

BY FRANK BENEST, ICMA-CM

CREATING LEGACY

Senior managers can stay energized by focusing on legacy

Legacy is a powerful motivator at midlife. Towards the end of my mostly successful local government management career in 2005, I was city manager in Palo Alto, California, and found myself in the “doldrums.” According to developmental psychologist Frederick Hudson, this is a typical phase in one’s career.

When a person is in the doldrums, there is “little wind left in the sails” and no longer much joy and passion in life. I concluded that there had to be something more than day-to-day operational management or completing another budget.

A Disruptive World

To make matters worse, I found that my organization, like other public agencies, was facing a world disrupted by demographic, social, value, and technological shifts; public distrust; and permanent fiscal stress. The pace of change was accelerating and change was discontinuous—no one could anticipate it.

All structures and processes in my local government organization at the time, including job descriptions, hiring rules, and purchasing regulations, were oriented towards a static world. We were ill-equipped to respond to nonlinear change.

To further undercut our ability to respond, my organization and other local governments were struggling with a retirement wave of baby boomer managers, resulting in a leadership crisis and brain drain of immense proportions.

Different Kinds of Legacy

After a fair amount of grumbling with colleagues, I did some reflection and concluded that I wanted to focus on legacy. As I reflected, I realized that there are various kinds of legacy.

Earlier in my career, making a difference was about the physical improvements

that I helped accomplish in communities where I served: a new community center, affordable housing projects, a redeveloped downtown, and a multi-service facility for the homeless with transitional housing.

Later in my career, I found myself focusing on building the talent pipeline and creating more of a learning and innovation culture in our organization. I could also make a long lasting difference through my professional involvement in ICMA by developing Next Generation programs and serving as a one-to-one coach.

Leaders can create legacy at all stages of career and life, and different people also are motivated by different kinds of legacy work. In any case, at midlife and particularly when senior managers encounter the doldrums, a leader may wish to consciously refocus on legacy as a way to keep energized.

What Is Legacy?

At ICMA’s 2012 conference in Phoenix, Arizona, I led a session on “Creating Legacy.” These elements of legacy were defined at the session:

- Results in something of lasting value.
- Can be tangible or intangible.
- Must be purposeful and intentional.
- Is “hefty” and significant.
- Takes hard work over time.
- Often encounters resistance.
- Produces little immediate payoff.
- Is motivating and energizing.

The Challenges

Recognizing that legacy work produces no immediate payoff and takes time and effort over the long haul, those wishing to build legacy face difficult challenges:

- How do we become less driven by the immediately urgent?
- How do we shift focus to the longer-term?

- How do we remove ourselves from some operational management?
- Who is going to step up to take on more management responsibility so we can focus on legacy?

Achieving Your Legacy Dream

At the same session, senior managers were asked the question: What would you like organizational or community members to identify as your legacy five years after vacating your position? Here is a sample of the responses:

- Purchasing an electrical utility to better serve the community.
- Updating the general plan and land-use ordinance to enhance our community into the future.
- Constructing a new multipurpose center in the downtown.
- Creating a more innovative culture.
- Preparing the next generation of leaders in the organization.

Session participants were also asked: What are the competencies required to achieve your legacy dream? Participants responded with the following:

- “Inspiring others in quiet ways.”
- “Translating the meaning behind the dream.”
- “Starting conversations with stakeholders and building the vision together.”
- “Communicating the vision.”
- “Teaching and coaching.”
- “Installing a sense of confidence amidst the turbulence.”
- “Enduring.”
- “Demonstrating courage in the face of adversity.”

Key Tenets

To pursue their dreams, senior managers must understand several key tenets of legacy building:

- **Legacy building requires leadership, not management.** Management is based on one’s formal authority and can only force a minimal level of compliance from others, especially when one must cross organizational

boundaries. In contrast, leadership is based on one's interpersonal attributes, even one's moral or spiritual attributes.

Leadership is about mobilizing people to do difficult work. It is about capturing the hearts and minds of people when they do not have to comply. As author and poet Charles Laurer has stated, "Leaders do not force people to follow—they invite them on a journey."

- **Legacy builders need an active futures orientation.** Peter Drucker, the premier management thinker of the 20th century, warned leaders that they cannot "manage" change. They can only embrace change and help shape it towards a preferred future for our organizations and communities.
- **Other managers must step up.** If a senior manager is going to shift to legacy work, department heads and other managers must fill in behind in order to manage the day-to-day work of the organization.
- **Legacy work requires an intense focus.** Building legacy suggests (in the words of author Jim Collins), disciplined thought and disciplined action in the midst of many distractions.
- **Legacy building involves the willingness to immerse oneself in adversity and risk.** Depending on the initiative, my own legacy work required resolve, faith, and resilience in face of international and external opposition. There was adversity, whether it was developing a multiservice center and housing for the homeless or promoting a more risk-taking organizational culture.

Scholar and author Warren Bennis calls these journeys "crucible" experiences that transform the leader. Looking back, most legacy leaders would not have traded the experience for something easier.

10 Strategies

There is no one magic-bullet approach. After reflecting on my own legacy journey and discussing legacy work with

other senior managers, I have identified 10 strategies for building legacy:

- 1. Reflect on possible dreams.** As Shimon Peres, president of the state of Israel, once noted, "All great things are born of dreams." Before I launched the effort to cultivate leaders and stimulate learning and innovation in my Palo Alto organization, I did a lot of thinking and then scheduled a series of coffees with key players inside the organization as well as outside peers to share my thoughts and get feedback.
- 2. Engage emerging leaders in identifying the big challenges of the day.** Emerging leaders often bring fresh perspectives about the current state of affairs internally and externally. They may see opportunities that long-time senior managers may not perceive. Plus, after identifying an opportunity, they can be more easily engaged in doing something about it.
- 3. Pick one (and only one) legacy opportunity and commit.** Legacy work requires focus in terms of attention, energy, and time when these are all in short supply for the senior manager.
- 4. Challenge other managers to step up to manage day-to-day operations.** Instead of just managing their own departments, department heads as well as the assistant city or county manager must be challenged to become "little city or county managers" and help manage operational issues across the organization. Of course, this requires the chief executive to let go, provide authority as well as responsibility, and refocus on the longer-term opportunity.
- 5. Mobilize the crowd.** There is likely to be opposition. Therefore, "go slow to go fast." Great legacy builders engage other internal and external players, including elected officials, listen to their perspectives, and integrate their interests into the plan of action. Because everyone has their fingerprints on the plan, it is everyone's plan.
- 6. Communicate the dream.** What's the "why"? Through stories as well as supportive data, leaders must com-

municate the essence of the initiative. If others are going to follow the leader on the legacy journey, they must understand the rationale and share the dream. The leader may have to frame effort differently for different groups, but the "why" must resonate.

7. Allocate (and protect) time and energy. If one is trying to achieve a new general plan for a community, purchase an electric utility to serve future needs, or accelerate the development of emerging leaders, the leader must allocate time and energy to the initiative. Most important, it is critical to protect that time and energy as others push their priorities onto the senior manager.

8. Develop a support team. The legacy leader cannot do it all, nor is it desirable. There needs to be a team. When a succession-development initiative was initiated in Palo Alto, a diverse leadership development team representing all levels of the organization was charged with bringing the dream of "growing our own leaders" to fruition.

9. Identify key metrics. What does success look like? In Palo Alto, we decided that we needed to accelerate the development of key talent so that we would be able to promote a ready and able internal candidate for 75 percent of key positions as they became vacant.

10. Start the journey and allow for twists and turns. Legacy work is a journey—one may know the general direction but not the precise destination. A legacy builder must be open to the adventure.

Creating Lasting Value

Author and philosopher Irving Kristol summed up the task: "You have to know one big thing and stick with it. The leaders who had one very big idea and one very big commitment are the ones who have a legacy." **PM**



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