

Public Management Report

An occasional (and maybe insightful) examination of the issues, dilemmas, challenges, and opportunities in leadership, governance, management, and performance in public agencies.

On why so many public managers are:

Obsessed With “Best Practice”

If, as Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds,” then “best practice” is the refuge of unimaginative ones. Unfortunately, public managers everywhere are on a manic search for “best practice.”

Students at the John F. Kennedy School of Government are required to write a second-year policy report for a client in the public or nonprofit sector. And what does this client inevitably want? You guessed it: “best practice.” The client (presumably a seasoned public official with significant responsibilities) asks this young graduate student with considerably less experience to identify “best practice” in the official’s own field.

Do these public managers not know what the leaders in their field are doing? Have they not devoted research and thought to how effectiveness is (could be and should be) achieved in agencies with similar responsibilities? Do they not go to a conference or two, just to learn what approaches others might be trying? Do they not read (or, at least, skim) the management books that populate airport bookstores? Do they not subscribe to management magazines and executive e-zines? Have they not analyzed the origins of their agency’s unique challenges and examined possible strategies for overcoming them? Why are they so obsessed with identifying something that someone else has labeled “best practice”?



Because, if they can discover a “best practice”—a *certifiably* “best” practice—then they can stop thinking.

If a practice is indeed “best,” managers don’t have to worry about why or how the practice works. They don’t have to worry about whether the practice will prove effective in their specific organization with its distinctive problems and particular social, economic, and political circumstances. Someone else has wrestled with all of the puzzling specifics, thus insuring that the practice is universally applicable. Managers who adopt a

best practice don’t have to worry about the usual (though inevitably exasperating) details of implementation. After all, the practice is a “best” one. Everyone recognizes that.

Furthermore, once they have identified a “best practice,” public managers don’t have to explain it to others. They need not justify their new practice to colleagues, superiors, or overseers (from legislators, to journalists, to citizens). All they need do is announce that they have implemented “best practice.” Everyone will be duly impressed.

In adopting a “best practice,” public managers conveniently avoid the hard work of figuring out whether this practice will do something that their organization needs done. The practice is the “best” one—or at least a

"best" one—they can confidently assure both themselves and others.

Everyone will agree. Who will challenge the unnamed management gurus who have warranted the practice as "best"? Who is willing to look foolish by claiming that something else might be better—not that it is guaranteed to be better, just that it *might* be better?

You, of course, have heard of it: The International Center for Best Practice. It has charters from the United Nations and the World Bank, and is stocked with Nobel laureates in management. Once a year, they convene in Zurich, Singapore, or Capetown to choose a few, select practices to be officially authenticated as a "Best Practice." If the head of a public agency can find one of these practices and implement it throughout his or her organization, no one can dispute that he or she is not an *au courant* public executive.

The International Center for Best Practice, with charters from the United Nations and the World Bank, is stocked with Nobel laureates in management who convene once a year to certify a few, select "Best Practices."

Yet, regardless of who has accredited a practice as best, before implementing it, the public manager needs to answer two questions. Whether a practice is a narrow administrative system or an innovative leadership strategy—whether the practice is "best," "better," simply "good," or purely experimental—the manager needs to be able to answer the "why?" question and the "how?" question.

Why? Why are we implementing this practice? What vital (or merely helpful) purposes will we achieve by implementing this practice? What will the practice accomplish? Management practices are not abstract cure-alls—organizational patent medicines that will remedy all kinds of organizational afflictions from dysfunctional legislation to conflicting stakeholder pressures. Implementing any managerial practice—good, better, or best—makes sense only if the practice will, somehow, help resolve one or more of the problems that prevent our organization from achieving our mission.

How? How will this specific practice help to resolve our particular problems? What is our cause-and-effect theory? How does this practice work in general—in the ideal case? And how must this practice be adapted to work in our particular circumstances to help our agency accomplish its public purposes?

The search for "best practice" is the early twenty-first century's equivalent of the early twentieth century's search for the "**one best way.**" The language is a little less absolute. It isn't *the* one best way. It is merely *a* best practice (modified by a distinctly indefinite article).

This is the beauty of the search for best practice. There can be many best practices—maybe even thousands of them. Consequently, managers need not be very discriminating. They can choose from a long menu of best practices, without worrying about whether

it will provide some operational nutrition or merely create institutional heartburn. Each manager can select from the menu of best practices something that he or she finds personally appetizing.

For too many public managers, the search for "best practice" has become a substitute for thinking. **B**

Robert D. Behn is the author of *Performance Leadership: 11 Better Practices That Can Ratchet Up Performance* and a lecturer at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

As a member of the team of Kennedy School faculty who lead executive-education programs for the public sector, Bob chairs "**Driving Government Performance: Leadership Strategies that Produce Results.**" He also conducts **custom-designed executive programs** for public agencies, most recently for the California Air Resources Board and Miami-Dade County.