

Bob

# 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 all performance-driven public executives must learn to

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## Be Unreasonable

On March 4, 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt was inaugurated as President of the United States. Seventeen days later, he proposed that Congress create a Civilian Conservation Corps. In nine more days, Congress passed legislation establishing the CCC.

That was the easy part. The president was enthusiastic and Congress was cooperative. FDR's cabinet, however, was much less enthralled.

It can't be done. That's what they told Roosevelt. After all, he wanted more than legislation. He wanted real results. He wanted to get young men working—and quickly—reports Jonathan Alter in his book, *The Defining Moment: FDR's Hundred Days and the Triumph of Hope*. The new president wanted a quarter of a million young men working in the national forests that very summer.

How about that for a stretch target? Zero to 250,000 in a few months.

Sounds rather unreasonable. Indeed, "for all sorts of logistical reasons," Alter reports, the President "was told repeatedly that this was simply impossible."

FDR was undeterred. Alter concludes that "FDR's obliviousness to theories of pragmatism was a blessing, for while his solution was practical, his means of getting there were not, or so thought those around him."

After all, implementation would require collaboration among four different federal departments: Army, Interior, Agriculture, and Labor. That might take a decade—or a century.

Roosevelt, however, wasn't only unreasonable. He was also persistent. His message to the Department of Labor and to Frances Perkins, its secretary, reports Alter, was straightforward: "Do it now and I won't take any excuses." Then, continued Alter, "after setting this seemingly unrealistic target, FDR worked on the gearing to make it happen."

And, it did happen. And quickly. On April 17, the Forest Service opened its first camp. By June 29, the

CCC had 270,000 men in 1,300 camps. Unreasonable, indeed.

"It can't be done." Any public executive should expect to hear these four words whenever he or she even thinks about setting a **performance target**. Any specific target, let alone a **stretch target** to be achieved quickly.

Certainly, most public executives lack the personal determination, managerial skills and political savvy that FDR had acquired through a half-century of personal adversity, executive experience, and leadership challenges. Still, any public executive can develop a professional commitment to a specific result. He or she can learn to confront the inevitable four-word push back: "It can't be done." In doing so, the executive can learn the necessity of being unreasonable—and to persist in that unreasonableness.

**"The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man."**

**George Bernard Shaw**  
*Man and Superman*

Roosevelt was repeatedly unreasonable. Yet, as George Bernard Shaw once explained, such unreasonableness is essential:

The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.

In 1994, when William Bratton became police commissioner of New York City, he set out to reduce crime by 10 percent in his first year, 20 percent over two years, and 40 percent over three years. Bratton was being unreasonable. As mayor of

Baltimore, Martin O'Malley wanted the city to fill every pothole reported by citizens within 48 hours. O'Malley too was being unreasonable.

Any public executive who establishes a **stretch target** for his or her organization to achieve is being unreasonable. After all, a **stretch target** is one that cannot be achieved by just working a little harder and a little smarter. By definition, to reach a stretch target, an organization must change some of its basic routines and practices. It must alter in several fundamental ways its strategic thinking and its operational tactics.

Any public executive who sets a stretch target can expect to be told: "It can't be done." And the only way to overcome this pragmatic response is to be unreasonable.

When a public executive explains that some other, similar organization has already done something similar, they will inevitably be given the all-purpose bureaucratic excuse: "You don't understand. We're different."

To which Shaw had yet another retort:

People are always blaming their circumstances for what they are. I don't believe in circumstances. The people who get on in this world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want, and, if they can't find them, make them.

Public executives can blame their circumstances for their failure to produce meaningful results. Effective executives, however, learn to **recognize their luck**. Then they learn how to be unreasonable. **B**

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