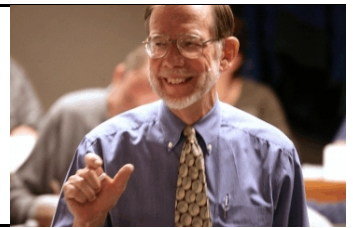


Bob

# Behn's Performance Leadership Report

An occasional (and maybe even insightful) examination of the issues, dilemmas, challenges, and opportunities for improving performance and producing real results in public agencies.



On why, to produce significant results, public executives need to

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## Combine Ted Williams's Goals and Grit

On next-to-the-last day of the baseball season, Ted Williams had a batting average of .39955. That number is off the charts. Any major league baseball player who has a batting average above .300—that's three hits for every ten chances—is a very good hitter. Over an entire season, for every ten chances, Williams was getting nearly—but not quite—four hits.

Still, .39955 does round off to .400. So, to preserve a very impressive .400 average, Williams could have simply not played on the season's last day.

Not Williams. He played. On that Sunday afternoon, in four at bats, Williams had four hits. His average was now a nice, comfortable .4048. But the team had another game to play. Again, to preserve his .400 season, Williams could have sat it out. Not Williams. He played the second game, too. Going two for four, Williams ended the season with a batting average of .406.

That was in 1941. In over half a century since, no major-league baseball player (not even a steroid imbiber) has hit .400 for an entire season.

Ted Williams was a man with a purpose. "A man has to have goals—for a day, for a lifetime," said Williams. And his was "to have people say, 'There goes Ted Williams, the greatest hitter who ever lived.'"

Williams, of course, had several valuable assets. He had superb eyesight and excellent hand-eye coordination. And he was intelligent too. He was always studying pitchers and pitching.

Williams determined that a pitcher's fastball came in at an angle of 4.5 to 5 degrees to the horizontal, while for a curveball the angle was between 10 and 15 degrees. Thus, he concluded that his swing should have a slight uppercut, thus creating a larger "impact zone," the time during which his bat had contact with the ball.

Moreover, he understood Bernoulli's principle of fluid dynamics that explained why curve balls curved and why airplanes (like the ones he flew in

World War II and the Korean War) stayed in the air. "You had to be an MIT graduate," said pitcher Bob Lemon, "to know what the hell he was talking about."

But above all, Williams had grit. In pursuit of his goal—to become baseball's greatest hitter—he was indefatigable, both intellectually and physically.

"Ballplayers are not born great," Williams argued when he was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. "They're not born great hitters or pitchers or managers. And luck isn't the big factor. No one has come up with a substitute for hard work. I've never met a great player who didn't have to work harder at learning to play ball than anything else he ever did." Indeed, Williams always worked hard.

Effective leaders, report Angela Duckworth and her colleagues, share a "perseverance and passion for long-term goals." To improve performance, public executives need this same kind of consistent and durable effort. Like Ted Williams, they need grit.

In the final at bat of his career, Williams hit a home run. John Updike wrote a now-classic article in *The New Yorker* about that game: "Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu." In it Updike described Williams as "the classic ballplayer of the game on a hot August weekday, before a small crowd, when the only thing at stake is the tissue-thin difference between a thing done well and a thing done ill."

Yes, Williams's intelligence and natural ability were important. Equally so were his goals and his grit.

Angela Duckworth, of the University of Pennsylvania's Department of Psychology, defines "grit" as the "perseverance and passion for long-term goals." Moreover, she and her colleagues have found that "grit may be

as essential as talent to high accomplishment."

For example, West Point plebes who score high on the grit scale are more likely to survive Beast Barracks. Moreover, this measure of grit is a better predictor than the summary measure created by the Academy's admissions committee.

From their research, Duckworth and her colleagues conclude that the same applies to teachers and students. Novice teachers who measured higher on grit produced higher academic gains in their students. Grittier undergraduates earned better grades. And adults with more grit finished more years of education.

To Duckworth's research group, grit means "working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress." Moreover, Duckworth's research "suggests that one personal quality is shared by the most prominent leaders in every field." That quality is "grit."

Yes, to improve an agency's performance, public executives need talent. But they also need grit. "Achievement is the product of talent and effort," writes Duckworth, and this effort must be more than short bursts of intensity. The "consistency and duration" of this effort is essential.

As Peter Drucker once observed, "whenever anything is being accomplished, it is being done, I have learned, by a monomaniac with a mission."

From 1939 through 1961, the left fielder for the Boston Red Sox was a monomaniac with a mission. His name was Ted Williams. **B**

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