

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.



On the advantage that all public executives have because of

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The 'Meaning' Inherent in Government Work

It's official. "Meaning" matters. To employees. And thus to performance.

How do I know? Because McKinsey says so. In a recent issue of the *McKinsey Quarterly*, two of the firm's consultants write about the necessity of "Increasing the 'meaning quotient' of work."

The authors report, "executives tell us that they're struggling to create 'MQ'—which is consultant speak for "meaning quotient." This MQ, they explain, is "a sense among employees that what they do really makes a difference to themselves or others."

Performance in the private sector doesn't just depend upon employees' IQ, says McKinsey. It depends on their emotional quotient (EQ). And, reports McKinsey, performance also depends on MQ.

Naturally, McKinsey has a solution for this problem: "Through a few simple techniques, executives can boost workplace 'MQ' and inspire employees to perform at their peak." Interesting. We don't need to actually increase the *meaning* of the work. Some "techniques" will be enough. Not "platitudes," of course, but "tools."

McKinsey's consultants offer three "specific, actionable techniques" that, they argue, though counterintuitive and overlooked, are still powerful.

Technique #1: Don't just tell employees the company story about how their work will improve the firm's industry position, status and bottom line.

Managers should also tell employees stories about four other impacts of their work: how it will improve society; how it will help customers; how it will create camaraderie among the members of their work team; and how it will help their own personal or professional development plus (of course) their pay.

Technique #2: Give employees discretion. Certainly, the chief executive should set the overall direction and strategy for the firm. Still, managers should let individuals and

teams figure out how best to accomplish their job, thus creating the ever sought-after yet so elusive employee ownership.

Technique #3: Motivate people not just with pay for performance, but also with surprise rewards. McKinsey suggests small but symbolic tributes that recognize achievements—not just money but also intrinsic rewards.

During his first stint at Apple, Steve Jobs was trying to recruit John Sculley, then president of Pepsi, to become Apple's CEO. Jobs offered Sculley a big salary. But Pepsi was already paying him a bigger salary. Jobs offered Sculley a car. Pepsi had bigger cars. Jobs offered Sculley big fringe benefits. Pepsi had bigger and better benefits.

For public-sector employees, McKinsey's "Meaning Quotient" is inherently large. Still, it would certainly help if public executives told a few stories to remind employees, citizens, and potential employees of the meaning involved in all of government work.

Jobs soon figured out that he was going to lose this battle. Finally, Jobs convinced Sculley to leave Pepsi for Apple by asking him a simple question: "Do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugar water or do you want a chance to change the world?" Sculley got the difference and decamped to Silicon Valley.

Sugar water? Maybe there are some tools and techniques that can increase the MQ of selling sugar water. But no matter how many different stories managers tell, the MQ of selling sugar water is never going to be very impressive.

Public agencies don't sell sugar water. They are already in the business of changing the world. As public executives seek to improve performance, they need to remind everyone

that their organization's results have real meaning for real people.

The meaning is already there. The executive does not have to sugar-coat it. It might be protecting vulnerable children. It might be creating the infrastructure that facilitates better economic development and more employment. It might be ensuring that marketplace for financial securities, or for housing, or for employment is fair for all. It might be defending the country.

Such work is inherently meaningful, though it would certainly help to tell a few stories to remind both employees and citizens of this obvious (but too often overlooked) fact.

One of McKinsey's examples of "small, unexpected rewards" that can motivate people comes from the Australia and New Zealand Banking Group, whose CEO gave every employee a bottle of champagne for Christmas. Obviously, the U.S. General Services Administration—indeed any public agency—will not be able to do anything close to that. Still public executives can employ a variety of intrinsic rewards and **esteem opportunities** to demonstrate that the accomplishments of individuals and teams are appreciated.

The meaning of public-sector work can overcome **the entrance problem**. Government will hardly compete with the private sector in terms of salaries, or cars, or benefits. But it can easily compete with meaning.

Indeed, it is the meaning behind public sector work that provides the foundation of what Jim Perry of Indiana University calls "**public-service motivation**." **B**

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