

# 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 why public executives need to remember that

## Sometimes Weird Works

Officially, he is 5 feet, 9 inches tall. That is a lie. Nobody believes it. He is closer to 5 feet 7. Maybe. In October 2007, during the World Series, the clubhouse guy at Coors Field in Colorado refused to let him in. Obviously, this imposter was not a major league baseball player.

Yet, **Dustin Pedroia** is just that and more. He plays second base for the Boston Red Sox, and last year he hit .326 with a slugging percentage of .493. Did I mention that he also won the American League's most valuable player award? At 5-7? That's weird.

Tony Gwynn thinks that Dustin Pedroia is weird. Gwynn, a Hall of Famer with a .338 lifetime batting average, is too polite to use the word "weird." But it's clear that's what Gwynn thinks: "This guy is 5-8, and he's supposed to be the best guy on this team?" Michael Schell, chief of the biostatistics division at the University of South Florida's Moffitt Cancer Center, has compiled the definitive list of *Baseball's All-Time Best Hitters*. Gwynn is number one on Schell's list; so, when it comes to hitting a baseball, he should know.

Still, Gwynn isn't alone. Everyone in baseball thinks that Pedroia is weird. His swing is a vicious uppercut that has motivated numerous commentators to suggest that he take a more modest approach more befitting of his physical stature.

After all, for his size and his position, Pedroia should be lucky to bat ninth. Yet, for several days last September, when several of Boston's power hitters were injured, Pedroia batted cleanup. And with first base open, what did Ozzie Guillén, the manager of the opposing Chicago White Sox do? After the game, Guillén explained: "I never thought I would walk a jockey."

For Dustin Pedroia and the Boston Red Sox, weird works.

This, however, isn't only true in baseball. **Robert Sutton** makes the same argument in his book, *Weird Ideas That Work*. Sutton, a professor

of management science and engineering at Stanford University, examines how human knowledge about organizational behavior gets applied—and misapplied—in business. Consider just two of Sutton's 11½ weird ideas.

Weird Idea #1 is quite simple: "Hire 'Slow Learners' (of the Organizational Code)." That certainly sounds weird. Sutton, however, seeks to foster innovation and knows (as we all do) that every organization sends out subtle (and not so subtle) signals about what is acceptable and what isn't. Sutton, however, favors employees who are "unfettered by social norms." Thus, he argues, "it is smart to hire slow learners, to tolerate deviants, heretics, eccentrics, crackpots, weirdoes, and just plain original thinkers, even though they will come up with many ideas that are strange mutations,

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dead ends, and utter failures."

Weird idea #6 is "Reward Success and Failure, Punish Inaction." "Failure stinks," admits Sutton, yet he emphasizes that "it is impossible to generate a few good ideas without generating a lot of bad ideas."

So how can an organization produce a lot of bad ideas (plus a few good ones)? Answer: reward both of them. Moreover, Sutton argues, you need to punish people who produce neither good nor bad ideas. "Firms should demote, transfer, and even fire people who spend day after day talking about and planning what they are going to do, but never doing it." And, because success automatically comes with so much praise, Sutton suggests that firms should "reward failure even

more than success." That is certifiably weird.

**Jeffrey Pfeffer**, a professor of organizational behavior at Stanford's Graduate School of Business, offers his own weird ideas in a book titled, *What Were They Thinking: Unconventional Wisdom About Management*.

Like Sutton, his coauthor on other books, Pfeffer concedes the inevitability of errors, yet notes that "admitting mistakes is rare in corporations." Indeed, he writes, the "tendency to want to hear good news is extremely widespread and organizational leaders signal in a variety of subtle and less subtle ways that they want to be told what they want to hear."

Pfeffer argues that firms should create "a culture where people feel free to admit they need help." After all, until people admit their mistakes, until they admit that they don't know what to do, and thus until they admit that they need help, they can't start learning. Thus, one of Pfeffer's unconventional suggestions is to "inject an organization with truth serum."

In the business world, the ideas of Sutton and Pfeffer are certainly weird. Yet, in the public sector, they are weirder still. Imagine public executives hiring deviants, rewarding failure, or injecting their agencies with truth serum. Business firms may be wedded to conventional thinking, but government agencies are—historically, at least—even more sclerotic and resistant to the weird.

A century ago, the best double-play combination was **Tinkers to Evers to Chance**. Today, however, if you want to build an organization full of most valuable (and, yes, weird) players, you need Pedroia to Sutton to Pfeffer. **B**

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