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.

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 Benoulli, 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.