



Career Compass No. 49:

Building High-Performance Teams— What’s the Magic?

In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Frank Benest explains the traits of high-performing teams, how to build them, and what they are capable of accomplishing.

by Dr. Frank Benest

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I’m a mid-career manager in a large water district. The division team that I supervise is involved in water conservation and recycling programs. I also lead several project teams involving internal and external groups.

During my career, I’ve participated on a few great-achieving teams and some terrible teams. My current work team plus several project teams are decent but not especially high-performing. Maybe it is because my water agency does not have a culture of high achievement and excellence.

How do I build high-performing teams? Is it possible to overcome the organization-wide culture? If so, what’s the magic?



(No Magic Required)

DR. BENEST: Since teams are critical to the way we do our work in local government, I wish I knew the “special sauce.” However, I do have some ideas that I’ve picked up over the course of my long work in the trenches of local government.

WHY TEAMS?

There is a strong business case for relying on teams to do our work:

- The big challenges of the day (for example, conserving water, promoting economic prosperity for all) cannot be solved by anyone alone and often require engaging stake-holder groups from the different parts of the organization and from outside the agency.
- Teams bring together different ideas, perspectives, expertise, approaches, and resources.
- Teams provide the opportunity to foster commitment and accountability.
- Teams create the opportunity for people to support each other in doing difficult work.

FRANK'S PREMISES

Before I share some ideas about building high-performing teams, I need to share several premises and even biases. These premises include the following:

- Oftentimes, teams are “teams” in name only. A team is a team only if it behaves like one
- Many teams are used primarily for information-sharing, but don't do much real work as a team
- Serving on an effective team requires everyone to move beyond their individual agendas and interests
- Even if you are not the Department Head, a team leader can help create a “pocket of excellence” in his/her sphere of influence
- It takes time and focused effort to build a team
- No one action will create a great team; team-building requires sustained effort
- Elite teams are “leader-full”

FRANK'S EXPERIENCE WITH THE JOB CENTER FOR DAY WORKERS

To give you a sense of what a great team looks like, I'd like to share my team experience addressing a day worker problem when I was City Manager in Brea, CA.

Downtown merchants and residents were complaining about day workers. The day workers were blocking access to stores, running out into the streets to jump into the trucks of contractors, and littering. The City Council wanted me to use the police to push the day workers out of the downtown. I thought this was a waste of police resources and was basically unjust. I asked the Council for some time and pulled together an inter-departmental team with additional representatives from congregations serving newly arrived immigrants.

Each department had their own department interests and perspectives. The police did not want to use scarce resources on day workers who were just trying to get work. The redevelopment staff wanted to revitalize the downtown and saw the day workers as an obstacle. The legal staff were concerned about federal immigrant employment laws and the city's potential liability if we got involved. The church people were only concerned with social justice.

There was much disagreement about how to address the day worker challenge and the proper role of the City. However, after some research and community outreach, our team proposed a Job Center using a modular unit on a vacant parcel of city-owned land. The site would allow contractors to match up with day workers off the city streets.

The proposal caused a firestorm of opposition, particularly from residents who thought the City shouldn't be using tax monies to serve “illegals.”

Our team persevered and slowly built support from the faith community, downtown merchants, the police, and immigrant advocates. Different team members worked to get the modular unit donated, address parking and traffic circulation issues, and resolve any federal immigration problems. We learned a lot.

The Council eventually approved the Job Center pilot on a 3-2 vote, and it turned out to be a great success. After the Job Center opened, we subsequently used the Job Center experience as a “story” to illustrate that the City could solve intractable community problems if we exerted leadership, worked across boundaries, and engaged community groups.

TRAITS OF HIGH-PERFORMING TEAMS

My experience with the team that created the Job Center for Day Workers illustrates the traits of high-performing teams. Such teams:

- Ensure that purpose and expectations are clear
- Do something (not just share information)
- Are “owned” by all
- Feature “shared leadership”
- Encourage different people to make different contributions
- Focus on learning
- Share knowledge and resources freely
- Encourage disagreements in order that the team makes better decisions
- Hold team members accountable
- Provide social support
- Tell their story
- Celebrate successes and failures
- Are built over time

FRANK’S TEN IDEAS TO BUILD GREAT TEAMS

Here are my top ten ideas for building with others a high-performing team.

1. DEVELOP A TEAM CHARTER.

Start with a number of conversations with the group, identifying its purpose, its vision of moving forward, strategic and operational priorities, and the “rules” of engagement or protocols for conducting meetings, working together, and making decisions. Remember, as the poet David Whyte suggests, leadership is the art of conversation.

2. TALK ABOUT THE MEANING OF THE WORK. ASK YOUR TEAM MATES:

- “What is our ‘collective ambition’?”
- “Why is it important?”
- “What will result if we are successful? If we fail?”

Meaning is a great motivator.

3. REFORM TEAM MEETINGS.

Don’t use meetings for info-sharing. Focus on generating ideas, debriefing, and developing a shared plan of action.

One idea to reform meetings is to focus each meeting on a question. For instance, instead of labeling the agenda item as a discussion of budget priorities, the item should be stated as follows: “Given upcoming budget cuts, what are the one or two key priorities for which we need to maintain funding?” Or, “What is one key investment for the upcoming two-year budget?” (See [Career Compass No. 38: Your Staff Meetings Don't Have To Be Dreary](#)).

4. ROTATE MEETING CONVENER AND LEADER ROLES.

All great teams exhibit “shared leadership.” To promote shared leadership, rotate who calls the meeting, puts together the agenda, and facilitates the discussion.

5. USE THE TEAM TO SHARE LEARNING.

Great teams are self-reflective and self-critical. A great team is always focused on learning, especially from mistakes. Ask the following in debriefing a recent team experience:

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

As John F. Kennedy said, “Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.”

6. PUT CONFLICT TO WORK.

High-performing teams avoid “group think” and encourage members to express different perspectives and ideas. You want your teams to consist of people from different disciplines, with different expertise, perspectives and life experiences (see Frans Johansson, [The Medici Effect](#)). Diverse teams are the most innovative, if the groups encourage the exploration of different ideas.

To make conflict productive, the leader must model openness to different ideas and help make it “safe” for team members to express themselves. The team charter and group protocols need to encourage discussion and debate. You may also want to designate different people at different meetings to serve as the “contrarian.”

7. EMPHASIZE PROGRESS.

Team members will stay engaged and energized if they see progress along the way. It is the leader’s role to help the team set milestones and then recognize and celebrate progress (see Teresa Amabile et al., [The Progress Principle](#)).

8. BUILD CONNECTIONS.

Relationship-building must precede problem-solving and accomplishment. Leadership is all about creating connections with others. People will decide to follow (or not). Therefore, a leader must get to know team members, their hopes and dreams, concerns and fears, unique motivations, and family and outside pursuits.

Often leaders think they must choose between emphasizing results or relationships. Rather, a great leader achieves results through relationships.

9. HELP THE TEAM TELL ITS STORY.

In terms of influencing others, data is necessary but completely insufficient. Story-telling is the most powerful way to communicate and persuade.

Therefore, a team can create a readiness for those inside and outside the organization to collaborate with the team and support its work if it has a good “story” or narrative to tell. We used the Job Center story to demonstrate to the city organization and the Brea community that we all could address difficult challenges and do great work together.

10. PROMOTE “PURPOSEFUL PARTYING.”

To build cohesion and a sense of great purpose, it is always important to celebrate team progress and achievement. We in local government all too often do not take the time to celebrate because we are too busy with the next demand on us.

Team leaders should therefore “party with a purpose.” It can be a coffee and bagels break, a pizza party, or an ice cream social. It doesn’t cost much, but it underscores our positive work together, builds momentum for the future work, and demonstrates that we care.

A CULTURE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

One of the laments from team leaders is “how do I force accountability?” You can’t.

Formal leaders try to force compliance, make demands, even plead—all to no avail. Formal authority can only force a minimal level of compliance and performance. True accountability is team accountability.

So, here are some questions that suggest how to create a culture of accountability:

- Do team members truly see the meaning and purpose behind the work or task?
- Have we as a team developed through conversations a clear vision, specific goals, and expectations of each other?
- Is there shared leadership?
- Do we have the capabilities, resources (including time) and support to achieve what we intend?
- Are we debriefing along the way and learning from missteps?
- What are the consequences if we fail?
- Do we have peer accountability (or does accountability come from the formal leader)?

ELITE TEAMS

Regardless of the overall organizational culture, any of us can help create a “pocket of excellence” within our own realms. Even in the face of political, funding and other organizational obstacles, members of high-performing teams learn over time to . . .

- Share ideas, perspectives and resources
- Make different contributions to further the “collective ambition” of the team
- Support each other
- Share leadership
- Learn together
- Persevere
- Make a big difference in organizational or community life

Such groups become elite teams and do indeed create “magic.”

Career Compass is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's liaison 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. Read past columns at icma.org/careercompass.