

Career Compass No. 10: Personal Learning—The Key to Adapting and Advancing

In this installment of Career Compass, Dr. Benest discusses how to integrate professional development and maintain work-life balance.

- *I am a mid-level parks and recreation supervisor. I do a good job and receive positive evaluations. However, I often hear from the city manager or speakers at professional meetings that I need to involve myself in continuous learning if I am going to enhance my value to my local government organization and be able to advance. Well, I have already earned my MPA but I am tired of going to school and want a life outside of work. Yet I do want to advance. What do I do?*

Yes, it's true. Our world is changing so quickly and unpredictably (remember life before the economic meltdown?), that we need to constantly learn if we are to personally adapt and help our organizations adapt. As the management consultant Gary Hamel often asks, "Are we learning as fast as the world is changing?"

You don't need to go back to school to learn. In fact, the best learning happens on the job, not in the classroom. Classroom education may help you develop a conceptual framework about new behavior in a new world, but it does not produce desired new behavior. Learning new behavior results from experience—from doing. Therefore, your goal is to create new or different experiences which help you enhance your skills, competencies, and aptitudes; expand your knowledge; and create a wider view of the organization and the world around you.

To incorporate learning into your everyday work, I suggest these seven personal learning strategies:

1) Be reflective (and help others reflect)

There is no learning without reflecting on your practice. So, debrief everything. By yourself—and better yet with colleagues—you need to conduct a debriefing of every project, board or community meeting, or other experience. This post-action report should include:

- What went right?
- What did not go so well?
- What did we learn for our future practice?

To promote this kind of reflection, you can start any unit or division meeting with a "learning report" about a recent work experience or professional article. Or you can simply ask during the meeting: "What was significant about last night's Parks and Recreation Commission meeting? What did we learn for the future?"

2) Cultivate a growth mindset

Many people have a fixed mindset. They view their talents as fixed. They avoid challenges and the possibility of failure. They like to solve the same kinds of problems over and over again, which reinforces their sense of competence.

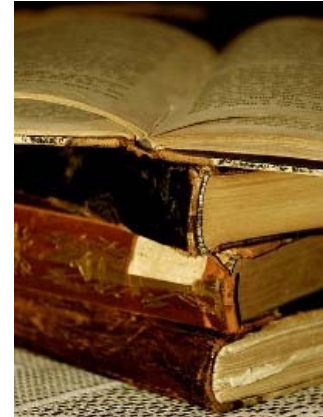
Those with a growth mindset see challenges and even failures as opportunities for improving skills or acquiring new ones. In the face of adversity, they believe that talent grows with persistence and effort and that they can learn from adversity.

To cultivate a growth mindset, you need to consciously stretch yourself.

3) Stretch yourself

There is no growth without missteps and mistakes. You must find ways to stretch yourself and encounter new and different situations. The best approach is to engage yourself in a series of stretching job assignments. To do so, let your manager and other managers know that you are seeking out special projects and team leadership opportunities, interim management assignments, opportunities to interact with boards and commissions, and other new experiences, such as learning new technologies. In terms of securing these opportunities, you can be the first to volunteer, or you can negotiate with your manager for new assignments, obviously demonstrating that you are on top of your current workload.

Challenging yourself with "stretch" goals is key to learning and achieving. As suggested by Peter Bregman in the hbr.org blog, high achievers and active learners need to set goals for themselves where they have a 50-70% chance of success. According to psychologist and Harvard researcher David McClellan, that's the "sweet spot" for learning and achieving. Then, when you fail half the time, you can figure out what you should do differently and try again.



4) Observe others with a critical eye

To learn from others, not just in your department but throughout the organization, you need to observe their practice with a critical eye. You should ask yourself: What kinds of challenges are they addressing? What did they do well? Where did they stumble? Why? What could I emulate?

5) Read a lot

Reading a lot of diverse literature—both work and non-work—helps one develop a different set of lenses through which to view and analyze the world. So you should certainly read professional articles and books in your discipline and from other disciplines in local government or management and business. However, autobiographies, fiction, poetry, and essays all may be provocative and generate learning if you try to apply the lessons to your work life.

To support your reading habit, you can start or participate in a book or article club that meets once or twice a month at lunch.

6) Apply lessons from outside of work

An agile learner is not only reflecting about experiences but also trying to apply any lessons from those experiences. Therefore, you should be on the look-out for experiences involving your parents, spouse, children, neighbors, friends, and other non-work associates that could have some applicability to your professional life. Could a conflict with your children lead to enhancing your people skills? Could a non-work experience, such as traveling to another country, provide some insight into environmental management?

7) Get a coach

A coach can provide valuable feedback on your practice or some problematic work situation, suggest new resources, offer advice, and expand your network. A coaching relationship can be formal or more likely informal. A coach can be a manager or peer inside or outside the organization. Your regional or statewide professional association may provide a listing of managers or senior professionals who have volunteered to coach. ICMA offers coaching resources (for example, the Emerging Leaders Development Program provides a legacy coach to participants). Or, you can just ask a manager or colleague to provide feedback or advice. You'd be doing a peer or manager a favor. Coaches love to coach!

A key competency for advancing in local government management is one's demonstrated capacity to learn and adapt. With accelerating change due to new technologies, demographic trends, climate change, value shifts, and other mega-trends, technical skills and knowledge more quickly become obsolete. Learn-how becomes as important as know-how.

In a disruptive world, most organizations will begin to understand that we need to hire and promote based on learning agility.



Career Compass is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff, and appears in ICMA's [JOB newsletter](#) and online. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's senior advisor for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future Career Compass, e-mail careers@icma.org or contact Frank directly at frank@frankbenest.com.

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