



Career Compass No. 58:

Overcoming Deep-Seated Fears

by Dr. Frank Benest

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I'm a lieutenant in an urban police department in the mid-west. Our department is being criticized (and in some cases abused) by those in the community who say that police treat people of color differently than white residents. While some claims are certainly overblown and unfair, I do feel that we need to improve a whole host of approaches, including whom we recruit for police positions, training, policing protocols and procedures, discipline, and communication and engagement with different neighborhoods and groups.



Given the culture of my police department, it will take courageous leadership to move towards these changes. I'm committed to police service and want to make it better. We cannot be effective if there is a big disconnect between police and the people we serve.

I'd like to help start a conversation with the command staff about what we need to do. While there are likely a few colleagues who may agree with my concerns, I know there will be push-back and resistance, not just from the command staff but the rank and file. I'm sort of stuck. I don't know what to do. Can you help?

DR. BENEST: I congratulate you for recognizing the need for change. You are correct that any change-for-the-better must start in conversation with others. As David Whyte has said, “leadership is the art of conversation.” However, I sense that what is holding you back is fear.

A LITTLE FEAR IS A GOOD THING

A modicum of fear is a good thing. Those who have no fear are wildly over-confident, out of touch, or both (See Dan Rockwell's *Leadership Freak* blog post "[5 Lies About Self-Confidence](#)", Sept. 4, 2016).

A little fear gives us pause before acting and hopefully minimizes any wild gambles. This pause provides time to think things through and to do adequate planning.

SIGNIFICANT FEAR IS A BAD THING

Too much fear, however, inhibits creative thinking and problem-solving, limits learning, and incapacitates us. Fear shuts us down.

LEADERS NEED TO ACT

Authentic leaders (as opposed to managers) are compelled to exert positive influence and act with others to make things better. Fears get in the way and we are immobilized. We then cannot fulfill our leadership role.

WHAT DO WE FEAR?

We all fear something. To fear is part of the human condition. If someone suggests that he or she does not have any fears, that person is lying to you.

Many kinds of situations generate personal fears. For instance, we may . . .

- Be asked to speak publicly to a large group of professional colleagues
- Feel the need to advocate for an unpopular solution
- See and want to stop an unethical action or an injustice
- Have a contrary opinion when the group has already made up its mind
- Want to lead a change project that may be opposed internally or externally
- Be offered an opportunity for which we feel somehow inadequate
- Need to do something outside our comfort zone, such as meet new people at a social or professional event

In these kinds of situations, what are our deep-seated fears? If we probe into our psyches, our underlying fears may include:

- “I will fail”
- “I will be shown to be a fraud”
- “People will oppose my idea (or me) and I will not be liked”
- “I will lose credibility and won’t be able to lead on other issues in the future”
- “I will be personally rejected by others”
- “I won’t be promoted”

- “I will be fired”
- “I will be embarrassed or humiliated or isolated”

WHAT DID OUR MOTHERS SAY ABOUT FEAR?

Again, we need to overcome our fears if we are to act like leaders (and have a fulfilling life). How we deal with fear often is connected to what we were taught by our parents.

Some of us had mothers who drummed in to us “Be careful!” Thus, we tend to be overly cautious and avoid taking courageous action (see Dan Rockwell's *Leadership Freak* blog post "[6 Ways to Deal with Blamethrowing](#)" May 26, 2016).

However, some of us were fortunate to have mothers who encouraged courageous behavior. For instance, the mother of U.S. Senator Cory Booker told him as a young boy, “What would you do if you could not fail? Then do it!”

I was fortunate that my mom Rosy encouraged me as a young man to be courageous. When I was fearful of taking some action, Rosy would ask me: “Frank, what is the worst that can happen? How likely is that to occur? If you can live with the worst case, go for it!” Rosy taught me that courageous people have fears, but they acknowledge their fears, and then act anyway.

WHAT ARE SOME STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING FEARS?

If we can face our fears, we can minimize their debilitating effects. Less fear means more courage to act. Here are some approaches to addressing our fears.

1. Look inside and have a conversation with yourself

Ask yourself: “Deep down, what do I really fear?” Typically, you may respond, “I don’t know. I’m not sure. It just doesn’t feel right.”

You need to dig a bit deeper into your psyche. By digging deeper, you may conclude that “I fear people will resist my idea and they won’t follow me.” However, you need to still probe deeper into your soul until you acknowledge that you may truly fear rejection, ridicule, or just not being good enough.

Serious self-reflection (perhaps with the help of a trusted colleague, friend or coach) will assist you in identifying, naming, and acknowledging a deep-seated fear. Undefined, unacknowledged fear is perhaps the greatest barrier to courageous action.

2. Ask yourself if courageous action is meaningful to you

People will take “smart risks” (see [Career Compass No. 18: “Taking Smart Risks”](#)) if the action has great meaning for them and is aligned with their values (see [Career Compass No. 57: “Leading By Living Your Values”](#)). If the action is not that meaningful for you and doesn’t energize you, why would you struggle to overcome your fears?

3. Calculate the costs of the status quo

Most of us calculate the costs of taking a new action. However, we typically do not assess the costs of the status quo option.

In your situation, ask yourself—

- “Am I really willing to accept the current situation without trying to make it better?”
- “What are the costs to the Police Department? To the community? To fellow officers? To me?”

If the costs of the status quo option are high for you and others, you may be compelled to overcome your fears and act anyway.

4. Acknowledge your bank account of credibility

If you are a good lieutenant who achieves desired results and works well with others, you have a positive “bank account” of trust and credibility. As you lead projects, support others and make contributions, you are continuously making deposits and adding to your bank account.

Let’s say that you have accumulated over time \$100,000 of trust and credibility in your so-called bank account. If you take some action that meets resistance, you may have to take a withdrawal of \$10,000.

The problem is that we fear any withdrawals from our bank accounts. The reason that we build up the bank account is so we can survive a withdrawal.

\$90,000 left in the bank account is still a large bank account. If you have built a significant account over time, don’t fear a withdrawal if it is for a worthy effort which may fail.

5. Think through some pertinent questions

Before jumping into action, ask yourself (and any involved team members) the following questions:

- How important to me is doing something to improve the situation?
- Is the action aligned with my values?
- Do I have the resources (including time), or can I get the resources?
- Is the timing suitable?
- Will I learn a lot, or grow a lot?
- Have I identified roadblocks? Can I overcome them?
- Can I slowly generate support inside and outside?
- What are the conversations inside and outside that I need to initiate?
- Who are potential supporters and what are their values and interests?

6. Learn from your past successes in confronting fear

To help you take action, it is often helpful to reflect on a past experience when you were fearful but managed to act anyway. In your case, it could have been a time when you put your life in jeopardy when you were policing the streets; or dreaded speaking to an audience; or suggested to your team that the group opinion was flawed or ill-advised; or spoke out against a slur of some kind.

Debrief the previous experience—

- What did you fear deep-down?
- What did you do?
- How did you deal with your anxiety or minimize the fear?

To overcome fear and take action, you must leverage the capabilities that you already have inside yourself. By acknowledging these proven capabilities, you will surprise yourself (see Andy Molinski, [hbr.org](https://hbr.org/2017/01/you-are-more-resilient-than-you-give-yourself-credit-for/), [“You Are More Resilient Than You Give Yourself Credit For”](https://hbr.org/2017/01/you-are-more-resilient-than-you-give-yourself-credit-for/), Jan 25, 2017).

7. Focus on what you can do

Even if a particular action may require decisions or resources from top management, you should identify and focus on other actions that you can in fact take. For instance, you can . . .

- Start several conversations with other Police Department members about beneficial changes and incorporate some of their ideas into your thinking
- Do some informal research into what other Police Departments are doing to address the challenge
- Share some of the research at your PD management staff meetings
- Talk to the Police Chief and offer to lead a committee addressing some aspect of the problem

As UCLA basketball coach John Wooden once said, “Do not let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do.”

8. Use supportive colleagues, friends or coaches

To identify and acknowledge the need to act as well as your fear of acting, you must often talk out loud about what you are feeling. The easiest way is to have an honest conversation in a safe environment with someone whom you trust. A supportive colleague, friend, family member or coach can listen, ask questions, and even suggest some approaches to confront your anxiety, take a forward step, or minimize any potential fall-out.

If you approach a like-minded colleague in the PD, you can share your fears but take the first step together. Your colleague becomes a partner and helps you become accountable to your values and the do-able actions that you are compelled to take.

9. Do a “pre-mortem”

To learn from a difficult experience, we often do a post-mortem. We ask ourselves (and team-mates):

- What went well?
- What did not go so well?
- What did I (we) learn for the future?

However, before taking any action, it is often a good idea to do a “pre-mortem.” In a pre-mortem, we ask ourselves and others:

- What are all the things that can go possibly wrong if we take this course of action?

- How do we re-engineer the proposed course of action to avoid all the things that may go wrong or minimize the problems that may occur?

The pre-mortem helps us think through our effort so we avoid some missteps.

10. Take a small step or two to start the journey

Assuming you are compelled to act because of your values, I suggest that you take a small step or two (for example, start a conversation with a few peers in the department). These “little bets” (see Peter Sims' book *Little Bets—How Breakthrough Ideas Emerge from Small Discoveries*, 2011) will help you reduce fear, and they can be ramped up over time. Plus, little bets tend to be reversible if you discover too much opposition.

Typically, one or two steps lead to other steps and you begin to build momentum. View your initial actions as the first steps in a journey. In a “journey,” you may know the general direction but not the precise destination.

So, take one step NOW. Delay magnifies fear. Courage emerges as you move forward, not before (see Dan Rockwell's *Leadership Freak* blog post ["How to Find Advantage in Office Politics"](#), June 7, 2017).

11. Practice a growth mindset

People with “fixed mindsets” fear challenge because they may stumble or fail in some way. Those with fixed mindsets desire to avoid criticism and therefore take few risks. They give-up easily when challenged. They want to do the same things over and over again because that reinforces their sense of competency.

Those with “growth mindsets” embrace sensible risk-taking because they see challenge and “stretching” as paths to growth. They see effort as the path to mastery and persist in the face of setbacks. They view mistakes as necessary to learning. Those with growth mindsets acknowledge criticism and learn from it. They thus achieve and contribute more. (See Carol Dweck's book *Mindsets: The New Psychology of Success*, 2006)

If you take leadership to help improve police service by doing what you can do within your realm, it may be difficult and you may be criticized. You may stumble along the way. However, you will do what you are compelled to do, learn and grow, and make a significant contribution.

DISCOVERING YOUR COURAGEOUS SELF

Leadership is about taking ownership of a problem or challenge, putting yourself in the fray, and exerting positive influence in moving forward. Given their values and commitments, leaders are compelled to act with others.

If you are scared, you need to name the fear and embrace it. Then you can prepare yourself and take a few steps forward. Seventy percent ready is good enough, unless it's a life or death situation (see Dan Rockwell's *Leadership Freak* blog post ["Don't Believe Your Momma"](#), May 26, 2017). Over time, you will strengthen your courage muscle.

Remember, everyone is fearful, even courageous people. Pema Chadron, American Buddhist nun, once remarked “We usually think that brave people have no fear. The truth is that they are intimate with fear.”

To take courageous action, you must believe that you can do something meaningful and that your action will make a difference.

Taking responsibility and well-thought-out action in the face of adversity will actually engender respect from others and enhance your career possibilities. More importantly, you will discover your better self. “It is always our own self that we find at the end of a (difficult) journey” (Ella Maillart, Swiss writer).

Acting courageously will enhance your life. As suggested by the French poet Anais Nin, “Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one’s courage.”

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.