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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?"  
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On why it is important for all public executives to remember

## Why the Generals Have It Easy

Compared with most public executives, the generals have it easy: They get to declare victory.

You probably weren't in Yorktown to witness General Charles O'Hara present the sword of surrender to General George Washington's top officer, General Benjamin Lincoln.

I also don't think you were at Appomattox Court House. Still you are well aware of General Ulysses S. Grant's victory.

You might be old enough, however, to have been on the deck of the USS Missouri in 1945 to witness General Douglas MacArthur's victory. More likely, you remember his less final but more symbolic victory when he "returned" to the Philippines.

To dramatize that he had made good on his "I-shall-return" pledge, MacArthur waded ashore twice. He wanted a dramatic image of his victory, but on the first try, the photographer was MIA. So MacArthur went back and did it all over again. That's the picture that *you* remember.

Not all military battles end, however, with a formal surrender. At Waterloo, Napoleon stubbornly refused to do so. But all of us still know that the victory went to Wellington.

Indeed, for the glory of every military victory, there is an accompanying humiliation of defeat. General Charles Cornwallis sent O'Hara out to surrender; yet we all know that it was Cornwallis who lost. And every painting of Grant inside Appomattox Court House includes Robert E. Lee.

Obviously, the generals don't always win. They do, however, get the opportunity to occasionally declare victory. Most public managers don't.

After all, most public managers do not have a dedicated enemy to defeat. Most public managers do not have an opponent who can ceremoniously surrender even a symbolic sword.

Still, sometimes public managers and their troops do get to declare victory. For example, think of the public managers in public health.

In 1979, the World Health Organization announced that smallpox had been eradicated. Defeated! Unfortunately, for photographers, historians, and artists, the Variola major virus wasn't available to dramatically surrender its sword (or its DNA).

Yes, public-health managers have yet to defeat either diphtheria or polio. Yet, they are winning both battles. **For both diseases, immunization has cut world-wide deaths by 85 percent.**

Why, however, can't most public managers win a glorious victory? Because they are more focused on avoiding an ignominious defeat.

Yet every victory worth celebrating has only been achieved at some risk—specifically at the risk of a public and shameful failure.

Yes, most public managers aren't up against Napoleon. In fact, most have no one—no specific army, enemy, or person—to defeat.

**To demonstrate the value of their agency and their leadership, public managers need to be able to declare victory. But first, they have to define what victory is. Then they have to mobilize the resources, develop an effective strategy, and commit to victory.**

Still, all public managers have something to accomplish. If they do not, both their job and their agency should be eliminated. If they have nothing specific to accomplish, why do they exist?

So what result is victory? What should an agency and its leadership team seek to accomplish? Maybe this has been specified, though I doubt whether the World Health Assembly or its executive board gave WHO's director-general an explicit, out-of-the-blue directive: Defeat smallpox!

Instead, I suspect, as it became obvious that victory was possible, the decision to attack smallpox emerged

from discussions among key managers, strategists, and stakeholders. Victory, however, required WHO to mobilize the necessary resources, to develop an effective strategy, and to commit to victory.

Resources, strategy, and commitment: All three are necessary for victory. All three require management and leadership. Resources present a physical and fiscal challenge. Strategy creates an intellectual challenge. Commitment induces a psychological—and the biggest—challenge.

**That's why public managers avoid setting targets. Targets are dangerous. They require a public commitment and thus create the possibility of a public defeat. Without a target, however, a public manager has no opportunity for a meaningful victory.**

Without a target, the manager and the organization can only assert: "We are working as hard as we can, as creatively as we can, and as diligently as we can. What more do you want?"

Our answer, of course, is that we want *victory*. In most situations, we may not know what victory should be. We just know we want one.

Thus, an agency manager has a choice: Either define and pursue victory, or discover that the elected chief executive is looking for a new manager (just as Lincoln was constantly looking for a general who would win).

Certainly, the generals never have it easy. Lincoln went through multiple generals before he found one who aggressively pursued victory. Still, the generals do have one big advantage over most public managers. Like Grant at Appomattox, they do occasionally get to declare victory. **B**

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