



Career Compass: What Skills Are Most Important for a Manager (And How Do I Develop Them)?

In the first of a recurring series on career advice, Frank Benest reflects on the skills and abilities most important for a successful city or county manager and how professionals new to the field go about developing those skills. If you have a question you would like answered in a future column, e-mail it to nextgen@icma.org.

What skills do I need to succeed in senior management and how do I develop them?

The one set of skills essential to serve as a chief executive in local government is leadership, or people skills. Most often people get promoted into supervision or low-level management because of their effective technical skills. However, managers most often fail because of their poor people skills, as opposed to poor analytical or technical competencies. In fact, a Harvard Business School study looked at manager failure and found that as much of 80 percent of senior manager failure resulted from poor people skills.

Five years ago, the Cal-ICMA Coaching Program surveyed up-and-coming talent in local government. When asked “what skills do you need to acquire in order to advance into management?,” most aspiring managers responded that they needed technical skills, such as budgeting, HR, project administration, IT, and other hard skills. However, when the coaching program surveyed city and county managers and department directors, they strongly indicated that aspiring managers needed soft skills, including skills in team leadership, team-building, conflict resolution, listening, communication, supervision, and other people leadership skills. For the senior managers, it was the soft skills that created the hard results.

For the top executive, what does leadership really look like in practice? From my perspective, executive leadership is a set of roles to be played at different times depending on the needs of the organization and the community.

These leadership roles include:

Convener and Conversation Starter. Leaders must convene and engage employees and community members so that they take an active role in conversations about the present and future of their organization or community. These venues could include small, intimate opportunities, such as “coffee with the chief executive” on designated mornings in the cafeteria, as well as more formal group meetings or workshops with employees and community members. In a very real sense, leadership is about conversations.

Translator. Leaders need to translate the challenges, difficulties, opportunities and the nature of the work so employees perceive meaning. By helping employees sense they are making a difference in the lives of others, building community and saving the planet, leaders become “meaning translators.”

Dream Maker. Individuals, organizations, and communities all require dreams and must participate in the hard work to achieve those aspirations if they are to do great things and become fulfilled. Therefore, leaders must engage others in discussing their own dreams and those they hold for the organization or the community. Of course, leaders must then work with all to translate those dreams into plans and actions.

Journey Leader. A great organization is characterized by employees who commit to the general enterprise, key initiatives, and each other. Employees cannot be ordered to commit. Managerial authority is impotent. As Charles Lauer has stated, “leaders cannot force people to follow—they invite them on a journey.” Therefore, leaders must articulate the nature of the journey, excite people about the opportunity and challenge, and then invite people to join them.

Follower. Great leaders are great followers. If leaders engage employees and community members in the big issues of the day, they must be open to following the values, ideas, and needs articulated by others. To be a great follower, leaders must demonstrate a certain humility and vulnerability in addition to any traditional toughness and forcefulness.

Cheerleader. Leaders cheer on project teams even when not leading the effort. An effective leader provides encouragement, resources, and other support so that employees and community partners can achieve their hopes, dreams, and plans.

Party Host. We in local government do not know how to have fun in the workplace. In our party host role, we can organize coffee and bagel breaks, tail-gate pizza parties, or ice cream socials in order to recognize people, show our appreciation, and especially celebrate our successes. I call it “purposeful partying.” Partying with a purpose helps create a more vital and committed team.

So, as an aspiring manager, how can you develop leadership skills? You can learn leadership skills by engaging in leadership work regardless of your formal position in the organization. **You learn leadership by doing.**

First, you can exert leadership skills by asking to join or volunteering to participate on project teams in your local organization or community or through your church, a nonprofit or professional association. Leadership is a social activity, so you need to engage yourself with others.

Second, you can ask questions to employee or community partners and engage them in conversations about the following:

- *What are our hopes and vision for this effort or project?
- *Why is this project important to us and others?
- *What do we want to achieve?
- *Who else needs to be part of the conversation?

Third, an aspiring manager can help engage others in a worthy journey. You can articulate your dreams and encourage others to communicate their own. As you embark with others on a journey, you can model excitement and passion as well as tenacity in taking on the inevitable problems as you experience the project journey.

Fourth, you can serve a cheerleader and party host in any position.

Finally, you can be a good follower by supporting others as they exert leadership, asking how you can help and bringing up the tough questions that must be addressed by the team while demonstrating your commitment to the endeavor.

Everyone can learn leadership skills by engaging in leadership work. Certainly, you'll make mistakes from which you can learn. As President John F. Kennedy once said, "Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other."

I wish you well as you experience the joys and challenges of learning leadership.

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