

Career Compass No. 88: Leaders Are Dealers in Hope

Turbulent times can sap hope, which can create anxiety and depression, lower team morale, and damage productivity. But there's hope...in hope!

By Dr. Frank Benest | Jan 8, 2021 | ARTICLE

Dear Frank –

I am a finance services manager in a large suburban city and supervise a division of financial analysts and accountants. Over the past three years in my position, I have developed positive and trusting relationships with team members.

Prior to the pandemic, our team enthusiastically took the lead in order to develop a new financial services software package. The software aims to streamline accounting, budgeting, purchasing, and contracting processes; better monitor finances; and speed up program implementation across the city. In doing so, we started collaborating with a vendor and IT staff, as well as representatives from our client departments.

As we shifted to remote work, team members were fearful about their health and the health of their families and loved ones, their jobs and livelihoods, and the general chaos all around us. We quickly got focused on maintaining our work output and decided to postpone the launch of the new software program. Due to the pandemic-related economic crisis, the city laid off all part-time staff and instituted a hiring freeze but we still have all our full-time staff. After almost a year, most of us still work from home. Our fear has turned into endless uncertainty not only about our health and jobs but also about all the external change, such as demands to open up the economy and schools, as well as calls for racial justice.



My team is distracted, uneasy, anxious, and exhausted, with little energy to collaborate with others and get innovative about new ways of doing business. In my view, neither the city manager nor the finance director has stepped up to exert strong leadership to counter people's perception of a bleak future.

I feel helpless and so does the team. What can I do as team leader?

Yes, there is a lot of change around us, both internally in the organization and externally in our community, the nation, and the world. Our initial fears about our health, safety, and security have now turned into uncertainty, anxiety, dread, and a sense of hopelessness about the future. We are all in a state of high anxiety. Anxiety levels are three times higher than a year ago (Chantal Bechervaise, "[How to Be Anxious Without Becoming Depressed](#)," *takeitpersonally.com*, Oct 28, 2020). In fact, one study indicates that 53% of American adults have a sense of hopelessness (LaRae Quy, "[How to Have Hope in a Bleak World](#)," *SmartBrief* blog, Oct 10, 2020).

3-D Change

Without doubt, there is a lot of change internally and externally. To survive and even thrive amid the change, we need to understand the nature of the change.

The change we are experiencing has three dimensions. It is

1. **Perpetual:** Happening on a continual basis.
2. **Pervasive:** Affecting multiple areas of our lives all at once.
3. **Exponential:** Accelerating at rapid rates.

It is not just the amount of change. Change is occurring all around us in many aspects of our lives. It is nonlinear, so we cannot anticipate it. And it is accelerating faster and faster.

As indicated by Aneel Chima and Ron Gutman, "Change, by its nature, leaves people and organizations feeling confused, vulnerable, and fractured at a time when resilience, cohesion, and collaboration are necessary to perform at the highest level." (See "[What It Takes to Lead Through an Era of Exponential Change](#)," *hbr.org*, Oct 29, 2020.)

Learned Helplessness

Martin Seligman, the famed American psychologist, coined the phrase "learned helplessness." When people feel powerless in distressful times or situations, they easily get frustrated, become more passive, and give up. In the process, team members suffer physically and emotionally. (See Katia Savchuk, "[How to Be a Good Boss in Trying Times](#)," *Stanford Business*, July 23, 2020.)

To counter learned helplessness, we leaders must help our teams confront the new realities, take action to move forward, and in the process make a positive difference for our teams, our organizations, and the communities we serve. In order to do so, we all need the right kind of emotion. The word “emotion” derives from the Latin *motere* which means “to move.” This suggests that the right kind of emotion creates the stimulus to take action for the better. (See Chantal Bechervaise, “[How to Be Anxious Without Becoming Depressed](#),” *takeitpersonnelly.com*, Oct 28, 2020.)

What is the adaptive emotion we all need now? Hope!

Hope Defined

Creating a sense of hopefulness is a key opportunity to exert positive influence, regardless of your position. As a manager, creating a shared sense of hope for your team amid 3-D change is a critical leadership responsibility.

What is hope? Hope is defined as the confident expectation that something positive will happen. It is not wishful thinking. Hope is aspirational yet practical and realistic. Hope can help us overcome a sense of anxiety, uncertainty, dread, and powerlessness.

Why Hope?

Simply put, hope points us in the right direction amid all the uncertainty and fuels our next steps forward.

The Post-Heroic Leader

To help create a sense of hope and optimism about the future, we typically wait for the “leader as hero” to save the day. The “leader as hero” is typically seen as a solo, bigger-than-life, charismatic leader who, through the power of his/her personality and ideas, takes charge, inspires certainty, and pulls everyone along the path to success.

There are several reasons that we cannot rely on the heroic leader. First, we cannot wait for the heroic leader (such as your city manager or finance director) to show up and wave a magic wand. Either the hero does not show up or any change is not embraced or not long-lasting. Second, the heroic leader is the wrong model. More than ever, we now need “servant leaders.”

In his classic essay “[The Servant as Leader](#),” Robert Greenleaf emphasized that servant leaders are humble yet committed to the organization, their coworkers, and the people they serve. Servant-leaders are “other-centered,” as opposed to “me-centered.” They seek to influence (rather than increase their own power and status) so that they can better make a difference and serve others. It is not about their great ideas but the best ideas that will come from everybody in an effort to address the problem or challenge.

While great leaders are humble, they are still passionate. They just demonstrate their passion in a quiet manner and fulfill their commitments every day in small ways. They

exhibit their passion by demonstrating their commitment to certain values, their own sense of purpose, and organizational goals. They don't ask of others what they are unwilling to do. They model the way. (See [Career Compass No. 41: The Post-Heroic Leader](#).)

The Importance of Trust

To help create a shared sense of hope, team members must trust you as a leader. Trust is the key currency of 21st century leaders. I congratulate you. You seem to have built some level of trusting relationships with your team members.

To generate trust, leaders must behave in a variety of ways:

- Focus on relationship and connection with team members.
- Share yourself so others will share some of themselves.
- Show empathy in acknowledging the feelings and concerns of team members.
- Demonstrate some level of vulnerability (“I don’t know the solution.” “I need your help.” “I made a mistake.”).
- Model hope and optimism about the future.
- Take agreed-upon action.
- Give trust to build trust.

(See [Career Compass No. 42: Trust Me!](#))

If you slowly build trust within the team, you are in a position to create a sense of hope going forward.

Eight Ways to Build Hope

To create aspirational yet realistic hope, the leader must take some of these steps:

1. Show up with hope

We leaders are often uncertain, distracted, and confused, just like our team members. We may be immobilized by our own fear and often focus on the worst case. We typically over-estimate the risks and possible negative consequences of taking any action.

Yet, we must show up with hope and optimism. To do so, we need to manage our own negative emotions. Before engaging your team, you should pause, take a deep breath, and focus on your hope for the future. (See Richard Tedeschi, “[Growth After Trauma](#),” *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 2020.)

To lead your team amid fear and uncertainty, consider:

- Past instances when you and/or your team have prevailed.
- Best-case scenarios.
- Available human and organizational resources.
- The cost of doing nothing.
- The opportunity to make a big difference.

As the leader, you must be hopeful in order to build hope in your team.

2. Start conversations

To help team members perceive hope and steps forward, leaders must start authentic conversations. The best way to engage in conversation is to ask questions, listen deeply, and acknowledge what you hear. (See [Career Compass No. 61: Leadership Is the Art of Conversation](#).)

In these conversations, you want to demonstrate empathy and explore people's feelings, concerns, and challenges . . . and how you and your team members can respond. Then you must actually respond in some fashion. Listening and responding create trust. (See [Career Compass No. 86: Empathy Is a Superpower](#).)

You do want to go beyond surfacing and addressing fears and concerns, where possible. In these conversations, you want to identify people's **purpose**. In other words, what are we here for? You don't want to impose your purpose; rather, you want shared purpose to emerge through conversation. (See Margaret Heffernan, "[How the Best Leaders Answer 'What Are We Here For?'](#)," *hbr.org*, Oct 27, 2020.) For example, your shared team purpose may be creating and managing a sound financial system for the city so all your client departments can help make a positive difference in the lives of residents, business people and their employees, and visitors.

You also want your team to identify a set of **values** to shape your work together and guide decisions. For instance, team values could include:

- The health and safety of employees and community members come first.
- We are all in this together.
- To serve amid adversity and uncertainty, we must do whatever it takes to find creative solutions even if it means changing rules and long-established ways of doing things.

In the midst of confusion, you can follow Google's "Step Zero" example. Google starts with purpose and values, which then allows for fresh ideas, experimentation, pivoting, and learning. (See Marvin Chow, "[Lessons from Google's Virtual Summer Interns](#)," www.fastcompany.com, Oct 2, 2020.)

Finally, by exploring your shared purpose and values, your team conversations can help formulate your shared **hope**. Your hope must be in service of your purpose. For example, your hope may be to develop a new financial services software program that will eliminate bottlenecks, streamline processes, improve financial tracking, and cut time to implement.

3. Focus on opportunity

In your team conversations, you want to identify possible opportunities to innovate or at least find the “silver linings” amid the chaos. (See Christina Carter, “[7 Strategies to Help You Live with Uncertainties](#),” *ideas.ted.com* blog, Oct 21, 2020.) Uncertainty creates opportunities to collaborate and to do things differently.

Questions can help illuminate opportunity. Ask:

- Amid all this confusion, what is the great opportunity to do things differently?
- What good can we make of this?
- What would success look like?
- How might we...?

(See [Wally Bock](#), “[What Good Can We Make of This?](#)” *Three Start Leadership* blog, Oct 22, 2020)

The pandemic and the resulting confusion give you the great opportunity to collaborate with others in developing the financial services software package for the city.

4. Craft a “hope story” or narrative

Based on your team conversations, you can help the team weave together ideas about their hopes and dreams and the opportunities they perceive. Your “hope story” typically includes the heroes, the challenges to overcome, what success looks like, and the good that will be achieved.

To express this hope narrative, many groups sketch story cards or boards, draft a newspaper or social media headline, or develop a tweet. This hope story then is posted and shared with other groups, thus creating enthusiasm and fostering collaboration.

5. Do something

After identifying your hope story, you must do some “future-back” thinking. You ask your team this key question: “What needs to be true or come to pass so we can achieve our hope?” In other words, what do we need in terms of technology, protocols, training, and collaborative efforts from others to achieve the hope? The team then needs to do something. (See [Career Compass No. 87: Do Something!](#))

The team must decide on one or two steps forward. For example, could we next:

- Identify the “low-hanging fruit” to move forward?
- Draft a set of proposed protocols for a streamlined purchasing process?
- Develop a training outline for the draft purchasing protocols?
- Start a beta test of the software in one department or division?

As the group takes action, you debrief with the group:

- What is working?
- What is not working?
- What are we learning to inform our path forward?

Action clarifies the journey forward. Your team takes a few steps forward, pivots and adjusts, fixes things up, and learns as they go.

6. Manage the temperature

As your group takes a step or two forward, you must manage the mood of the team. Sometimes you need to increase the temperature in order to create more urgency and movement forward. Other times, a leader may have to lower the temperature since people are feeling overwhelmed and distressed. As Bob O’Neill, former ICMA Executive Director, stated in a session titled “Leading in Crisis” during the 2020 UNITE conference, leaders must know “when to push and when to pause.”

7. Deal with the “messiness in the middle”

Achieving your hope story takes time. Positive change gets very “messy” in the middle of the journey. There are obstacles and resistance to overcome, new learning and competencies to be developed, energy and enthusiasm to be sustained.

Therefore, you must help your team members see progress in achieving the milestones along the way so that you maintain momentum and enthusiasm.

8. Express gratitude

As team members express their hopes for the future and your group takes steps forward, leaders must express appreciation for their efforts and gratitude for who they are and the commitments they make. “Leadership is about noticing.” (See Dan Rockwell, “[Gratitude for Leaders](#),” *Leadership Freak* blog, Nov 2, 2020.)

Gratitude fuels hope and keeps it alive.

Leaders Are Dealers in Hope

How do leaders respond to 3-D change? With hope!

Shaped by shared values and purpose, aspirational and realistic hope helps us discern a positive future and fuels action to achieve it.

As Napoleon once famously stated, “leaders are dealers in hope.” In times of great change and uncertainty, hope helps us accelerate our efforts to adapt.



Sponsored by the ICMA Coaching Program, *ICMA 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.

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