Career Compass No. 77: Ten Practices to Build a Mini-Culture of Learning

If there is no behavior change or better way of doing things, learning is not real or authentic.

I am a public works operations superintendent in a large special district. I oversee several field divisions (parks, streets, water, public facilities) and supervise these division managers. The district's board of directors and the general manager want us to focus on environmental sustainability. While our different groups are quite useful in doing their work, I see the need to promote learning and experimentation in all things "green."

The problem is that there does not seem to be much enthusiasm to learn new things and try out new approaches in our work. People seem to be stuck in doing things the way we've always done them. While we encourage staff to attend training workshops, the district as a whole does not actively promote ongoing learning. In fact, we tend to be afraid of making any mistakes.

How do I help create a learning culture, at least in my realm of the organization?

Yes, the world is changing, and we need to adapt. One of my favorite quotes from Gary Hamel is: "Are we changing as fast as the world is changing?" In most case, the answer is "No, we're not."

Of course, adapting requires ongoing learning, experimenting, and risk-taking.

What is a learning culture?

Learning is defined in the dictionary as an activity or a process for gaining knowledge or skill by studying, practicing, being taught, or experiencing something. I prefer to focus on **authentic learning** which is defined as real-life learning. It is a style of learning that encourages learners to create a tangible, useful product to be shared with their world or some behavior is changed for the better. (See Steve Revington at www.authenticlearning.weebly.com .)

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Culture is defined as "the way we do things around here." It is the operating system for the team or unit or organization as a whole. Culture seems like it is a "squishy" notion, but it consists of two elements:

1. Values and beliefs.
2. Behaviors.

Therefore, a learning culture consists of values and behaviors that promote learning and new ways of interacting and changing things for the better.

A new or enhanced culture is not created overnight. Instead, it's built slowly over time, step by step, behavior by behavior. (See Career Compass #51 "Building a World-Class Culture.")

Where do you begin?

To get started, you need to do a few things:

First, understand that you don't need to change the whole organization. You can create a mini-culture of learning. Even though the entire district may not encourage robust learning, experimentation, and risk-taking, you can develop a learning mini-culture in your part of the organization. Start in your realm of influence.

Second, you need to start talking about the "big why" and need to promote learning and adaptation. Always start with the "why," not the "what" or the "how." (See Simon Sinek's TED Talk "[How Great Leaders Inspire Action](#).") Discuss learning and adapting as critical ingredients to the future viability of the organization and PW operations. Share some examples of new environmental efforts that could pay-off.

Third, to create a state of readiness, you can serve as a role model. Modeling is the most potent way that others learn. Are you learning new things? Are you sharing what you've learned with your direct reports and their teams? Are you demonstrating that you've been uncomfortable as you've learned? (I have more to say later on the importance of discomfort.) Are you sharing what you have learned by stumbling around and making a few mistakes?

Finally, you should focus on "learning by doing" coupled with candid and helpful feedback. There are two elements to promoting authentic learning: 1) taking on stretching job assignments, and 2) receiving honest feedback or coaching.

How do we overcome our blind spots?

We all have cognitive blind spots, especially those of us with technical and professional expertise. The Buddhists say that our "expert's mind" is a full and closed mind. To promote learning and new ways of doing things, you must encourage your team to confront challenges (such as environmental sustainability) with a "beginner's mind," which is an empty and open mind.

To promote cognitive humility, Dan Pink, in his [Pinkcast 3.09](#) (August 13, 2019) suggests several questions from Warren Berger's *[The Book of Beautiful Questions](#)*. You can ask yourself and your team:

1. Do I think more like a soldier (defending territory) or a scout (exploring new territory)?
2. Would I rather be right, or would I rather understand?
3. Do I routinely solicit and seek out opposing views?
4. Do I enjoy the pleasant surprise of discovering that I'm mistaken?

Another way to promote openness to new ideas is to include non-experts from other fields or disciplines when you are brainstorming new solutions. Thus, it would be helpful to include recreation leaders, librarians, police officers, or neighborhood group members who don't have any expertise in public works operations but will bring diverse experiences and ideas to the discussion. (See [Career Compass #72 "How Do We Generate Creative Ideas?"](#))

What are the key ingredients of powerful learning experiences?

In my leadership development workshops, I often ask participants to share a powerful learning experience and identify key ingredients or conditions that made the experience so powerful. The typical characteristics of powerful learning include:

- The challenge was important or meaningful to me and/or my organization or community.
- I had to "stretch" and get uncomfortable.
- I was given some measure of autonomy to "figure it out."
- I learned as I went along.
- Honest and responsible mistakes were accepted if I was committed to excellence and learned from the missteps.
- I had informal coaching or support from my boss.
- My team supported the effort.
- I was given the time and resources to take on the challenge.
- I could see progress as I tackled the problem.
- I was able to share what I learned so that others could benefit.
- My boss or coach believed in me.
- Someone showed they cared about my growth and development.

These are the classic "enabling" ingredients or conditions for powerful learning. Any one experience does not have to include all these ingredients; however, for the experience to have a strong learning impact, it must incorporate a lot of these ingredients.

Consequently, if you can provide opportunities to promote learning for individuals and the team based on these enabling conditions, you will encourage robust learning and over time and create a mini-culture of learning and development.

What are 10 practices to promote learning?

Based on my local government management and consulting experience, I have identified 10 practices to promote learning. While it is helpful if the overall organizational culture supports these practices, you can use these suggested approaches with your team without much support or approval from top management.

The 10 practices are:

1. Start each meeting with a learning report. When I was the city manager of Palo Alto, California, we encouraged each unit in our organization to start its staff meeting with a learning report. It could be a summary of an article or report, or what was learned at a recent work-

shop, or themes from a stakeholder or community meeting, or "what my teen daughter told me at the breakfast table."

2. Debrief everything. After every experience (for example, key project event, governing board or neighborhood meeting), you can engage the team in a debriefing. Debriefs include three questions: What went well? What did not go so well? What can we learn for our future practice?

Of course, as a leader, you must make it safe for people to provide different views and opinions. (See [Career Compass #69 "Psychological Safety—The Key Determinant of Team Effectiveness](.").")

When appropriate, it is a good idea to share the key learnings from the project or initiative debrief with other groups so they can learn from your team's experience.

3. Ensure everyone has an individual learning plan. While it is common for professional and technical staff to develop an annual work plan, you can also require that each staff person incorporate (or draft a separate) learning and development plan. Questions on the individual learning plan template could include:

- What do you want to learn in the coming year?
- What are different ways to get the learning?
- What learning activities do you propose?
- Why would that learning be valuable to you, the organization, or the community?
- How could the new learning be applied?
- What kind of resources (time, money, or other support) would you need?
- How would you share the learning with other staff or key stakeholders?

4. Provide choices. Everyone wants options and choices. People like to learn in different ways. While learning by doing plus feedback and coaching is the most powerful way to learn, people could secure learning in many ways:

- Taking on a stretch assignment.
- Leading a new team.
- Becoming an interim or acting manager.
- Taking a course or seminar.
- Doing research, such as interviewing key informants.
- Reading some of the literature and identifying best practices.

5. Help people secure the ideal mix of learning. While everyone tends to focus on classroom training, the ideal blend of learning is 70/20/10: 70% of learning for an individual should

ideally be learning by doing; 20% should be informal or informal coaching; and 10% should be classroom training or education.

6. Favor "ready, fire, aim." As managers, we tend to question the ideas of our direct reports and try to make them better. Unless "the barn is on fire" (Dan Rockwell, "[Reject Fast Solutions](#)," *Leadership Freak* blog, Aug. 26, 2019), we should instead just encourage people to try out their idea. As Dan Pink emphasizes in his book *[Drive](#),* autonomy is a key self-motivator along with purpose.

7. Help people find their "sweet spot" of learning. In giving stretch assignments, you want to help people find their sweet spot of learning. (See [Career Compass #73 "How Do I Secure and Benefit from a Stretch Assignment?"](#)) The sweet spot is a stretch assignment where there is a 50-70% chance of success. If there is a 90% chance of success, it's too easy, and there's no discomfort, and therefore they won't learn anything new. If there's only a 40% chance of success, the effort will cause too much distress, and the person will tend to withdraw or shut down.

8. Take "little bets" and smart risks. To learn by doing and achieve positive outcomes for themselves and others, people must take some risks. Since our local governments tend to be risk-averse, you can help staff minimize the risks of new endeavors by:

- Making a "little bet" (see Peter Sims' book *[Little Bets](#)*) by doing a small beta-test and then scaling the solution after you've learned what works and what doesn't work.
- Engaging the internal and external stakeholders as partners in the new endeavor, thereby creating allies and "spreading the risk."
- Calling everything an experiment because, of course, there will be mistakes (some things will work and others won't) with any experiment.
- Tying your learning effort to a broader agenda (for example, the board's priority of environmental sustainability) or some other ongoing investment (for example, an IT or capital project).

9. Encourage teaching and mentoring. Some people (like me) learn best by teaching. If someone has acquired new knowledge or learned a new skill, encourage them to give a presentation at a unit meeting or to the larger department at an all-hands meeting. They can also do a demonstration, or you can have others "shadow" or partner with them as they try out a new skill.

10. Celebrate new learning. One of the best ways to build a learning culture is to celebrate new learning. Once someone gets a certificate or learns a new skill, recognize the person with

bagels and coffee for all at a staff meeting or department all-hands meeting, as well as highlight their learning achievement in the employee e-newsletter.

Learning is the key to adaptation

All local government organizations are facing tough adaptive challenges (demographic and technological shifts, climate change, homelessness, the opioid epidemic, growing income inequality). There are no right or wrong answers to these problems. Learning and experimentation at all levels of our organizations will be required to adapt to new realities.

Your role as a leader is to promote learning for everyone. To paraphrase David Gable ("How Humble Leadership Really Works," *hbr.org*, April 23, 2018), as a leader, you are mere overhead if you're not helping staff learn and become better at what they do.

Sponsored by the ICMA Coaching Program, *Career Compass* is a monthly column focused on leadership and career development 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 leadership or career question you would like addressed in a future Career Compass, e-mail careers@icma.org or contact Frank directly at frank@frankbenest.com