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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, if "winning" for a public manager means driving up results,

Managers Who "Win" Twice Must Know A Lot

Theo Epstein knows something. Actually, Epstein knows a lot—a lot more than all of the other people in his line of work. After all, Epstein has produced miracles both in Boston and in Chicago. As the general manager of a professional baseball team in each city, Epstein has won the sport's championship.

In 2002, when the Boston Red Sox chose Epstein to be its general manager, he was 28, the youngest general manager ever in the history of major league baseball.

A baseball team's general manager doesn't catch the ball, or throw the ball, or hit the ball. He doesn't make the daily pre-game decisions about who should play what position. He doesn't make strategic or tactical choices during the game.

The job of the general manager is to put together a winning team. He identifies players who can help the team win. He selects them, drafts them, recruits them, and trades for them. He negotiates their contracts.

The general manager creates a "team" with a balanced combination of the necessary and desired skills. He seeks players who possess a competitive drive, who foster clubhouse comradery and who are team leaders. The general manager also selects the field manager and coaches.

During a game, however, the general manager does not run the team. This is the responsibility of the field manager and his coaches. They train the players, select those who will start each game, and make personnel substitutions during a game. The field manager and his coaches make all of the in-game tactical decisions.

Still, a baseball team's general manager has much more direct responsibility—including responsibility for the organization's ultimate success—than the HR director of most businesses or public agencies.

When Epstein took over the Red Sox in 2002, Boston had won baseball's championship—the World Se-

ries—five different times. Yet, almost all of the city's baseball fans had never celebrated any of them. The last victory had been in 1918.

After that championship came the "Curse of the Bambino." Harry Frazee, who owned the Red Sox, sold Babe Ruth (the "Bambino") to the New York Yankees. Then, for 86 years—from 1919 through 2003—while the Red Sox never won the World Series, the Yankees did so 25 times.

Yet in 2004, just two years after Epstein became Boston's general manager, the Red Sox won their first World Series in 86 years.

To the citizens of Boston—indeed, to the citizens of Red Sox Nation everywhere—this was more than just a winning season. This ended both the 86-year drought and "the Curse."

In 2007, Boston won the World Series again. Then, after the 2011 season, Epstein left the Red Sox to take on the same basic responsibilities for the Chicago Cubs.

Theo Epstein has twice produced the same big result—and in different circumstances. This can't be luck. Any private, nonprofit, or public manager who produces a significant jump in results in two different situations must know something—many somethings.

And what team did the Red Sox defeat in the 1918 World Series? Answer: The Chicago Cubs. Since then, the Cubs had played in the World Series five times—in 1929, 1932, 1935, 1938, and 1945. Still, Chicago had not won since 1908. By 2011, the Cubs had gone over a century without a championship.

To rescue the Cubs, it took Epstein a little longer than it had in Boston. But last November—after 108 years—the Chicago team that Epstein put together did win the World Series.

In 2004, *The Boston Globe* made

"Young Theo" its "Bostonian of the Year." With Boston having suffered for 86 years without a baseball championship, "The Architect" didn't even have a runner up.

After the Cubs won their championship, the team made baseball's traditional visit to the White House, where President Obama noted: "Epstein takes the reins of an organization that's wandering in the wilderness and delivers them to the promised land."

In 2017, *Fortune* ranked Epstein #1 on its list of the "World's Greatest Leaders." He beat out Pope Francis (#3) and Angela Merkel (#10).

Yes: both the Red Sox and the Cubs are baseball teams. The Cubs play in the National League while the Red Sox play in the American League. And though both leagues do play the game of baseball, their rules are a little different and thus so are their tactics and strategies.

As the general manager of two different baseball teams—in two different leagues—Epstein has won the World Series. In two different circumstances, he has produced the same big jump in results.

Those public managers who drive up performance in two different organizations are not simply lucky. Once, sure. We can dismiss them as lucky. But, if they do it twice—particularly if they produce this "win" twice in two different circumstances—we cannot dismiss them as lucky.

Any manager—private, nonprofit, or public—who can produce a big jump in results in two different situations must know something—a lot of somethings. **B**

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