



Career Compass No. 62:

“How Do I Get a Better Title?”

by Dr. Frank Benest

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I'm a senior management analyst in the city manager's office in a mid-sized city. Over the past four years, I've been the lead person for the organization on a number of internal and external communication issues. I'm well-regarded and often called upon by the city manager or department heads to help craft and carry out a communications plan. I'm especially utilized when the issue is contentious and we need employee or civic engagement.

Last year I asked for a formal reclassification of my position (and more money) to communications manager. In her meeting with me, the city manager expressed appreciation for my work but told me she would not recommend a reclass as part of the annual budget process. She simply had other budget priorities in a tight budget year. She further indicated that I was not a manager since I did not directly supervise anyone.

I'm still leading communication and engagement efforts, but I believe my senior management analyst title does not reflect my duties. I'd like the higher pay from a reclass but a better job title is my key goal.

What do I do? I feel stymied.



DR. BENEST: I understand your rationale and desire for a formal reclassification with commensurate pay. A formal (or even a “working”) job title aligned with your actual responsibilities is important for several reasons:

- It supports your activities as you try to exert positive influence and achieve results.
- It reflects your place in the organization and the value you deliver.
- It positions you for future advancement.
- It also helps keep you engaged and energized.

Just because you got a “no” does not mean you give up. You have many options to explore.

KEY STEPS

To pursue a formal reclassification or just a better title more reflective of your duties, consider these steps.

Reflect

As suggested by Rebecca Knight in her *hbr.org* blog piece [“How to Ask for the Job Title You Deserve”](#) (July 17, 2017), the first thing to do is reflect on why you desire the reclass or new title. Does the title better reflect your place in the organization? Will the better title give you more influence in order to get the job done? If so, how? Will the title better position you for further advancement?

What is your rationale? What is important to you?

Document your results

You need to document your key communication efforts and results on a monthly or quarterly basis. This will help you create a better foundation for a future discussion with the city manager (and department heads).

Listen to your boss

In your discussions with the city manager, ask questions and try to discern:

- What is important to her?
- What are her upcoming agenda and priorities?
- What is important to the city manager with respect to communications and stakeholder engagement?
- What does “success” look like with respect to your efforts?

This data can then help you frame your strategy for a reclass or new title.

Engage the city manager in a development conversation

To create more readiness for a future discussion about your position and your title, you might want to take the initiative and have a development conversation with the city manager. This development conversation should focus on:

- Your hopes and dreams going forward in your career.

- Areas for growth and development.
- Ways to broaden your influence and increase positive impact.
- Ways to stretch assignments to better serve the organization.
- Education, training, and coaching opportunities.
- How you get to “excellent” or achieve the next level in your work and provide even greater value to the organization.

(Visit [ICMA's coaching resources page](#) for training videos and talent development resources, including an outline for a “talent catalyst conversation”.)

This kind of conversation not only provides good advice from your boss but tends to “hook” your city manager as a supporter and perhaps even secure her as a new member of your “dream team” of special advisors.

Get more professionally involved and visible

To learn more about communication strategy and stakeholder engagement, get actively involved in an appropriate professional organization of public sector communicators. For example, at the national level the City County Communications and Marketing Association (3CMA) is well-suited to support your learning. In California, there is the California Association of Public Information Officers (CAPIO). All local government disciplines (public works, HR, police, etc.) have separate statewide professional organizations that promote the discipline.

These professional organizations obviously help you do your job better by providing knowledge, resources, and contacts. If you get actively involved (by making presentations, writing an occasional article for their newsletter, and/or volunteering for a committee), you are also signaling to your city manager and others in the agency that you are a public communications specialist with professional expertise. Of course, you must let your boss and others know of your professional activities.

Enhance your role

To leverage your communications work and showcase your leadership capabilities, you could put together a city-wide “key communicators” group that you would lead. Composed of at least one key communicator from each department, this working group could develop key messages and strategies in communicating with internal and external stakeholders on tough issues.

There are two ways to form this group:

1. Ask the city manager to formally call together this multidepartment group and designate you as the team leader.
2. Form the group based on your relationships with these key department communicators.

With respect to simply taking the initiative and not asking permission, you might first want to have a series of one-to-one conversations with potential members of the group. In these one-to-one conversations, you would discuss the purpose and benefit of such a communications team, incorporate other ideas about the proposed team, and gain support before moving forward.

Do some research

You will need to do some research inside and outside the organization. First, you need to reach out to members of your “dream team” of special advisors and coaches (see [Career Compass No. 7: “How Do I Create a Dream Team of Advisors?”](#)) and validate how you are perceived in the organization and to what degree communications work is valued by top management. Assuming that your self-perceptions are validated, you can proceed with more self-confidence. If not, you need a strategy to better promote the value of communications and stakeholder engagement.

Second, ask if they anticipate any upcoming initiatives of great importance to the city council and city manager that require a critical communications or engagement element. If so, you can tie any future request for a reclass or new title to this initiative and your role in it.

Third, through your network in the organization, find out if anyone else has sought and secured a reclass or new title in your agency. If so, talk to that person. How did he or she go about it? What was the process? What worked? How did he or she frame the request?

Fourth, do some research outside your agency with other city governments or other public organizations. Find out:

- What roles do communication and stakeholder engagement play in their ongoing work?
- Who leads these efforts?
- Where is the position placed in the organization?
- What is the lead person’s title and salary?
- Do they utilize a team or working group to support communication and stakeholder engagement?

Craft a strategy

You are now ready to craft a strategy and then have several conversations with the city manager about a reclass. You could share a one- or two-page memo outlining your case. As part of this strategy, the city manager already knows about your career aspirations. You can now share your views about the importance of your work to the organization and how you are enhancing your role and efforts. You can also tie your request to a key initiative (i.e., downtown revitalization, neighborhood safety, sustainability) of the council or city manager.

Moreover, you can provide a summary of your research about how the other local governments utilize the communications function, the responsibilities of the lead person, and the titles and salaries of those communications leaders.

Finally, if you sense continuing hesitation, ask the city manager: “What would it take for you to approve my reclass and new title?” and “What are some metrics that I could achieve to support my reclass and add more value to the organization?”

Consider timing

Rebecca Knight in another *hbr.org* piece [“How to Ask for a Promotion”](#) (January 29, 2018) suggests that the timing of the request is important. Obviously, you don’t want to make a reclass request

immediately before or after difficult budget cuts. A good time to make the request is after you or your team have been successful in achieving significant results.

If a reclass or position title change requires city council approval, you need to time your request early on as the city manager's budget proposal is being developed.

Don't get too creative

If you want the title "communications manager" yet the city manager resists because you don't manage any people, you can suggest that this title is appropriate because you manage communication issues. Or, based on the city manager's comments, maybe you recommend a title of "communication issues manager." Or, you might suggest the title of "strategic communications officer" (which doesn't suggest that you to supervise people).

Depending on the culture of your organization, the city manager might resist an overly creative title. For instance, some HR professionals have tried to retitle their positions to "chief people officer." In some organizational cultures, that title would work; in more stodgy cultures, it wouldn't.

Options B and C

In any negotiation (even those in which you don't have an equal amount of power), you must always have a fallback position or two.

If the city manager still resists the reclass and higher pay, suggest that you get the new job title but the position stays at the same pay level as the senior management analyst.

If she still resists, you might want to suggest a "working title." In other words, given your specialized duties, you have the working title of "communication issues manager" or "strategic communications officer," but you formally you continue as a senior management analyst.

An appropriate working title is helpful in supporting your leadership role inside the organization. It also positions you for advancement, either in your agency or with another organization.

Be Persistent

Your discussion with the city manager is not a one-and-done conversation. As I suggest above, it will be more likely a series of conversations during which you engage the city manager in your career aspirations and lay the groundwork with respect to the results you have achieved and the importance of your efforts to the city manager's agenda going forward. Once this state of readiness has been developed, you can propose the reclass and new position title.

TAKING CHARGE OF YOUR CAREER

To get a reclassification or simply a new formal or working title, remember to:

- Reflect on why you want a better title.
- Document your results.
- Do some research inside and outside the organization.
- Hook your boss as a key supporter of your career development.

- Get professionally visible.
- Grow your role.
- Craft a winning strategy, including some fallback options.
- Be persistent.

You need to take charge of your career and advocate for yourself. If you don't promote your value, who will?

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.