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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 all public managers have to articulate, for their organization, a specific

Definition of Winning: Real & Moral, not Dumb

In baseball, the rule is clear. There is no such thing as a "moral victory." Only real victories count.

I'm sorry. Breaking up a no-hitter doesn't count as any kind of victory, unless, of course, breaking up the no-hitter actually produces a real win.

After all, in baseball, the rules of winning are very explicit: At the end of the game, the team with the most runs wins. (Just check this morning's standings.)

This is a beauty of baseball, indeed, of all sports. At the end of the game, everyone knows who won.

The same is true at the end of the season. Everyone knows: The team that won the most games in its league won the season. And, now this team has the opportunity to win the sport's championship.

Nevertheless, at the beginning of the season, some teams know: We aren't going to win the championship. We didn't win last year, and we don't have the talent necessary to win this year. This team is realistic.

Still, this team hopes to improve. Last year, the team won 30% of its games. This year, it wants to win 40%. For next year, the team's target is to win 50% of its games.

The team does aspire to win the championship—not, however, this year. Instead, they develop a plan—a multi-year trajectory that will make them competitive in three years. Then, in year four, they plan to have a chance to "win the whole kielbasa."

In the coming year, for this team, "winning" is losing "only" 60% of its games. If it wins 40% of its games, it will be satisfied. It will have achieved its own—established and very specific—*definition* of winning.

What, however, is the definition of *winning* for a public agency? What is success? What should the agency seek to accomplish this year?

Has the agency's leadership team thought seriously about its definition of success? Has it defined what winning means for the current fiscal year?

Maybe the legislature or the elected chief executive has already defined what the agency has to do to "win." In

that case, the leadership team needs to design an implementation strategy.

If, however, the organization has been given no authoritative definition of winning, the leadership team needs to create one. Otherwise, everyone in the organization will continue to simply follow their own, established operating procedures.

Most public managers—and most of the people in most public agencies—don't think in terms of "winning." They may think about dutifully following all the required procedures. Indeed, they may focus on making sure that they don't violate any of the rules that establish these procedures.

What is "winning" in a public agency? What is everyone in the agency trying to accomplish this year. Too often, a public agency's leadership team has failed to articulate what the agency is trying to accomplish. As a result, no one knows what winning is.

I have often told a story about a task force on which I served. We were asked by the executive of a large public agency to review its management approach, strategies, and practices.

We interviewed all of the middle managers who reported to this executive. One member of our task force asked everyone how the director evaluated his or her performance.

The question was embarrassing. The answers even more so. And the only response offered by more than one manager was: "I guess if I keep my name out of the newspaper I'm doing a good job."

That's winning? Keeping your name out of the newspapers is "winning." That is a "success"?

Yes, your traditional city-hall or state-house journalist does not cover public agencies with the same approach that Boston's baseball reporters cover the Red Sox. Nevertheless, all reporters like a good story. And winning can be a good story.

In fact, if "winning" accomplishes a

significant public purpose—if it produces a real result that no one thought was possible, it might make a very good story.

Suppose, for example, a public agency announced its definition of winning for the next fiscal year. Suppose it was clear about its short-run and long-run objectives. Suppose it even suggested a way to keep score.

That certainly won't keep the name of the agency executive—or the names of its key managers—out of the newspapers. But it might provide all of the agency's staff—and all of its collaborators some clear motivation.

Significantly, the definition of winning for a public agency, would be about more than entertainment. An agency's definition of winning would provide an explicit sense of purpose: An important public purpose. A moral purpose.

Of course, public officials—and thus public agency's—can have dumb purposes too.

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, President Kennedy, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and others in the Pentagon debated strategy and tactics. Several, including Air Force general Thomas Power, advocated a nuclear assault on the Soviet Union.

Indeed, Power's views on both strategy and purpose were well known. Once in a strategic discussion about the possibility of nuclear war with the Soviet Union, Power had complained: "Why are you so concerned with saving their lives? The whole idea is to kill the bastards. At the end of the war if there are two Americans and one Russian left alive, we win!"

I don't know about you, but for me that's not winning. Actually, it's a very dumb definition of winning. ■

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