



Career Compass No. 55:

I'm Not Ready!

In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Frank Benest provides valuable suggestions on gaining the confidence to land an executive management position.

by Dr. Frank Benest

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I'm a public works manager in a mid-sized county. Soon, I'd like to move up to a public works director position in another county or city in my state.

Here's the problem: I fear that I may not be ready to be a director. While I'm knowledgeable in the planning, budgeting, and management of capital projects of all kinds, I don't have deep knowledge or expertise in other public works areas, such as operations of parks, streets, or utilities. However, even if I get appointed to a public works director position, I fear that I may not be able to handle all the diverse demands of the job or lead others who have more expertise than me.

I've started to apply for director jobs, but I am anxious about actually getting an executive position. Should I continue to apply if I don't feel prepared? If I do take on a new executive management position, how do I handle it so I can succeed?



Take the Leap!

DR. BENEST: I understand your concern. Once you secure a director's position, you fear that you might be easily dismissed or not highly regarded as a leader by the subject matter experts (SMEs) in other areas of public works who would know more than you. You may feel like a fraud.

Reflecting upon my own career, I've never been truly ready for any new position. For example, I was a community services director when I was able to secure my first city manager job. While I had deep experience and knowledge in recreation and human services, I had no expertise in finance, HR, public safety, utilities, public works, or planning and land use. The biggest challenge facing my new city involved redevelopment, a subject I know nothing about.

How was I able to make the leap from a SME to a generalist leader? Here are some approaches.

Approaches for Taking the Leap

DON'T OVERLY FOCUS ON EXPERTISE

It's impossible to be a SME in all aspects of public works or other local government disciplines. That's not your job as a department director.

If you simply try to work harder in a quest to gain new expert knowledge, you will get frustrated and fail. Other SMEs will always know more than you and won't respect you if you simply try to become as knowledgeable as them.

While you want to expand your learning, your new role is not to become an expert in all things. Your job is to lead a team, which means helping the department. . .

- Identify and focus on priorities, given all the demands from the governing board, external groups, and other departments.
- Create with others a vision of where the department is trying to go.
- Set tangible and achievable goals.
- Remove obstacles to success.
- Engage employees.
- Communicate with internal and external stake-holders.

In the blog post ["Leading People When They Know More Than You Do"](#) (Harvard Business Review Blog, June 18, 2015), Wanda Wallace and David Creelman suggest that someone like you must move from a "specialty leader" style to a "generalist leader" style. A specialist leader knows what to do and focuses on facts and details. The generalist leader focuses on relationships, the questions to ask, and the people to call. Your new role is to bring out the best in others, not tell them what to do.

IDENTIFY WHAT YOU DO BRING TO THE NEW POSITION

While you are not a SME in many public works areas, you do bring a lot to the table as a generalist leader. For example, in dealing with any issue, you can help the public works management team:

- Crystallize the challenge.
- Focus on key issues.
- Break the big project into manageable "chunks."
- Move forward on first steps.

- Engage critical stake-holders.
- Apply lessons learned.

In my first job as city manager, I brought to the role a number of key attributes. I was high-energy and action-oriented. Moreover, I was able to engage employees, reach out and develop relations with stakeholder groups, and focus people.

As Wallace and Creelman state, as a specialty leader you make decisions based on your unique knowledge. As a generalist leader, you add value by making things happen.

LEAD WITH A BEGINNER’S MIND

The Buddhists talk about the value of a “beginner’s mind” vs. an “expert’s mind.” An expert’s mind is full of knowledge, expert assumptions, and past experiences (all good stuff). The problem is that there is no room in the expert’s mind for new information, perspectives, and approaches. The expert’s mind is therefore a full mind.

In contrast, a beginner’s mind is an empty or open mind. By assuming a beginner’s mind, you as a generalist leader have the opportunity to ask questions of long-tenured managers and SMEs, learn new things and promote new approaches.

ASK POWERFUL QUESTIONS

While you may not have expertise in local government finance or public works operations, you’ve had enough exposure to those areas so you can ask pertinent questions of those division managers or other SMEs who report to you as the new director. You lead by being curious and asking provocative questions. For instance. . .

- For what ideas are we fighting?
- Are we focused on the right problem?
- What’s the big “why” or compelling rationale to address this challenge?
- What’s the nature of the challenge?
- Who are the key stake-holders inside and outside the department? What are their interests? How do we know?
- What else do we need to know?
- What have we learned in our previous efforts in dealing with this issue or similar issues? How do we apply these lessons?
- What key resources do we need to effectively address this challenge?
- Whose support do we need? How do we engage these groups?
- What does “success” look like?
- What are first steps?
- What if we take an entirely different approach?

FOCUS ON THE BIG PICTURE

A generalist leader focuses on the big picture and doesn't get bogged down in the details. So, how do you help yourself and others focus on the bigger picture view? Here are several suggestions to develop this big-picture skill:

First, you want to serve as a "translator" for your department team. You must identify the big issues and challenges facing other departments that you hear at executive team meetings and then summarize those issues for your department group. Once you present those challenges from other departments or the larger organization, you should ask:

- What are the implications for our department?
- How can we help the organization respond?

Second, it is important that you continuously scan the environment for social, economic, political, value, demographic and other trends. You can do that by reading Public Works and better yet non-Public Works publications (and encouraging your department managers to do the same), and attending regional, state-wide and national meetings at which you are actively on the look-out for emerging issues. Then again, you want to present these emergent trends at your department meetings for discussion.

Third, Wallace and Creelman suggest that the generalist leader develop this skill by figuring out how a particular problem affects people two levels below you and then two levels above you. Your leadership role is then to articulate this bigger picture to your team.

DON'T FAKE EXPERTISE BUT STILL LEAD WITH CONFIDENCE

You should never try to fake expertise you don't have. You will be challenged and exposed as a fraud. However, while not a SME, you can still lead with confidence.

Here's an example. As a city manager, I was not a finance or budget guru. However, I led our city budget team. At the beginning of the two-year budget cycle, we engaged the governing board, the departments, and boards and commissions in identifying strategic priorities; presented our big budget challenges; communicated those challenges to all; and engaged departments, labor groups, and other stake-holders in problem-solving. Once the budget team developed a recommended balanced budget addressing the governing board's priorities, the team presented the proposed budget to the board. As city manager, I provided the big picture and assertively summarized the key challenges and budget strategies, but the team presented the budget. After all, they had the expertise and had done the work but I was still perceived as the team leader.

As a generalist leader, I did not have the deep knowledge of the budget numbers. I did have "executive presence" (Career Compass No. 36 "[Creating a Leadership Presence](#)"). Generalist leaders who exude executive presence dress appropriately; have a relaxed body stance; communicate in a calm voice yet are enthusiastic in tone; and use sentences that are crisp and to the point. They communicate a few key messages tailored to resonate with the interests of the audience.

ADOPT A GROWTH MINDSET

As you take on a new position for which you aren't totally prepared, you must adopt a growth mindset.

In her book [Mindset](#), Carol Dweck differentiates between fixed and growth mindsets. If you have a fixed mindset, you view your talent as limited. You desire to look smart so you avoid new situations and challenges; you tend to give up easily; you see effort as fruitless; you fear mistakes since they may indicate weakness; and you insist on doing the same tasks over and over since this reinforces your sense of competency.

Those with a growth mindset view their talent as expandable. You embrace challenging new situations and experiences; see effort as the path to mastery; and look at mistakes as opportunities to learn. With a growth mindset, you can proceed with more confidence. You accept the fact that you will make some mistakes as you learn and grow and become more accomplished in your new position.

USE YOUR DREAM TEAM

As you consider advancement into general management, rely on your dream team of special advisors. Good coaches are "catalysts." They see potential greatness in us that we don't often fully appreciate. Oftentimes, all we need to pursue advancement is someone telling us "You can do it!"

Once you advance and face challenges for which you may not be prepared, you especially need to use formal or informal coaches (see Career Compass No. 48 "[How Do I Benefit From a Coach?](#)"). Internal and external coaches can help you navigate new challenges. For example, you can ask for guidance on how you can. . .

- Promote more collaboration with another department head who sees little value or advantage in partnering on one of your department's key projects
- Better engage department employees in certain strategic priorities
- Secure the support of the chief executive for needed staffing and funding
- Better communicate misgivings to the executive team about a new organizational initiative
- Handle the resistance of a long-time division manager who is not supportive of your new direction
- Better overcome the internal resistance to new ideas

DEBRIEF YOUR EXPERIENCES

To grow into a new leadership position, you must debrief new experiences. With the division managers and other employees in your department, you must learn what is working and what is not. Therefore, with each new experience (e.g., budget battle, new park project, community meeting regarding a new utility rate hike), critique the experience in respect to:

1. What went well?
2. What has not gone so well?
3. What did we learn for future practice?

USE YOUR FIO SKILLS

As a 21st century leader, your greatest competency is not technical know-how. In the disruptive world of local government, technical knowledge becomes quickly obsolete. Learn-how becomes as important as know-how. FIO (“figure it out”) becomes the key competency.

What is FIO skill? It’s when you are thrown an adaptive challenge for which you and your team know little and for which there may not be a right or wrong solution. For instance, how does the community reduce its water usage by 30% while maintaining its quality of life? Or, how do we accommodate both dogs and people in some of our parks? You confront the challenge; convene key employees and outside interest groups; start a series of conversations; do research; identify some options; pick a tentative solution; secure support to try it out; and learn and fix up the solution as you go along.

YOU’RE NEVER TOTALLY PREPARED

As we develop ourselves, all of us typically feel that we may not be ready to advance. In my coaching practice, I find that women professionals particularly tend to overly question their ability to move up, unless they consider themselves completely prepared for the new opportunity.

You are never totally prepared--pursue and seize the opportunity anyway.

You are ready. Take the leap!

Sponsored by the ICMA Coaching Program, 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. Read past columns at icma.org/careercompass.