

Career Compass No. 5: Developing Leadership Skills When You Have No Formal Authority

In this installment of Career Compass, Dr. Benest offers advice on developing the critical leadership skills necessary to advance, when your current position isn't formally giving you the opportunity to build those skills.

- *I am a mid-level program staff person in a medium-sized local government who wants to advance into management. I know that I need to develop leadership skills if I am to become competitive for lower-level management jobs. However, in my job, I have no formal authority or supervisory responsibilities. How do I develop my leadership skills when I don't have the opportunity to exert any authority?*

Here are some points to consider about harnessing leadership skills you may already have, and finding opportunities to develop these skills inside and outside of work.

First, you may have had a lot of leadership experiences; they may not have been related to your paid position. For instance, in the past, have you served as a recreation leader, scout leader, baseball coach, Sunday School teacher, or Big Brother or Sister?

Second, you can begin to develop new leadership experiences outside of your paid job. For example, in the early days of my career, I volunteered to lead a committee in my professional association and thus led a project involving a number of colleagues. As a younger local government staff person, I also volunteered to serve on a board of directors for a community nonprofit and developed several worthwhile improvement programs in conjunction with other community members. As a young professional, I also served as the president of our employee association (no one else wanted the job) and developed both leadership and negotiation skills.

Third, you can take a training course or two in the areas of supervision, management or leadership. Some local government agencies offer their own training courses or belong to a regional training consortium to provide this kind of training. Your HR department can help you seek out such opportunities. In addition, professional associations like ICMA offer courses and training programs (for example, check out ICMA's Emerging Leaders Development Program) as do most community colleges.

Fourth, you need to seek out leadership opportunities in your job. You learn leadership by doing and learning from the experience. Here are some options:

- Ask your manager to be on the lookout for an acting or interim assignment in which you can supervise others or lead projects
- Ask your manager to appoint you as a lead staff person for an ongoing or time-limited project
- Call together colleagues who are working on different aspects of a larger challenge and help create an informal self-directed work team.

In any of these situations, you must learn how to exert personal leadership without relying on formal positional authority. Even as an acting supervisor, you must rely on your personal attributes and people skills. The formal authority of a manager can only force others to provide a minimal level of performance or compliance. Leadership, as opposed to management, can help people achieve great things.

In a team environment, I have found the following ten approaches help build and support your leadership capacity:

1. **Rapport.** Build rapport with others before trying to lead a specific project; get to know colleagues personally as well as find out about their personal interests and family; demonstrate that you care about your colleagues.
2. **Passion.** Demonstrate your own enthusiasm and passion for the challenge or project.
3. **Positive Opportunities.** Help the work group focus on the positive opportunities posed by the problem or issue, instead of emphasizing all the obstacles.
4. **Quiet Expertise.** Lead with quiet expertise, whatever your expertise or knowledge entails.
5. **Resources.** Offer any resources that you may have (e.g., your contacts, computer or writing skills, facilitation skills for a community meeting) to help your team members, not only on the team project but for any other effort in which they may be involved
6. **Listen.** Ask questions and be inquisitive of the perspectives of others; listen and then listen some more; help integrate the views and interests of other team members into the goals and strategies of the team; emphasize win/win opportunities; don't become overly invested in specific outcomes (leadership is a journey for which the end-point is often uncertain).
7. **Trust.** Trust other team members and they will tend to reciprocate that trust.
8. **Accountability.** Hold yourself accountable for the work of the team; meet your obligations and others will tend to do so as well.
9. **Serious Fun.** Make meetings "serious fun;" for example, bring bagels or cookies to a meeting or plan an offsite session at a downtown café.
10. **Celebration.** Help the group celebrate milestones along the way, thus building momentum, confidence, and group capacity.

Finally, you must reflect on your leadership experience. It is also helpful to ask a trusted colleague, mentor or coach to assist you in critiquing your leadership efforts. Learning anything, including leadership skills, requires self-awareness and critique. The key is learning from any missteps. As Jeff Immeldt, CEO of GE, once stated, "People can help you but leadership is one of those great journeys into your own soul."

In sum, you need to use opportunities on and off the job to build your portfolio of leadership skills. So, when you next apply for a job and the interviewer asks, "Tell us about your management experience," you can respond: "Let me tell you about a few of my leadership experiences." Good luck!

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