

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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On why all public officials need to remember not only

Exit, Voice, and Loyalty — but also Entrance

In September 2010, four-year-old Marchella Pierce died a horrific death. In May 2012, her mother was convicted of murder and her grandmother of manslaughter. But others were also charged in Pierce's death.

In March 2011, Brooklyn District Attorney Charles Hynes indicted Cherece Bell and Damon Adams for criminally negligent homicide. Adams was the social worker in New York City's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) whose case load included Marchella Pierce. Bell was Adams's immediate supervisor. Neither has yet to come to trial.

Still, Hynes's decision to indict Bell and Adams has provoked dissent. After all, neither Adams nor Bell abused Pierce. Nevertheless, they have been charged with contributing to her death—or, perhaps more accurately, for not having prevented it.

"Marchella might be alive today had these ACS workers attended to her case with the basic levels of care it deserved," Hynes said. "We are going to find out at long last what they're doing at ACS to make sure there are no more child fatalities."

Every year, New Yorkers report nearly 65,000 cases of potential child abuse or neglect to ACS and its staff of 6,500. If each employee handles just ten per year, the agency could thoroughly investigate every one.

Except that ACS has other duties. For 40 percent (or 26,000) of these reports, ACS decided that the report was credible enough to investigate further. In 2010, ACS placed over 7,000 children in foster care, but its foster-care case load is double that.

Any child welfare agency can make two basic errors. It can place a child in foster care when he or she would, in fact, be better off in the original family. Or it can leave the child in the family, when he or she would, actually, be better off in foster care. Some of these choices may be obvious. For others, however, the choice will be complicated and not at all obvious—

and if something goes wrong, subject to much second guessing.

Like all of us, child-welfare workers triage. Like all of us, they have only 168 hours in any week. Like all of us, they can't do everything that they are supposed to do. With responsibilities for a large number of vulnerable children, they can't do a comprehensive job for every one.

"You ask yourself, if I don't do a [home] visit, will this child die?" one ACS worker told *The New York Times*. "That's horrible. But that's what we have to do. The truth is any child can die if you don't make a visit."

In late 2012, Albert Hirschman, who spent nearly four decades at the Institute for Advanced Study, died. When you heard the news, you too might have found your well-underlined copy of Hirschman's *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*. As he explained, when disgruntled with any organization—

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your baseball team or your employer—you have two obvious choices: Quit. Or remain loyal and try to convince the organization to change.

Both "exit" and "voice" are relatively easy to monitor: Fans stop buying tickets; employees resign. Fans complain; employees do too. Observant managers notice such behavior. And from a survey of season-ticket holders who failed to renew and exit interviews with departing employees they can learn why.

There are, however, other unhappy people: potential fans who will never buy a ticket; potential employees who will never fill out an employment

application. They exercise neither *exit* nor *voice*. They simply don't *enter*.

For public agencies that seek to attract intelligent and dedicated employees, the indictment of employees who have seemingly impossible jobs creates an obvious problem. It narrows the pool of potential employees.

Observant managers can also notice this behavior—the drop in the number of job applicants. But how can a manager learn from those who might have applied but never did?

It is clearly essential "to make sure there are no more child fatalities." But is indicting individual employees the best way to achieve this purpose?

Behind Hynes's indictments is the assumption that holding individuals accountable fixes the system. But this isn't obvious. If ACS's child-welfare workers were doing an impossible job under impossible conditions—if daily they must make multiple, complex, decisions under uncertainty—will not one or two eventually make a choice that turns out very wrong? Indeed, which decisions are the right ones?

Then who is responsible? An agency that failed to fix its procedures? A mayor who didn't emphasize training? A city council that cut the budget? Citizens who voted—or who didn't?

Every organization has dysfunctional procedures and incentives. As Olivia Golden of the Urban Institute emphasizes in *Reforming Child Welfare*, identifying and remedying them is essential. Punishing individuals who, while working within these procedures and incentives, make the inevitable mistakes does not fix the problem. By discouraging entrance, it just makes the problem worse. **B**

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