Career Compass No. 66:

# Lighten Up!

*by Dr. Frank Benest*

**September 24, 2018**

*Dear Frank,*

*For the past four years, I have served as the assistant director of finance for a mid-sized city. I oversee operations of the finance divisions, plus lead several multidepartment teams. I also serve as the city's budget officer.*

*I seem to be well-respected for my work by subordinates and peers. However, I have received some troubling feedback from the finance director. The director acknowledges that I produce very good work and she values me. However, she is concerned that I come off as "too serious." She has apparently heard from staff in finance and other departments that I should "lighten up."*

*Well, it is true that I'm serious and very committed to the work and results for our organization. The work in finance is very important and our organization cannot be successful unless we in finance do good work.*

*Since I want to advance in local government management, I don't want to derail my career. Is this really a problem for me?*

**DR. BENEST:** You should be pleased that your boss acknowledges your good work and she values you. However, if you're perceived as "too serious," it is a problem. Here's why.

## WHY IS "TOO SERIOUS" A PROBLEM?

Our organizational cultures need more fun and playfulness for several reasons. First, all local governments face adaptive challenges (financial stability, homelessness, climate change, affordable housing, income inequality, opioid crisis) that confound our technical skills. To make matters worse, there are no right or wrong answers. (See Career Compass No. 65 FIO—The Key Competency for 21st Century Leaders). We need creative thinking to respond to these adaptive problems. However, in an atmosphere of "deadly seriousness," it is difficult if not impossible for staff to be creative.

Second, we are in a war for talent. . .and we are losing the war. (See Career Compass No. 64: Ten Ideas to Become a Talent Magnet.) Increasingly, employees want a "cool" place to work and a more engaging, energizing, and even "fun" environment. Our organizational cultures in local government tend to be quite stodgy.

Third, if we are all about serious work and results, we tend to ignore relationships and the people who produce the results. Because people feel no connection with you, they tend not to follow.

Finally, we spend a lot of time at work. Shouldn't we strive for a more fun environment for ourselves and others if we spend our waking lives at work?

While we cannot offer "beer busts" on Friday after work, free meals onsite, or other costly perks that are provided by high-tech corporations, there are other ways to promote a more energizing, caring, and fun environment. I will provide some examples below.

One caveat: As you struggle to find ways to generate a little bit of fun in the work, do not confuse perks with culture. For instance, allowing employees to bring their dogs to work is a perk. Texting an employee or writing a note of condolence after they had to put their dog down is about your caring culture.

## DOES FUN MEAN LESS SERIOUS?

No. We can promote more fun in our work environments and still be extremely serious about our work and results. Here's how.

## HOW DO YOU PROMOTE SERIOUS FUN?

If you see the need to make some modifications in your behavior, don't get hung up on the notion of fun. If fun strikes you as too frivolous, think of vital. So, how do you contribute to a more vital work culture?

Moreover, acknowledge that you are a role model. Since you are the assistant finance director, people take cues from you. If you are too serious, they become too serious. You, therefore, need to model some more playful behaviors as you tackle your serious work.

I have 11 ideas for you to help promote serious fun.

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1. **Embrace the need to become less serious**

Take the feedback from your boss to heart. We all need to modify behavior to get better at what we do, especially if we want to exert positive influence and achieve even better results for the benefit of all. Identify promoting fun as a goal on your personal work plan for the coming year and then commit to some ideas or activities to help achieve this goal.

2. **Become more self-aware**

As Bill George affirms in *Discover Your True North,* leadership starts with self-awareness. Are you acting in ways that promote "deadly seriousness" and restricts the creative thinking of others? Monitor your interactions with staff and note in a journal the interactions and how people respond. Or, get some feedback from a trusted peer or colleague or coach.

3. **Flex your behavior**

No one wants to change who you are. Leadership has many voices. There are many ways to exert positive influence. Having said that, you can always get better at leading by flexing your behavior.

For example, I have always been an "ideas guy." I get very enthusiastic about big ideas to solve big problems. People tend to follow me because of my ideas and my willingness to take risks to bring the ideas to reality. However, I began to notice a growing problem. When I walked into a staff meeting and enthusiastically advocated my big idea, everyone else voiced acceptance of the idea and but then failed to follow me. By starting the meeting with my idea, I sucked all the air out of the room.

Therefore, I had to flex my behavior. I first asked several people in advance of the staff meeting to share their ideas at the beginning of the meeting. I also asked the least influential team members to start with their opinions. I even tried a round-robin format with everyone stating one possible idea to address the challenge before I proposed an idea. I got better at facilitating a problem-solving discussion so that by the end of the meeting I could summarize all the ideas and weave in my idea. Of course, my idea had become much better by the end of the discussion.

How can you flex your behavior to promote more fun and energy?

4. **Get personal**

People won't choose to follow you unless they connect with you on a personal level. So, try a few simple ways of connecting. Greet people in the morning. Walk to every office, smile, and say good morning. If members of the team are in remote locations, call them. Ask about their family or their weekend or their daughter's soccer game. Share something about your family or weekend. Create a little rapport. Don't start every conversation with work. (See Dan Rockwell, *Leadership Freak* blog, "12 Ways to Get Serious About Fun", Nov 13, 2014.)

5. **Take 5**

To lighten things up and get to know your team members, you may want to create a new ritual for staff meetings. Start your staff meetings with the agenda item called "Take 5". For 5 minutes, people can share a family anecdote or experience, discuss their weekend or a hobby.

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During the Take 5 ritual, you can also create the habit of asking a team member a nonwork question that will create connection. For example, ask "what was your favorite toy as a kid?" Let's say, you colleague answers, "A pogo stick." You can then ask her some follow-up questions:

- "What was it about that toy that you enjoyed so much?"
- "What did that toy enable you to do?"
- "Who did that toy allow you to become?"

The responses will help you and the group celebrate that person, give the other person time to reflect on their life story, and create connection. (See Dan Rockwell, *Leadership Freak*, "On Chemistry Sets and Pogo Sticks", May 26, 2018.)

### 6. Use a little wackiness

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*Since creative thinking cannot occur in an environment of deadly seriousness, get a bit wacky.*

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For example, if you'd like your finance team to come up with some creative solutions for a particular challenge, start by asking them to identify some wacky ideas and post them on the wall with post-its. Once people share their wacky ideas and laugh out loud a bit, ask for their not-so-wacky ideas (which will tend to be much more creative after a bit of playfulness).

Another way to promote creative problem-solving is to start a staff meeting by engaging the team in a creative game or exercise. For example, ask your team to brainstorm 20 diverse ways to use a brick. A brick can be used in construction, or as a design feature, or as a weapon, etc. (There are many books as well as online examples of creative games that stimulate creative thinking.)

To lighten things up and highlight the contributions of individual team members, you can also organize a "My Real Title" day. Ask all team members to identify one strength or added value that they contribute to the success of the team, and then ask them to post their "real title" on their office door or the entrance to their cubicle. You can also have everyone share their real titles at the weekly staff meeting. When we did this during my tenure as city manager of Palo Alto, California, my real title was "The Provocateur." This simple activity was fun and enlightening and promoted self-awareness and the recognition.

### 7. Partner with a fun champ

As Dan Rockwell advises in his piece "You Don't Know How to Make Work Fun" (*Leadership Freak* blog, April 30, 2018), if you don't know how to make work fun, ask someone who does. Rockwell suggests that you designate a chief fun officer for the month whose job is to surprise everyone with a simple fun experience or activity at least once a week for a month. Of course, you must support your chief fun officer and join in the fun with enthusiasm. Remember you are a role model for others.

### 8. Celebrate achievement whenever you can

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To reinforce good work, you want to celebrate achievement whenever you can. When the team accomplishes anything, bring a cake. If it is a major achievement, such as the governing board's approval of the two-year budget, organize an ice cream social and invite all the department budget representatives as well as your budget team to the celebration. Celebration is fun plus it reinforces achievement and good work. I call it "purposeful partying" (you are partying with a purpose).

You need to celebrate not just at the end of the project but along the way as well. Oftentimes our projects in local government take a number of years to achieve. Therefore, people often lose motivation and momentum. To maintain motivation, it is a good idea to acknowledge and celebrate progress or achieving certain milestones along the way. (See Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer, *The Progress Principle*.)

Providing food and drink are always good ways to celebrate. Even without refreshments, you can simply lead a "clap-moment." Clap-moments make people feel good.

When I was city manager of Palo Alto, I asked every staff group in the city to start each staff meeting with an item called "Team Acknowledgements and Achievements." Or simply start any meeting with the question, "what's working?"

If you organize mini-celebrations, it shows that you care about the people as well as the results. If people feel that you care, they tend to be more engaged. (See Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman, *First Break All the Rules*.)

### 9. Have fun with awards

Since we often celebrate achievement with awards, have a little fun with crazy awards. For instance, celebrate big failures in the pursuit of excellence with a "Fabulous Flops" award. Or you can celebrate smart risk-taking by bestowing a "Turtle" award for "sticking your neck out." Or recognize fun champs with a "Fun-Maker" award. Such recognitions not only highlight desired values but promote fun.

### 10. Create a fun budget

To subsidize picnics or other celebrations bringing the team together for a bit of fun, create a fun budget. The fun budget does not have to be exorbitant. Typically, fun is cheap.

### 11. Do something unplanned

Spontaneity is good. You can do something fun that is unplanned. For instance, show up to a staff meeting with coffee and bagels for no reason at all. Just because.

Or on the spur of the moment, invite a staff person on a walk to brainstorm ideas about a project.

**SERIOUS FUN IS NOT FRIVOLOUS**

Promoting serious fun is not frivolous or distracting from real work. It is a key leadership behavior.

People will not follow you if they do not perceive your humanity, if they do not connect with you. You are concerned about results, yet it is through relationships that you produce results.

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So, lighten up and lead the way.

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