

Bob

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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.



"What were they thinking?"

Vol. 13, No. 8, April 2016

On why all public executives need to

## Learn to Hit a Major-League Curveball

In March, 2006, the Boston Red Sox traded pitcher **Bronson Arroyo** to the Cincinnati Reds for outfielder **Wily Mo Peña**. Big mistake.

Arroyo was a skinny (but effective) pitcher: six feet, four inches, but only 190 lbs. Peña was a big powerful hitter: six feet, three; 260 lbs.

On Tuesday, April 11, 2006. Judy and I were at Fenway Park for Opening Day. In Boston, Opening Day is a holiday. Maybe not quite as big as **Allston Christmas**—August 31 and September 1—when the apartment leases for university students expire, and they leave their old sofas and tables on the curb for any elf who will lug them away. Still, in Boston, Opening Day is always big — as in BIG!

In the the fourth inning, Peña replaced Boston's right fielder who was injured. In his first at bat, he hit a fly-ball — an easy out. On his next at bat, he struck out swinging.

But, in the seventh inning, Peña got a chance to redeem himself. A deep fly ball came his way. Back he went to the wall, but he didn't catch it. Instead, the ball bounced off his glove and into the stands. Home run!

Later that day, Peña did catch two fly balls, for which the Fenway fans cheered him—sarcastically. (Being new to Boston, Peña did not get this.)

That same day, Arroyo, pitching in Cincinnati, hit his second home run of the year. Boston's sarcaistas noted that in the home-run race it was Bronson Arroyo 2, Wily Mo Peña —1.

Arroyo pitched in the majors for 15 seasons, starting 369 games and making the 2006 All Star team.

Peña, however, was not so successful. He was good at hitting home runs—big, towering home runs. But only if the pitcher threw him a fast ball. If the pitcher threw a curveball, Peña didn't stand a chance.

Indeed, Wily Mo Peña never learned to hit a major-league curveball. Spending parts of eight years in the major leagues, he hit 84 home runs, but struck out 559 times.

This is often what makes the difference when a minor-league baseball player gets promoted to the major leagues. He has done well against minor-league pitching. Very well. That's why he has been promoted.

Now, however, the game is different—different in many ways. For most batters, one big difference is the curveball—the *major-league curveball*. It doesn't follow the usual trajectory, predicted by Isaac Newton's laws of motion. **A curveball's path is affected by Daniel Bernoulli's principle of fluid dynamics: If the speed of a fluid increases, its pressure decreases.**

Bernoulli's principle is what keeps an airplane in the air. The wing is curved so that the air molecules that go over the top of the wing have to go further (and thus faster) than the molecules that go under the wing. Thus, there is less pressure on the top of the wing than on its bottom, so if the plane is moving fast enough, it doesn't fall. It continues to fly.

*When a public manager is promoted, he or she will face a major-league curve ball. This new challenge is something he or she has never seen before. Thus, the manager must learn to craft a completely new strategy that fits the completely new situation.*

The same principle applies to a rotating curveball. The rotation reduces the air pressure on one side of the ball compared with the other side. Thus, the ball's trajectory curves.

For a batter, predicting the trajectory of a fast ball is much easier than predicting it for a curveball. And if he cannot distinguish between a curveball and a fast ball, he can't predict its trajectory—and thus can't hit it.

Against traditional, fast-ball pitchers, Wily Mo Peña hit lots of home runs. Against Daniel Bernoulli, however, Peña didn't stand a chance.

A minor league baseball player who is trying to make it in the major leagues has seen curveballs. But he hasn't seen a *major-league curveball*. As a result, he doesn't know what to do: To swing or not to swing? For a baseball player up from the minor leagues, that is the question.

Every profession has its equivalent of the major-league curveball. Indeed, the word "curveball" has come to mean something unexpected. Something unusual. Something a person has never seen before.

Actually, most professional promotions come with multiple curveballs. For a public executive, the *major-league curveball* is the big test. Over the years, in a variety of circumstances, the executive has developed a large management and leadership repertoire. When faced with a problem, the executive searches this repertoire for a similar problem. Then with some subtle adaptations of the strategies in this repertoire, the executive will craft a new approach that fits the current situation.

At the same time, an executive must continuously add to his or her management and leadership repertoire. What worked in the minors, often won't work in the majors. To be truly effective, a public executive needs to recognize each new curveball, to identify its unusual, unique features, and then to create a new leadership strategy designed to produce results that will help achieve the organization's purposes.

To make it to the major leagues of performance leadership, a public executive has to be able to hit every new, major-league curveball. **B**

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