

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 the predicament of jumping on:

The Performance Treadmill

Last September, as the major-league baseball season was coming to a close, **David Ortiz** of the Boston Red Sox ruminated aloud: "I don't know if I want to hit 40 homers." And why would a big, powerful major-league player who was in the running for the season's home-run crown not want to hit the magic number of 40? "Because then they're going to ask me for 40 all the time."

Fifty years ago, **Billy Loes** of the Brooklyn Dodgers offered a similar sentiment. Loes didn't hit home runs; he was a pitcher. Still he also recognized the consequence of performing too well: "I have no intentions of winning 20 games," said Loes. Why? Because, then "they keep expecting it of you."

To both Ortiz and Loes, the predicament was obvious: Once you jump on the performance treadmill, you can't jump off. Once you ratchet up your personal (or organizational) performance to a new level, you need to demonstrate that it wasn't a fluke. You need to demonstrate that you weren't just lucky. You need to demonstrate that you really are a top performer. Unfortunately, the only way to do this—the only way to prove that you weren't just lucky—is to do it again. Having done it once, you are stuck.

Of course, it could have been a fluke. It could have been pure luck. It doesn't make any difference. You are still stuck.

For, if you fail to repeat last year's achievement, everyone will talk: "See, it was just a fluke." "I told you it was nothing but luck." And you know that this is what your colleagues, as well as numerous outsiders, have been thinking all along. You don't have to hear the gossip yourself to know what people are saying.

Thus you are stuck. If you want to shut down the gossip, if you want to prove that you are as good as last year's performance implies, you have to do it again.

This may suggest a subconscious reason why some public-sector managers fear the demand—even the possibility—that they improve their agency's performance. They, too, recognize the predicament: If you hit 40 homers last year, you ought to be able to hit 40 again this year. If you won 20 games last year, you ought to be able to win 20 this year. That's what people expect from top performers. That's the consequence of demonstrating the ability to perform at a very high level. People expect that you can do it again—year, after year, after year. Do you want to prove them wrong? Do you want to prove that you aren't really as good as last year's press?

Thus, any effort by public managers to exercise performance leadership is simultaneously an effort to jump on the performance treadmill. They are constructing a treadmill for themselves, for their organizations, for their



employees, and for their collaborators. And once they jump on the treadmill, they can't get off. They have to keep running—with the success on one lap requiring even more success on the next. Once they are on the treadmill, they have to keep running—running so that they can somehow ratchet up performance again next year.

Business managers are very familiar with this treadmill. The shareholders don't say: "Because you did such a good job this year, you can take next year off." Instead, this year's performance becomes the baseline for next year's targets. This year's performance becomes the benchmark for measuring next year's accomplishments. In business, the expectations of the investors creates the performance treadmill. Every year, the investors demand that the firm improve its performance over last year's.

Once you jump on the performance treadmill, you can't jump off. Once you ratchet up performance to a new level, you need to prove that you weren't just lucky. And the only way to prove that is to do it again.

In contrast, the leaders of a public-sector organization are not required to jump on the performance treadmill. After all, they have a lot of other responsibilities. Citizens are not single-minded in demanding that this year's performance becomes the baseline for next year's improvements. They are at least as focused on demanding that the managers of public agencies deploy their financial assets precisely as prescribed by legislation and that they treat citizens, employees and applicants, vendors and bidders very, very fairly. Indeed, these demands are enough to keep any self-respecting public manager quite busy. Why not focus on coping with the finance and fairness side of the accountability dilemma and leave the demands for improving performance to a successor?

For those who actually want to get their organization to jump on the performance treadmill, performance targets are a useful tool. Set a first-year or first-quarter target for every unit in the agency. Most units won't

make their target. They won't know how to do it. They won't believe it's for real. They won't devote sufficient attention to the task.

But a few will. And those few are stuck. It doesn't make any difference that it was a fluke. It doesn't make any difference that they were lucky. They are stuck.

For the only way that they can convince people that it wasn't a fluke—that they weren't lucky—is to do it again. They didn't jump on the performance treadmill. They fell on to it. It doesn't make any difference. They are stuck.

If the leaders of a public agency do choose to ratchet up performance, they should not fool themselves. They are simultaneously choosing to be stuck. They are choosing to jump on the performance treadmill. And once they have jumped on, they can't jump off.

Billy Loes's best year was 1953, when he won 14 games for Brooklyn. No one ever expected him to win 20 games.

Last year, David Ortiz hit 41 homers for Boston. Now he's on the performance treadmill, and this year, the citizens of Red Sox Nation are expecting even more. **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 in Lisbon.