

# Career Compass No. 79: Leading by Connecting

What can I do to become a better leader who people follow?

By Frank Benest | Jan 10, 2020 | ARTICLE



*I'm a new supervisor of an economic development team in a large city. Because I have technical expertise and push to achieve results, my team members seem to follow me on technical matters. However, even though I'm the formal supervisor, my influence with the team is uneven.*

*I tend to be an introvert, so I'm not terribly social. I focus on getting the job done. What can I do to become a better leader who people follow?*

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You are correct to assume that people want to see that their supervisor has technical expertise and knowledge about the work. Technical knowledge and experience lead to some, but not a lot, of influence.

You cannot force people to follow you because of your positional authority as a manager or supervisor. People on a team *choose* to follow or not. Leadership is all about exerting positive influence with others, regardless of your position. People tend to follow leaders that they connect with on an interpersonal level.

Therefore, the critical task in enhancing your leadership capability is to promote relationship and connection with others.

## What does “connection” mean?

“Connecting” with someone may seem like a squishy concept, so what does it mean?

As a supervisor, you give something (information, resources, time, permission) and the employee gives you something (results, performance, commitment, energy, focus). In our professional roles, we certainly undertake many transactions with people.

Connecting is not “transactional.” In authentically connecting with someone, we attempt to understand them (their history, hopes, values, and concerns) and appreciate their uniqueness.

Establishing a human connection with someone is not cerebral, it is emotional. It is more than finding commonality or similar interests; rather, it is a way of relating and forming an emotional bond. I understand who you are and you understand who I am. Even if there are many differences, we care about each other.

Connecting with others requires sharing yourself with others. Connection is all about accepting other people, showing genuine interest in them, and wanting what is best for them. You can connect with someone even if you don't agree with their perspectives and ideas.

We are a relational species—we connect for the sake of connecting.

## The Value of Connection

We spend most of our waking hours at work or working. Therefore, establishing connections with people helps enhance and enrich our lives.

In addition, when we connect with others on our team or elsewhere, all the positives tend to increase, including:

- Employee or stakeholder engagement.
- Discretionary effort.
- Collaboration.
- Adaptability.
- Trust.

### Results vs. Relationships

Throughout most of my career as a local government manager, I was focused on achieving results as opposed to promoting relationships. Most leaders fall somewhere along the continuum of results vs. relationships.

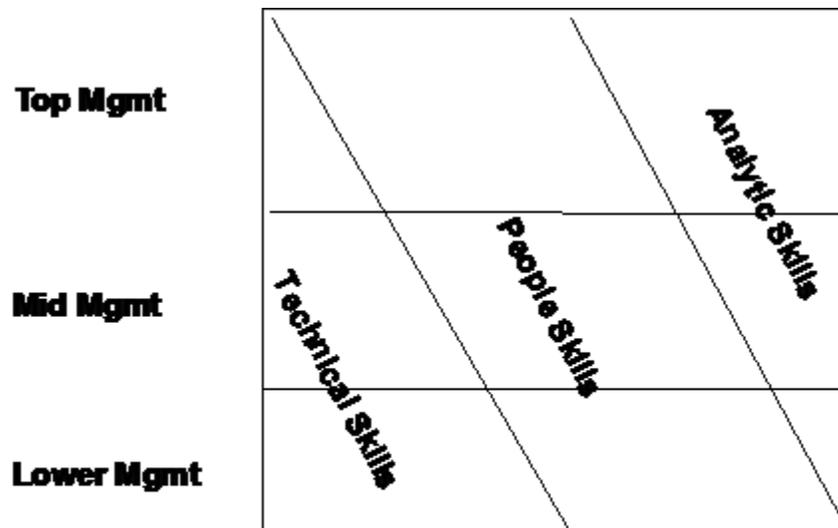
Late in my career, I finally figured it out. *A leader achieves results through relationships. Demanding or Supportive?*

A results-oriented leader tends to be demanding of others. A relationship-oriented leader tends to be supportive of others. If one is just demanding, one is perceived as a “jerk.” If one is just supportive, one is perceived as a “pushover.”

The secret is to be demanding *and* supportive at the same time. It is not an “or;” it is an “and.”

### The Importance of People Skills

At lower levels of management, one needs a chunk of technical skills, people skills, and a sliver of analytic skills. At mid-level management, one requires all three skill sets. At senior levels of management, leaders need a chunk of analytic skills, people skills, and a sliver of technical skills. See chart below.



### **80 percent of management failure is related to poor people skills**

The common skill set is people skills. One is promoted into management because of technical skills (what a bad idea!). One fails in management because of poor people skills. In a Harvard Business School study, 80% of management failure was related to poor people skills.

As one advances into management, the “soft” skills produce the hard results.

### **Frank’s Personal Experience in Connecting**

Because I had suffered a number of personal losses in my life, I started as the city manager of Palo Alto, California, writing personal, handwritten notes to any employee who was experiencing the loss of a family member, friend, pet, or some other trauma. I expressed my experience of grieving the recent loss of my wife Pam and told them that we as an organizational family would support them as they struggled with their grief.

Employees were incredibly grateful that their leader cared about them. As a result of the feedback that I received, we also contracted with an employee assistance program (EAP) to provide grief counseling and other support services.

Not only were employees grateful but I connected with them through the human experience of loss. To this day, 10 years after I retired as city manager, employees stop

me in the downtown, expressing gratitude for my efforts to recognize their struggle with grief.

In reflecting upon this experience, I now realize that our common experience of loss and my efforts to connect with grieving employees created connection. Because of this emotional bond, the employees tended to trust me and follow me.

## Whose Responsibility Is It?

It is your responsibility as a leader to take proactive measures to build relationships with team members and others. While it is important for all team members to connect with each other, you have the primary responsibility if you want to exert positive influence.

## Practices to Promote Connection

Here are 12 practices to build relationship and connection.

### 1. Be intentional

To be effective in connecting with others, you must consciously focus on the task of building relationships. It's like any other goal—you must be intentional and focus on it.

### 2. Get personal

Get to know your team members and other employees and stakeholders with whom you must collaborate. An easy way to get personal is to walk around at the beginning of the day and the end of the day, and ask about the employee. For instance, ask . . .

- How was your weekend?
- How did your daughter do in her soccer game?
- How is your partner progressing in starting a new business?
- What was good about your day?
- What are you learning?

Of course, the best way to promote relationship is to share yourself—your interests, your goals, your family news. You need to model the way so people feel comfortable sharing themselves.

A simple practice is to “take five” at staff meetings. At the beginning of each team meeting, team members can take up to five minutes to share something happening in their lives.

### 3. Give people space to be themselves

I like sports, traveling, and telling stories. My basic work approach is “ready, fire, aim.” Other people may have completely different interests and ways of working and being. If people are going to accept the “authentic me,” I must accept them in all their uniqueness. For instance, if the other person is more deliberate or analytical than me, I must make the space to let them express their way of working and doing things.

A team shares a common work enterprise and must achieve certain goals and results together. However, there are many ways of achieving those results.

#### 4. **Get away from your office**

As supervisors and managers, we often spend too much time in our offices and require people to come to us. So, it is a good idea to go to the work space of a team member for an impromptu meeting, schedule a walking meeting, or meet at a café. Even though we do serious work together, some informality generates relationship.

#### 5. **Ask questions to generate conversation**

Authentic conversations create relationship and connection. To engage in such conversations, you can ask questions, such as:

- Why is this project important to you (or the organization or community)?
- What does “success” look like to you?
- What are you learning?
- How can I better support you?
- How are you going to proceed?

(See Career Compass #61 titled [Leadership Is the Art of Conversation](#))

Great conversationalists listen twice as much as they talk. They are also curious and ask the other person to “tell me more.”

Being present, asking questions, listening, and seeking to understand all increase your influence (see [Dan Rockwell, Leadership Freak blog, Aug 4, 2017.](#))

#### 6. **Support people when they are struggling**

As indicated by my personal experience, leaders need to find ways to support people when they are struggling. By being forward-looking, we can ask people what they have learned from a mistake instead of dwelling on a failure. If someone is caring for a family member or even would like to attend their child’s daytime school performance, we can offer some scheduling flexibility or telework so the employee can attend to his or her family. We can also offer support services to struggling teammates through the agency’s EAP.

#### 7. **Promote gratitude**

According to the Gallup research, recognizing a team member at least once every seven days promotes engagement. It also reinforces good performance. More importantly, expressing gratitude for the efforts and contributions of others is a key way to connect with them.

At staff meetings in Palo Alto, we started all-staff meetings with an agenda item called “Team Accomplishments.” This was an opportunity for team members to give a “shout out” recognizing the contributions of others.

In addition, we can celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, and professional or work achievements by sending a card or note or by providing coffee and bagels at the weekly staff meeting. By expressing gratitude for people, we show we are interested in others and we care about them.

#### 8. Conduct “stay interviews”

While we often lavish attention to get a talented professional to join our team, we often forget about them until they leave and then we do an exit interview. By then, of course, it's too late and we have lost the talent.

To build relationship and retain talent, a good practice is to conduct a “stay interview.” The purpose of the stay interview is to get to know your direct report better and to retain the person. I know a department director who does a “walking interview” with each of the employees in her department on the staff person's anniversary date.

Some stay interview questions include:

- What do you like most about your work?
- What keeps you here?
- What would entice you away?
- What do you want to learn this year?
- What makes for a great day at work?
- What brings you down on the job?
- Is there anything you'd like to change about your job?
- What would make your job more satisfying and rewarding?
- Do you feel recognized for your accomplishments?
- What strengths or talents do you have that aren't being used?
- What is your greatest challenge or roadblock?
- What part of working here strikes you as ridiculous?
- How can I or the organization help you reach your career goals?
- What support do you need to be more effective?
- What is the most satisfying part about your job right now?
- What is least satisfying about your job?
- If you could wave a magic wand, what changes would you make in the work environment?
- What can we do to ensure we keep you with us?

(See Marnie Green, *Painless Performance Conversations: A Practical Approach to Critical Day-to-Day Workplace Discussions*, 2013.)

Not only do you learn key information through these stay interviews but you also demonstrate that you care. Caring for the other person creates connection.

#### 9. Show vulnerability

Connection and trust all increase with vulnerability. As a leader, you can demonstrate vulnerability at work by saying:

“I made a mistake.”

“I screwed up.”

“I don’t know.”

“I need help.”

By sharing a loss of a loved one, you also show vulnerability.

Remember, only strong leaders can show vulnerability. (See Career Compass # 32 [“The Power of Vulnerability.”](#))

#### 10. Promote learning and growth

One way to show caring is to offer opportunities for team members to learn and grow. As you discover through conversation what team members want to learn, you can provide opportunities for:

- Stretch assignments.
- Team leadership.
- Interim or acting assignments.
- Formal education or certification.

Learning and development is the new “social glue.” As long as talented people are learning and growing, they will tend to stay with you. Such development opportunities also demonstrate that you care.

#### 11. Share stories

From ancient times, human beings have told stories. Tribes, communities, and families have used stories to enchant, entertain, instruct, perpetuate core values, and preserve wisdom.

In contemporary societies and organizations, we still use stories to pass on experience and knowledge. Most importantly, sharing personal experiences or stories help us connect with others.

(See Career Compass #50 [“Story-Telling—A Powerful Way to Communicate and Lead.”](#))

#### 12. Don’t fake it

You can’t fake it. You must understand the value of human connection. You try to connect with others because you see the value in it for yourself and others. You make the effort to form a human bond with others because it enriches you and others.

## What If You Are an Introvert?

It is a myth that great organizational leaders are all extroverts and “charismatic.” Jim Collins in his books *Built To Last* and *Good To Great* demonstrated that great leaders are often introverts. The key to their success was that they were humble men and women who were committed to the vision, values, and success of the enterprise. (See Career Compass #76 “[Humble Leaders Get Results.](#)”

Extroverts get energy through interacting with others. It is easier for them to socialize and form relationships with larger numbers of employees and other stakeholders.

Introverts get energy through quiet time with themselves, reflection, and looking inward. Therefore, introverts must be even more intentional about building relationships and human bonds. Introverts must block off time and regularly schedule time for walking around. They must also be conscious of getting out of their office to personally connect with staff in their offices or in the field. They should also occasionally switch from email to conversing in-person with people. They could arrive at a staff meeting early to welcome people and ask how they are doing before the formal meeting begins.

### **Relationship-Building Takes Time and Effort**

Relationship-building requires focus and leveraging small, daily interactions. Connecting with others happens over time, one intentional behavior after another. As a leader, you go slow to go fast.

Leadership is all about sharing yourself. As Frances Hesselbein stated, “Leadership is a matter of how to be, not how to 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](mailto:careers@icma.org) or contact Frank directly at [frank@frankbenest.com](mailto:frank@frankbenest.com). Read past columns at [icma.org/careercompass](http://icma.org/careercompass).