioning Instructions," which said at the bottom of page 2:

IMPORTANT

Please DO NOT press [button 6] as it is not needed and will lock the remote.

Please also Do NOT press the following buttons [2, 3, and 10].

What were these people thinking?

Why does this remote even have buttons 2, 3, 6, or 10?

Fortunately, the back page of this flier was boldly labeled **Troubleshooting** and offered instructions for fixing four problems. (When was the last time you needed troubleshooting instructions for an HVAC system?)

Pressing button 6 was what created one of these problems: "The screen on my remote looks nothing like the picture and nothing works." For this problem, the solution was:

"Underneath the [#6] button is a tiny red button. This is the reset button. Take a pen or whatever will fit and press it for 2 seconds. The screen will fill with text for a few moments then go blank. Try to turn the remote on now."

Having done this, I now go back to the inside of the flier and follow the five steps to make the room warmer.

A police chief cannot experience what it is like to deal with a hassling cop or an incompetent detective. A director of a state child-protection agency cannot learn what it is like for a child to have a case worker ignore the signs of mom's abusive boyfriend.

The final step is: "Please allow approximately 15 minutes for the unit to switch between air conditioning to heating and produce warm air."

What were these people thinking? Don't the executives for this chain of three dozen hotels ever stay in one of their own? Don't they find their own HVAC system annoying? (Or do the staff at every hotel know the desires of every executive so that, when one arrives, his or her room is at precisely the desired temperature?)

A business has numerous ways to discover the reality of its products and services. The "secret shopper"

has a long tradition: Employ people to buy a product or use a service and report back on a host of dimensions: Does the shower have a soap dish? Is the HVAC system easy to use?

And, of course, a firm's executives can use their own products and services. If, however, a problem is very serious but quite rare, an executive may never encounter it personally.

This, I assume, was the case for the executives at General Motors. When the defective ignition switch started turning off Chevy Cobalts while they were running, no GM executive experienced this problem. At least, however, GM executives do drive GM cars, though most may never drive a Cobalt.

The same cannot be said of most public executives. A police chief cannot experience what it is like to deal with a hassling cop or an incompetent detective. A director of a state child-protection agency cannot experience what it is like for a child to have a case worker ignore the signs of mom's abusive boyfriend.

The Secretary of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs cannot experience the delays that thousands of veterans are having getting appointments. Neither can the deputy secretary or an assistant secretary.

Most public executives cannot personally sample their agency's services? For them, this is an important, unique, and troubling problem.

There are, of course, indirect mechanisms: a secret shopper; a complaint form on a Web site; an audit. None, however, are guaranteed to ensure that the public executive learns what is really going on. **B**

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