

Career Compass No. 35: Leadership Lessons from My Teenage Daughter

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In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Benest shares some leadership lessons learned from parenting a teen.

I am writing a different kind of Career Compass column today. I have a 15-year-old daughter, Leila, who is the love of my life but she and I are struggling as we navigate her teen years. Leila tends to ignore my advice and regularly informs me that "I don't get it." I'm trying to learn from some of our more contentious interactions and reflect on how I can better exert positive influence. After one of our recent disagreements, it occurred to me that there are some basic leadership lessons that Leila is teaching me and that might be worth sharing.



A Situation Last Week

My daughter is co-president of a high school club. The other co-president is not discussing issues with Leila and is making decisions unilaterally. Leila comes home after school and is quite upset. I'm a bit distracted prepping for a workshop while watching the first Monday Night Football game of the season. I'm sort of listening and then offer some advice on how Leila can address the problem. This only causes more negative reaction and histrionics and gets me uptight since Leila won't let me help her.

SOME QUICK LEADERSHIP LESSONS

Having reflected on my inadequate behavior trying to support Leila, I have concluded that our difficulties in interacting suggest a few leadership lessons:

Lesson No. 1: Don't get caught up in the drama.

Lesson No. 2: Stay calm (this is difficult).

Lesson No. 3: Pay attention and listen (this is very difficult; I'm watching the football game).

Lesson No. 4: Show a little empathy (also very difficult).

Lesson No. 5: Ask questions (I know how to do this).

Lesson No. 6: Don't micro-manage; let her solve the problem herself.

APPLYING THE LESSONS

Oftentimes staff come to us as managers about someone who is obstructing them or acting stupidly (according to them). It's easy for us to get caught up in the drama but it is not helpful.

The most difficult thing for me is to just pay attention, put away other stuff or thoughts, and focus on the other person. Just connect. People won't follow you unless they feel a connection. (See [Career Compass No. 32: The Power of Vulnerability](#).) Since I see myself as the ultimate problem-solver, I often pull out a piece of blank paper and take a few notes. Leila hates that and now forbids me to take notes during any conversation.

When I offered Leila a suggestion, she totally ignored it and went on to further blast away and pretty soon we were debating the best approach. She ends the back-and-forth by telling me that I'm clueless as a single dad (she is basically correct) and then stomps off. Later, when I express that I just wanted to help and that Leila doesn't seem to appreciate my efforts as her father, she tells me that if I want unconditional love, I should get a dog.

We can show a little empathy by saying "that must be difficult" or "you must be frustrated (or disappointed)." We can ask questions that might help the other person clarify the situation for himself/herself. Once you let the person vent (actually this is sometimes all the other person wants from you), you can ask. . .

- What are you going to do?
- What is one approach or another approach for dealing with the situation?

You may then ask "how can I help?" Usually the colleague (and certainly my daughter) will say "you can't—I will handle the problem."

A SITUATION THREE WEEKS AGO

Leila goes to her long-time nanny and surrogate mother Patty and suggests that Patty approach me about allowing Leila to go to an amusement park at night with friends and then sleep over at one of her friend's home. (Leila's smart. She knows that Patty has influence with me and can "front" her request.)

When I hear about Leila's plan, I ask some questions and Leila gets defensive. "Don't you trust me?" I assure Leila that I do trust her but it's my responsibility to make sure that she is safe and I will follow up the other girl's parent about the amusement park trip and the sleep-over. I say to Leila—"If you were the father, what would you require in order to say 'yes'?" I end by sharing some possible concerns, encourage her to follow-up, and tell her that we need to discuss the plan some more.

I do follow up with the other parent who assures me that she will pick up the girls at an appropriate time and there will be supervision for the sleep-over.

While Leila acts like she is being put upon, she does schedule a time to talk to me and respond to the issues that I originally raised. I agree to take the girls to the park since the other parent will be picking them up. Since Leila senses that I'm still a bit hesitant, she suggests that I get some advice from Patty. She ends by saying, "Dad, you need some coaching."

SOME ADDITIONAL LESSONS

Lesson 7: Don't agree too quickly; let things play out.

Lesson 8: Don't give in to emotional blackmail.

Lesson 9: Trust but verify.

Lesson 10: Ask for more information in response to your questions.

Lesson 11: Let the other person figure out how to resolve your concerns.

Lesson 12: Do your part and provide support.

Lesson 13: Model optimism and steadiness.

Lesson 14: Get some advice.

APPLYING THE LESSONS

As leaders, we are stewards of the enterprise. To perform this role, we must ask questions, get responses to any concerns, offer support, set appropriate limits, yet whenever possible say "yes". When others are facing a difficult situation, we can make a big difference by demonstrating optimism and steadiness.

Being a parent or an organizational leader is a challenging responsibility. Leila is right. I do need coaching as a parent (and leader). We all do.

A FINAL LESSON

When I found a moment that Leila and I were not struggling with some issue, I went to her and told her how much I loved her, how grateful I am for her, and that I will always be there for her. Leila responded by saying, "I know, Dad. I love you, too."

Even though I take pride in solving problems, being action-oriented, and giving sound advice, I often fail to recognize that "connection" and authentic relating all help us better interact, overcome our challenges, and become more whole.

MANAGING A CITY IS EASY

I know how to manage a city. Give me a city any time. I just can't manage my daughter. Yet Leila is a good teacher.

WHAT HAS LEILA TAUGHT ME? PLENTY.

For instance, a parent or leader needs a strong ego and sense of self-worth because you will be tested on a daily basis.

She has taught me that parenting is difficult but the rewards are immense.

THE BEST PARENTS (AND LEADERS)

I know that there are some obvious differences between being a parent and serving as an organizational leader. Yet, there are many leadership lessons a child can teach you. Probably the

most important lesson involves a paradox. With Leila's guidance, I've discovered that great parents (and leaders) must be demanding and tough-minded, yet also tender-hearted.

Thanks, Leila.



Career Compass is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff. 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.