

Bob Behn's Public Management Report

An occasional (and maybe insightful) examination of the issues, dilemmas, challenges, and opportunities in leadership, governance, management, and performance in public agencies.

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On why public executives need to remember that

Luck Is Recognizing It.

"It's better to be lucky than good." At least, that is what the cliché suggests. But how do you know when you are lucky?

Sure, if you win the Megabucks lottery, you know that you have truly been lucky. Your ego suggests you won because of your brilliant selection of the correct six numbers, but logic says you were just plain lucky.

Most of us, however, never get this kind of luck—pure serendipity with a speedy payoff. For most of us, luck only reveals itself slowly over time.

Suppose you are offered several jobs. You could be lucky—very lucky. One of these jobs could be ideal for your desires and talents. But which one? This is not obvious. Moreover, you will not learn whether you have been lucky—and whether you have chosen luckily—until long after you have made your choice.

Actually, every one of these jobs could be lucky ones. Every one could be ideal for you. Or none of them. How would you know?

Most executives are lucky. Many executives are lucky often. But do they possess the capability to recognize this luck and act on it. As Louis Pasteur observed, "in the fields of observation, chance favors the prepared mind." The field of leadership certainly requires astute observation.

In New York City in 1994, Rudy Giuliani was lucky. When he became mayor, the city had a problem that his administration could do something about. That problem was crime.

Rudy Giuliani was lucky. When he became mayor and wanted to reduce crime, there existed an experienced police professional who had some ideas about how to reduce crime. Furthermore, when Giuliani became mayor, there also existed an experienced police professional who wanted to reduce crime in New York.

Giuliani was lucky. The professional who had some ideas about reducing crime was the same person who wanted to reduce crime in New York. That person was William Bratton.

William Bratton was lucky. When he wanted the job of reducing crime in New York City, there existed a mayor who wanted to hire him to do precisely that. Furthermore, there was a mayor who was also willing to support his efforts to do that. That mayor was Rudy Giuliani.

William Bratton was lucky. When he wanted to reduce crime in New York City, there existed a small but talented cadre of experienced police professionals who wanted to do the same thing and who had some ideas about how to do it. That cadre of people included Jack Maple.

Jack Maple was lucky. When he wanted to implement his ideas for reducing crime in New York, he had a police commissioner who recognized the value of these ideas and was willing to support experiments in implementing them.

Anyone can easily dismiss a successful public executive as lucky. Indeed, this executive *was* lucky; this successful executive was given a job he or she knew how to do. More importantly, this executive was also smart enough to recognize and act on this luck.

Giuliani, Bratton, and Maple were all lucky. But it was not just that, in New York City, Jupiter was aligned with Mars. Much more importantly, each recognized his luck.

Giuliani recognized his luck in Bratton's availability. Although Bratton would be a controversial appointment as police commissioner, Giuliani recognized that Bratton had the potential to make a significant dent in the city's crime rate.

Similarly, Bratton recognized his luck in being selected by Giuliani. Although Giuliani would be a difficult mayor to work for (what mayor isn't?), Bratton recognized that, if he kept focused on the mayor's priority, he would have the mayor's support.

Bratton also recognized his luck in Maple. Although Maple was a controversial and flamboyant cop, Bratton realized that Maple had the imagination and drive to help reduce crime.

Finally, Maple was lucky. After bashing his head against NYPD's dysfunctional culture, Maple recognized that under Bratton (for whom he had previously worked in New York's Transit Police) he would get a real chance to implement his controversial and innovative ideas.

None of this had to happen. After Giuliani was elected, he could have cut back on his commitment to reduce crime and chosen a traditional, safe commissioner. Bratton could have remained in Boston as its police commissioner, tackling crime but on a scale less than a tenth of New York's. And Maple, having been beaten up and demoralized by NYPD's bureaucracy, could have given up and taken a less demanding but more lucrative job with Pinkerton.

Giuliani, Bratton, and Maple were all lucky. But so are lots of people. What distinguished them is that they recognized their luck. As another famous New York political figure, George Washington Plunkitt of Tammany Hall, once explained, "I seen my opportunities and I took 'em." But you can't exploit your opportunities unless you've seen 'em.

It is always easy to dismiss a successful public executive as lucky: "If they had given me *that* job, I would have been the one to produce those marvelous results."

Yes, if you had been given that job, you would have been lucky. But, would you have been smart enough to recognize your luck? **B**

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