

# Career Compass No. 42: Trust Me!

**IN THIS ISSUE OF CAREER COMPASS, DR. BENEST HELPS US WIN OUR TEAM'S CONFIDENCE WITH A RECIPE FOR TRUST.**

*by Dr. Frank Benest*

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*For the past nine months, I have served as the unit head of the city's Transportation and Parking Division. We have a big and often controversial agenda and are expected to deal with a number of traffic-calming, downtown parking, and pedestrian and bike safety projects during the next two years. I'm energized by the agenda and want to exert leadership for our unit in taking on these projects. The problem is that the employees in the unit do not seem quite as enthusiastic, are tentative about any creative ideas, and in some cases resist my leadership. In staff meetings I've tried to push forward with my goals for the unit but with poor results.*



**"OK...on three! One, two...no wait!"**

*Prior to my appointment as unit manager, the employees did not have a good relationship with their previous manager. Employees found him aloof, didn't see him as their advocate, and perceived him as more concerned with the wants of top management than with any needs they have. The previous manager did not defend the good work of the unit when it was scrutinized by top management, the council, and the many different stakeholder groups. To make matters worse, the unit (like the rest of the organization) suffered through program cutbacks, loss of some benefits, and a few layoffs of colleagues.*

*I've tried being more assertive and demanding; however, after some reflection, I believe that there is not much trust. I need my team members to trust me. Do you have any guidance? I hope it is not too late.*

.....  
You have focused on the right issue. Followers won't decide to follow unless they trust you as the leader. Trust is the currency of leadership.

It is not too late to change the current dynamic. Therefore, the question is how do you build trust between you and the team. Trust is not created overnight. It is a slow process.

Here is how I suggest that you start.

# Building Trust

## **CONNECT ON A PERSONAL LEVEL**

Trust is based on people connecting with you on a personal level. Consequently, start by holding a series of ongoing one-to-one conversations with staff. At these one-to-one get-togethers, try to be authentic and reveal something of yourself--your family and career, your hopes and dreams, your non-work interests and leisure pursuits. Inquire about the family, career, and personal interests of the employee. Share your goals and expectations for the division. Most importantly, ask how you can support the goals and efforts of your direct reports. Inquire about the obstacles that they face. Ask if they have the equipment, resources, and support they need to be successful.

Perhaps you can hold some of these conversations over coffee away from the office. Don't just meet once. Make these individual discussions an ongoing practice. Trust is not built in structured large-group staff meetings.

## **LOOK FOR SMALL WINS**

To begin addressing people's skepticism, you should look for several small wins. Perhaps your unit needs more time to complete a traffic study. Or your team requires some more money for a specific consultant to help it finish up a bicycle corridor project. You can advocate with top management to get the time or to move budget monies around to support your unit. Make sure that you communicate in staff meetings how you responded to what you have heard from team members.

## **TO BUILD TRUST, SHOW TRUST**

Think about how you can demonstrate trust in your team. For instance, perhaps a few of your unit members commute a long distance and have requested to telecommute and do their work from home once every two weeks. Work with the team to develop criteria for a pilot telecommute program and then implement it.

Trust must be reciprocal.

## **DEMONSTRATE PATIENCE**

Since building trust takes time, it is necessary to show patience. While you have an ambitious agenda of key projects, you as the leader can show patience if

- The team is making ongoing progress
- People want to improve their performance and are open to learning from missteps
- Team members are assuming new positions or responsibilities or are taking on "stretch" assignments.

As Dan Rockwell states in the [Leadership Freak blog](#), impatience by leaders creates fear, fractures relationships, and is perceived as arrogance. A team cannot be creative in an atmosphere of fear. And there cannot be trust without positive relationships.

Patience is not weakness. Just because you are patient doesn't mean that you aren't tenacious in the pursuit of team goals. It doesn't mean that you accept mediocrity.

Patience requires that you focus on solutions, progress, improvement, and employee learning and development. To do so, you must learn how to deal with frustration and demonstrate self-control.

### **DEMONSTRATE VALUES IN ACTION**

As you share your values in one-to-one conversations and in staff meetings, look for ways to make your values visible and come to life. You will gain trust if people see your values in action.

Let's say that you have stressed learning as a value. If that's the case, explicitly tie stretch assignments, training, and debriefing experiences to your value of continuous learning.

If you have expressed your value of taking smart risks in support of building community and making a positive difference, ask the team to identify several creative solutions to a traffic-calming challenge. After the discussion, help the group select a proposed solution and then pursue it with the team taking some smart risks associated with the solution (see [Career Compass No. 18: Taking Smart Risks](#)).

### **ENHANCE CONNECTIONS AND SHOW YOU CARE**

Trust is enhanced when there are positive social relationships on the team. Here are some ways to promote social connections and show that you care:

- Take a staff person for a morning coffee or an afternoon ice cream conversation.
- Conduct a walking meeting with individual staff.
- Provide bagels or cookies to celebrate team accomplishments.
- Schedule at the beginning of staff meetings a "take 5" segment so people can briefly share what is happening in their professional and personal lives.
- Shadow parking enforcement staff as they carry out their responsibilities in the downtown.
- Write personal notes (no e-mails!) to employees to recognize accomplishments and express gratitude for their effort, and support them when a family member has a health problem or when someone is suffering a loss.

### **OVER-COMMUNICATE**

When there is not a lot of trust, a leader must communicate on a regular basis and with predictability. Certainly use e-mails but recognize that e-mails only provide information; they do not build trust. Make sure that you are communicating face-to-face in one-to-one

informal conversations in addition to formal meetings. When you think that people are tired of hearing about values, vision, goals, and expectations, communicate some more and in different ways.

### **ACCEPT BLAME**

Look for opportunities to acknowledge your mistakes and accept blame. Even if you are not completely at fault, take responsibility. And then ask: "What can we all learn from this experience as we move forward as a team?" As the leader, "model the way" so others take responsibility and commit to learn from mistakes.

Demonstrating this kind of vulnerability allows people to enhance their connection with you. You will gain a measure of trust.

### **ASK QUESTIONS, ENCOURAGE PEOPLE, AND HOLD THEM ACCOUNTABLE**

The best way to engage employees, promote discretionary effort by everyone, and slowly engender trust is to ask questions, such as:

- What projects are the most important and should take priority? Why?
- What are the obstacles? How do we overcome or minimize them?
- How can I assist you as your manager?
- What are we learning for future practice?
- How might we creatively address this challenge?
- If we were to proceed, what would success look like?
- If you were in my role as unit manager tomorrow, what are the three things that you would do and why?

As the leader, you don't need to have all the answers. Everybody needs to contribute their ideas and perspectives so that they get their "fingerprints" on any plan.

As the team explores paths forward, encourage them as opposed to telling them what and how to do it. Then "monitor and mentor." You can hold people accountable if you have done a good job of expressing your expectations and identifying the metrics of success.

### **SHOW PROGRESS, SHARE CREDIT**

As emphasized by Teresa Ambile in *The Progress Principle*, employees need to see continual progress toward team goals in order to stay self-motivated. In one-to-one conversations and unit meetings, ask team members to discuss progress and milestones met. As the leader, acknowledge and recognize individual and team efforts.

### **TELL THE UGLY TRUTH, SPREAD OPTIMISM**

It is important that the unit can depend on you to provide the unvarnished truth about the environment in which it works. You therefore need to share information about city finances, the department budget, perspectives from top management and council members, and the

"politics" of controversial projects. For example, unit members need to understand how transportation and parking projects are perceived by different stakeholder groups. Even as you spread the "ugly" or difficult news, you also have a role in encouraging the team, spreading optimism that good team efforts will ultimately prevail.

## **EXPLAIN YOUR DECISIONS**

Trust is slowly built in an environment of transparency. Consequently, you must go out of your way to explain what is behind your decisions, such as reallocating staff and budget resources from a traffic-calming study to a parking demonstration project. People may not agree with your decisions but they will more easily understand and accept those decisions if they know the "why" behind them. As a boss, you must be open, even if you are personally inclined not to share what you are thinking.

## **SERVE THE TEAM**

Team members will tend over time to trust you if you are perceived as a "servant leader." You serve the team by

- Asking questions
- Providing forthright information
- Letting people know what is expected of them
- Securing resources for the team
- Encouraging and guiding group members
- Advocating for the needs of the team
- Helping unit members cross boundaries and connect with stakeholders inside and outside the organization.

## **BUILD YOUR COMPETENCE**

As you articulate and demonstrate your values and discuss what matters to you, you are focusing on character. You must also demonstrate competence. While you may have been appointed because of your analytic and management skills, you also must show that you are growing your technical and political astuteness.

You can grow your technical knowledge about transportation and parking issues by reading, going to workshops, and getting tutorials from various staff people in specific technical areas.

You can show and improve your political skills as you help your unit secure additional resources or get resources reallocated. You can help the unit "frame" projects differently for different groups. You can provide guidance so the team better engages stakeholder groups in controversial transportation and parking projects.

## ENGAGE WITH STORIES

To make values and goals come alive, leaders must share their personal stories. For instance, you can discuss what people, events, and experiences have shaped you as a person and leader. You can explore what is important to you and why. And then you can encourage others to do the same.

Facts, figures, and data are important but they don't "stick" and they don't inspire others to act. Stories are "data with a soul."

One way to use stories as a way to engage staff and create commitment is to invite neighborhood representatives, business people, and other residents to staff meetings. You can ask these customers and stakeholders to share their stories and how the team's efforts have made a positive difference in their lives and neighborhoods.

## GET COACHING

It is always a good idea to rely on a trusted advisor inside or outside the organization in order to get feedback on your efforts to promote a more trusting environment. Everyone needs a sounding board to share goals, efforts, frustrations, and disappointments. It is impossible to come up with all the right moves by yourself. You don't have to accept all of the advice but informal coaches can provide good food for thought and consideration.

## Toughness Is Over-Rated

You sound like a leader who wants to do well. Going forward, you certainly want to express your expectations, establish goals and measures of success with staff, and hold people accountable. But you cannot solely rely on being assertive and "tough." You need to foster trust as a basis for leadership.

Trust is a by-product of creating human connections with others and serving the team. You can't just say "Trust me!" You must build trust in small incremental ways over time.



*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](mailto:careers@icma.org) or contact Frank directly at [frank@frankbenest.com](mailto:frank@frankbenest.com). Read past columns at [icma.org/careercompass](http://icma.org/careercompass).