

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 officials need to learn how to

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Exercise Leadership Without Authority

Last September, the Boston Red Sox collapsed. They didn't just collapse. They *Collapsed*—with a capital C. It was the biggest collapse since the Berlin Wall.

At the end of last August, with just 27 games to play, Boston had a nine-game lead in the race to make the playoffs as the “wild-card” team. Of their remaining games, however, the team won just seven. Instead of going to the playoffs, the team went home.

The recriminations came quickly. It was revealed that several starting pitchers were eating chicken and drinking beer in the clubhouse during the games. The field manager was dismissed, and the general manager left. Red Sox Nation was not happy.

In their collapse, what did the Red Sox miss most? Pitching? Hitting? Defense?

What the Red Sox missed most was **Johnny Damon**.

In 2004, Damon played center field and hit lead-off. He started more games (148 out of 162) and played more innings than any other member of the team. He was a key member of that 2004 Red Sox team that won the World Series for Boston for the first time in 86 years.

But wait, baseball aficionados will say. How could the Red Sox have missed Damon last September? He hasn't played for Boston since 2005. In the past six seasons, he had played four with the New York Yankees, one with the Detroit Tigers, and another with the Tampa Bay Rays.

Moreover, during his seventeen-year career, Damon was never the league's (or even his team's) best outfielder. He never hit the most home runs or had the highest batting average. He never ranked at the top of the clever statistics created by the sabermetricians of the **Society for American Baseball Research**.

Damon was never a MVP. He never won any fancy awards. He is unlikely to be elected to the **Baseball Hall of Fame**.

Throughout his career, however, Johnny Damon has been a clubhouse leader. He never had any official authority. He was just one of twenty-five players. Yet, he exercised leadership. In September 2011, not one of the twenty-five players on the Boston Red Sox was able to exercise that kind of essential leadership.

Manny Acta, manager of the Cleveland Indians, is known as a motivator—someone who can get the best out of his players. Yet he recognizes the value of leadership from within the team. “If you can have two or three guys in the clubhouse who put out the fires, that means a lot, because players respond to their peers.”

Any team needs people who will tell their colleagues, “I know you're hurt. But you got to play. We need you. We need you today.” Says Acta, “every team needs those guys.”

“Leadership is not the same as authority,” argue Heifetz and Linsky. Heifetz focuses on the activity of “exercising leadership” and avoids the word “leader” because we implicitly assume the leader is the person at the top of the organizational hierarchy.

Acta thinks this peer-to-peer leadership is most powerful: “If their peers are telling them, ‘You're messing up, stop it,’ then that sometimes means more and is more effective than if the manager or the coaches are saying it.”

What the Red Sox needed most last September was Johnny Damon. Not necessarily *the* Johnny Damon. Certainly, however, they needed a Johnny Damon. They needed someone who would say, “You're messing up. You've got to stop it. Stop it Now!”

“Leadership is not the same as authority,” write Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky in *Leadership on the Line*.

Traditionally, however, we have implicitly associated leadership with authority. The leader is the person at the top of the hierarchy: the mayor of the city, the president of the firm, the director of the department. Of course, when this hierarchical superior is absent, the deputy automatically becomes the leader.

Moreover, we assign to this hierarchical head a clear and central role—the formal responsibility for the organization's future. For the rest of us, this is convenient. We have delegated (if only implicitly) the guidance and operation of the organization to the individual at the very top. This “leader” is responsible; the rest of us are not. And if things go wrong, we know who is to be **held accountable**.

If the team doesn't make the playoffs, the players still get to stay. It is the manager—the hierarchical “leader”—who gets fired.

Heifetz, however, tends “to avoid the term *leader* because it generally connotes an authority figure (the leader of the band) or a specific set of personal traits (He's a real leader).” Instead, in *Leadership without Easy Answers*, he prefers “to use the active phrase ‘exercising leadership.’” Heifetz wants to “focus on the activity of leadership and not on the role of authority or the intrinsic qualities of any person.” And this “activity of leadership” can come from anyone, anywhere in the organization.

So far in 2012, the Boston Red Sox have continued their mediocre play of last September. Meanwhile, Johnny Damon is playing—and providing leadership without any authority—for Manny Acta's Cleveland Indians. **B**

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