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# 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 public officials need to recognize that

“What were they thinking?”  
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## Failure Has To Be An Option

Even though you remember it, he never said it. Even if you never saw the film, you still remember it. But that doesn't mean he said it.

Oh yes, Gene Kranz said it in the film *Apollo 13*. Actually, it was the actor playing Gene Kranz who said it. Yet, in April 1970, when Mission Control was frantically trying to rescue the crew of Apollo 13, neither Kranz nor anyone else at NASA said “Failure is not an option.”

Kranz did, however, say something similar when the script writers for the film interviewed him. And they immediately recognized that their art needed to improve a little on life.

Still, we have all memorized—in fact, internalized—these five words: “Failure is not an option.” And when lives are in danger, it is certainly a necessary mantra—one around which everyone can mobilize.

But should failure always be “not an option”? Should failure *never* be an option? Are there no situations in which failure is acceptable?

In reality, most successes are preceded by failure. Indeed, the list of people and projects whose success only followed failures—often multiple failures—is long and distinguished: Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill. Thomas Edison and Henry Ford. Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin. Ludwig van Beethoven and Igor Stravinsky. Steve Jobs and Bill Gates.

Across the spectrum of human endeavors—from leadership, to science, to business, to music, to technology—great successes were achieved only after an inevitable series of failures. Often after colossal failures.

Indeed, failures necessarily precede success. And the bigger the ultimate success, the bigger and more numerous will be these necessary failures.

In government, all failures are conspicuous candidates for punishment. Yet not all failures are equal. The cause of some failures is deceit. (Think emission testing software.) The cause of other failures is incompe-

tence. (Think, I hope, airbags.)

The cause of some failures, however, is our intellectual inability to invent—on the very first try—a perfect solution to an intractable problem.

Unfortunately, most public-sector problems are, by definition, intractable. Otherwise the private sector would have solved them. They have become public problems precisely because they are intractable.

Solving such problems requires experimentation. And all experiments come with the possibility of failure—often a high probability of failure.

After all, the experiment is based on a guess—a guess about what will happen if we do something different.

In science, this “guess” is given a more distinguished title: It is a “hypothesis.” Maybe a hypothesis is an “educated guess.” Maybe it is a “very educated guess.” Or maybe it is just a “wild guess” (if only because none of the educated guesses have worked): Think neutrino and dark matter.

Not all failures are equal. The cause of some is deceit. (Think emission-testing software.) For others it is incompetence. (Think, I hope, airbags.) For still others, the cause is our inability to invent a perfect solution to an intractable problem.

Of course, the more educated the guesser, the more likely the guess will work. Still, it is just a guess. And more likely than not, it won't work. As Einstein reportedly observed: “If we knew what we were doing, it wouldn't be called ‘research.’” (Please note: the Internet is prone to failures.)

If we are going to solve public-sector problems, if we are going to solve intractable problems that the private sector can't solve, we have to experiment. And with these experiments comes, inevitably, failure.

Punishing failure is easy. The story

is simple. Or, it can be made so by plausibly ascribing the failure to incompetence or, even better, to deceit.

Suppose, however, the failure resulted from the difficulty of formulating an educated guess for solving an intractable problem. Suppose, from the complete collection of educated and wild guesses, the one chosen had the highest probability of success. Suppose, also, that this probability was very low. Still, it was a very intelligent guess. Should the bravery to experiment—in the face of the high probability of criticism—with an intelligent hypothesis be punished. Or should it, even though it failed, be recognized as a necessary and intelligent effort to produce better results?

In 1920, Robert Goddard, often called the father of modern rocketry, was ridiculed on the editorial page of *The New York Times*: “That Professor Goddard . . . does not know the relation of action to reaction, and of the need to have something better than a vacuum against which to react—to say that would be absurd. Of course he only seems to lack the knowledge ladled out daily in high schools.”

On July 17, 1969, the day after Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, and Michael Collins took off for the moon in Apollo 11, *The Times* retracted its 49-year-old critique of Goddard: “Further investigation and experimentation have confirmed the findings of Isaac Newton in the 17th century and it is now definitely established that a rocket can function in a vacuum as well as in an atmosphere. *The Times* regrets the error.”

Maybe *The Times* should have called its “error” a “hypothesis.” **B**

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