



Career Compass No. 59:

Perform the Job Before You Get It

by Dr. Frank Benest

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I've been in my position as community services supervisor for four years. My manager will be retiring in 18 months. While five of us supervisors report to the recreation division manager, I want her job when it becomes open.

The recreation division manager is well-respected, approachable, decisive, and quite effective in leading the recreation division. She also is quite active in addressing city-wide issues with other managers inside the department and across departments.

Among all the recreation division supervisors, I have the most extensive experience in youth and senior programs, aquatics, and adult classes. Plus, I have budget experiences under my belt. I also have a master's degree and am active in the state parks and recreation association.

How do I ensure that I get the promotion when the recreation division head position becomes open?



Lights! Camera! Action!

DR. BENEST: You can't. There is no way to ensure or guarantee that you get the job when it becomes available, despite everything you have going for you. Here's the question: how do you maximize the likelihood of getting promoted?

It is good to have diverse experience in a number of program areas and supervision and budget experience and to be professionally active. The key is to **perform the job you desire before you get it.**

You do not want to get the job and then start behaving and performing as the recreation division manager; rather, you start exerting positive influence now so you become the natural choice for the promotion. For example, how do you exert more positive influence in division meetings with the other supervisors and the division manager?

So, how do you figure out how to act like a division head?

WHAT ARE SOME APPROACHES?

1. Observe

To begin with, you must consciously observe the recreation division manager and other senior managers inside and outside the department. You want to observe:

- How do they act
- What questions do they ask? (see [Career Compass No. 24: Asking Powerful Questions](#))
- How do they solve problems with others and make decisions?
- How do they engage and connect with others? (see [Career Compass No. 37: Engaging Employees for Success](#))
- How do they remove obstacles, seek outside resources, and enable others?
- How do they promote team learning?
- In what ways do they communicate the big picture to staff?
- How do they cross boundaries and address problems outside their division silos?
- When they walk into a room, how do they exert “leadership presence”?
- How are they serving others? (see [Career Compass No. 41: The Post-Heroic Leader](#))

You must ask yourself in what ways do you want to emulate your manager (and other managers) and in what ways do you want to behave and act differently. Early in my career, I worked for three terrible city managers and learned through observation what not to do.

We learn a lot from good leaders. We often learn more from poor leaders.

2. Conduct several info interviews

A good way to gather intelligence about the manager role in your organization, and some of the joys and challenges of those positions, is to request an informational interview with several well-respected managers (including your own). You can specifically request a formal informational interview or simply ask them to share coffee with you so you can “pick their brains” about your career development.

Here are some classic info interview questions when you have coffee with a manager:

- Can you describe for me your career journey?
- Looking back, what have been some high points, low points and turning points in your career journey?
- What was a “crucible experience” (an experience of great challenge and adversity) that tested your leadership? How did the experience transform you as a leader and person?
- Who served as a formal or informal coach supporting your growth and development? What made that relationship so powerful?
- What are some current leadership challenges that you must address?
- What was a big failure and what did you learn?
- What has given you a great sense of fulfillment?
- What is your career journey going forward?
- What is one big take-away from your public service career?

You can then reflect upon what you heard from these informational interviews and any potential implications for your leadership behavior and career development.

3. *Become more self-critical*

All great leaders are self-reflective and self-critical. They recognize that followers choose to follow (or not). Consequently, good leaders are always asking themselves:

- Why would someone want to follow me?
- Why would someone be reluctant to follow me?

Let me share a personal example. I love to take risks and people often follow me because I am courageous. Courage is the leadership “gift” that I am compelled to give away. However, sometimes I am also reckless and should be more cautious. For instance, I once strongly advocated for redeveloping a shopping center in Palo Alto. Even when it was clear that the redevelopment proposal did not have sufficient support in the community, I kept pushing and I lost some credibility with staff and the council. By debriefing this experience with staff and with further self-reflection, I developed a better sense of when to pull back. Smart risk-taking is good; wild gambles are not. (See [Career Compass No. 22: Overcoming Your Blind Spots.](#))

4. *Get feedback*

Get some feedback from a respected leader or coach in your organization and/or the recreation division manager. Ask your advisor:

- To lead a major division in the community services department, in what areas am I doing well?
- In what areas can I strengthen my performance?
- What are some options for better developing myself and positioning myself for advancement? (see [Career Compass No. 54: How Do I Position Myself for Advancement?](#))

5. Visualize yourself in a new role

Given all of this data-gathering, you need to visualize yourself in the role of recreation division manager. What are you doing? What are you thinking? How are you acting in meetings? What does success look like?

6. Flex your behavior

Once you observe the practice of other managers (the good, the bad, and the ugly), and reflect on your leadership behavior and get feedback, it is time to “flex” your behavior and practice. You are who you are; however, a good leader figures out when they need to add a few new behaviors to their portfolio of behaviors. For example, do you need to focus a little more on building relationships and rapport with internal staff or external stakeholders, as well as focus more on completing tasks?

Remember, you are not pretending to be someone you are not. You are just practicing some new behaviors. (See Herminia Ibarra, [“The Authenticity Paradox,”](#) *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 2015.)

7. Model (and practice) key behaviors

Good leaders are role models. They lead by modeling key behaviors. Do you need to listen more, start conversations, and/or integrate the ideas of others into your proposals? Pick one or two behaviors and practice them. Then debrief::

- What went well?
- What didn't go so well?
- What did I learn for the future?

8. Partner with others

No one person can exhibit all the positive qualities or attributes of good leaders. Therefore, consider partnering with someone who can complement your portfolio of behaviors. If you are not a great facilitator of internal or external meetings, perhaps you can partner with another staff person who is more facilitative in group settings.

9. Ask how you can support your current manager

It would be helpful if you asked the recreation division manager how you can help her move the recreation division or the department agenda forward. You can also query her on how you could relieve some of her burdens, such as a quarterly report or budget (or at least assist in these tasks).

10. Be authentic

The good news is that “leadership has many voices.” (See Bill George, *True North: Discover Your Authentic Leadership*, 2007.) There are many ways to lead. While you want to observe and

learn from others, flex your leadership style, and expand your portfolio of behaviors, you must still be your own person and remain true to yourself.

At the end of the day, it will be about leveraging your strengths and giving away your unique leadership “gifts.”

HOW WOULD YOU ACT NOW?

So, envision yourself in the Division Manager position and start acting in ways to better serve others and to exert influence for the larger group and the larger good. That’s what leaders do.

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.