



"What were they thinking?"

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On why every public manager needs to personally identify

His or Her Own Managerial Goldilocks Zone

Every public manager confronts a spectrum of **performance deficits**.

Some are big and complex. Many of these performance deficits have a significant, deleterious impact on the results that the organization seeks to produce for citizens. It will take even an experienced manager years—maybe a decade—to eliminate (even mitigate) all of their deleterious impacts.

Some are small and simple. An experienced public manager can easily eliminate them, though doing so won't accomplish very much.

Other performance deficits are in the manager's "Goldilocks Zone." For an experienced, public manager these performance deficits are neither too big nor too small—neither too complex nor too simple. Every experienced public manager has a collection of these.

When an experienced public manager is faced with a performance deficit in his or her Goldilocks Zone, this manager might easily invent a creative strategy for eliminating it. After all, this manager has made a career of eliminating—or, at least, mitigating—a large diversity of performance deficits.

This manager's leadership strategy will, certainly, focus on the important public purpose for which the organization has been given responsibility. It will include a **specific target** that, when achieved, will have a significant and visible impact on results.

Moreover, this will be a motivational strategy, designed to inspire everyone in the organization (plus its collaborators) to implement the strategy to achieve the target with intelligence, dedication, and creativity.

First, however, comes an analytical question: "Which of the problems that I now face are 'big and complex'? Which are 'small and simple'? And which ones fall in my 'Goldilocks Zone'?"

This triage task might appear to be rather straightforward. The big and complex problem looks . . . well . . .

really big and really complex. (*Think of Ed Sullivan saying "Really Big."*)

Previously, several accomplished public managers may have attempted to eliminate one or more of these performance deficits. Yet, all have been unsuccessful. It doesn't make sense to tackle one of these first.

Really small and simple problems would also . . . obviously . . . be very small and very simple. Give each to an intern. (You'll quickly learn who is competent.)

For even the experienced manager, the real challenge is to identify the performance deficits that belong in his or her Goldilocks Zone—and then to pick one.

Many public managers have a personal Goldilocks Zone—a set of performance deficits that are neither too big and complex nor too trivial. From years of experience, these managers have developed leadership strategies to eliminate or mitigate each.

Every public manager's Goldilocks Zone is, however, personal. It is shaped by the manager's experiences—by the nature of the performance deficits that the manager has previously figured out how to eliminate or mitigate.

After all, each experienced manager has produced different results in different circumstances. Each has a personal portfolio of problems and strategies, successes and failures. Therefore, each has learned multiple, personal lessons.

Consequently, when it comes time to triage—when it is time to select on which performance deficit to focus next—the manager is making both a professional and a personal choice. This manager could ask a colleague for advice, but this colleague's judgment would be based on his or her own professional experiences.

One experienced manager might

assign a problem to his or her Goldilocks zone. Others might think it is trivial. Another might decide it was too complex to tackle.

The more performance deficits with which the manager has wrestled, the broader and deeper will be his or her repertoire of performance strategies—and, consequently, the bigger will be this manager's Goldilocks Zone.

Thus different managers will put different performance deficits in their personal Goldilocks zone.

These are all professional—yet also personal—choices. Whether a manager can create a strategy for eliminating a specific performance deficit will depend upon his or her professional experience. Has the manager seen problems with similar characteristics—not necessarily problems with identical features or from the same policy field—but problems from which previous experience suggests how to craft an effective strategy. Maybe this manager has seen and solved problems with similar organizational complications, or similar motivational challenges, or similar resource constraints. If so, this manager may have found a problem in his or her own Goldilocks zone.

In contrast, other managers might lack even an initial idea about how to approach this problem. After all, each manager's Goldilocks zone is personal. It contains only problems that the individual manager can structure, can create a strategy for dealing with this structure and has the resources necessary to implement this strategy, which includes talented and dedicated staff and collaborators. **B**

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