

Career Compass No. 91: Post-COVID, What Is Your Leadership Narrative?

In this edition of Career Compass, Dr. Benest invites us to be strategic about how we restart operations: we have a unique opportunity to start fresh.

By Dr. Frank Benest | Jul 10, 2021 | ARTICLE

Dear Frank -

I'm an assistant city manager of a mid-sized city in the northeast. I oversee administrative service departments, including finance, HR, and IT. Almost all our employees have been vaccinated. Since our office staff have begun to return to city hall and other facilities, we are now developing a hybrid model of work with many of our employees doing some remote work, as well as onsite work. I am working with the HR department and the city's executive team to develop this hybrid model strategy.



The big challenge is that our employees are feeling exhausted and anxious about returning to the office. As a result of the pandemic, many seem to be demanding more flexibility and are certainly more concerned about work/life balance and such issues as child and elder care. I'm also aware of surveys indicating that many employees will be looking for new jobs with other agencies that better meet their needs.

The city manager and department heads know that we cannot return to normal. How do we respond? What is our message to employees?

I'm pleased that you and other organizational leaders understand that you can't just return to normal and do a simple reset. The pandemic experience has been a dress rehearsal for ongoing uncertainty and disruption. Employees at all levels are feeling

exhausted, disengaged, and disconnected from each other and their organizations, and simply anxious about the future.

In fact, I believe that the pandemic was an **accelerator** of workplace and organizational problems, such as overwork, too many rules, lack of flexibility, loneliness, and isolation. (See Jennifer Moss, “[Beyond Burnout](#),” *hbr.org*, Feb 10, 2021.)

“THE PANDEMIC EXPERIENCE HAS BEEN A DRESS REHEARSAL FOR ONGOING UNCERTAINTY AND DISRUPTION.”

Three Phases of the Pandemic Experience

During the pandemic, many remote workers and their teams have experienced three phases:

The first phase was characterized by a sense of urgency to respond to the needs of residents (especially the most vulnerable), business people, and other employees. We felt that we are all in this together. Based on the dramatic shut down of our communities and the economy, coupled with the needs of the vulnerable, our local governments quickly experimented and iterated new services (i.e., online service transactions), new ways of interacting (i.e., virtual city council and community town hall meetings), redesigned processes ((i.e., use of electronic signatures, fewer required approvals, virtual onboarding of new employees), and reallocated talent to new priorities (i.e., outreach to small businesses). There was a lot of novelty in the first phase and many of us felt exhilarated.

After a few months, a longer second phase occurred. Employees and their managers could not sustain their sense of urgency and energy, became exhausted with overwork, or at least experienced Zoom fatigue. Teams just tried to maintain some level of productivity. Remote workers were overwhelmed with work and family challenges, deeply concerned for the health and safety of their families, and felt uncertain about their futures. Many began to feel disconnected to their colleagues and their organizations and generally isolated.

The third phase is now upon us. Many remote workers are returning to work with little enthusiasm and feeling exhausted, unsettled, and disconnected. To the extent that the leadership team does not have a clear vision for the future of the workplace and work itself, people become even more anxious.

Growth Through Adversity

Like all organizations, in the past year-and-a-half, your local government agency has experienced great adversity. Here is the big question: Given the pandemic experience, can your organization work to achieve “growth through adversity” and thus reimagine

organizational values, culture, expectations, ways of doing business, and relationships? (See Melissa De Witt, “[Reset Button: Stanford Psychologist Says We Can Build a Better Normal After the Pandemic](#),” *Stanford News*, March 22, 2021.)

To grow through adversity and address the third phase of the pandemic-related experience, you as an individual leader and the agency’s leadership team must craft an authentic “leadership narrative.” More than ever, leaders need a powerful narrative that resonates with employees.

What Is a Leadership Narrative?

A leadership narrative provides a basis for focusing everyone’s attention on what is important in the near-term and moving forward in the mid- to long-term. As employees return to the office, they are asking:

- How will I be safe returning to the office?
- How will returning to work impact my family and personal life?
- Is my job secure?
- What is important to my leaders and what do they care about going forward?
- How do my leaders hope to work with us all in order to improve our unit, team, department, and/or organization as a whole?
- How would they like to enhance our organizational culture?
- What steps are leaders going to take with employees and other stakeholders to make their plans come true?

A narrative focuses attention on the threats and opportunities currently facing the organization and those looming in the future. The narrative is uncertain about how things will turn out. The resolution of the narrative depends on the choices and actions, not just of the leaders, but of organizational members at all levels of the enterprise. The narrative is in fact a powerful call to action. (See John Hagel III, “[Every Company Needs a Narrative](#),” *hbr.org*, May 25, 2021.)

“THE PANDEMIC WAS AN ACCELERATOR OF ORGANIZATIONAL PROBLEMS.”

Why Is a Leadership Narrative Important?

A well-thought-out and well-defined leadership narrative helps counter the problematic new realities now confronting local governments:

- Lots of uncertainty with respect to tax revenue shortfalls and major external challenges, such as the continuing public health crisis and demands for climate protection, affordable housing, social justice, police reform, and support for small businesses and essential workers.
- Employees feeling exhausted and disconnected.
- Less employee commitment to the organization.
- The great threat that talent will flee.

The Talent Challenge

An authentic (or “true”) leadership narrative that resonates with employees will help the organization attract, energize, and retain talent. Your organization needs “A” players (key talent) in order to address the major challenges facing your local government. The problem is that talent is mobile. It can go anywhere.

“A” players have the competencies and self-confidence to effectively compete in the marketplace. They have choices. The literature calls these more talented employees “free exiters” because they can freely exit. In contrast, “C” players tend to stay with an organization because they do not have the necessary skills to leave or lack self-confidence.

“MANY REMOTE WORKERS ARE RETURNING TO THE OFFICE WITH LITTLE ENTHUSIASM AND FEELING EXHAUSTED, UNSETTLED AND DISCONNECTED.”

Consequently, to attract talent and especially retain your best talent, your organization needs an organizational culture that is supportive of employees and their needs and aspirations. Culture is defined as “the way we do things around here.” It encompasses our values and commitments, what we care about, how we treat each other, and how we do our work and try to improve it. A leadership narrative that rings true and is tied to further developing and enhancing culture will help your organization attract, energize and most importantly retain talent, especially as you experience this great transition from COVID to post-COVID.

Survey Indicates a New Emphasis for Leaders

In a far-reaching survey conducted by McKinsey and Company, 9 out of 10 organizations will be combining remote and onsite working in the future. Because most organizations do not have a well thought out vision for this hybrid model of work, employees are feeling even more anxious about their return to work.

Fifty-eight percent of the organizations surveyed reported increased productivity during the pandemic (these enterprises were termed “productivity leaders”); 31% reported that they maintained productivity (“productivity middlers”); and 11% indicated declines in productivity (“productivity laggards”). According to the research, the key factor in improving productivity was keeping employees connected with each other and the organization. These “small connections” included opportunities to discuss projects, share ideas, network, mentor, and coach.

The McKinsey report suggested a need to manage differently. Supporting small moments of connections requires subtle shifts in how managers work. More than half of the productivity-leading organizations have trained their managers on how to lead

teams more effectively with an emphasis on human interaction skills, such as demonstrating more empathy and providing and receiving feedback.

Finally, the McKinsey research emphasized that reimagining work requires redesigning processes by experimenting and learning. During the pandemic, we all witnessed an incredible number of micro-innovations. To enhance productivity going forward, leaders need to promote a learning and innovative environment based on a test-and-learn way of doing business.

(See Dan Ravid et al, “[Will Businesses Continue to Work From Home?](#),” *World Economic Forum*, May 25, 2021.)

Zoom In, Zoom Out

To develop a powerful narrative as local governments address post-COVID realities, leaders must zoom in and focus on improving operations and redesigning processes. Streamlined or redesigned processes and protocols will better serve customers doing business with the agency and also enhance the productivity of employees.

In addition to zooming in and improving the day-to-day business of government, leaders need to zoom out and work with employees (and in some cases external stakeholder groups) to figure out how to transform the work and focus of local government. Ask yourself

- What is our role in protecting the climate or addressing social and economic inequities?
- How do we reform policing?
- How do we get more engaged in producing affordable housing or reducing homelessness?
- How do we enhance our organizational culture so that employees will choose to join us and stay with us?

Once we focus on some of these new or enhanced roles or directions, leaders and work

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groups must engage in “future-back” thinking. Once we have defined a preferred vision for three to five years into the future, we look back and ask: What is required to make our story for the future come true? What do we need with respect to new technologies, new employee competencies, employee

training and staff development, engagement of stakeholder groups, partnerships, and staff reallocations? Once we do this future-back thinking and planning, we must then execute the plans over time.

Your leadership narrative must focus attention on current operations (“*running the business*”) and also emphasize future challenges and opportunities (“*changing the business*”).

Zoom in, zoom out.

What Are Elements of a Powerful Leadership Narrative?

Recognizing that many employees may be feeling anxiety, exhaustion, vulnerability, and disconnection, I suggest that a powerful leadership narrative include the following five elements:

1. “I Care. We Care.”

Individual leaders need to express and demonstrate that they care, and the organizational leadership as a group must do the same. By sharing their own challenges during the pandemic, leaders encourage others to share their concerns and difficulties.

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Leaders can also demonstrate their caring commitment by instituting return-to-work safety protocols, communicating their vision for a new workplace, showing a commitment to appropriate flexibility, and responding to employees who are overwhelmed with childcare and eldercare responsibilities. Developing a comprehensive wellness program and/or contracting for an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provide resources and show that we care about employees as whole persons. As part of a reentry program, some local government agencies have held employee town hall meetings with an EAP counselor who has helped respond to issues and provided resources.

All the Gallup research on employee engagement indicates that engaged and energized employees feel that “someone at work cares about me.”

2. “You Belong.”

As a result of our isolation during the pandemic, all of us now more fully appreciate the need for social contact and a sense of connection and community.

There are many ways to promote belonging and connection:

- Build relationships (for instance, conduct a walking meeting or meet at a café; have a conversation about family or non-work activities).
- Tell personal and professional stories at team meetings and encourage others to do the same.
- Share some of your non-work self with others in order that they too share some of their selves.

- Ask questions to start conversations with colleagues and listen.
- Conduct listening meetings or larger town hall meetings with employees.
- Schedule “office hours” (via Zoom or in-person) for individual employees to stop by and discuss projects or simply share.
- Support people when they are struggling (i.e., if someone is caring for a family member, offer some remote work so the employee can attend to their family).
- **Commit to diversity and inclusion in all aspects of the employee lifecycle (i.e., recruitments, employee development, promotions).**
- Celebrate everything, work and non-work related.
- Express appreciation for the people with whom we work.

Many employees only have a “transactional” relationship with work and their organization: I do good work and in return the organization provides good salary and benefits. To increase engagement, energy, and commitment, as well as retain talent, employees must feel part of a community. Michael Lee Stallard calls this a “connection culture.” (See “[Hope Employees Return to Work? Start Here](#),” *SmartBrief*, May 11, 2021.)

3. “Our Work Matters.”

Local government has a competitive advantage because our work is meaningful. Daniel Pink in his book *Drive* (2009) identified purpose as a critical self-motivator.

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The problem is that leaders do not often articulate the purpose behind the work or help people explore the meaning behind their efforts. Think of your typical staff meeting. We run into the meeting and immediately start talking about “what” we’re going to do and

“how” we’re going to do it. We need to start with the “why.” (See Simon Sinek, TED Talk, “[How Great Leaders Inspire Action](#).”)

Our work has always had purpose. In fact, more than ever, the pandemic has highlighted the meaningfulness of our efforts, whether it is protecting people so they don’t get sick, or making rule changes so small business people can stay in business and essential workers can maintain their livelihoods as well as their health.

4. “We Will Figure It Out Together.”

It goes without saying that learning is a key part of how we work and what we do going forward. It is all about learning and taking calculated risks if we are to transform services as well as redesign processes and change bureaucratic rules. We must continue to experiment and iterate, see what works and what doesn’t, and learn as we go. Within certain guide rails, leaders must encourage some measure of autonomy and risk. (See *Career Compass No. 46: Leading By Letting Go*.)

It is all about figuring it out.

5. “We Will Support Your Growth and Development.”

The opportunity to learn and grow is critical to maintaining the commitment of many employees to the organization. Talented employees tend to stay with an organization as long as they are being challenged and are learning and growing.

There are many ways to promote learning and development:

- Stretch assignments and special projects outside of one’s area of expertise.
- Job rotations.
- Acting or interim assignments.
- Team leadership opportunities.
- Staffing a city commission or neighborhood advisory council.
- Lunch-and-learn sessions.
- Book clubs.
- Formal or informal coaching.
- Leadership or management academies.
- Talent exchanges within the organization or with adjacent local governments.

One of the best ways to promote learning is to debrief every significant experience with your team: What went well? What did not go so well? What did we learn for future practice?

Gallup’s research suggests that learning and growth are big factors driving engagement and commitment.

Most employees are also interested in how they can advance in their careers. Without too much difficulty or cost, HR can offer in-person or online workshops on how employees can take charge of their careers; learn about career ladders and what is required to move up; and develop resume, interview, and networking skills.

A commitment to employee development is beneficial to the organization; however, it also demonstrates that “we care.”

Crafting the Narrative

Before expressing your leadership narrative, you must figure out what you should emphasize. The best way to craft the narrative is to ask employees questions, listen intently, and identify the key themes that you hear. You must be willing to respond to what you hear.

Some powerful questions include:

- What have you appreciated about working from home? Why?
- What has been your biggest personal or professional challenge during the pandemic?
- What have you missed about not being in the office?

- What practice, protocol, or innovation would you like to continue as your return to the office? Why?
- What are some pre-pandemic practices, processes, or activities that we should now jettison?
- Given some of the big challenges that our agency and community face, how do we need to change the way we do business?
- In respect to your individual or team work efforts during the pandemic, what were you most proud of?
- **What are your biggest fears/concerns about returning to the office?**
- What kind of support do you need from me and other leaders as you return to the office?
- What are your expectations of the organization and its top leadership as we all return to the office?
- Going forward, what do you want to learn?

“IT IS NOT JUST ABOUT STORY-TELLING. IT MUST ALSO BE ABOUT STORY-DOING.”

To generate the kind of data that you need, you can utilize any number of methods, including one-on-one meetings, team meetings, surveys, focus groups, and stay interviews. (See [Career Compass No. 80: To Retain Your Talent, Use Stay Interviews.](#))

By asking questions, listening, and acknowledging emotions, a leader builds trust. (Theodore Kinni, “[All the Feels: Why It Pays to Notice Emotions in the Workplace](#),” *Stanford Business*, May 13, 2021.) By giving voice to your employees, you are showing that you care.

Making the Narrative Come True

Again, to make the narrative come alive for employees, you and the leadership team must do future-back planning and ask what do we need to make the narrative come true. You must take some steps forward, see what works and what doesn’t, pivot, and learn as you go.

It is not just about “story telling.” It must also be about “story doing.”

Here are seven tips for making the narrative effective:

1. After you conduct your various listening activities, identify the themes you heard, share those themes with employees, and commit to act.
2. As you communicate the key elements of your narrative to employees, avoid giving business or project updates. (There are other ways to give updates.) You only have so many opportunities to capture the attention of employees; don’t waste the opportunities.
3. As you take action relevant to your narrative, refer back to your listening activities and the themes that you heard from employees.

4. Use stories involving specific employees and their efforts to make the narrative come alive. For example, to illustrate that “our work matters,” share a story of how a city team worked with the Boys and Girls Club to set up a learning pod at the community center.
5. Let employees know what you and the organization are learning as “story-doing” occurs and what changes are being made along the way.
6. Keep it simple. For instance, “We care and this is what we are doing.”
7. Overcommunicate the message. Distracted and stressed-out employees only hear 20% of what you say. Therefore, when you think that people are tired of hearing from you, tell them again.

Creating a Connection Culture

Daniel Goleman, the emotional intelligence expert, states: “A primary task of leadership is to direct attention.” Leaders must first focus their own attention and then the attention of others.” (See Lisa Earle McCleod and Elizabeth Lotardo, “[Financial Targets Don’t Motivate Employees](#),” *hbr.org*, Feb 26, 2021.)

In this transition (with many more to follow), people need to hear what is important to leaders, what leaders care about, and what they will focus on. And what is important to leaders must reflect what employees care about.

“YOU CAN HELP CREATE IN YOUR OWN SPHERE OF INFLUENCE A CULTURAL OASIS.”

A lot of the potential elements to a powerful leadership narrative used to be considered “soft, nice to have.” Now these cultural commitments (“I care.” “You belong.” “Our work matters.”) are key

business necessities if organizations are to survive and thrive in the post-pandemic “messy” world of local government. Even if the top leadership team is resistant to organizational change, you as an individual leader can help create with others in your own sphere of influence a “cultural oasis.”

As your local government moves from a “transactional” orientation to a relationship-oriented connection with employees, leadership and employees are creating a new “connection culture.” This culture is based on an emerging social contract with employees. The organization agrees to not only provide good salary and benefits but also a sense of belonging, a commitment to care for employees, work that matters, learning and growth, and a more agile orientation in responding to an ever-changing environment. Employees commit to be more engaged, energized, and adaptable to new demands.

A good leadership narrative is a good organizational story come true.



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