

Career Compass No. 46: Leading by Letting Go

In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Benest recommends that leaders make the transition from controlling to coaching.

by Dr. Frank Benest

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I'm a recently appointed division manager in a large city Human Resources Department. I was promoted because I'm results-oriented and have demonstrated my ability to accomplish whatever assignment is thrown my way.

As division manager, I have a lot of day-to-day administrative responsibilities. Yet, I want to lead change in my division as well as the Human Resources Department. This leadership role requires a lot of analysis, communication, and engagement. To move the changes forward, I feel that I must do a lot of the important work.

I have been told by my director that I need to be less hard-driving and give people the time to adjust and get on board. However, I'm afraid that if I lessen the pressure and become more laissez-faire, the group will lapse into old behaviors and attitudes, and we won't achieve the goals that I'm committed to. I don't want to give up on what I want to achieve in this new leadership position. The goals are important to the organization and to me. I care a lot.

Can you help?



When I was a less seasoned leader, I too felt that I must "drive" change and ride hard on staff to achieve important results. When I felt my unit was not apt to step up or perform at its highest level, I did the important work myself. It was all about my vision, my goals, my agenda, and my results. I, too, cared a lot.

Upon a lot of reflection, I discovered that the problem was two-fold:

- It was impossible for my brilliant self to do all the important work.
- The team underperformed, given its capacity and potential, and, therefore, the available talent was
- underutilized.

As I matured as a leader, I learned that I had to "lead by letting go." Letting go is not losing control or giving up. Letting go is about engaging people and creating shared intentions, goals, and leadership. As a former chief executive and now as a consultant, I have learned a lot over my years of practice, yet still struggle with this issue. Here is my advice. (By the way, we teach best what we most need to learn.)

Ideas for Letting Go

Over time I had to make the transition from managing/controlling/driving results to supporting/coaching/developing people. So, what are some ideas for making this transition?

1. REFLECT

Before taking any actions to improve the situation, you must reflect and ask yourself some courageous questions.

First, ask yourself: "What are the consequences of me being in control?" As suggested above, the consequences include the minimal compliance of staff; their lack of commitment to the vision and the goals; and little growth and development by all (including you as leader).

Second, ask yourself: "What do I truly fear?" If you are honest with yourself, you may conclude that you fear losing control, failing to bring about the desired changes, and perhaps being perceived as an ineffective leader in this new role.

Third, ask yourself, as Dan Rockwell suggests in his Leadership Freak blog, "[Simple Strategies to Tap the Power of Letting Go](#)"

- Who can do what I'm doing, at least 80% as good as I'm doing?
- Where am I slowing, rather than energizing, the process?
- What can I do that no else can do?
- Who has the capacity and desire to learn new roles?

2. REDEFINE YOUR ROLE

To become truly effective as a leader, you must explicitly redefine your role. You must transition from one who directs and/or does the important work to one who leads and achieves results and public value through others. Begin by asking yourself, who can. . .

- Do some of my administrative work?
- Reach out to other departments and engage them in the change process?
- Map out current processes and identify opportunities to streamline?
- Suggest non-value-added rules to eliminate?
- Focus on employee communication across the departments?

This new definition of roles needs to be part of the ongoing conversation with staff (see below).

3. PUT MORE EMPHASIS ON RELATIONSHIPS

In addition to the work and results, begin to spend more time and energy on getting to know the staff and other players inside and outside the division and department. Share yourself, and likewise demonstrate an interest in their families, leisure pursuits, career goals, life stories, and histories. Followers will not follow if they do not feel a human connection to their leader and to other team members.

You can connect with people by walking around, asking questions, and sharing personal experiences and stories. You can do the same thing at the beginning of one-to-one meetings. Chit chat is important if there is a true interest in the other person. You can also start staff meetings with a "take 5" segment, during which one or several people can share a personal anecdote or experience with the group. To get this tradition going, you should take the initiative as the team leader and share a personal vignette from your life.

4. FOCUS ON THE "WHY"

Instead of spending all your time on the "what" and "how" of the work, begin to emphasize the purpose and meaning of the work or the project. Meaning is the great motivator. (See [Dan Pink's book Drive](#).) Ask your team members: Why is our HR work so important to the organization and the community that we serve? You might want to invite to a quarterly staff meeting several employees from other departments who can relate how the work of HR helped them (and perhaps their families) and allowed them to better serve the community.

If people agree on the "why," do you really need to firmly control all of the "what" and the "how"?

5. FACILITATE CONVERSATIONS WITH STAFF

In addition to having conversations about the "why" of the work, you can facilitate conversations about the following topics:

- What does "success" look like for our team?
- What might we do to achieve success?
- How might we proceed?
- What could impede us or get in our way?
- How could we address these obstacles?
- What are our first steps?
- What should be my role as the division manager?
- What should be your roles as team members/leaders?
- How are we progressing?
- What are we learning?
- What adjustments might we make?

As the poet David Whyte once said, "Leadership is the art of the conversation."

6. AVOID TRYING TO SECURE "BUY-IN"

Oftentimes leaders try to get staff (or other stakeholders) to "buy-in" to their great ideas. People instinctively know when you are "selling." Buy-in is really manipulation. Instead of trying to impose your ideas (or selling them), it is best to have a conversation, ask questions, identify the hopes and interests of people, and incorporate their ideas into any proposal. You need to get the "fingerprints" of others on the final plan or it is really not a shared plan.

7. PROVIDE "GUARD RAILS"

Once the team develops a shared vision and shared goals, you can provide "guard rails" or boundaries within which staff can act autonomously and expect your support. For instance, you can specify how much financial or program authority team members have in conducting a project. In other words, within defined parameters, staff can "go for it." Outside the guard rails, staff need to have the conversation with you and/or the entire team.

8. TALK ABOUT PROGRESS

A lot of projects, particularly organizational improvement initiatives, take several years to achieve. It's easy for team members to lose momentum and get discouraged. Therefore, it's important to discuss milestones and celebrate progress along the way. (See Teresa Amabile et al, *The Progress Principle: Using Small Wins to Ignite Joy, Engagement, and Creativity at Work*.) Dan Rockwell encourages leaders to appreciate "imperfect progress."

9. PROMOTE LEARNING AND GROWTH

Growth (for you and others) and added team capacity cannot happen unless you let go.

As the team works on achieving its shared goals, you can promote learning by debriefing with the team. Police and fire professionals call these debriefings "post-action reports."

At every staff meeting, ask the team about key projects:

- What is going well? Where are we making progress?
- What is not going well? How are we going to address some of the problems?
- How can I help as team leader?
- What are we learning for future action?

Regardless of the position, team members learn by doing, reflecting upon their experience, and applying the lessons learned. Your role is to facilitate their learning and development. Great leaders grow more leaders.

10. GET A COACH (OR TWO)

You need encouragement and coaching as you struggle with making this transition from a driver of results to a leader who supports and develops people. The best way is to get a formal or informal coach or two (see [Career](#)

Compass No. 7 "How Do I Create a Dream Team of Advisors" and Career Compass No. 45 "City Managers Need Coaches Too").

A coach can help you reflect on your fears and insecurities as well as approaches for developing a team that creates a shared vision and goals and a real sense of commitment. A coach can help you confront the feeling that no one can do it as good as you.

The best coaches don't provide answers but help you explore options and choices that are best for you.

Trust the Process

This process of self-development as a leader is a journey with twists and turns, small successes and setbacks. You need to trust the process, the ongoing conversation, the people. Take small steps and build on the effort.

Great leaders are supportive and demanding at the same time. With the team, you are evaluating along the way, checking on milestones, debriefing, confronting mediocrity, making adjustments, celebrating successes, and learning from mistakes. You haven't given up your role as leader.

Over time, the team will take on more and more self-leadership. Great leaders then become great followers.



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.