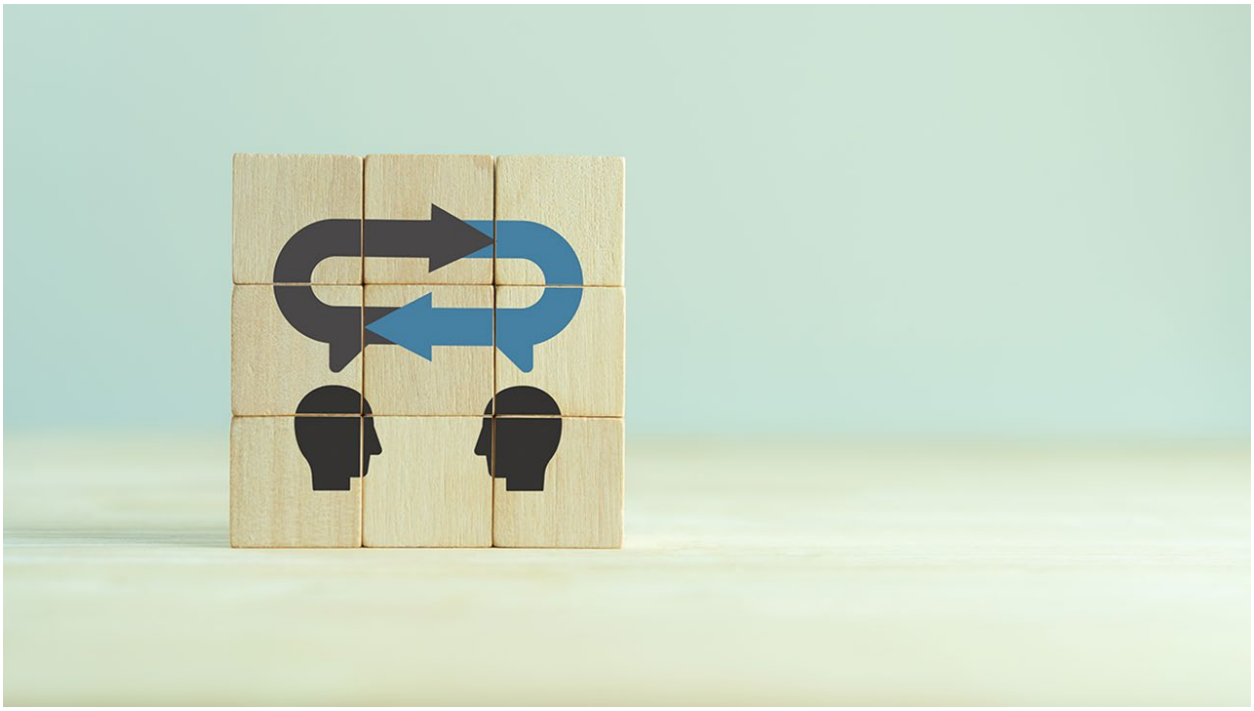
ICMA | coaching program

Career Compass No. 115: Combating Chronic Organizational Distress

The solution is not 'fixing up' employees or making them more resilient. It is more about how leaders retool organizations.

By Dr. Frank Benest | May 25, 2025 | Article



I am the HR director of a large suburban city government. I have been tasked by the city manager and the executive team to help our employees deal with a lot of stress and anxiety that are hurting organizational productivity. Our employees are feeling overwhelmed and stressed by ever-increasing demands, new initiatives, a fairly large number of vacancies, and difficulties in filling positions.

Our latest employee survey indicated a significant amount of job dissatisfaction among employees across many organizational units. Work-life balance is a top concern. We have even witnessed a growing number of mental health issues.

I am working with our training manager in HR to develop training sessions to help employees better manage their time, set priorities, balance work-life responsibilities, and focus on wellness and self-care; however, what we are planning seems inadequate.

Can you suggest how we should respond?

Most local government leaders are witnessing an escalating incidence of employee uncertainty, anxiety, stress, feelings about being out of control, and growing dissatisfaction with their job. While offering employee training sessions on time management, work-life balance, and self-care may somewhat ameliorate the situation, it will not fix the problem. The big problem is not employee distress; it is organizational distress.

By focusing on employees and their inability to handle ever-increasing stress and anxiety, we are blaming the victims and focusing on the symptoms, not the causes of organizational distress. (See Evan Milberg, "Brigid Schulte on How to Overcome 'Greedy' Work Culture in U.S.," ICMASmartBrief, Sept 25, 2024.)

Chronic distress now being experienced by many local government employees is an organizational challenge and thus requires an organizational response. Therefore, I am going to suggest some organizational responses to chronic distress.

What are the sources of organizational distress?

Seventy-one percent of professionals and knowledge workers have experienced burnout; over half more than once. This problem is worse in the public sector, especially local government, because demands keep coming from the public as well as elected officials regardless of resources or our capacity to respond. (See Dan Rockwell, "Fatigue: 3 Dangers-3 Unexpected Gifts," Leadership Freak, July 31, 2024.)

There are many sources of distress:

- Constant new demands from elected officials and the public.
- Ever-changing priorities from the governing body and top management.
- New initiatives.
- Introduction of new technologies or ways of doing work.
- Unfunded mandates.
- Staff churn and unfilled vacancies, causing even more work for those remaining.

- Unrelenting criticism of local government executives and employees from elected officials as well as the public.
- Long commutes in high-cost regions.
- Difficulty in juggling responsibilities to care for children or elders.

To exacerbate the situation, employees feel overwhelmed by all their "busyness." They spend most of their day rushing from one meeting to another, jumping on and off the phone, and plowing through endless emails. At the end of the day, they are frustrated that they did not get any high-impact work done or address any key project. (See Brigid Schulte, Over Work—Transforming the Daily Grind in the Quest for a Better Life, 2024.)

As one example, we are overwhelmed with meetings. Employees spend an average of ten hours a week in meetings and say that 43% of the meetings are a waste of time. Mid-managers report that all their unproductive busy-work leaves them with only six and a half hours a week to do their actual work. (See Brigid Schulte, "The Quest to Imagine a Workplace that (Actually) Values Work-Life Balance," Behavior Scientist, Sept 24, 2024.)

What is the paradox of increased workloads?

Knowledge workers, including many local government employees, reported a 31% increase in their workloads over the past year. The paradox is that increased workloads have not translated into higher productivity. Part of the reason is that only 51% of completed work by knowledge workers is considered high impact. (See Dexter Tilo, "How Much Are Organizations Losing from Unnecessary Work?" Human Resources Director, Oct 11, 2024.)

Consequently, the United States was only tenth in the world in Gross Domestic Product per employee hour worked. (See Evan Milberg, "Brigid Schulte on How to Overcome 'Greedy' Work Culture in U.S.," ICMASmartBrief, Sept 25, 2024.)

What is the difference between good and bad stress?

Not all feelings of stress experienced by employees are the same. Some stress is good ("eustress"). Eustress is defined as moderate levels of psychological stress that is beneficial for the experience. Healthy doses of stress energize and motivate us, challenge us, and promote our learning. If we do not feel any stress, it is difficult to perform and achieve our desired results. (See Dan Rockwell, Leadership Freak, "Moving from Distress to Eustress," June 5, 2020.)

Too much or prolonged stress creates bad stress ("distress"). Distress is defined as emotional, social, physical, or spiritual pain or suffering that may cause a person to feel

sad, afraid, depressed, anxious or lonely. People who are distressed may not be able to manage or cope with normal work or personal activities and responsibilities.

What is chronic organizational stress?

What many local government agencies are experiencing is chronic organizational distress. Chronic organizational stress is when employees are feeling anxious and distressed by the conditions outside of themselves with little control over these stress drivers. Most importantly, these drivers of stress are persistent and cumulative.

Why confront the problem now?

This problem of stressed employees struggling with overwork has become more and more apparent for a number of years. It is natural for residents to want local governments to provide more services and address new problems, and elected officials want to respond to these expectations and demands. However, local government organizations have increasingly lacked the capacity to respond. The Great Recession resulted in the elimination of a number of positions and the pandemic-related revenue losses and other impacts wrecked havoc on organizational capacity. To make matters worse, new adaptive problems just keep on coming.

> *Executive leaders can no longer ignore the problem of mounting organizational distress.*

Chief executives in local governments have tried to accommodate these new demands with inadequate resources. There is little unused organizational capacity to address additional challenges. As indicated above, these efforts to respond have led to chronic organizational distress. Moreover, when employees see this inability on the part of chief executives to say “no,” they are disheartened and the problem is exacerbated.

Simply put, executive leaders can no longer ignore the problem of mounting organizational distress. We must now directly confront it.

Why are employee-focused solutions inadequate?

Providing employee training and wellness resources is helpful but inadequate. Certainly, training and other employee-focused solutions may help people better manage their time, use stress-reduction techniques, prioritize wellness and self-care, and generally promote work-life balance. For example, self-care strategies (healthy diet, exercising, sufficient sleep) help employees better cope and become more resilient.

However, these employee-resilience efforts do not get at the root causes of chronic organizational distress, which hurt the well-being of employees and undercut performance and productivity. These employee-focused solutions do not eliminate the causes of the distress. (See Evan Milberg, "Brigid Schulte on How to Overcome 'Greedy' Work Culture in U.S.," ICMASmartBrief, Sept 25, 2024.)

There is no magic bullet; however, local government leaders can retool the organization in various ways to combat organizational distress and enhance culture.

What are helpful organizational strategies?

Certainly, the chief executive needs to model helpful behaviors so that others can minimize their distress. The city or county manager must set boundaries and norms around when he or she can be scheduled and reached and other times when family and other pursuits take precedence.

If a leader is always everywhere and everything to everyone, you are not minimizing the stress on the organization. You are nurturing it.

Beyond modeling, there are a number of efforts that organizational leaders can undertake to better insulate employees and enhance organizational performance.

Visibly confront the lack of capacity

Chief executives can no longer ignore organizational distress and must now confront it head-on. In one-to-one meetings with governing board members and at governing board meetings, budget hearings and community meetings, executives must diplomatically yet assertively confront reality:

- Ninety to ninety-five percent of available resources are already committed to ongoing service delivery.
- There is no available unused capacity to respond to new demands without decreasing the quantity or quality of services, eliminating some service all-together, or deprioritizing or delaying some work.
- Possible one-time grants or other one-time monies will not solve the challenge of maintaining the new service once it is launched.

Chief executives must also use their annual performance review as an opportunity to enroll the governing board in efforts to minimize organizational overload.

Realistic expectations require difficult trade-offs.

The governing board and service user groups must right-size their expectations of the organization if it is to fulfill its ongoing mission. Realistic expectations require difficult trade-offs. If the governing board does not make the trade-offs, their policy responsibility falls to staff. The governing board is then abdicating its policy role.

These are difficult and risky conversations with elected officials and stakeholder groups. This kind of leadership from the chief executive obviously requires courage; however, this is the role and responsibility of the chief executive.

Conduct a conversation with the executive team about your culture of overwork

To start this journey of organizational revitalization, you must first set aside some time with your executive team to discuss your culture of overwork. If the demands keep coming and your organization is not responding except by adding more work to everyone's plate, your top leadership is contributing to the distress.

As indicated, employee workloads are increasing; overwork is creating employee distress; and productivity is plummeting. So, the initial questions for the executive team include:

- "Are we concerned about chronic organizational distress?"
- "Are we committed to respond?"
- "What are some initial ideas on how we as an organization can respond?"

Ask questions and listen to employees

Ignoring people's emotions makes things worse. Leaders need to acknowledge what people are feeling.

Before undertaking any organizational improvement initiatives, it is wise to conduct some listening sessions with employees across the organization, asking what conditions are leading to distress, and getting suggestions on how the organization can respond. The mere act of asking these questions and listening to employees demonstrates that leaders are aware of the problem and care about employees.

> *Hard data can help focus attention on the negative impacts of overwork and your "busyness" culture and help compel the organization to respond.*

To augment what you hear from employees, top management can collect certain quantifiable data, such as the time allocated to all reoccurring meetings, total hours required by managers and their direct reports to conduct performance evaluations, and

employee engagement and job satisfaction scores from employee surveys. This hard data can help focus attention on the negative impacts of overwork and your "busyness" culture and help compel the organization to respond.

As a follow-up to these listening sessions and the collection of other data, it is critical to provide ongoing feedback to employees on the themes that surfaced and some initial organizational actions to respond. Because organizational distress is persistent, it is important to conduct regular "temperature" checks with employees (for instance, pulse surveys) and quarterly check-in meetings with mid-managers.

Instigate conversations about purpose

More demands, more work, and more activity simply overwhelm us. Obviously, the organization needs a set of a few well-defined priorities and managers need to help direct reports focus on high-impact work. However, while priority-setting may help contain the overwork, it does not make the work meaningful. Purpose makes the work meaningful and provides energy.

Because it is sometimes difficult for employees to see the connection between their work and community benefit, top managers must intentionally conduct conversations with all levels of staff that emphasize the big positive differences that the organization is making in the lives of the people being served. We need to relentlessly highlight the positive impact on children, youth, seniors, and families as a result of our public safety, community service, library, infrastructure, and utility work.

In focusing on the purpose or the "why" of our work, leaders can invite internal and external customers to visit staff meetings and talk about the positive impact of the local government agency has made for them. At team meetings, leaders can also ask team members to share a story of how their work make a positive difference for an internal or external customer. These efforts put a human face on the results of our work and promotes meaning.

Shift your leadership style

A lot of anxiety is related to the highly complex and long-term adaptive problems (such as homelessness, affordable housing, traffic congestion) thrown at us. There are simply no right or wrong answers for these adaptive issues. Instead of directing and controlling or "managing" staff who are assigned to address these adaptive challenges, leaders may be more successful if they provide autonomy to employees as they pursue solutions.

Leaders must still articulate the purpose and meaning of these efforts as well as provide the general direction, the authority to make decisions about their work, and the necessary resources (such as time, budget, and training). If employees are then

empowered to "figure it out," they will tend to be more engaged and self-motivated and own the project. (See Naphtali Hoff, SmartBrief, "How Employee Empowerment Can Boost Retention and Foster Loyalty," Nov 8, 2024.)

As Daniel Pink notes in his book Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motives Us (2011), autonomy (along with purpose and mastery) is a great self-motivator.

Re-examine organizational policies and practices

Leaders need to put into place or adjust certain policies or practices to ameliorate the causes of the distress. For instance, do you have an annual priority-setting session with your governing board in order to identify only a few priorities and key projects for the year for which you and the organization will be accountable? Do you communicate what work must be deprioritized or delayed if the governing board wants to add a new priority?

Instead of measuring input (time in office, hours worked), we need to focus on individual and team output (deliverables, results).

Since governing boards typically throw new projects at departments throughout the year, another helpful practice is to intentionally include in any department work plan for the coming year a 10-15% margin of unused capacity.

Recognizing the new remote and hybrid world of work, agencies need to re-evaluate how they measure employee productivity. Instead of measuring input (time in office, hours worked), we need to focus on individual and team output (deliverables, results).

Yet another example is to modify policies and practices related to vacations. Some organizations now strongly encourage or require staff to take their vacation time so they can recharge. In addition, HR may encourage all employees to schedule summer vacations in January or February, rather than wait until a few weeks in advance when calendars are cluttered with meetings and other work responsibilities. Planning early forces teams to map out how to meet deadlines and delegate tasks so people do not feel compelled to work during vacations.

To support employees in using their vacations to recharge, some agencies provide staff with vacation checklists with include two vacation "transition" days, one before vacation and the other the first day back in the office. The intent is that the employee uses the

time to disconnect and then reconnect. (See Brigid Schulte, "The Quest to Imagine a Workplace that (Actually) Values Work-Life Balance," Behavior Scientist, Sept 24, 2024.)

What other changes in policies and practices would help?

Reform meetings and other time- and energy-draining activities

Most local government staff are overwhelmed with unproductive internal meetings that consume all their time and energy. Since the pandemic, there has been a staggering 192% increase in weekly meetings, making it difficult to complete key projects. (See Jennifer Moss, "Let's End Toxic Productivity," hbr.org, Nov 13, 2024.)

To underscore the cost of meetings, some organizations embed a cost calculator in their employee calendar app. The calculator spits out an estimate price of the meeting by factoring in the number of attendees, the average compensation for their roles, and meeting length.

Some agencies have conducted meeting audits, doing an inventory of all their standing meetings, eliminating some and/or reducing the frequency that these meetings are held. Other organizations have stipulated that meetings can only last 45-50 minutes (giving staff time to prepare for the next meeting). Moreover, meetings have been refocused not on updates (which can be done by email or on some online platform) but rather on one key decision. (See Career Compass #38 "Your Staff Meetings Don't Have to be Dreary.")

Administrative reports and other low-value administrative tasks can be identified and eliminated or reduced in frequency. In other words, the aim is to cut out "stupid work." (See Evan Milberg, "Brigid Schulte on How to Overcome 'Greedy' Work Culture in U.S.," ICMASmartBrief, Sept 25, 2024.)

The other big time and energy-drainer is the annual employee performance review. Organizations save thousands of hours of productive time by eliminating annual performance evaluations and relying on well-conducted 1:1 conversations between managers and their direct reports. (See Career Compass #68 "My 1:1 Meetings Are a Waste of Time" and Career Compass #110 "Accelerate Through Subtraction.")

What activities in your organization take up time and energy yet add virtually no value?

Institute "intentional scheduling"

Intentional scheduling by work groups can help mitigate distress. For example, instead of a weekly staff meeting taking 60-90 minutes, a work group can schedule each Monday morning a 15-20 minute "huddle" in-person or virtually. Each team member can briefly identify one priority for the week, one challenge that may hinder them, and any help they need. The frequency of regular staff meetings can then be reduced.

The onsite should become the new offsite.

Another scheduling device is a Wednesday or Friday "no-meeting" practice so people can reflect, plan, and focus on a key priority without interruption or distraction.

Since many organizations now allow hybrid work, it is wise to schedule team activities when team members come to the office. The onsite should become the new offsite. In other words, instead of having employees do work in the office that can be done at home, onsite activities should provide "moments that matter." These onsite activities may include consensus decision-making, collaboration across units, mentoring, onboarding, training events, project kick-offs, team development, and social bonding. (See Brian Elliott, sloanreview.mit.edu, "Hybrid Work: How Leaders Build In-Person Moments That Matter," Aug 1, 2024.)

Leaders must actively set expectations and standards if intentional scheduling is to become the norm in the organization.

Foster a culture of learning

Yes, we in local government make mistakes, hopefully well-intentioned mistakes. If we are trying to actively push our local government agendas forward, there will be errors. Oftentimes, we are getting criticized by governing board members and community members for those errors and we can thus become easily demoralized. (See Career Compass #102 "Responding to Public Criticism.")

To help mitigate the effects of this constant criticism on staff, it is helpful for senior management to emphasize organizational learning. For example, are we constantly searching for best practices in the field? Do we go to professional gatherings in order to identify innovations and better ways to do our work? Are we conducting post-action or debriefings of key experiences and projects and then sharing these learnings throughout the organizations? Are we celebrating failures that lead to better future actions?

Well-intentioned mistakes are to be embraced if they promote real learning.

Promote workplace belonging and community

A key element of an energizing and enriched employee experience is a sense of belonging and community. (See Career Compass #85 "To Thrive in Post-Pandemic,

Enhance the Employee Experience.") Belonging can help insulate employees from a certain amount of distress.

Employees want to feel that organizational leaders and fellow employees care about them and support them; they are valued and appreciated; and their opinions count.

To promote belonging in the workplace, leaders should focus on any number of positive "micro-interactions," such as greeting everyone upon getting to work or arriving early to a meeting so you can chit-chat about non-work topics. (See Dylan Taylor, "Micro-Interactions and Their Cumulative Impact on Organizational Success," chiefexecutive.net.)

Leaders can also institute organizational practices that create community, such as:

- Incorporating "connection" exercises at the beginning of team meetings (for example, share one personal or work joy and one personal or work challenge).
- Starting team meetings with a "shout-out," acknowledging progress on project goals or small wins.
- Creating thank-you celebrations at the completion of major efforts, such as the council's approval of the annual budget.
- Instituting peer coaching and other peer support programs.
- Providing "buddy" programs for new hires.

(See Career Compass #107 "The Business Case for Promoting Workplace Belonging.")

Upskill managers

Any organization improvement effort requires the active engagement and support of mid-managers. Positive organizational change happens (or not) in the middle.

The problem is that managers are particularly burned out. Gallup found that managers are more likely to be distressed and burned out than their employees. This higher prevalence of distress and disengagement is a result of growing workloads, staff vacancies, unclear expectations, and competing priorities. It is no wonder that managers are stressed out given all the new responsibilities heaped on top of the old responsibilities. (See Jennifer Robison, "The Antidote to Manager Burnout," gallup.com, Jan 22, 2022.)

Senior managers must find ways to help mid-managers connect with each other and support each other.

If we want managers to adopt new styles of managing and leading (for instance, communicate purpose, focus on learning, promote employee autonomy, provide coaching, and promote belonging), executives must model new ways of leading. Top management must also free up the time and energy of mid-managers and help train, upskill or reskill, and reward managers in these new ways. As part of this effort, senior managers must find ways to help mid-managers connect with each other and support each other. (See Career Compass #96 "Why We Need Great Mid-Managers More Than Ever.")

So, if we want to combat chronic organizational distress, we must engage and support mid-managers in their critical roles.

What can you control?

If you take your leadership role seriously, a key challenge that must be addressed is combating chronic organizational distress. It negatively impacts just about everything, including employee engagement, job satisfaction, employee well-being, and most importantly individual, group, and organizational performance. You do not have a magic wand and cannot control how your governing board or the public behaves. However, there are things you do control.

You can decide to relentlessly focus on a few priorities, examine workloads, reduce meeting overload, eliminate "stupid work," engage everyone in intentional scheduling, promote learning and belonging, and help reskill managers. You may not be able to do all of this, but you can do some of this.

Most importantly, you can model certain behaviors. You can begin by asking yourself:

- How am I showing up at work?
- How am I interacting with others?
- Am I acknowledging what others are feeling?
- How am I promoting connection with others?
- What am I asking others to focus on?
- How can I better support others?

As a leader of the organization, department, unit or team, you may not be able to eliminate all of the anxiety and stressful feelings. However, there are plenty of ways that you as a leader can combat chronic organizational distress.

Sponsored by the ICMA Coaching Program, *ICMA 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. 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.