

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 public executives need to cultivate

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The Skill and Habit of “Short “Division”

We humans have a knack for numbers. All of us. We are born with it. Pretty cool, huh?

Still, don't get too cocky. Animals have it too. This includes the usual collection of laboratory rats, pigeons, and chimps. It also includes wild lions on the Serengeti.

What we—and some animals—have is “the number line.” Even before babies have the word for three, they know three things are different from two things. Three dots are different from two dots. Three Mickey Mouses are different from two Mickey Mouses.

Furthermore, babies recognize that three Mickeys are more than two Mickeys. On the number line, we somehow intuitively know that three things is “higher” than two things.

Arithmetic, however, is an acquired skill. Humans aren't born with a knack for arithmetic. We don't get good at arithmetic simply by being introduced to the mechanics—by being told how it works. Like any skill, the ability to do arithmetic requires practice—lots of practice.

Sorry: If you want to be good at arithmetic, you have to work at it.

Unfortunately, the most valuable arithmetic skill is long division. “Unfortunately” because it is the final skill you learn and the most complex to use. The ability to do long division requires that you first acquire the ability to do addition, subtraction, and multiplication.

Earlier this year, at a Kennedy School seminar, the presenter noted that 1.5 million people in the U.S. work for Walmart. “Wow,” I whispered to the colleague sitting next to me. “That's a big number. That's half-a-percent of the U.S. population.”

How can half-a-percent be a “big” number? It hardly sounds bigger than 1.5 million. After all, the 1.5 million is located way, way out on the number line. In contrast, a half of anything, is below one. It's almost zero.

But if half a percent of the people in the U.S. work for Walmart, that

means one person out of every two hundred people works for Walmart. To me, that sounds pretty big.

In Boston, the seating capacity of Fenway Park is 37,000. This means that if every seat in the ball park is full, that crowd includes 185 people who work for Walmart.

Yes. Yes. This number is not accurate to three significant figures. Moreover, I have no idea whether Walmart has more or fewer stores and employees in greater Boston than it has elsewhere. And even if the population of stores and employees perfectly matches the U.S. averages, there is no guarantee that Walmart employees in greater Boston have roughly the same interest in the Red Sox as the general population. Still, if just 100 people in a random Fenway Park crowd of 37,000 are Walmart employees, that strikes me as a big number.

Humans have a knack for numbers. But arithmetic—particularly division—is a challenge. It is not only an acquired skill. Doing it is an acquired habit. To make comparisons, executives need to work at their skill and habit of using “short division.”

Actually, if your arithmetic is a little more careful, the number gets even bigger. After all, Walmart doesn't employ too many 12-year-olds. And its army of over-seventy greeters has been laid off. The number of employed people in the U.S. is roughly 140 million. So at 1.5 million workers, Walmart employs over 1 percent of the workforce. Looks pretty big to me.

Of course, to make these calculations, I didn't really use long division. Call my arithmetic “short division.”

After all, I was making a lot of approximations. The original calculation that I made—the one that concluded half a percent of the U.S. population works for Walmart—was

based quickly on a total U.S. population of 300 million. Actually, the U.S. hit that number six years ago. The total is now over 310 million.

But I only wanted an approximation—a number to what I call one-and-a-half significant figures. I was looking for something like 0.5 percent, or 1.0 percent, or 1.5 percent. Just a ballpark number. I wanted to know whether the number was big or small. I wanted some **comparative data**. And to generate such a comparison, you need to use division—whether that division is long or short.

Still, doing division—either the official, long version or the short, quick approximation—is not just an acquired skill. It is an acquired habit.

Over a decade ago, I was driving in Maine when I saw a sign saying: Drive Carefully. 750 Moose-Car Accidents Last Year. I continued driving and then did the short division, dividing by 365. “Wow,” I said to myself, “that is two moose-car accidents per day.”

If, in Maine, you were given the task of getting a moose and car to hit each other every 12 hours, you would have a big challenge. After all, Maine is a big state—400 miles from south to north. Most of the people live in the south; most of the moose live in the north. Still, you would be helped by the rutting season, when moose, in their pursuit of mates, become oblivious to cars.

Ominously, hitting a moose with your car is not like hitting a deer. A deer will dent your fender and bounce off. A moose stands 6 feet or more at the shoulders and weighs half a ton. When your car hits a moose, it ends up in your lap. That's big. **B**

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