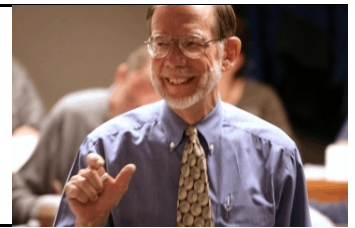


Bob

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 producing better results can be achieved only by

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Ratcheting Up Performance

Years ago, when my son was a young teenager, the two of us stood at the bottom of **Tuckerman's Ravine** in New Hampshire's White Mountains. The plan was to hike up the ravine, over a saddle point near the top of Mt. Washington, and then to the **Lake of the Clouds** hut operated by the Appalachian Mountain Club where we would spend the night.

"I'm not going to make it all the way up there," my son said.

"It certainly looks like a long way up," I said—but only to myself.

We made it. We did not, however, try to jump to the top. We only did it by taking just one step at a time.

This lesson also applies to the challenge facing the leadership team that seeks to improve the performance of its public agency. The team, too, can't jump. It can't jump from the nadir of the results valley to the apex of the results mountain. It can only make it up one step at a time.

Of course, one step isn't enough. After the team takes its first step, it has to take a second one. Indeed, it has to take a lot of steps. Each small step is an incremental yet measurable improvement. And, importantly, these small but numerous steps accumulate into a significant improvement.

The steps only accumulate, however, if the agency never slips back. The team can't take two steps up the results mountain, and then take two steps back down. Once the agency has reached a new performance plateau, this needs to become the base from which the agency creates its next performance improvement. This is the process of "ratcheting up performance."

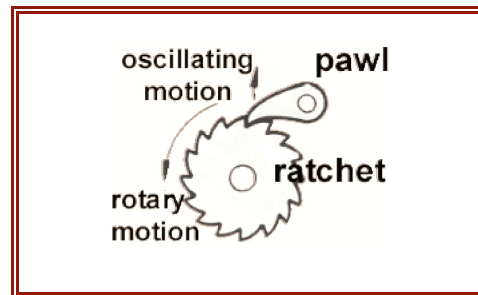
A ratchet is a simple mechanical device that permits motion in only one direction. You can find one in a socket wrench, in a car jack, in a clock. Sorry, not in your electronic watch—only in a mechanical one.

A **ratchet** is a simple mechanical concept: To allow motion in one direction but not the other, a ratchet wheel contains teeth, between which a small

lever, called a pawl, fits. As the wheel turns it pushes the pawl up. But, once the wheel has turned a notch, the pawl drops down preventing the wheel from rotating back.

In his presidential address to the American Psychological Association, Karl Weick advocated a "**strategy of small wins**." Weick defined a "small win" as "a concrete, complete, implemented outcome of moderate importance." Or, as he explained, "small wins are controllable opportunities that produce visible results."

Moreover, because each such result is visible, it comes with "an immediacy, tangibility, and controllability." Then, "once a small win has been accomplished, forces are set in motion that favor another small win."



Each step up the mountain is immediate, tangible, and controllable. It is a visible accomplishment, verifying that another step is possible and confirming that it will accomplish something worthwhile.

The lesson for the leaders of a public agency who seek to improve results is clear: Don't try to jump to the top of the performance mountain. Don't create one zenithal performance target. Don't try to produce international peace and harmony by the end of the fiscal year. Instead, create an achievable **performance target** that will move the agency one notch closer to achieving its mission.

"Pick a winner," advocates Robert Schaffer, in his book *The Breakthrough Strategy*. Create performance targets that give the people in the organization the opportunity to win—

to achieve something that they (and those whose opinions they value) recognize as consequential. Then the agency's leadership team has to make sure that everyone in the organization (and, again, those whose opinions they value) understands that their leaders recognize the significance of their achievement.

Ratcheting up performance is essentially an addiction strategy: Create performance targets that people can hit. Get them hooked on success. Give them an opportunity to earn that **adrenaline rush** that comes from accomplishing something worthwhile, and then give them the challenge of accomplishing even more.

When a public agency is ratcheting up its performance, each small win creates not just a sense of accomplishment; it also establishes a new and higher plateau—a new baseline from which future performance must be compared.

Last month, my son and I were in Idaho, backpacking in the U. S. Forest Service's Sawtooth Wilderness. Now, of course, it is the father, not the son, who is wondering whether he can make it. Still, I did.

Indeed, as we hiked up the switchbacks from Edith Lake to the pass that took us over to Imogene Lake, we were struck, as we have been on numerous other expeditions, with how much vertical progress we were making. After only half-an-hour, we could look back down and see that we were already significantly above Edith Lake.

Still, we never jumped. As always, we only made progress towards our goal one step at a time. **B**

Robert D. Behn is a lecturer at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government where he chairs the executive-education program "**Driving Government Performance: Leadership Strategies that Produce Results**." For more on the challenge of ratcheting up performance, see his report: *Performance Leadership: 11 Better Practices That Can Ratchet Up Performance*.