

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 operational and political challenge of answering:

The Ubiquitous *How?* Question

This month, at spring training in Fort Myers, Florida, Josh Bard is trying to catch Tim Wakefield.

In eleven years with the Boston Red Sox, Wakefield has proven to be a very durable pitcher. At 39, when most of his contemporaries have long since retired, Wakefield is still a top major-league pitcher. Last year, he started 33 games, pitched 225 innings, and compiled a record of 16 wins and 12 losses. In 13 seasons, he has pitched 2,292 innings. Not bad for a guy who long ago lost the speed on his fastball.



While most big-name pitchers throw a fastball that exceeds 90 miles per hour, Wakefield's pitches are consistently in the high 60s. Yet last year he struck out 151 batters. How did he do that?

The answer is that Wakefield throws a knuckleball. He doesn't rely on speed to get the ball past the batter. He relies on flutter. Wakefield's pitch doesn't follow a normal trajectory as would be predicted by Newton's laws of motion (or even by the Magnus effect, which accounts for the curve in a curve-ball). As his pitch comes in towards the batter, it dances. The batter simply has no idea where the ball is going—where it will be just a split second later. The complex dynamics created by the interaction between the stitches on a barely rotating ball and the currents in the air

mean that even Wakefield himself doesn't know precisely where his pitch is going.

Neither does his catcher.

Thus, in a spring training game—the first game in which he had ever caught a knuckle-ball pitcher—Josh Bard had a lot of problems. He couldn't catch many of Wakefield's pitches, which, he confessed, made him “look silly.”

So Bard got some advice from the umpire standing behind him. Fieldin Culbreth, told Bard sagely: “Just catch it.”

Culbreth, however, didn't tell Bard *how*.

Not that we should be surprised. Culbreth had never caught a knuckleball either. In fact, he had never even tried.

In public management—as in baseball—the challenge is sometimes to figure out what to do. Should the batter bunt or swing away? Should the infield try to turn a double play or just get the sure out? These are questions of strategy. But even after the strategy decisions have been made, there still remains the simple, often baffling, one-word question of execution: “*How?*”

In public management—as in baseball—the individuals who must actually get the

job done are constantly confronted with the ubiquitous *How?* question.

The legislature or the political executives usually decide on the *what*. They then leave it to the agency managers to figure out *how*.

The legislature may decide that the schools need to improve students' mathematical skills. The parliament may decide that the Health Ministry needs to reduce infant mortality. Who can object to either? Who can complain about improving mathematical competence or helping children live?

But setting forth such general aspirations is not enough. Principals and teachers still need to figure out exactly what kinds of pedagogical methods work best with what students. And the Ministry's infant health branch and field staff have to figure out not only what is causing high infant mortality in what regions but also what actions will negate or mitigate these causes.

Moreover, there are numerous stakeholder groups that believe that their cherished approach is just what every child needs to get better at math or just what every mother should do to ensure her children's survival. Thus, in answering the *how?* question, the managers need not only to figure out what might work best in what circumstances. They also have to cope with the well-meaning and usually persistent (if not imperious) advice from individuals and organizations who already "know" the answer.

A wag once observed that NASA's 1960s task of landing a man on the moon was simple because no stakeholder groups insisted that this man land in their cherished crater.

For most public managers, however, answering the *How?* question is both an operational and a political challenge.

Operationally, answering the *How?* question might appear relatively straightforward. Top management asks a few analytical wonks to evaluate the alternatives using the available evidence. Unfortunately, for most public-policy objectives, whether it is increasing math skills or reducing infant mortality, the evidence for most of the available operational approaches is ambiguous, contradictory, or both. Thus, the managers must choose amongst unproven options backed by uncertain evidence.

Unfortunately, this doubles the political challenge. Not only are there competing answers to the operational *How?* question. Each of these competing answers is supported by its own collection of dedicated and energetic stakeholders.

Thus, public managers not only have to answer the *How?* question. They also have to explain their choice. Being able to produce results

helps; nevertheless, the advocates of other strategies will still argue that their approach is even better. Thus, along with the necessity of answering the *How?* question, public managers need to explain their rationale to citizens.

Josh Bard has it easy. If he can catch Wakefield's knuckleball, no fans will demand that he choose their cherished method. **B**

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