



Career Compass No. 65:

FIO – The Key Competency for 21st Century Leaders

by Dr. Frank Benest

August 13, 2018

Dear Frank,

I am a fire captain in a mid-sized city in the west. The fire chief recommended me to represent the department on a multidepartment team. Appointed by the city manager, the team is charged with addressing the growing problem of individuals or families living in cars and recreational vehicles. Oftentimes the people living in their vehicles have jobs and many of the kids go to school. The families just can't afford the cost of housing in the region. Moreover, there are a lot of stakeholder groups (neighborhood groups, business associations, churches, schools, advocacy organizations) that are involved yet often in conflict about what to do about the problem.



The community services director is the chair of the committee and after the first couple of meetings asked me to serve as vice-chair. I don't mind backing her up, but I know nothing of this complicated problem. I take a leadership role in my department, but I am uncertain and uneasy about helping to lead this multidepartment team. I feel for these people and want to help the city address the challenge but I'm not comfortable taking a leadership role.

DR. BENEST: The problem of people living in vehicles, RVs, or on the streets is a big adaptive challenge. It is not a technical challenge where the solutions are known and can be addressed through management.

According to Ronald Herzberg and Marty Linsky in their book *Leadership on the Line*, an adaptive challenge is one where there are no right or wrong answers, each stakeholder group has its own preferred solution, and value conflicts abound. Adaptive challenges can only be addressed through leadership, not management. Homelessness is a classic adaptive challenge.

VUCA

People living in their vehicles is a messy and contentious problem. The military uses the term “VUCA” to describe such situations. For instance, as opposed to past wars, the army is not fighting on the linear fields of Europe with mechanized armies against nation-states. Rather, today when the army sends a field unit into an Afghani village, it is difficult to identify the enemy combatants vs. the noncombatant civilians. The soldiers are not fighting on the fields of Europe but block by block, house by house. It is **v**olatile, **u**ncertain, **c**omplex, and **a**mbiguous. It is a “VUCA” situation—just like your homelessness challenge.

Many of the contemporary problems that we face in local government—affordable housing, water shortages, immigration, poverty, economic vitality—are VUCA-like. They are adaptive challenges for which we don’t have technical solutions acceptable to everyone in our heterogeneous communities.

VETO POWER

After writing his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins spoke at the ICMA Annual Conference on his research about how corporations get from “good” to “great.” The city and county managers challenged Collins to explore how local governments (as opposed to business entities) could go from good to great. Collins took on the challenge and discovered that decision-making was strikingly different in the public sector. In fact, Collins identified that the defining element of the public sector (vs. the private sector) was that everyone could say “no.” (See Jim Collins, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*.)

Not only are you dealing with an uncertain situation, but every stakeholder group can block your committee’s efforts to implement a positive response to the homelessness problem. All these groups can “veto” your efforts. So, the leadership question is “How do we get to ‘yes’ when everyone can say ‘no’?”

To get to “yes” (or at least minimize opposition to a positive approach), your group must get out of the city silo, cross boundaries, and engage stakeholders along with the individuals and families involved. When you cross boundaries, you have no authority. That will feel very uncomfortable.

LEARNING AGILITY

You and your colleagues on the committee have a lot of technical knowledge and skills. For instance, I am sure that you know how to knock down a fire, help someone amid a heart attack, or inspect a commercial building for fire hazards. Since you and your city colleagues can’t solve the homelessness challenge with your technical expertise, you must get out of your comfort zone and explore a range of possible responses, none of which are perfect solutions for everyone.

You can leverage technical knowledge and skills in a stable environment.

In an uncertain and disruptive environment, technical skills quickly become obsolete. Learn-how becomes as important as know-how.

It's all about learning agility. So, how do you become an agile learner?

In her blog piece on March 15, 2018, "[Why Learning Agility Is Key to Survive in Today's Business World](#)," Rayi Noomega defined an agile learner as "someone who has the ability to learn new things and easily adapt to changes and make the most of it." When confronted with new situations and realities, someone who is an agile learner will view the challenge from multiple angles and generate new ideas on how to respond with others.

To promote learning agility in your situation, you and your colleagues should:

- Start a lot of conversations with affected parties (see Career Compass #61 "Leadership is the Art of Conversation").
- Reach out to other jurisdictions and organizations that are struggling with the same challenge.
- Read a lot.
- Brainstorm with everyone.
- Identify a few options.
- Try out one or several experiments.
- Fix up the "solutions" as you go along.

GET UNCOMFORTABLE

Little learning occurs when you and your colleagues are comfortable. This team assignment is obviously a "stretch" opportunity for you to learn and grow. You must get uncomfortable if you are to take advantage of the opportunity to learn and lead.

ENLARGE YOUR TEAM

You might want to enlarge and diversify your multidepartment team to include external stakeholder group representatives and several people who live in a vehicle or RV. As Google's Aristotle Project discovered, effective teams that arrive at great solutions are diverse and ensure that there is broad participation. Team leaders need to ensure that there is "psychological safety" to disagree so that everyone is unafraid to share their unique perspectives.

START A SERIES OF CONVERSATIONS

To identify the best or most acceptable approach for implementation, you must engage stakeholder groups in authentic conversations, ask questions, listen intently, incorporate their ideas where possible, address their concerns and fears, and generally get their "fingerprints" on the proposed solution.

Of course, you must be open to the conversation and be willing to consider different perspectives. As actor Alan Alda once suggested, listening and engaging another person in authentic conversation involves the “willingness to let the other person change you.”

As a leader, you must show in tangible ways that the conversation influenced your thinking and the proposal. Otherwise, the conversation is not “authentic;” it is merely talk. To influence others, you must let them influence you. And you must provide feedback to the other person about how the conversation changed your perspective or idea.

Typically, the most elegant solution or best idea to implement comes after any initial ideas are tested against reality, including available resources and political acceptability. It is an iterative process of testing out and morphing your idea as you discover the interests and concerns of other people. As everyone gets their fingerprints on the eventual solution, it becomes “our idea” and thus acceptable to most parties.

TAKE SMART RISKS

As a result of these conversations, your larger team may then explore and consider any number of imperfect responses:

- Provide portable bathrooms where the RVs and other vehicles park at night.
- Partner with the county social services or a nonprofit to reach out to the individuals and families and provide available support services and any housing, if available.
- Secure a safer environment where the vehicles could park at night; for example, at churches or temples, at the city community center, or at a VA facility.
- Collaborate with the school district to provide sleeping quarters for families with children at the middle school gym.
- Raise funds to purchase vouchers to provide discounted shelter at local motels.

Of course, the longer-term solution would be to work on promoting and building affordable housing for low-income working individuals and families.

To address this VUCA challenge, take some smart risks (as opposed to wild gambles). To take smart risks and make a difference for your community, you and your team colleagues should:

1. **Consider the risks only if they are important to you and align with your passion and values.** If this issue is important to you and the community that you serve, you might be willing to take the required risks to pursue some of the solutions.
2. **Calculate the costs of doing nothing (status quo option).** We typically ignore the costs of the status quo. What are the negative impacts to the community and the families who live in the vehicles if the city does nothing?
3. **“Ready, fire, aim.”** It’s about getting things “roughly right” and fixing up the approach as you go along. There is no perfect solution in a VUCA situation.
4. **Use a respected sponsor.** If you know the politics of your city council and your community, you might want to find a front-person or two to serve as sponsors. For instance, the police

chief, the president of a neighborhood group and/or a minister might be a good sponsor for your effort.

5. **Spread the risk.** By engaging several stakeholder groups and getting their fingerprints on the proposal, you spread the risk and minimize the potential for opponents to attack your staff team.
6. **Tie the change project to another initiative or investment already underway.** You are more likely to secure support for your proposed solution if you tie it to an ongoing priority of the council or some other influential group. For instance, your solution might be tied to the council's priority of supporting families, promoting great neighborhoods, or creating a safe community.
7. **Pilot everything.** Even if what you propose is not an experiment, call it a "pilot." A pilot suggests that there will be missteps and errors that you will learn from them to develop a better permanent solution.
8. **Take incremental steps and ramp up over time.** You might want to start by providing a portable toilet in an area where the RVs and other vehicles park and then perhaps learn more by doing one-to-one outreach to identify what the families need. Taking incremental steps creates momentum. Moreover, any one action is reversible.
9. **Debrief experience as you go along.** Doing post-action reports as you proceed (just like you do for a fire incident) allows you to learn what works and how to enhance your future efforts. For any debrief with your team, you want to ask three questions:
 - What is going well?
 - What is not going well?
 - What are we learning to enhance our future practice?
10. **Seek guidance from your "dream team."** Since this is a messy and potentially contentious issue, you need to seek guidance and advice from formal and informal coaches. (See [Career Compass No. 7: How Do I Create a Dream Team of Advisors](#) and [Career Compass No. 48: How Do I Benefit from a Coach](#).)

EMBRASE THE PARADOXES

Leadership is not about your positional authority. It has nothing to do with your position. It is about exerting positive influence in an environment where everybody can say no.

To exert leadership, you need to embrace several leadership paradoxes. (See [Career Compass No. 56: The Paradoxes of Leadership](#).) First, you need to go slow to go fast. To engage the various stakeholder groups and incorporate their interests or at least minimize their concerns, you need to take the necessary time to arrive at an acceptable solution.

Second, you must often pull back to push ahead. Again, your colleagues and coaches on your dream team can help you discern when you need to retreat from advocating for a solution that will not be supported until you modify the approach.

Third, only strong leaders can show vulnerability. (See [Career Compass No. 32: The Power of Vulnerability](#).) Don't be afraid of saying "I don't know", "I need your help" or "I miscalculated or made a mistake." Only self-confident leaders can show some frailty or flaw. People won't follow you unless they connect with you. Showing vulnerability promotes connection and thus promotes your leadership capacity. Remember, followers choose to follow (or not).

DEVELOP A GROWTH MINDSET

To address the homeless situation in your community, you and your team members must adopt a "growth mindset." In her book *Mindset*, Carol Dweck indicated that those with a "fixed mindset" believe that their talents and abilities are fixed. They avoid new challenges because they are afraid to fail, and they try to do the same thing repeatedly because it reinforces their sense of competency.

Those with a growth mindset seek out new challenges, try out different approaches, and see mistakes as opportunities to learn and grow.

FIO IS THE KEY COMPETENCY OF 21ST CENTURE LEADERS

As you engage others in authentic conversations, incorporate different ideas and perspectives, try stuff out, fix things up as you go along and learn from your mistakes, you are practicing "FIO" (Figure It Out) skills. FIO is the key competency for leaders in disruptive times.

Responding to the homeless problem in your community is challenging and beyond your technical skills and expertise. Yet it is a wonderful opportunity to learn and grow and become a better leader. As John F. Kennedy stated, "leadership and learning are indispensable to each other."

Enjoy the leadership and learning journey.

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.