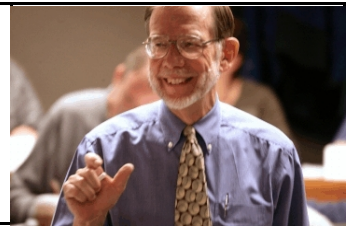


Bob

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 all public executives need to be aware of how

Vol. 9, No. 8, April 2011
Copyright © 2011 by Robert D. Behn

Multitasking Creates Mediocrity and Mistakes

April 26, 2009. Fenway Park. Boston Red Sox vs. New York Yankees.

Bottom of the fifth inning. Bases loaded. Andy Pettitte pitching for the Yankees. Jacoby Ellsbury, Boston's fastest player, on third base. But Pettitte isn't paying attention.

Ellsbury steals home.

Andy Pettitte may not think so, but to Judy and me, cheering from the bleachers, this is baseball at its best.

In four seasons with the Red Sox, Ellsbury has stolen 136 bases. Last year, Ellsbury was hurt, playing only 18 games. But in 2009, he stole 70 bases—almost one every other game.

In the last five seasons, only seven major-league baseball players have stolen home. And, amazingly, this was the second time that the pitcher who wasn't paying attention was New York's Pettitte.

Another one of the seven was Carl Crawford. During his nine years with the Tampa Bay Rays, Crawford stole 409 bases. In 2009, he stole 60. **In one game in 2006, Crawford stole second, third, and home — against the Red Sox.**

This year, however, Carl Crawford plays for the Red Sox. For baseball pitchers, the combination of Ellsbury and Crawford is going to provoke headaches. For when either of them gets on base, he becomes an obvious threat to steal.

Thus, the pitcher is forced to pay attention both to the runner and to the batter. This is the multitasker's nightmare.

Unfortunately, we humans are lousy multitaskers. If the pitcher concentrates too much on the batter and not enough on the runner, the runner will have a much easier time stealing the next base. If the pitcher concentrates on the runner and not enough on the batter, the batter will have a much easier time with the pitch—either ignoring the ball because it isn't close to the strike zone or hitting it because it is delivered poorly. Ellsbury and Crawford are going to drive pitchers crazy.

Indeed, during 2011, Ellsbury and Crawford are going to be exhibit A & B (or B & A) for the problem of multitasking. And just wait until Ellsbury is on third and Crawford is on first.

We humans believe, of course, that we are excellent at multitasking. Just ask us. In fact, however, people who report that they are excellent multitaskers are easily distracted. **"High multitaskers are suckers for irrelevancy,"** concluded Clifford Nass of Stanford University. **"Everything distracts them."**

Nass and his colleagues gave a battery of tests to both high and low multitaskers. Guess what: The *low* multitaskers did better. **"Multitaskers were just lousy at everything,"** observed Nass. **"We thought multitaskers were very much in control of information,"** noted Eyal Ophir, also of Stanford. **"It turns out, they were just getting all confused."**

We humans think we are excellent multitaskers. In fact, however, we are simply delusional. **Indeed, the research reveals that those of us who do the most multitasking are actually the worst at it.**

Floyd Bloom, the neuroscientist from Scripps Institute calls our brain **"the most complex structure that exists in the universe."** It can perform many complex tasks amazingly well. This is because the brain's neurons can fire dazzlingly fast.

Between two complex tasks, however, the brain has to reset itself. We don't have two brains, let alone twenty-two. We have only one. Yes: the parts of our brain that keep the heart pumping and the lungs breathing work automatically and independently of the parts that do the complex thinking.

At some tasks, however, our brain doesn't always do so well. These are

multiple, simultaneous tasks that involve thinking and deciding. These tasks require the brain to reset between each thought—between each choice. This creates a lag. And if the brain is trying to go back and forth between two different tasks, these lags begin to accumulate (though to these lags, we humans are completely oblivious).

Some types of multitasking are easy. We can make the bed and talk at the same time. Making the bed is a routine task that we have done hundreds of times; it requires no thinking. But if two tasks are both complex, the brain has to work harder.

Have you heard of **"the invisible gorilla"**? Daniel Simons of the University of Illinois and Christopher Chabris of Union College created a simple video. Three people wearing white t-shirts pass a basketball among themselves, while also weaving among three other people in black t-shirts doing the same thing. Simons and Chabris asked people to count the number of times the people wearing the white t-shirts passed the ball.

This counting is not simple. It requires your undivided attention. So when a gorilla walks across the screen, you never see it. Or, if you do pick it up, you lose count.

When faced with two concurrent and complex tasks, we humans have two alternatives. Option 1: We can try to do both tasks at the same time, in which case we will do neither of them well. Option 2: We can focus on just one task—which we will be able to do well—while ignoring the other, which won't get done at all.

No wonder Andy Pettitte decided it was time to retire from baseball. **B**

Robert D. Behn is a lecturer at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government where he chairs the executive-education program **"Driving Government Performance: Leadership Strategies that Produce Results."** His publications include: *Performance Leadership: 11 Better Practices That Can Ratchet Up Performance.*