

## Career Compass No. 8: Leading From the Middle

In this installment of Career Compass, Dr. Benest offers suggestions for how mid-level professionals can help lead the organization, even though they aren't senior management.

- *I often hear at conferences and workshops that we mid-level professionals need to help lead our local government organizations. I am stuck in the middle of our bureaucracy and have little influence. How do I lead from the middle?*

Yes! Local governments need you and other professionals to lead from the middle for two basic reasons:

**First**, executive managers at the top of the organization are too overwhelmed to do all the leading. The big challenges of the day (i.e., redesigning services in the face of our financial crisis, better using technology to serve and communicate with community, engaging citizens and building trust, finding and implementing environmental solutions) require leadership at all levels of the organization. Recognizing limited resources and especially constrained staffing, we need to build (in Margaret Wheatley's phrase) "leader-full organizations."

**Second**, you cannot "grow" your career and position yourself for advancement if you do not develop leadership skills even without formal authority.

Before identifying some strategies, we need to differentiate between management and leadership. Management is based on one's positional authority. As most long-time managers realize, an individual's positional authority can only force a minimal level of compliance and performance from others in the organization. Leadership is the ability to influence others in the pursuit of goals based on one's interpersonal, even moral or spiritual, attributes. So developing leadership skills is about learning how to expand your influence in the organization in order to get things done and achieve organizational goals.

To lead from the middle, I would suggest a "top 10" list of strategies:

### **1. Develop "positive regard" for your manager.**

Through observation, conversations, and reflection, you need to get into the head of your manager and identify his or her values, goals, concerns, and preferred work styles. This positive regard will then help you frame your ideas, suggestions, and proposals in terms that appeal to or resonate with your manager. For instance, if your manager is obsessive about reducing the budget, you should frame any proposal so that it highlights how your unit or department can become more cost-effective.

### **2. Offer to take projects or tasks off the plate of your manager or others.**

Higher-ups are often overwhelmed with demands and too many priorities or simply dislike some aspect of their positions. Therefore, a good way to expand your responsibilities and enhance your skills and experiences is to volunteer to take on a project that would help lessen the load of your manager or another manager, or to do a task (i.e., write a project report) that does not appeal to a superior. If you relieve a manager in this way, the manager is often willing to coach you on the project or assignment. Plus, by helping your manager with a project, your boss may help you take on a new assignment that you desire.

### **3. Be selective about taking on new assignments.**

As a result of a new project, you want to learn new skills and expand your leadership capacity. So you need to evaluate possible assignments for which you can volunteer in terms of the opportunity to develop new competencies, including leadership skills, expand your relationships inside and outside the organization, and interact with boards, commissions, and advisory groups. To gain the support of your supervisor, you should conduct at least a periodic "development conversation" with your boss so that he or she knows the kinds of new assignments that you are seeking.

### **4. Adopt your boss' view.**

To influence your boss or the boss of your boss, you need to identify the needs and priorities of the whole organization and relate your suggestions and any proposals to the big picture, not the objectives of your unit or even your department. In addition to adopting a big-picture view, it is helpful to relate any ideas to your manager's "hot button" issues related to key services, budget, critical stakeholders, or to your manager's particular notion of legacy. In other words, you must adopt the boss' point of view.

**5. Communicate in your manager's language.**

How does your manager like information? Is your boss a spread-sheet "numbers" guy or gal, or does he or she like a narrative?

You can even "paint a picture" by developing a video interviewing citizens or partners, or take your manager into the field in order to talk with business people, seniors citizens, or neighborhood leaders. These kinds of efforts enhance your ability to communicate and enhance your credibility.

**6. Expand your network/use your network.**

To increase your value and potential influence, you should expand your network, especially to other departments and to partners outside the organization. By expanding your network, you can begin to identify and assess opportunities to solve problems, redesign services, create partnerships, or innovate in specific areas. Then you can volunteer yourself and your relationships to help solve the problems that you identify.

**7. Leverage your assets.**

In addition to your relationships, you have an array of assets to offer in addressing important issues. While you may not have positional authority, you have knowledge and specialized expertise (i.e., budgeting, land use planning, environmental management, redevelopment) and energy and passion for a particular project. If you leverage your assets in addressing a key issue, you gain influence with respect to that issue and future efforts.

**8. Become a key communicator.**

If you expand your relationships and use them to spread key messages of importance to top management, then senior managers become more dependent on you to help get the word out. Plus, communication is a two-way street. Senior managers need feedback so that they get a realistic view of how their ideas or proposals are being received.

**9. Sell the benefits of your proposal, but also provide cost-benefit analysis.**

As you try to influence your manager and sell an idea or proposal, you must certainly focus on the key benefits, particularly those of interest to the manager. But in this day of constrained funding, time, and energy, you also need to discuss how your idea is a good use of limited resources.

**10. Help your manager or other team members in group meetings.**

Every team needs help to become more productive and achieve its goals. Even though you may not have authority as the formal leader of the team, ask yourself how you can facilitate the discussion, encourage others, galvanize action, start a courageous conversation, or take on a key responsibility or assignment in order to move the team forward. If you are viewed by the team leader or other team members as a valuable asset in helping the group become more effective, you will build your influence inside and outside the team setting.

The upshot is that you can lead from wherever you are positioned in the organization. Leadership is all about exerting positive influence in the pursuit of worthy goals. The 10 strategies identified above all help you grow leadership capacity and use leadership for your benefit and the benefit of the organization.

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