On the pervasive phenomenon of:

Hoop Jumping

A while back, at a meeting of Kennedy School faculty, one colleague expressed surprise that a U.S. government agency had contracted out the development of the strategic plan it was required to produce by the 1993 Government Performance and Results Act. After all, the rule of thumb for contracting says: "Contract out your non-core activities; do not contract out your core activities." What could be more of a core activity than deciding what the agency was trying to accomplish and how it would accomplish this? Thus, this colleague wondered, why would a federal agency contract out the task of developing its own strategic plan?

The answer, I suspect, is because this agency's leaders did not consider the development of this strategic plan to be a core activity. They knew (I hope) what they were trying to accomplish; and they knew (again, I hope) how they were going to do it. They had a strategic plan. To satisfy the GPRA requirements, however, they needed a Capital-S Strategic, Capital-P Plan. Producing a document to keep the GPRA guardians happy would take time—their most valuable resource—but it was not going to help them to manage their agency. Thus, the agency's leaders contracted out the task of fulfilling this requirement. (If they were really smart, they would have contracted it out to a firm that produced a Strategic Plan that, last year, won a prize.)

Even if the agency had prepared its strategic plan internally, it still could have failed to take the task seriously or to pursue it creatively. "Strategic planning systems often drive out strategic thinking as participants 'go through the numbers' of completing yearly planning forms and review cycles," observes Andrew Van de Ven of the University of Minnesota. And he's writing about business firms. "Without the intervention of leadership, structures and systems focus the attention of organizational members to routine, not innovative activities."

The leaders of public agencies must cope with a variety of requirements. Some are designed to prevent people from doing bad things; others, to force people to do good things. The leaders will guarantee that people follow these requirements; they will set up, for example, internal units to make sure that everyone follows the rules. Further, *if* they believe that a rule embodies an important public value, they will try to ensure that the people in their agency follow not only the letter but also the spirit of this rule.

If they conclude, however, that a rule is silly or excessive or counterproductive, they will figure out how to comply with the letter of this rule without wasting valuable resources (especially the time of talented people) on the effort. They will see the rule as a hoop and will quickly and nimbly jump through it.

Public managers—whether they have worked their way up through a governmental hierarchy or have spent all of their prior professional life in the private sector—have seen all this before. They have coped with multiple requirements—those designed to prevent them from doing bad things and those designed to require them to do good things. In the process, they have learned how to jump through the hoops created by such requirements. So, when required to jump through yet another hoop, they know how to do it. Indeed, to become an effective public manager, you have to become a very dexterous hoop jumper.

The legislators and regulators who create these requirements are invariably surprised by this hoop-jumping behavior. They believe that they have created the ideal system—the perfect set of requirements for achieving their purposes. So they immediately attribute bad motives to the hoop jumpers: "Why are these people subverting our wonderful system? Are they evil? Are they stupid? Are they malicious? Can't they see how our new system will help their organization?"

No. They can't. This is why they are not taking the new requirements seriously. The line managers see the new requirements as, at best, a consumer of their valuable time. At worst, they see these requirements as undermining their efforts to improve their agency's performance. Little wonder that they are cynical about both the new system and those who created it. Little wonder they conclude that the system calls for more hoop jumping.

Of course, the system-wide requirements could provide public managers with positive incentives to jump through these hoops. Indeed, the system might even provide them with positive incentives to pursue intelligently the fundamental public purposes behind the hoops. Those who create such systems could

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provide public managers with real reasons to produce whatever is required—be that good strategic plans, good performance measures, good performance targets, or good performance reports.

Actually, creating incentives for managers to *comply* with still more requirements is quite easy; you punish those who don't comply and praise (maybe even reward) some who do. Usually, the task of jumping through the hoops of the new requirements is sufficiently simple that experienced public managers can do it quite adequately.

But to get the leaders of public agencies to pursue intelligently the performance purposes behind these hoops is never simple. To do this difficult and demanding work, public managers need experience, training, and knowledge. To improve performance, agency leaders need skills in setting performance targets and motivating people.

If legislators really want to improve the performance of public agencies, if they want to accomplish the purposes behind the requirements in laws like the Government Performance and Results Act, they need to do more than create systems and require public officials to follow their requirements. They need to invest in creating leaders. **B**

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