

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.

On the value of giving people an opportunity to earn:

An Adrenaline Rush

Why do people go to work in the government? For the high salaries? For the big bonuses? For the awesome perks? For the public adulation? People who seek employment in the government for one of these reasons are people who we don't want working in government. They just aren't smart enough.

Most of the people who chose to work in the public sector did so because they sought to accomplish something—something significant. They wanted to save the world—or, at least, their own small part of the world. They chose public service because they wanted to serve some larger purpose.

Over the years, they may have grown cynical. They may have been beaten down by the system, by the abundance of the rules, by the drudgery of the paperwork, by the continual second-guessing. They may have concluded that it is impossible, in their agency at least, to save any part of the world—no matter how small. Still, regardless of how cynical their outside facade, they often still harbor a hidden, repressed desire to contribute to something significant.

For public managers, this latent (if well buried and well disguised) aspiration can be a big advantage. But how can the leaders of a public agency tap this yearning? How can they revive this deactivated desire?

Answer: Give people something meaningful to accomplish—a real opportunity to earn the personal satisfaction that comes from doing something truly worthwhile.



This is another reason why a performance target is so useful. It can be truly motivational. A performance target can give people that real opportunity to earn the personal satisfaction that comes from doing something truly worthwhile.

From the beginning, a performance target provides people with a compelling challenge. It not only gives people the proverbial reason to get out of bed in the morning. It provides focus and meaning for their work. And in government, such a target can be much more compelling than the monthly sales quota.

A performance target can relieve people from the drudgery of their daily routine. They will, of course, still have to fill out the paperwork. Everyone does. But the paperwork is no longer itself the purpose. Achieving the target is. Their work is important—perhaps even their paperwork is important—because they are contributing to a significant, well established, and well accepted purpose.

Individuals may, of course, have their own, small, personal performance target. But that target is important only because it is essential

to achieving an even larger target—a larger purpose.

Then, at the end, when they have achieved their target, it provides them with a feeling of accomplishment. They have won. They undertook to do something significant, and they did it. Without the explicit target, they might never have gotten to this goal. And even if they had, they would never have experienced the same sense of success—the same thrill of striving and achieving something truly worthwhile.

An easily achievable or inconsequential target will do little. The target must be significant. It must require real effort. If people determine that it will be easy to hit the target, or if they recognize that it is unconnected to any larger purpose, they will feel little need to devote much energy, effort, or intelligence to the undertaking.

Public managers need to give people a chance to contribute to achieving a significant success. Once this big target has been achieved, the contributors will experience the adrenaline rush that comes with a triumphant victory.

“Make no little plans,” observed Daniel Burnham, the architect who helped rebuild Chicago after the great fire of 1871. “They have no magic to stir men’s blood.” Instead, Burnham urged us to “think big.”

This is an advantage to managing a public agency. It is much easier to find something big to think about. Yes, it is possible to make little plans. But it is easier to make big ones. In government, it is much easier to create the magic that will stir the blood of employees, collaborators, stakeholders, and citizens.

People are not attracted to government by the opportunity to fill out the paperwork. They want big. And the manager of any public agency—regardless of whether the organization is large or small—has the opportunity to give them something big.

It might not be obvious what this big opportunity might be. But it is there. In any public agency, creative leaders can find it.

And once they find it, they need to make everyone in the organization—and people outside of it too—part of this big, magical plan. They need to give everyone a chance to contribute to achieving this blood-stirring target.

For once this big target has been achieved, all of the contributors will experience the blood-stirring, adrenaline rush that comes with a triumphant victory.

Moreover, once they have felt this sense of accomplishment—once they have experienced the adrenaline rush—they will be addicted. They will want it again. They will not be satisfied with just one victory. They will want to win again—and again.

Thus, the public managers’ motivational challenge is to give their employees—and others—that first opportunity to be a part of something significant, to learn how exhilarating it feels to contribute to a big success. Then, the public manager has to give them another chance to do it again—and then again.

Public managers need to provide their people with repeated opportunities to earn the motivational rush of adrenaline that comes from making big plans and achieving them. **B**

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