



Leaders at the Core of Better Communities

Career Compass No. 41: The Post-Heroic Leader

In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Benest kickstarts our leadership journey in 14 steps.

by Dr. Frank Benest

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I lead the Parks and Facilities Division in a large city government. We are faced with major challenges in addressing the drought. My division needs to help the city reduce city water consumption by a council mandate of 20 percent. Since our parks and public facilities use a lot of water, we have a big challenge. We have old irrigation and plumbing systems that leak; we need to invest in cost-effective technologies to help reduce water usage; and we must enlist the users of our parks and facilities in helping reduce consumption. At the same time, we have precious assets that must be preserved for the future—unique parks, an arboretum, and well-used and valued golf courses and sports complexes.

I recently went to a conference and the keynoter exhorted us local government managers to be great leaders and inspire others. My parks and recreation director wants me to "take charge" and come up with some big ideas to solve our drought-related challenge.

I want to respond but I'm not a take-charge kind of guy. In fact, I am an introvert. I don't have the charisma gene. Now, I think I do some things fairly well. I'm committed to public service and preserving our community's great park and public space resources. I support our team and the team members appreciate it.

I'd like to help solve the drought challenge. But I don't have enough authority or power to solve the problem. Moreover, I'm told I have to be a much better "out-there" leader if I want to move up in the organization

I don't know how to do this big leadership thing. Do I have what it takes?



"Why is everyone looking at me? I think they want me to do this!"

American culture unfortunately mythologizes leaders as bigger-than-life heroes who through the force of their personalities and ideas lead their teams to greatness. Not so. Heroic leaders do not create greatness which is sustainable over time.

In his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins found that those corporations that are successful and sustain greatness are not led by charismatic leaders but rather by humble and committed executives. These humble leaders are committed to the enterprise, its mission, and certain enduring values, yet at the same time they help their organizations adapt to changing times and circumstances.

LEADERSHIP HAS MANY "VOICES"

You're a quiet guy. Do not despair! There is no one model of effective leadership. As Kevin Sharer, former Amgen CEO noted, "leadership has many voices." Thankfully, different kinds of leaders have different "gifts" to give away and

make a positive difference. You are an introvert and can contribute a great deal given your strengths and attributes. The key is to be the best you can be. It is clear that you are committed to the mission of the parks and public facilities division. You are supportive of your team. You want to make a positive contribution. Therefore, the issue is how to become an even better leader.

LEADERS CAN'T FORCE PEOPLE TO FOLLOW

Management is based on one's positional or formal authority. By using their positional authority, managers can force a minimal level of performance by the employees who report to them.

In contrast, leadership is based on one's interpersonal attributes. Leadership is about winning the hearts and minds of people. It is about mobilizing people to do difficult work and take action when there is often no perfect solution.

As American author and poet Charles Lauer has said, "Leaders don't force people to follow. They invite them on a journey." I love the "journey" metaphor. The nature of a journey is that you know the general direction but not the precise destination.

So, with respect to addressing the drought, how do you invite employees in your division and department, other departments, as well as external stakeholders, on this journey of reducing water consumption and at the same time preserving your city assets? Is it a worthy and energizing journey for others? Are you passionate enough about the journey? If not, why should anyone follow?

INTROVERTS CAN BE GREAT LEADERS TOO

Introverts like yourself can be very effective leaders, if they leverage their strengths. Introverts often exhibit some very positive behaviors:

- They ask questions. (See [Career Compass No. 24: Asking Powerful Questions](#))
- They encourage others to speak first.
- They listen before speaking.

Because introverted leaders ask questions, listen, and generate ideas from others, their own ideas are better informed. Most importantly, others are contributing to the ultimate plan and get their fingerprints on the plan. They "own" the plan because they helped create it.

You are likely to come up with a good drought response plan if you ask the right questions and listen to members of your team, other division and department groups, and external stakeholders, such as park and facility user groups.

HUMBLE SERVANT-LEADERS

Great leaders are "servant-leaders." In his classic essay "[The Servant as Leader](#)," Robert Greenleaf emphasized that servant leaders are committed to the organization, their co-workers, and the people they serve. They are stewards of the people, resources, assets, and the organizations they serve. Servant-leaders are "other-centered," as opposed to "me-centered." They seek to influence (rather than increase their own power and status) so that they can better make a difference and serve others. It is not about their great ideas, but the best ideas that will come from everybody in an effort to address the problem, such as the drought challenge.

While great leaders are humble, they are still passionate. They just demonstrate their passion in a quiet manner. They are not boisterous about their commitments but they demonstrate their commitments every day in small ways. They exhibit their passion through their commitment to certain values and goals and through their persistence, tenacity, hard work, and ethical behavior. They don't ask of others what they are unwilling to do. They model the way.

AN ADAPTIVE CHALLENGE

The drought response is not a "technical" challenge that can be addressed through technical solutions, but rather an "adaptive" challenge. As suggested by Ron Heifetz and his colleagues at Harvard, adaptive challenges usually involve many stakeholders, often with differing values, perspectives, and preferred solutions to the challenge.

Technical problems are "tame" problems that can be addressed by managers using their formal authority. Adaptive challenges are "wicked" problems that require leaders to bring together different groups, start conversations, and "figure it out" together, recognizing that there are no perfect solutions. The water crisis for your city is certainly an adaptive challenge.

CROSS BOUNDARIES, START CONVERSATIONS AND AIM FOR SHARED LEADERSHIP

Yes, you do not have sufficient authority or power to successfully address the drought challenge. Rarely do leaders have sufficient authority or power to solve any significant problem.

Because responding to the drought is an adaptive challenge requiring leadership, you need to cross boundaries. Certainly you need to engage your division employees since they will have a lot of ideas about how to reduce water use in your facilities and minimize the impact to the park assets and the public users. However, you cannot solve the problem solely in your division silo. You need to engage other groups and start conversations about everybody being part of the solution. These groups include:

- Other divisions in the department (for example, recreation and cultural arts divisions)
- Other departments (for example, utilities)
- External stakeholders (for example, park user groups)
- The general public.

Given the drought challenge, with whom do you and other team members need to start conversations? What is the nature and content of the conversations? As poet David Whyte has pointed out, "leadership is the art of conversation."

Once they cross boundaries and start conversations, humble leaders aim for shared leadership. They encourage leadership from wherever it may come. For instance, they encourage employees to contribute to the thinking and problem-solving and help create a better enterprise. Given the drought challenge, they ask:

- How do we address the leakage problems in our old irrigation and plumbing systems? Where can we best invest limited financial resources?
- How do we cut water usage in ways that have a minimum impact on the public (for example, stop washing the park maintenance vehicles)?
- How do we explore technology responses to better use limited water (for example, using soil moisture meters to measure the moisture in our golf course turf and avoid over-watering)?
- How do we communicate with the user groups and the general public about our department's response to the drought crisis and encourage the public to modify its behavior and become part of the solution (for example, let's conserve at home and at work so we can save our parks for the future)?
- Which other groups (for example, neighborhood associations that are adjacent to parks) do we need to engage?

AVOID SEEKING "BUY-IN"

We in local government often say that we need to get "buy-in." The term and the mindset suggest that we have a solution and therefore we need to convince/manipulate others to "buy it."

Humble leaders start conversations because they understand that they don't have the one perfect solution. Conversations help us understand people's hopes and dreams, their concerns and fears, and where they are in their current thinking.

Conversations are not about teaching but learning about different perspectives and generating additional ideas.

FOCUS ON THE "WHY"

In order for people to join you in addressing the water crisis in creative ways, they need to understand the "why." Typically, we start by discussing the "what" and the "how." Rather, we need to begin with the "why" which involves the meaning and purpose behind our endeavor.

What is the why of the drought response? Water is life. Water is required for functioning of the community. Water is needed to preserve certain park assets and amenities for the present and the future.

Once the meaning of the journey is explored, you and others can explore the what and how of your response.

DIRECTING VS. ENGAGING

When you gather staff and/or stakeholder groups to brainstorm ideas, people will not join you in the leadership journey if you have a command-and-control mindset and typically "suck all the air out of the room." Employees and other stakeholders won't share their best thinking and won't commit their discretionary effort. They need to be engaged in authentic ways.

"Taking charge" is not telling people how the department will respond to the drought. It is engaging people, talking

about the "why" behind the drought response, and supporting the team or teams involved. It is engaging people, yet letting go so they respond and own the problem with you.

ASK FOR HELP

For employees and residents and other users to step up and contribute to a multi-prong solution, you must demonstrate not only humility ("I don't have all the answers"), but also some vulnerability. By asking for ideas and assistance, you exhibit vulnerability. People connect with leaders who are human and show that they are not all-knowing and all-powerful. When people connect with such leaders, they will contribute and decide to follow. (See [Career Compass No. 32: The Power of Vulnerability](#).)

ARE YOU A MULTIPLIER OR DIMINISHER?

Heroic leaders diminish the ideas and contributions of others. Because they do not share the problem and engage others in developing new approaches, they "own" the problem and no one struggles with them to solve it. Humble leaders open up the dimensions of the problem to others, ask for their ideas and help, and support the team in solving the problem with others.

As suggested by Liz Wiseman in her book *Multipliers-How the Best Leaders Make Everyone Smarter*, heroic leaders with big ideas and their own visions for the future diminish the talent and intellect of people around them, at precisely the point that we need to increase everybody's productivity and creativity to address adaptive challenges.

In contrast, "Multipliers"

- See the genius in others and amplify the smarts and capabilities of the team
- Shift from answers to questions
- Extend the challenge to others
- Stimulate debate about ideas before making decisions
- Install ownership and accountability throughout the team.

SHOW GRATITUDE

Humble leaders not only recognize the contributions of others, they demonstrate gratitude. They say "thank you" and "I'm grateful." Followers connect with grateful leaders and they too begin to feel grateful for the opportunity to serve and do great things together.

DON'T WORRY ABOUT BEING NOTICED

You don't have to be an "out-there" leader to move up the organization. As you begin to effectively address adaptive challenges by enlisting others, you will be seen as a highly valued leader, be given bigger opportunities to serve, and be promoted into more responsible positions in the organization. You may have been promoted into management because of your technical skills, but you will advance into senior management because of your leadership or "soft" people skills.

FIND THE LEADER WITHIN

In summary, as you confront the drought and other adaptive challenges, be your authentic self and use the "gifts" that make you special. Engage your team, convene others, start conversations, listen, and begin better defining the problem and possible responses. Then of course take action with others even when there is no perfect solution. Fix things up as you go along.

Through this kind of quiet leadership, you can help your organization decrease water consumption, and at the same time, preserve unique park assets for future generations.



Career Compass is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's liaison for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future *Career Compass*, e-mail careers@icma.org or contact Frank directly at frank@frankbenest.com.