

Career Compass No. 33: Making the Move Up and Out—What’s the Fit?

by Dr. Frank Benest

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In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Benest shows us when a bird's wings are strong enough for leaving the nest.

I'm a middle manager in a county organization who leads a program unit in a large public works department. I've been with the county for seven years and have developed a very positive relationship with my division manager, my staff, and my peers. I am well-regarded, generally like the work and the people, and know how to get things done within my department and the organization. I feel comfortable and valuable.

Recently, I have heard of a public works division manager position soon to come open in a city within the region. It may be a good move up and I think I would be competitive. However, I wonder if it would be the right move. I am particularly concerned if it be a right “fit” given the good experience that I've had with my current county organization.



Can you offer some advice as I consider this new opportunity?

The good news is that you are doing well, feel comfortable, and are well-regarded in your current position and organization. Moreover, since the new position has not been formally advertised, you have some time to gather intelligence and “size up” the opportunity. Recognizing we spend the majority of our waking hours on the job, considering the “fit” is a good idea.

Gathering Intel

There are a variety of ways to get information on the city government organization and the position. They include:

- Talking to public works colleagues outside your organization in the region (see [Career Compass No. 30: Building a Powerful Network](#))
- Discussing the opportunity with several informal coaches inside or outside your organization

- Contacting a colleague in the city government that will be offering the position (or asking another colleague or coach to help you make the connection)
- Going online and reviewing news articles (and blog postings) about the city organization in general and the Public Works Department in particular
- Talking to residents and business people in the city (again, colleagues or friends can help you connect)
- Calling the public works director in the city, indicating that colleagues have encouraged you to consider the upcoming division manager position, and asking the director about the scope and expectations of the position.

Frank's Top Ten Issues to Consider

In gathering intelligence, what are the “fit” considerations and other issues that you should assess? I have identified my “ten top” issues and related questions to ask:

1. THE NEW BOSS

People join an organization because of the opportunity and the reputation of the organization. They leave the organization because of a poor relationship with their immediate supervisor. Therefore, here are some questions to address regarding the public works director to whom you would report:

- Is the director well-regarded in the field?
- Is the director considered a strong leader?
- What might be the director's expectations of the division manager position?
- What's the director's style of leadership?
- Does the director foster a sense of team collaboration within the department and with other departments?
- Does the director support the division managers and the other staff?

2. THE BIG CHALLENGES

- What are the big challenges facing the city organization or the city as a whole? From the city council's perspective? From the staff's perspective?
- Do the big issues energize you?
- What have been the biggest media issues in the last six months?

3. COMPENSATION PACKAGE

- What is the current division manager's compensation?
- Does the compensation and benefit package minimally meet your needs?
- If the compensation package is not a solid increase (15% +), does the new position put you in a much better mid- to long-range position for compensation and other kinds of growth?
- Are there some key additional benefits of importance to you or your family?

4. THE DEPARTMENT TEAM

- Is there a history of the senior management of the Public Works Department working together as a team?

- Does the department staff typically collaborate across division “silos” to address problems?
- Does the department have a tradition of effectively engaging outside partners to solve its problems?

5. ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

- What are the tradition, culture and reputation of the city-wide organization?
- Is there a history of openness to experiment and innovate?
- How risk-averse is the organization?
- Is there a history of ethical behavior at all levels of the organization?
- Does the organization support continued professional education for all staff?

6. “THE POLITICS”

- What is the relationship between the city council and the city manager and city management in general?
- Does the city council respect the professional judgments of the staff?
- How well do the council members generally work together? Are they business-like in trying to identify solutions to difficult problems? Are they civil when they disagree?
- Who are the big political players in the city?
- How do they exhibit influence?
- Is political influence somewhat dispersed or is there a small political elite?
- Have there been any recent political “battles” in the city?

7. LABOR-MANAGEMENT RELATIONS

- How many labor organizations are there in the city organization?
- What is the history of labor-management relations?
- Has there been a good working relationship between management and labor groups?
- Do union groups have undue influence with the council members?
- How much of city management is formally represented?

8. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND INVOLVEMENT

- Does the city in general and the public works director in particular have a history of supporting professional development of department managers and involvement in appropriate professional associations?

9. PERSONAL AND FAMILY LIFE

- What are the potential impacts (both positive and negative) of the division manager position on your personal and family life?
- Are there employment opportunities for your spouse or partner (if applicable)?
- Would you have to move to take the position? If yes, is the housing market in the area affordable? If not, how is the commute?

10. CHALLENGE AND LEARNING

- Even if there are some “fit” concerns, will the new position help you grow, stretch and contribute in significantly new ways?
- Will the position help you develop new competencies and provide new experiences and relationships that will enrich your professional life and career?

No Position Is Perfect

After collecting this data, you must assess the relative advantages and disadvantages of pursuing and hopefully securing the new position. In fact, how does your current position stack up to these “fit” issues? What are ultimately the most important issues for you at this point in your career and life?

How Important Is Fit, Really?

As you can tell, I think that the notion of “fit” is important. But how important is it? Let me tell you a personal experience.

After 11 years of a great run as city manager of Brea, California, I became too “comfortable” and felt the need to make a change. When I did some intelligence about the city manager opening in Palo Alto, California, it became clear that it might not be a great fit. I have always been a “ready, fire, aim” kind of guy who enjoyed taking risks and bold action. Palo Alto is a university town, with nine council members who conduct many meetings to discuss and re-discuss any potential change. It is a very process- and rules-oriented organization. It is a “Are we ready? Are we sure we’re ready? Are we really sure we’re ready?” kind of environment. If it were all about fit, I should have not pursued or accepted the position.

However, during my eight-year tenure in Palo Alto, I had to learn a more patient and facilitative style, became much better at dealing with a lot of organizational adversity during the dot.com bust and recession, and began for the first time to focus on the issues of succession development.

I grew a lot and matured as a leader and a person. It was not a good fit but I contributed a lot and was enriched.

What Is the Worst That Can Happen?

As a boy, whenever I confronted a big opportunity but feared taking a risk, my mother Rosy used to say to me: “Frank, what is the worst that can happen? Can you survive the worst-case scenario? If so, go for it!”



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.