Career Compass No. 32: The Power of Vulnerability

by Dr. Frank Benest

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In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Benest shows us how opening up can move us forward.

I've served as a division manager for two years in a county organization. I have worked hard to establish my presence as the division manager even though I'm a former peer. I'm trying to be a good leader, working to get our division team to the next level. They say they agree with our "stretch" goals but apparently they do not embrace them. I have been discussing with the division team the need to reprioritize our projects, cut our costs, engage outside partners, and rethink how we do our work. I want discussion but they do not engage when I lay out a proposed plan of action.

The last few years have been a tough time for our department and the county. Our county organization operates in an uncertain environment—changes in the political direction of the governing board, budget cuts and layoffs, uncertain state funding, new federal and state regulations, more scrutiny from the media and the public than ever before, and increased demands from everyone.

People are not responding as well as I would like to me in my role, and I want to see where I can improve to help our team become engaged again.

You have three good things going for you. One, you appear committed to helping move the team to the next level of performance. Second, you seem self-reflective. Great leaders are those who are self-reflective and self-critical. They reflect on who they are and how they act. Third, you recognize that leadership is about learning and becoming over time more effective in your leadership endeavors. As John F. Kennedy once stated, "Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other."

Leaders Can't Force People To Follow

To start addressing the lack of team responsiveness, you must first acknowledge that leaders can't force people to follow. Jim Collins suggests that you know it is a leadership situation when followers can decide not to follow. Given your formal authority as a manager, you can only force a minimal level of performance on the part of your direct reports. You cannot force team members to follow. They need to choose to follow and go beyond a minimal level of compliance.

The Paradox of Control

I am pleased that you recognize that your division team operates in an uncertain environment and you are trying to provide a sense of certainty for the team. You can't. If you try to control or act like you are in control, you lose control or influence. The most you can do is to acknowledge the uncertainty and disruption and demonstrate that you support the team and will struggle to help shape the change with them as the change happens. Control is not possible and trying to exert it erodes your influence.

Acknowledging Your Role in the Dysfunction

I sense that you have fostered a formal "I'm the manager, you are the follower" relationship with team members. To the extent that team members feel that the "stretch" goals for them are your goals, they will at some level resist those goals. To the degree that you present plans of action that are well-developed, people will feel little ownership and therefore little commitment. The proposed plans are your plans, not theirs.

Establishing a Human Connection

Followers may choose to follow you if they feel a human connection and at some level identify with you. They will not follow you if you are not open and you do not reveal your authentic self. Revealing yourself requires some vulnerability. So here's another paradox--the more vulnerability you demonstrate, the greater the measure of influence. Vulnerability creates connection. (See Brene Brown's TED.com video "The Power of Vulnerability.")

Becoming More Vulnerable

How do you as a leader become more vulnerable and help people better connect with you and decide to follow? Here are some suggestions.

1. REVEAL YOURSELF

To be authentic and create a human connection, you need to reveal and share some of yourself. For example, I . . .

- Am a single dad who loves my two kids yet struggles to be a good parent
- Have trouble not being in charge and am trying to become more of a facilitative leader
- Over-identify with my work
- Try to be strong for others.

As city manager of Palo Alto, California, I discovered the power of vulnerability after my wife Pam died and I then discovered that I had a life-threatening cancer and underwent very difficult treatment. After my absence, I wanted to reach out to employees, demonstrate that I had returned to work as their leader, and update everyone on our goals. I wanted to show I was okay and back in control. However, when I started the meetings by thanking everyone for their support for me and my kids during our time of adversity, I invariably started to cry. Looking back, I discovered that expressing my vulnerability allowed employees to better connect with me and strengthened my ability to lead and exert influence from that point forward.

A "safe" and fun way to reveal yourself and help others to reveal themselves is to use at a meeting the ice-breaker exercise called "Two Lies and One Truth." Everyone tells two audacious lies about themselves and one true statement and then everyone on the team must guess which of the

statements is a true statement. Another way is to start a retreat or planning session by asking everyone to share "one thing you may not know about me." You should start and model the way.

Of course, the easiest and perhaps best way is to simply be open and reveal things about yourself in casual conversations so that people will begin to feel a connection.

2. "I DON'T KNOW"

You will also promote vulnerability when you state "I don't know." These are three powerful words. You can pose a challenge to the team, indicate that you do not know how to proceed, and encourage the team to figure it out with your encouragement and support. In so doing, you are enhancing the opportunity for team members to step up, suggest solutions, and take ownership and responsibility.

3. STOP TALKING SO MUCH

Like many managers, you may be talking too much. Good leaders listen intently twice as much as they talk. To help you stop talking and directing, ask some provocative questions (see Career Compass No. 24: Asking Powerful Questions), such as:

- Why does what we do matter?
- For what ideas are we fighting?
- Are we as an organization or department who we say we are?
- Why would anyone follow our team?
- Are we focused on the right challenge or problem?
- What is our organizational culture all about?
- How do we sustain our culture?
- What if we take a completely different approach?
- How do we accelerate our learning?

4. ASK FOR HELP

When you ask for help without providing the answer or the solution, you are increasing your leadership quotient. By asking for ideas, listening intently, encouraging people to influence you, acknowledging their concerns (and taking them seriously!), and integrating their ideas and interests into a plan of action, the plan becomes their plan (not just yours). Because they will have their "fingerprints" on the plan, they will be more committed to the course of action. Of course, you then acknowledge the contributions of others and give credit to them.

Therefore, to be a great leader, ask for help and allow others to lead.

5. TAKE THE BLAME

When people play a part in some group failure, we tend to blame others. In blaming others, we try to preserve our self-esteem and value. Of course, blaming others only weakens self-esteem. And it destroys relationships. In an hbr.org blog piece entitled "Why You Should Take the Blame," Peter Bregman says that blaming also prevents learning. Therefore, Bregman suggests that leaders always take the blame for everything.

Taking the blame (even when it is not your entire fault) shows strength and courage and promotes your trust-worthiness. It allows everyone else to more quickly acknowledge the failure, even their role in it, examine the mistakes, and explore lessons learned for future practice.

Try it. Taking the blame liberates everyone else to recognize their responsibility and to more openly examine how to improve the situation.

6. TO BUILD TRUST, SHOW TRUST

Here's another paradox—to build trust, you must show trust. Part of being vulnerable is to demonstrate trust. By saying to your team members in words and showing them in actions that "I trust you" to figure out a problem and solve it, you are increasing their trust in you. If you articulate all the challenges and provide the direction in addressing them, you are showing little trust in the abilities of your group. Demonstrating real trust requires vulnerability. Showing trust in others acknowledges the possibility that they may betray your trust.

A "Squishy" Concept

Yes, I know that vulnerability seems like a soft and squishy concept. Yet this kind of soft skill helps create the hard results that you seek.

The Strong and Vulnerable Leader

Engaging others in an open and vulnerable way is one path to create influence as a leader. To do so, vulnerability requires courage and confidence.

Courage is all about confronting your fears that people may think less of you or they may not positively respond. . .and then moving forward anyway.

It requires courage to say these difficult words. . .

"I don't know"

"I blew it"

"I need help"

"I trust you"

A vulnerable leader is a strong and confident leader. Ultimately, vulnerability is based on confidence in your ability to exert positive influence when the results are always uncertain. Most of all, vulnerability requires a sense of self-value regardless of the outcome.

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.