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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 every public manager should

“What were they thinking?”
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Remember Why All Humans Value a T-Shirt

What do the techies in Mountain View and the baseball players in Boston have in common? Answer: They both love T-shirts.

Bo Cowgill, a product manager at Google, once observed: “**Actually, on a number of occasions, I've forgotten to pay out the small cash prizes we have at Google, and nobody noticed. But everyone notices when the T-shirts that show who won don't come.**”

Across the country, Brian Butterfield, a coach for the Boston Red Sox during the 2017 season made a similar observation. During spring training, Butterfield led a series of discussions with coaches and players reviewing specific and significant contributions that particular individuals had made during the game.

The contributions being discussed were not, for example, who hit the big home run. Rather the emphasis was on who did something small but significant that helped the team. For example: a player who took an extra base; or one who got dirty diving for a ground ball.

From this evolved a monthly award—the “Red Sox Culture Hero”—selected by the coaches. And what was the reward? Yep: A T-shirt. Honest!

But wait? Don't baseball players have a lot of T-shirts? (Indeed, don't you and I have a lot of T-shirts.) What's the value in another T-shirt?

Actually, Butterfield thought it had an impact. “It's amazing,” he observed. “**You get a bunch of millionaires sitting at a [meeting] and you present a millionaire with a \$20 T-shirt and they're like, 'It's the greatest thing I've ever received.'**”

So what's with the T-shirts? Sure, kids love T-shirts. They can't have too many, though they certainly have their favorites.

Still, what's with the adults? Specifically, what's with these IT techies and baseball players? These guys can buy as many T-shirts as they want (even if they want more than their kids.)

Is there something unique about IT and baseball? Sure, they're guys. Or in Silicon Valley, at least, they are mostly guys.

It isn't the T-shirt, of course. It's the recognition. More importantly, it's recognition for doing something effective and valuable—for making a contribution that people whom you respect have judged to be significant.

Yes, people who work for Google or play professional baseball already have status. And yet, a T-shirt—a T-shirt that recognizes an accomplishment—is still highly valued.

Indeed, when a T-shirt is presented with a little flair—in a way that dramatizes the contribution—the recognition for the accomplishment is even more valued.

Of course, a T-shirt has an additional plus. You get to wear it around the lab or in the clubhouse. You get to wear it in front of people whose esteem you value. It reminds people of your important contribution.

If techies at Google and baseball players in Boston all value the recognition for a significant accomplishment—recognition that comes disguised as a T-shirt—shouldn't public managers also take advantage of this effective motivator?

Perhaps in the 21st century, a T-shirt can have significance that is similar to a ribbon on a military uniform. After all, as Napoleon discovered, “a soldier will fight long and hard for a bit of colored ribbon.”

Soldiers also get to wear the ribbon. The recognition conveyed by a T-shirt or a ribbon isn't just a one-time thing. Both provide a continuing demonstration that the wearer did something important.

Certainly, you don't get to wear either the T-shirt or the ribbon every day. There are, however, occasions on

which it is perfectly appropriate to wear either. A T-shirt fits in the clubhouse, at a picnic, in the bleachers.

The lesson should be obvious: Public managers also need T-shirts. And if the cheapskates in the budget shop don't get it, first send them this page. If they still don't get it, just buy the T-shirts yourself. (Before you give the budget guys this page, do blacken out the word “cheapskates.”)

Actually, buying the T-shirts yourself has some advantages. First, it won't take you ten months to get them. Second, the words, design, and logo you put on the shirt will not require multiple approvals. Third, your staff will figure out that you paid (and they will value the recognition even more).

Of course, you have to make it clear that the T-shirt is earned. It is given for a major contribution.

Thus, when you announce each recognition T-shirt, you should also explain exactly what the recipient did—what he or she accomplished.

Then, once you've given out a few, your staff will quickly figure out who deserves the next one. For once you clearly establish what earns a T-shirt, your staff will get it.

Finally, just in case you're the cynical type, just in case you're worried that you can give away *too many* T-shirts, don't forget Napoleon's second (less-remembered) quote: “Give me enough medals, and I'll win you any war.” Indeed, every management training program ought to emphasize this basic message: “Don't forget the T-shirts.”

You can't give away too many T-shirts. **B**

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