

# 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.

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On the difficulty of

## Predicting Managerial Performance

In 1978, in the 20th round of the amateur baseball draft, the Philadelphia Phillies chose Ryne Sandberg. Overall, Sandberg was the 511th pick.

Six years later (after being traded to the Chicago Cubs), Sandberg was overwhelmingly selected as the National League's most valuable player. From 1984 to 1993, he played in ten straight All-Star games.

In 2005, Sandberg was elected to baseball's Hall of Fame. Of the players drafted in 1978, only one other has been so honored. (In the second round, future Hall of Famer Cal Ripken was chosen by the Baltimore Orioles, the team for which his father worked.)

This means that on 509 separate opportunities, very savvy baseball executives on all 26 major-league baseball teams chose another player. All of them failed to recognize Sandberg's potential and chose a player who proved much less successful.

In fact, of the 26 players selected in the first round of the 1978 draft, twelve of them—or nearly half—never played a single game for a major league team. Of the 20 players that the Phillies drafted before Sandberg, only two ever played in the major leagues—one for just 62 games; the other for a mere four.

Moreover, the 1978 draft was not that unusual; over the next two decades, of the 669 players drafted in the first round, 205 of them—over 30%—never played in a major league game. And of those who did make it to the majors, some got no more than the proverbial *cup of coffee*.

Branch Rickey was a baseball innovator, who invented the farm system. He designed and implemented the strategy that broke baseball's color barrier and brought Jackie Robinson to the Brooklyn Dodgers. Baseball Commissioner Happy Chandler once observed that Rickey knew "how to put a dollar sign on a muscle." Today, however, few executives seem to know how to do this. When they come to select their future players,

baseball executives appear to be doing little more than guessing.

Yet when they make these choices, they do possess a lot of information. They can scout any high school or college player in whom they are interested. Thus, they have been able to actually watch them perform—multiple times, in multiple situations.

Moreover, they have a lot of performance data on each such player. And they can disaggregate these data in multiple ways: How does this prospect hit with two strikes against left-handed pitching? Indeed, over the last several decades many baseball teams—beginning with the Oakland Athletics—have aggressively used such statistics to select their players.

Still, approximately a third of the time, they aren't even close. Why?

Can a baseball player hit a major-league curveball? We learn the answer only after the player faces a real major-league curveball. The same is true for a public manager; success with less complex tasks does not assure success in a major-league job.

Because, I think, it is difficult to predict how someone will perform at the next level. Sure, a player may be a baseball star in college. But this does not guarantee that he will perform well at the various minor-league levels, let alone in the major leagues. After all, at each successive level, not only will more of the players be better and thus the caliber of play be more challenging; in addition, the nature of the game will be qualitatively different. The individual players and the team strategies will be more sophisticated, more intelligent. At each level, the game becomes more demanding.

Consequently, the skills and approach that made a player successful at one level may prove less effective at the next. This is captured in the standard question that every baseball

executive asks about any baseball prospect: "Can he hit a major-league curveball?"

Unfortunately, there is no way to obtain a firm answer to this question until the player actually hits against a pitcher who has a deceptive and effective major-league curveball.

The same problem arises whenever a public-management position becomes vacant. There are a lot of candidates; many of them have performed very well within the organization's minor leagues. Other candidates have successful records in the minor leagues of other organizations in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. But which of these candidates will be able to perform well at the next level? Which one will be able to hit a major-league curveball?

Furthermore, we may not even know which way this curveball will curve. What might it look like? It might be dealing with an assertive stakeholder organization. It might be crafting an effective multi-organization collaborative. It might be motivating a lethargic organization to achieve a stretch target. Who knows? It might be all three. Or, it might be a challenge we haven't even thought about yet. From all of our prospects, which one should we draft?

This is the same question we citizens ask ourselves when we walk into the voting booth. We know how the incumbent is performing. But we have a lot less information about how the challenger will perform at this new, more demanding level. And sometimes there is no incumbent, only prospects. Would someone please tell us: Which candidate can hit the major-league fastball? **B**

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