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Career Compass No. 121: Leading with Grace

Good leaders are demanding and supportive at the same time. It's not easy. It's called "leading with grace."

By Dr. Frank Benest ARTICLE

Dear Frank:

I am an Assistant City Manager who oversees a number of departments in a mid-sized city in the Midwest. I've always been known as a "hard-charger" with high expectations who is demanding of others.

I have certainly gotten results but as I advance in my career I sense that something is

missing. Department heads and other staff acquiesce to my direction but not with much enthusiasm or deep commitment. Moreover, over time I have not felt as fulfilled as before. I understand that this is a tough and scary time for local government agencies but we need to better respond to City Council and community demands to achieve our goals.

There is obvious purpose and meaning in my work but I'd like a greater sense of effectiveness and a more mutually satisfying relationship with colleagues. Shall I try to be nicer? What am I missing?

Frank Responds:

You sound like a very committed local government leader who wants to better lead others and feel more enriched by the process.

Early in my career, I too was considered a "hard-charger" driven by results. I learned that my high expectations did not lead to great results if I used my positional authority to force results. As I continued to "drive results," I lost some energy and passion for my work.

Over time, I discovered a better way which was "leading with grace." While I got better embodying grace, in retrospect I must admit there were many instances when I did not act with grace.

Acting with grace is more than just being nice. I'd like to share what I and many other effective leaders have learned about leading with grace.

What is grace?

The word grace comes from the Latin word gratia and the Greek word *charis*. The biblical definition of grace is the unearned, unending favor and kindness that God bestows towards humanity. The key notion is that grace is unearned. Grace is God's gift to us, freely given. Grace requires action, including forgiveness, compassion and kindness for those who fall short.

How does the notion of grace relate to the practice of leadership?

While some of us do not believe in God or a higher power, I sense that the concept of grace has great relevance to leadership.

In my view, graceful leaders are those who are demanding and supportive at the same time. They have high standards and expectations and start with the assumption of good intent on the part of governing board members, employees, and community members. They also act with grace by exhibiting kindness.

Why should leaders practice grace?

There are a number of reasons for leaders to consider incorporating grace into their daily behavior. Leading with grace results in a variety of positive outcomes:

- **Connection.** Leaders can only force a minimal level of compliance from employees if they solely rely on their positional authority. Employees who experience kindness, empathy and compassion from their leader will feel a sense of connection with that leader. Employees and others will tend to follow if they feel connected to their leader.
- **Engagement.** Performance and productivity at the individual and team levels are tied to employee engagement. Key factors driving engagement include high expectations, social support, a sense that leaders care about employees, and an emphasis on learning and growth.
- **Collaboration.** Because kindness contributes to positive relationships, team collaboration is enhanced by graceful leadership.
- **Talent retention.** Talent tends to stay in a kind and positive organization. Kindness in the workplace creates "social glue." In a recent study, an unkind workplace culture was 10 times more likely than compensation to be the reason that people leave a job. (See Nicki Macklin et al, "Why Kindness Isn't a Nice to Have," hbr.org, July 29, 2025).
- **Self-fulfillment.** By giving a lot of yourself, you receive a lot. Kindness and social support will be reciprocated. Your work life will be enriched.

Leaders have an outsized impact on those with whom they work. We often under-estimate this impact. For instance, Gallup research indicates that 70% of the variance in team performance is based on the behavior of the team leader. (See Gallup Workplace, Why Great Managers Are So Rare.)

Why is leading with grace so difficult?

It is not easy to lead with grace. We leaders are often overwhelmed with demands from elected officials and community stakeholders, are subject to intense scrutiny, and blamed for any mis-step or mistake. It is difficult to act with grace if we are stressed and distracted.

It is also difficult to lead with grace because we assume that being demanding is a strength and showing kindness and compassion is "soft" or weak.

Again, to lead with grace is a delicate balance of being both demanding and supportive.

What are some key elements to leading with grace?

Leading with grace encompasses a number of elements. Graceful leaders. . .

1. **Value the uniqueness of others.** Graceful leaders understand that each member of the organization is unique and worthy of respect. They value and appreciate how the personal characteristics and life experiences have formed a unique individual with unique perspectives. They value the "gifts" that each person brings to their roles, no matter how different they are from one's own views or skills.

2. **Care for people.** Graceful leaders care for people and support their well-being. We get to know employees and show an authentic interest in their lives. We also deeply care about community people and the services that they need.

3. **Know our own values.** Leadership starts with self-awareness. We know our core values which shape our actions and guide organizational endeavors. We consistently communicate those values and are firm in our convictions.

4. **Express clear goals and high expectations and standards.** Graceful leaders set challenging goals, worthy of everyone's efforts, and express those expectations and standards.

5. **Ensure accountability.** Good leaders hold people accountable. If one's performance does not measure up to the leader's expectations, the leader provides constructive feedback and offers support without taking the responsibility away from the employee.

6. **Assume good intent.** To lead with grace, we must assume good intent. People want to do good, make their best effort, and help the organization or community become a better place to work or live. If we ask questions, listen with curiosity and seek to understand the other person's hopes and fears, we may conclude that the person means well even if we ultimately disagree. Unfortunately, sometimes we assume bad (even evil) intent, especially on the part of elected officials, staff, or community members who oppose our ideas or efforts. Assuming good intent may allow us to discover some common ground and a way forward.

7. **Strive for excellence.** Graceful leaders work to learn more and do better. John F. Kennedy famously stated that "Learning and leadership are indispensable to each other." We also seek excellence in others and thus promote learning and growth for all employees. To incorporate learning into the daily life of the organization, we provide ample stretch assignments, team leadership opportunities, training activities, and coaching services. In our teams, we debrief all our experiences so that we can improve our practice. Learning is not discretionary or "nice-to-have;" it is key to our leadership.

8. **Exhibit empathy and compassion.** Empathy is characterized by the ability to see the world through the eyes of the other person. It allows us to understand, acknowledge and consider their unique hopes, fears, ideas and perspectives. Empathy is not blindly agreeing with everyone or absorbing every emotion. (See Leda Stawnychko, "Empathy Is Under Attack—But It Remains Vital for Leadership and Connection," doi.org, Sept 24, 2025.) Rather, by listening intently and acknowledging what we hear, empathy creates the opportunity for others to share their truths. For leaders, empathy is a super power. Compassion builds on empathy. Compassion is responding as best we can to what we hear and what the other person needs. It could be giving more time for an assignment, providing coaching or training, or providing a work partner for someone. Compassion is benevolent action. (Anna Tang, "The Art of Graceful Leadership," forbes.com, May 9, 2023.)

9. **Demonstrate forgiveness.** Too often, leaders see any mistake or failure as a blemish on their leadership. Leaders then criticize those responsible, possibly even jumping down their throats. Graceful leaders view mistakes as learning opportunities, especially if others have made a good effort. We ask "what did we learn for our future practice?" We also ask what we as leaders can do in order to better support an initiative or project. It takes courage to forgive. Thus, only strong leaders can forgive. Forgiveness creates connection and expands our leadership capacity.

10. **Create hope.** In these difficult times, followers most of all need hope. Hope is defined as the desire for something good to happen in the future. However, it is not simply wishful thinking or an optimistic feeling. Hope is aspirational yet practical and realistic. Hope requires action. To hope is an action verb. People will gravitate to a leader who creates hope and a pathway to achieve it. (See Career Compass No. 119: How to Create Hope in Scary Times.) For instance, amidst budget cutbacks, you may express a hope for the organization to achieve sustainable finances and a commitment to avoid layoffs. To achieve that hope, you also communicate a set of strategies. Most importantly, you tie these hopes to preserving essential services for the community and your caring commitment to employees and their families.

Are there some limits to grace in the real world?

So, what happens if an employee does not live up to their responsibilities and your expectations and standards? As a graceful leader, you have tried to provide support but the employee still under-performs.

You have three options:

1. Tolerate the lack of effort, ability or desire to perform. (As a steward of the organization, this option is unacceptable.)
2. Move the person to another role that is more suited to their capabilities or strengths or recraft the job in some way, especially if the employee has made a best effort but failed. This is acting with grace.
3. Move the employee out of the organization with support (for instance, provide outplacement services, coaching, reasonable severance, and/or continuation of health insurance for a period of time).

   Under this third option, you are still acting with grace. You are being firm yet supportive.

What are some everyday examples of leading with grace?

How does grace play out in the real-life of organizations? Here are some examples:

- When we check in with employees, it must not be a mindless check-in. Rather, you may ask:
  - "How was the weekend?" or "How did your daughter do in the soccer match this weekend?"
  - "What is going well this week?"
  - "What is challenging?"
  - "What do you need?"
  - "How can I help?"

When you personalize check-ins with employees, you are choosing grace.

- If someone is delayed to a meeting or late with a deliverable or fumbled an assignment, prioritize connection over correction. You may choose to say, "I know we have asked a lot of you lately. How is your workload? What can I do for you?" Or, "I noticed you struggled with the presentation, so I thought I'd check in—is everything ok? What can I help you with?"
- Grace is showing kindness when someone is struggling.
- If we share information and challenges freely and with transparency, we may not know everything. You may admit "I don't know the answer to that but I'll get the information and share it." Or, "I don't have the solution. I need help."
- By showing some vulnerability, you are choosing grace. (These examples come from Sheila Murty, "What It Means to Lead with Grace," forbes.com, July 7, 2020.)

What are some suggestions for leading with grace?

Recognizing that it is not easy to act with grace, here are some suggestions:

- **Take care of yourself**. It's difficult to act with grace if you are experiencing a lot of stress. To mitigate stress as well as promote general happiness, it is important to exercise on a regular basis, ensure good nutrition, get adequate sleep, and maintain social relationships outside of work.
- **Be generous.** Grace is all about making yourself available, being fully present, and giving of your time and attention.
- **Be aware of how you show up.** When we are stressed or feeling put upon or overly criticized, we may show up preoccupied or distracted, grumpy, defensive, even short-tempered. These behaviors undercut any intentions to act with grace.
- **Make grace and kindness norms and incorporate them into organizational systems and protocols**. We need to be intentional about grace and kindness and incorporate these norms into organizational systems. For instance, do we provide the right training so that all managers know how to conduct effective one-to-one conversations with their direct reports and ask the right questions? Do we conduct "stay interviews" with all staff and address key issues demonstrating that we care about employees? Do all managers have development conversations with their team members and do we train managers on how to have such conversations? Do we evaluate and reward managers on their talent development efforts?
- **Model grace and kindness.** As a leader, the best way to ensure a lot of grace is exhibited in the organization (and thus reap the benefits of grace) is to model those graceful behaviors. People take their cues from their leaders.
- **Show grace to yourself.** We can't show grace to others if we don't show grace to ourselves. Most of us have high expectations for ourselves. Yet we all make mistakes. We need to forgive ourselves and move on.

> *"Grace becomes the grease that enables people to smooth over the rough patches as well as the glue that holds us together in pursuit of a common cause." -John Baldoni*

Grace can define you as a leader

Grace can ultimately define you as a leader and enhance your effectiveness.

Grace is not "soft." (See Celia Swanson, "Leading with Grace and Strength," celiaswanson.com, Oct 2018). You need to be firm about values, goals, and expectations and demonstrate empathy, compassion and support.

As I discovered over my career, grace can be learned and developed if you practice it. But you cannot fake it. Grace can become a part of who you are if you practice it in small private moments and interactions with others. (See Celia Swanson, "Leading with Grace and Strength," celiaswanson.com, Oct 2018.)

Grace is not situational or transactional. It is a "gift" freely given.

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