

Bob Behn's 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.

Vol. 4, No. 8, April 2007

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On why public managers have so much difficulty:

Measuring Individual Contributions

Growing up, I easily kept track of which baseball players were contributing the most to their team. I just checked the back of each player's baseball card for batting average, home-runs, and RBIs (which, for the uninitiated, stands for "runs batted in"). For a pitcher, I would check the won-lost record and ERA (which stands not for "Equal Rights Amendment" but for "earned run average").

That, however, is so last century.

Today, to know who are baseball's big contributors, you have to join SABR (the Society for Baseball Research), talk to Bill James, or log onto www.baseballprospectus.com. These are the sources of complex statistics and refined analyses of every major leaguer who has played since Henry Chadwick invented the box score in the 1800s.

If you pay some attention to baseball, you have heard of other statistics such as OBP (the hitter's "on base percentage") and OPS (OBP plus "slugging percentage"). But have you kept up on the newest ones: VORP for "Value Over Replacement Player" or EqA for "Equivalent Average"?

Why do these Sabermetricians collect all of these data and make all of these calculations? In part, they do it because it is fun. (You may not think that baseball statistics—or any statistics—are fun, but they do.)

Also, they are trying to answer a perplexing question: Who is the better player? Who makes the biggest contribution to his team? For some obvious and not so obvious reasons, this question is not easy to answer.

After all, an individual player's performance depends not only upon his skill and wile. It also depends on the circumstances. And these circumstances can vary markedly.

Some pitchers are supported by a brilliant defense. Some aren't. Some hitters come to bat with more runners on base, which gives them more chances to get an RBI. Some don't. Sometimes the ball takes a bad bounce. Sometimes it doesn't.

Sometimes the temporary effect of such differences is neutralized by a 162-game season or by a ten-year career. Sometimes it isn't.

Baseball executives need to figure out which players made truly significant contributions last year and thus who they should sign next year. To make these decisions, they need sophisticated analyses of detailed data.

So baseball statisticians spend lifetimes inventing, testing, critiquing, and revising various statistical indices that have the potential to shed some light on a player's performance.

VORP is designed to reveal how much better an individual offensive player is than a minimally acceptable one. It reveals how many runs this player contributes over the minimum.

In baseball, the team that scores the most runs wins. What, however, does it mean for a public agency to win? And how can a public manager figure out who is making a significant contribution to the agency's success if no one has defined success?

EqA is a summary statistic derived from nine other pieces of data. It is designed to measure a player's total offensive production taking into account the player's league and team. It is expressed on a scale similar to a batting average.

All of this for people who play a game.

Inventing some statistical indices for the performance of a public employee would be much more complex. For several reasons, the field on which public agencies, managers, and employees play is much more complicated, much more varied, and much more unpredictable than a baseball field.

Moreover, the definition of winning isn't clear. In baseball, the team that scores the most runs wins. No one disputes this. No one claims that the

team with the most hits or the most strikes wins. Since Abner Doubleday or Alexander Cartwright (or whomever you credit) invented the game, the team scoring the most runs wins.

How, however, does a public agency win? Different people have markedly different definitions of winning—and reading the authorizing legislation of an agency only increases the confusion. And baseball managers think they have a tough job.

Moreover, most public employees and most public managers rarely get specific guidance about what they should accomplish. When, Ed Koch was New York's mayor, he selected Ellen Schall to head the Department of Juvenile Justice and divulged what winning meant to him: "Don't let them out. Do as much for them as you can." In two succinct sentences, Koch was, simultaneously, both vague and contradictory.

This is why public executives have the responsibility to craft purposes. No one is clearly specifying their organization's purposes. No one is telling them what winning is.

Winning can't be the only thing, if no one can specify what this "thing" is. And how can a public manager figure out who is making a significant contribution to the agency's success if no one has defined success? Certainly the traditional performance-appraisal form is of little use.

Why? Because it fails to focus on results produced and, instead, relies on subjective judgments. It is the equivalent of rating a baseball player by the elegance of his batting stance. In government, as in baseball, any measure of an individual's value must focus on his or her contribution to real results. **B**

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