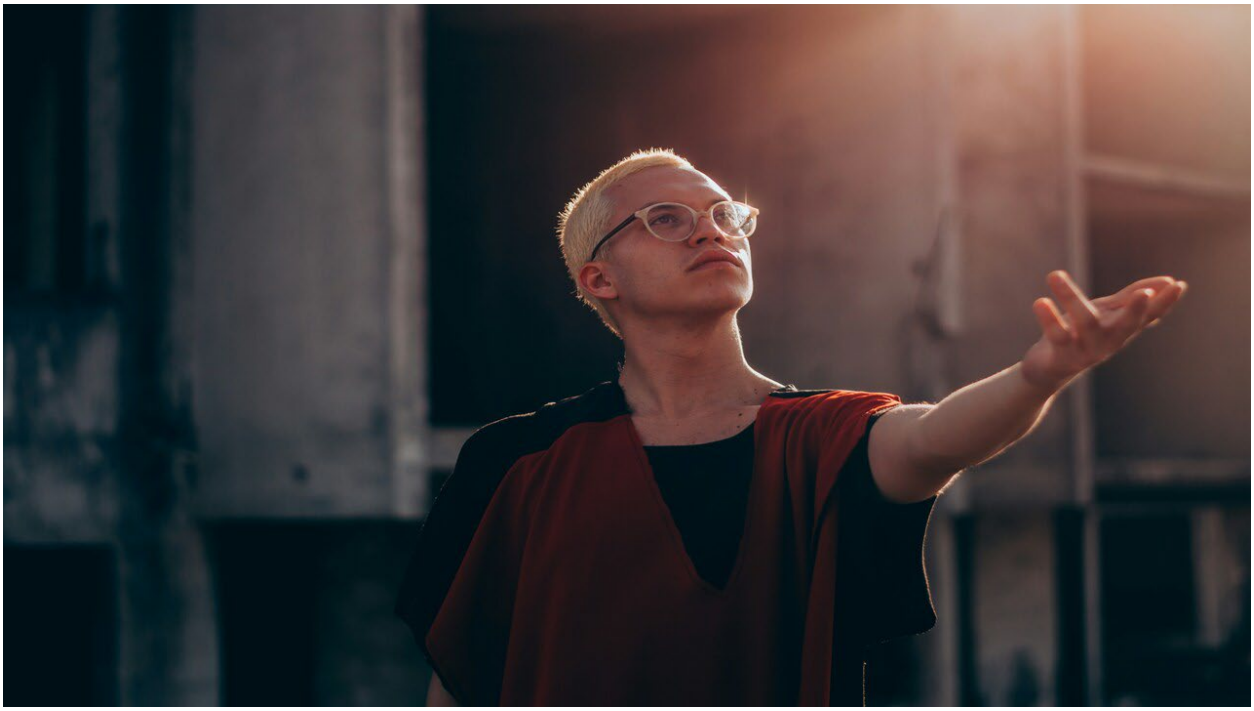
Career Compass No. 111: Are You a Generous Leader?

Exhibiting generosity makes us better leaders. There are many ways to generously serve others.

By Dr. Frank Benest | Oct 29, 2024 | icma.org Article



I'm a public works manager in a large suburban community. I manage a diverse team responsible for a number of key projects. I have worked in several local government agencies and have advanced in my career relatively quickly. I believe that I'm well-regarded by top management because I am results-oriented; have a "get-it-done" attitude; and am focused and tough-minded.

In the past 12-18 months, I have noticed that some direct reports are not responding well to my direction even though they are skilled and have the capacity to complete our projects. They seem uncertain, frazzled, unengaged, and in some cases overwhelmed.

We do have a demanding workload and people must step up to complete our projects. Do you have any advice for me?

Response

For much of my local government career, I too was very task- and results-oriented. As I advanced into higher levels of management, I discovered that this results-only mindset did not serve me (and others) well. Now more than ever, in the uncertain environment in which you operate, a results-only focus becomes a detriment.

Employees are facing a great deal of uncertainty and even turmoil. Externally

- We are involved in wars in Europe and the Middle East.
- Pro-Palestine demonstrations convulse university campuses.

- We are scared of gun violence in our schools and community.
- We are afraid to engage in some conversations as political polarization engulfs the country.
- Climate change threatens our future.

Internally

- Many local government agencies are once again struggling with budget cuts.
- Some governing boards have become more dysfunctional.
- Priorities seemingly change by the week and demands pile up.
- Prolonged vacancies are leading to productivity problems and causing the remaining staff to feel overwhelmed and exhausted.
- Many of us are uncertain how AI and other technologies will affect our positions and duties.
- We are all experiencing the ever-increasing blurring of work-home.
- Many of us are exhibiting distress and even mental health challenges.

We leaders cannot do much about the external drives of disruption; however, we can actively support our team members as the organization struggles.

How can we support our followers? We can serve as generous leaders.

What is a generous leader?

A generous leader is a formal or informal leader who "gives freely, without expectation of direct personal benefit, but to help others develop, grow and thrive." (See Joe Davis, "5 Ways Generous Leadership Lets Everybody Win," Next Big Idea Club, April 23, 2024) Generous leaders give their time, energy, and expertise to serve their team members or others.

Simply put, generous leaders give of themselves in the service of others. (See Career Compass #41 "The Post-Heroic Leader.")

Why is generosity more important than ever?

Given all the demands and uncertainty, employees increasingly expect that their organization foster a sense of belonging; leaders care about them and their families; and the organization exhibits a culture of appreciation. Employees want to feel a sense of connection with their leaders and the organization.

In other words, they want leaders who focus on relationship as well as results. Good leaders now realize that it is through relationships that they and their teams achieve results.

What traits are exhibited by generous leaders?

In my training workshops, I often ask participants to think of an influential person in their lives who supported their personal and/or professional growth. I then ask them to identify the key ingredients that made the relationship special.

These are the typical key ingredients, behaviors and traits exhibited by influential leaders who helped people grow, develop and thrive. They

- Saw potential in me.
- Believed in me.
- Provided opportunities and resources.
- Treated my mistakes as learning opportunities.
- Focused on incremental progress.
- Listened to me.
- Allowed me to "figure it out."
- Modeled positive behavior.
- Were open to my ideas.
- Shared their perspectives and knowledge.
- Provided time for me to interact with them.
- Focused on me.
- Shared their stories and themselves.
- Coached me.
- Expressed appreciation for my contributions.

These influential people gave of themselves. They were generous.

What is the paradox of generosity?

Generosity is the act of being kind, giving to others, and being selfless. We give of ourselves to benefit the well-being of others. Yet, generosity paradoxically increases our own well-being. We feel virtuous, often more fulfilled, engaged and energized, and yes, even happier.

Generosity also leads to enhancing our positive influence and thus enhances the performance of followers and their discretionary effort.

By giving a lot, we get a lot.

Why is generosity not always easy?

Leaders are struggling too. Their work/home life is blurred. They are often distracted with demands from the top, the middle, and the bottom of the organization. They are often criticized and under a lot of pressure.

A tough-minded leader must first understand that followers choose to follow or not, based in part on their relationship with the leader. To be effective as a leader, you must have high expectations

and push for results AND at the same time be supportive. It is not easy to be demanding and supportive but that is the challenge.

The definition of a tough leader is changing. Yes, employees (especially millennials representing 50% of the workforce) respect leaders who make tough decisions and push to get results. Yet, employees also want (even demand) leaders who are more empathetic (See Career Compass # 86 "Empathy is a Superpower"), engage with them, listen to their ideas and concerns, communicate often and in different ways, and are tough-minded and strong enough to be vulnerable and show much of their real selves. (See Joe Davis, "5 Ways Generous Leadership Lets Everybody Win," Next Big Idea Club, April 23, 2024)

When was Frank not generous and not so much?

Reflecting on my years as an active city manager, sometimes I was generous (and very effective) and other times I was not.

When I was most generous, I reached out to employees in small and large groups, asked them questions, listened to learn, and responded with follow-up actions. For example, when I started as the city manager of Palo Alto, California, I held 13 employee meetings, asking staff how I could be a great city manager for them. A big concern was their long commutes and time away from home and family. Therefore, we soon instituted a 9x80 schedule allowing many employees the opportunity to work 80 hours over 9 days every two weeks, getting alternative Fridays off.

In terms of generous behavior, I also provided during my tenure in Palo Alto many opportunities for employees at all levels of the organization to get involved in time-limited special project teams. In these teams, employees learned a lot, developed their leadership skills, and also helped advance the goals of the organization.

Sometimes I was not so generous as a leader. I must acknowledge that I was often harried and distracted in my one-to-one meetings with direct reports, a poor listener, and often cancelled or rescheduled these one-to-one meetings. This behavior did not feel good (yet it continued) and it undercut my effectiveness as a leader.

How do we get started?

Given this environment, what does it take to be more generous as a leader?

First, to become more generous, I believe that leaders must understand that their role is to serve and support others, not just push out results.

Second, they must be self-reflective and self-critical to determine to what extent they are giving of themselves in practice on a day-to-day basis. (See Career Compass #108 "Leadership Starts with Self-Awareness.")

Third, leaders need to slow down, free up a little time and emotional energy, and try out some small acts of kindness and connection.

Fourth, like all leadership endeavors, we need to debrief the experience. What went well? What didn't go so well? How can we do it better the next time?

Finally, it is imperative that leaders take a moment to appreciate the positive impact of a generous act and savor the good feeling (even occasional joy) of supporting another person.

What are 10 practices to promote generosity?

Generosity can take many forms for a leader. Here are just ten ways to become more generous.

1. Create the intention

To become more generous, a leader must consciously create the intention and identify some different or better ways to behave and interact with others (such as slowing down and really listening when having a one-to-one meeting). To solidify your commitment, it is important to share your intent with others.

2. Commit to authentic conversations that matter

An authentic conversation is one in which you as a generous leader are willing to listen to learn. (See David Brooks, How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen, 2023) Great conversationalists listen 70% of the time, talk 30% of the time. Good listeners ask open-ended questions, such as

- Why is this project important to you?
- What does success look like?
- How might we. . .?
- What else could we do?
- What is a completely different approach to this problem?
- What are we missing? Who are we missing?
- How would another department or a community group react to this idea?
- What is a step forward for you?
- How can I support you?

Great conversationalists also exhibit a curious mind ("tell me more").

Most importantly, generous listeners are willing to be changed by the conversation. If you go into a conversation with your mind made up, it is not an authentic conversation. It is just show. (See Career Compass #61 "Leadership Is the Art of Conversation.")

Finally, authentic conversations usually prompt a legitimate response from the leader. It may not be all of what the staff person wants, but the leader does his or her best to address the concern or issue raised without taking any responsibility away from the team member.

3. Give people a voice

If people do not feel safe to speak their minds or provide their opinions in group meetings, a leader must work hard to create a sense of psychological safety. (See Career Compass #69

"Psychological Safety: A Key Determinant of Team Effectiveness.") A leader may send out an anonymous online employee survey, or walk around at the beginning and end of the day conversing with employees, or schedule a drop-in coffee hour in the cafeteria when individuals can spend 15-20 minutes sharing thoughts and ideas with the senior manager.

Another technique is to request in advance that the most junior or least influential staff member provide at the beginning of the next team meeting their suggested action to move the team forward.

A powerful way to give voice is to ask employees or others to share a relevant experience or story. For instance, you can ask team members to identify a time when they were fearful but took a risk anyway that allowed them to grow personally or professionally. (See story prompts in Career Compass #50 "Story-Telling: The Most Powerful Way to Communicate and Lead")

4. Help people understand the purpose

Effective leaders always start with the "why" of the project (instead of "what" we are going to do or "how" we are going to do it). Generous communicators connect the work to the larger vision and the bigger picture. Purposeful work is a great self-motivator. (See Daniel Pink, Drive, 2009)

5. Give of your time

One of the best ways of being generous is to dedicate your time, minimize distractions (put away your smartphone!), focus on what the other person is saying, and acknowledge what you hear.

Meeting with someone at a cafe or conducting a "walking meeting" is a wonderful way to communicate that you care about the person and want to hear what they have to say.

6. Invest in people

Generous leaders give opportunities so others can grow and develop. They provide development opportunities not just for their "A" players but they also seek out "hidden stars." Development activities typically include stretch assignments, team leadership opportunities, interim manager positions, job rotations, and/or coaching.

Investing in people creates legacy.

7. Show who you are

Generous leaders engage with employees, communicate the big picture, tell their stories, and share their values. The more you feel comfortable sharing, the more you create relationship and connection.

As the city manager of Brea, California, I refused to recommend any new residential developments that featured security gates. I felt that security gates were antithetical to my values and the kind of community we aspired to become. While some elected officials and planning staff personnel disagreed with my stand, I was transparent and everyone got a better understanding of who I was and what I stood for.

Showing some vulnerability also creates connection and trust. You can show vulnerability by stating:

- "I need your help."
- "I don't know."
- "I made a mistake."
- "I was wrong."

Only strong leaders can show vulnerability. (See Career Compass #32 "The Power of Vulnerability.")

8. Know when to forgive and focus on progress forward

In an uncertain environment, generous leaders don't spend a lot of time criticizing mistakes. They ask "what did we learn from this failed experience?" They are forward-looking and thus query others about what progress looks like and what's the next step forward.

As long as people are committed to learning and improvement, generous leaders forgive well-intentioned mistakes.

9. Recognize the contributions of others

One of the key drivers of employee engagement is showing your appreciation. Gallup research indicates the employees who have been recognized in the last seven days are more likely be engaged and energized. (See Marcus Buckingham, First Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently, 1999)

To get results, effective leaders recognize that they must work through others. In return, generous leaders actively recognize the contributions of their followers.

10. Ritualize certain generous practices

Effective leaders make generous behaviors a ritual. Rituals are a prescribed set of actions regularly repeated in a precise manner by an individual or members of a group. Rituals give us a sense of certainty and a small measure of control amid a lot of change and turbulence. (See Career Compass #99 "Harness the Hidden Power of Rituals.")

To ritualize the recognition of staff members for their contributions, a leader may put "team acknowledgements" as a first item on every team meeting agenda. Or, to ritualize a focus on learning, every staff meeting agenda could feature a "learning report" from a different team member.

Give a lot, get a lot

My mother Rosy gave me great advice as a young man. Rosy said, "Frank, don't always worry about getting a lot. Give a lot, you'll get a lot."

Generosity is all about giving a lot. It is self-less service to others that helps them grow and thrive. Servant leaders do not expect much in return, but they in fact do receive much:

- Generous leaders create more influence.

- They promote discretionary effort, engagement, and productivity on the part of their followers.
- They achieve more joy in work and life.

Are you a generous leader? How could you become more generous?

Sponsored by the ICMA Coaching Program, *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.

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.

To get ICMA Career Compass delivered to your mailbox, be sure to subscribe to the ICMA Coaching Program emails at icma.org/profile. Under MyICMA at the top, select Communications, and select Coaching under E-Newsletters.

The ICMA Coaching Program offers free one-to-one coaching for any local government employee. Register on CoachConnect to choose a coach, and explore more Coaching Resources.

RELATED CONTENT

Career Compass #79 “Leading By Connecting”

Career Compass #86 “Empathy is a Superpower”

Career Compass #105 “How Do You Show Up as a Leader?”