



Career Compass: Defining Your Value In Uncertain Times

In this Career Compass, we address the question of demonstrating value in a climate of severe budget cuts:

- *I'm early in my career and am afraid for myself and others. How do I demonstrate my value in this economic climate of cutbacks, layoffs, and hiring freezes?*

As our national and global economies have hit some turbulence, most local governments will be making significant budget cuts now or certainly by the beginning of the next fiscal year planning cycle. Most local government revenues are tied to economic transactions, so we will be forced to make service and personnel cuts even as service demand increases in the recession. As these cuts are made, organizational members will experience fear and productivity will decline.

In these turbulent times, you may experience:

- Loss of your job and the jobs of other family members or colleagues
- Family insecurity
- Loss of professional identity
- Concern for community and country.

In times of fear, people tend to hunker down. That's the worst thing to do. You need to demonstrate your value and help the organization survive the budget cuts and re-think how it does business. How do you demonstrate value? By exerting leadership. Everyone can be a leader and exert positive influence regardless of where you are placed in the organization.

Here are 10 leadership strategies for you to help your organization in the midst of turmoil and fear, and, in the process, demonstrate your value:

1. Avoid "magical thinking"

Budget cuts will be made in your organization and in your department. Some people will think that the budget shortfalls will magically go away, or that cuts will only happen to other units, not their own, or that someone/something (the state?) will save them. You need to confront the ugly truth, help others do the same, and then decide to actively participate with others in crafting positive yet difficult solutions.

2. Seek out accurate information from top management

In tough times, inaccurate information and damaging rumors multiply. You need to get the facts and identify the intentions of top management, help your group openly discuss the budget situation and implications, and help stamp out rumors.

3. Support others

Once you try to control your own fears, you should support other team members. Listen to them, acknowledge their fears and concerns, encourage them, and listen some more.

4. Model positive behaviors

Modeling is the most powerful way that others learn. So, you need to model positive attitudes and behaviors. For instance, you need to get engaged, not withdraw. You can resist negative thinking that management does not care, or that managers will cut the jobs of others but not their own. And you can be forward-looking. As Betsy Fretwell writes in her [January/February PM article "Coping with Economic Crisis and Some Lessons Learned,"](#) we need to "take the rear view mirror off the bus." New challenges require new thinking. We need to get beyond "we looked at that before" statements and "haven't we plowed that ground already" arguments.

5. Actively participate in team meetings

Now more than ever, you must actively participate in your unit, division, and department meetings and offer your ideas. You can't see yourself as a passive victim. You can proactively contribute to a variety of solutions.

6. Re-think service delivery

The massive nature of our deficits requires re-thinking of how we deliver our programs. Instead of the local government agency directly providing all services, can your local government...

- Partner with a nonprofit or private entity to provide the service or meet the need?
- Reengineer or automate business practices, cutting out non-value-added work and cost?
- Regionalize a service with other local governments?
- Restructure around vacancies, broadening the span of management control?
- Market your assets (e.g., facilities, equipment, expertise, services) to other governments and generate new revenue subsidizing your

fixed costs?

- Stop providing programs that no longer serving a large community need?

Like our new president, your motto needs to be "Yes, we can!"

7. Engage others inside and outside in creative problem-solving

Many solutions are cross-cutting ideas. Such solutions need to involve staff in other units or departments, or outside stakeholders in other agencies or community groups. Given your network, you can help your organization engage others inside or outside city hall in designing creative solutions.

8. Volunteer to serve on the department or city-wide budget team

Don't wait to be asked. Raise your hand and jump in.

9. Demonstrate your value and ability to grow and learn

This is key. You must identify your assets and "gifts" and offer them to others as everyone struggles to address the budget crisis. You can offer your computer, writing, public speaking or facilitating skills to the overall effort. You must also work toward enhancing your existing value by continuing to learn and grow. Take a course or seminar, return to school, get involved in ICMA's Emerging Leaders Development Program, work on a new skill, take on a new assignment and stretch yourself.

10. Promote "serious fun"

In tough financial times, management often enacts new rules and procedures and creates a sense of deadly seriousness. The problem is that people can't be creative and identify new solutions in an uptight and overly serious environment. Creativity is generated when people are playful. Therefore, you can involve yourself and others in some playful activity. For instance, you can simply bring in some bagels and coffee to the staff meeting, or organize a fun outing or a crazy hat day. This is "serious fun" since it opens us up to new possibilities.

In times of financial meltdown, anyone can exert leadership influence, help the organization in small and large ways to regain its footing, and demonstrate their value as budget decisions are being considered.

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