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Career Compass No. 93: Does Your Executive Group Have a First-Team Mindset?

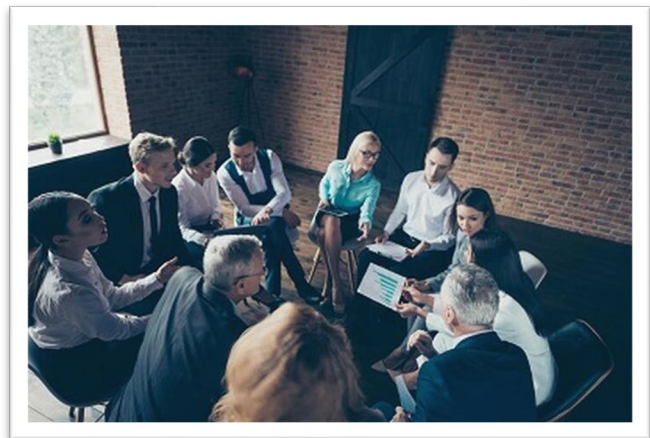
Having empathy for another team is critical to long-term problem solving.

By Dr. Frank Benest | Nov 08, 2021 | ARTICLE

(NOTE TO READERS: While this column focuses on how an executive team can adopt a “first-team” mindset, the same issues and strategies apply to department management teams led by a department director and composed of division managers.)

Dear Frank -

I'm a city manager in a large, eastern city. As in most local government agencies, my executive team is composed of all the department directors. The problem is that the executive team doesn't take a big-picture view of the challenges facing the city and gets bogged down in addressing operational issues and fighting for resources for their departments. I previously served as a department head, so I, too, tend to focus on operational challenges.



Each department head comes to the weekly executive team meeting with his or her own issues and advocates for his or her department needs and perspectives. Everyone is quite parochial, and I end up serving as a referee. Moreover, we don't spend enough time and energy on longer-term strategic issues for the city organization or community, such as environmental sustainability, affordable housing, economic vitality, organizational culture, or talent development.

I want to become a better leader for the executive team and better support its work. How can I help the executive team pivot so we can focus on our longer-term and broader strategic role?

Your executive team challenge is typical. Executive teams led by the city or county manager tend to be “second teams.” Team members identify strongly with their department and see themselves as advocates for the needs and perspectives of the department. For instance, for the fire chief or the community development director, their “first team” is their own department. When they participate on the executive team, they tend to advocate for attention, resources, policies, and solutions based on the needs and desires of their department members.

THE CHALLENGE IS CREATING A BIG-PICTURE PERSPECTIVE AND STRATEGIC ROLE AT THE EXECUTIVE TEAM LEVEL FOR DEPARTMENT DIRECTORS.

The challenge is creating a big-picture perspective and strategic role at the executive team level for department directors.

What happens when there is no “first-team” mindset?

When the executive team is a “second team,” there tends to be squabbling among team members. The city manager must act as the chief mediator. The focus tends to be on more immediate, shorter-term issues, such as dealing with the annual budget, upcoming capital projects, or agenda items for the next few city council meetings; communicating what is happening in your department; and seeking what you need from others.

In most second-team groups, a few members dominate and there are implicit “sacred cows” that seem to be protected from budget cuts, scrutiny or necessary improvements.

As Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky suggest in their book *Leadership on the Line* (2002), everyone is on the “dance floor” dealing with everyday operations and shorter-term challenges. No one gets up on the “balcony” to see patterns and longer-term challenges and opportunities.

What is a first-team mindset?

A first-team mindset is when department heads arrive at an executive team meeting, and everyone sees their primary affiliation as a member of that higher-level management group. With a first-team mindset, department heads become “little city managers” leading the whole city organization.

First-team members at the city executive level suspend their primary advocacy role stressing the needs of the groups that they represent and take on a big-picture view and larger strategic role for the city organization.

The other issue with most executive teams is that representatives seek **cooperation** from other team members. In other words, one department

representative (such as the parks and recreation director) has an idea or program need and asks assistance and support from another department representative (such as the public works director). The implicit message is that if you help me now, I'll help you later.

However, truly great first teams do not aim for cooperation, but rather **collaboration**. Collaboration happens when two or more people or groups work on shared goals to create something better. Collaboration often involves diverse players with different ideas. It typically requires giving up some control and thus becoming somewhat vulnerable. You cannot force someone to collaborate. (See [Career Compass No. 71: Why Won't They Collaborate With Us?](#))

Why is a first-team mindset required more than ever?

At this historic moment, local governments desperately need effective first teams at the executive level. Big adaptive problems of the day (i.e., COVID-19, police reform, racial justice, climate protection, economic rebound from the pandemic) have no right or wrong answers and cannot be solved in department silos. Leaders must cross boundaries and collaborate with other groups inside and outside the city organization. Parochial perspectives and ideas based on our professional experience as “experts” are insufficient to address the challenges and to adapt.

*EVERY EXECUTIVE TEAM MUST ASK ITSELF:
“WHAT IS THE BIG UNIQUE VALUE
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How do you diagnose the effectiveness of the executive team?

Every executive team must ask itself: “What is the big unique value provided by this team? As a leadership group, what do we provide that no other group can provide?”

To diagnose the effectiveness of your executive team, you can ask these questions:

- Is the team oriented toward information-sharing and coordination between the represented departments?
- Does the team leader (city or county manager) spend a lot of time refereeing among different opinions based on different interests?
- Do a few members dominate most discussions?
- Does the team often experience long and seemingly endless meetings?
- Do some members feel a bit unsafe or reticent to state their contrary views?

- Once a contentious decision is made, do some team members fail to “own” the decision and don’t work hard to implement it?
- Does the team have difficulty focusing on longer-term adaptive issues and challenges (i.e., enhancing organizational culture; attracting, retaining, and growing talent; serving underserved groups; responding to changing community demographics and new service demands) and then reallocating time and resources?

If you answer “yes” to a number of these questions, your team does not think and act like a first team. (See Jacques Neatby, “[The Ballooning Executive Team](#),” *hbr.org*, July 21, 2016.)

What does a first-team mindset look like?

Serving on an effective first team at the executive level, you exhibit the following behaviors:

- While I make other team members aware of the needs of my department, my first obligation is advocating for the priority needs of the overall organization and community.
- I share problems that I perceive outside of my department and suggest solutions.
- My voice seems to count.
- I encourage other team members to participate in all discussions.
- In team discussions, I talk directly to other team members as much as to the team leader.
- Once a difficult decision has been made by the team, I actively support it and communicate it to all.
- To enhance relationships, I not only have conversations with team members at formal meetings but also in more informal settings. I understand that the strength of the team is based on positive relationships.
- I seek to understand and acknowledge the positions of others, even if I don’t agree.
- I work to make it “safe” for others to provide divergent views.
- I seek collaborative solutions that build on the ideas of all.
- Everyone seems to “lead” the team at one point or another and exert positive influence.
- I share what I am learning and try to discern what we as a group are learning.
- I provide social support for others since our work is difficult.

What are 10 ways to promote a first-team mindset?

As a formal or informal leader on the executive team, you can promote a first-team mindset by incorporating a number of approaches, including:

1. State your intent

As a leader, you need to be clear about your intent to promote first-team attitudes and behaviors. You must discuss the concept of the first team and the implications for the executive team and help develop the willingness to move in that direction.

2. Model first-team attitudes and behaviors

Modeling is the most powerful way that people change their attitudes and behaviors. As a leader trying to create a first team, you must model and promote intellectual humility, curiosity, and psychological safety.

Daniel Pink, in his [Pinkcast 3.09](#) (August 13, 2019), cited four questions posed by Warren Berger in [The Book of Beautiful Questions](#). To promote intellectual humility, Berger suggested asking yourself:

- Do I think more like a soldier (defending territory) or a scout (exploring new territory)?
 - Would I rather be right, or would I rather understand?
 - Do I routinely solicit and seek out opposing views?
 - Do I enjoy the pleasant surprise of discovering that I'm mistaken?

*PSYCHOLOGICAL
SAFETY IS THE KEY
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To model intellectual humility, the formal or informal leader demonstrates curiosity, asks questions, listens intently, and then asks more questions. When I served as a department director and later as a city manager, I always enjoyed debating with others and defending my ideas. Unfortunately, my behavior did not promote an openness to different perspectives.

Psychological safety is the key ingredient to effective teams. Psychological safety in a team is when group members feel safe to express themselves. In a team characterized by psychological safety, team members. . .

- Feel that they can give voice to their ideas and perspectives without fear of reprisal or rebuke.
- Believe that if they make a well-intentioned mistake, others won't penalize them or think less of them.

Psychological safety allows team participants to regard mistakes and failures as pathways to learning and growth and better performance over time.

One way to promote psychological safety and elicit diverse views is to ask catalytic questions. *Leadership is often more about questions than answers.* Provocative questions include:

- What does success look like?
- How might we. . .? (i.e., “how might we better serve and support new immigrants in our community so that they and the rest of the community can thrive?”)
- What else could we do?
- What is a completely different approach to this problem?
- What are we missing in this discussion?
- Who are we missing in this discussion?
- How would a community group react to this proposal?
- How are you feeling about this conversation?

Listen intently to what is being shared and acknowledge what you have heard, even if you do not agree. (See [Career Compass No. 69: Psychological Safety—One Key Determinant to Team Effectiveness.](#))

3. Create a team charter, including norms for the team

The team should have a charter setting out its first-team responsibilities. These responsibilities include not just dealing with city council agenda preparation or addressing operational, budget and policy issues, but also doing the necessary plan-ahead strategic thinking for the organization.

As part of the charter, it is essential to set norms and related behaviors that will promote a first-team mindset. After discussing what makes a great first team, the group can identify and commit to 3-5 norms and related behaviors.

For instance, if “encourage equal participation” is a norm, the group may decide that one behavior promoting that norm is that the meeting leader will go around the room and solicit input from everyone, starting with the team member who has spoken the least in that day’s meeting. If “be fully present” is a norm, the team can commit to put all devices in a container by the door before the meeting begins. Or, if a team member gets distracted by their phone, they must throw \$5 into the “norm bucket.” At the end of the year, the group goes out for drinks and donates the rest of the monies to a community nonprofit. (See Sabina Nawaz, “[How to Create Executive Team Norms—and Make Them Stick](#),” *hbr.org*, Jan 15, 2018.)

4. Develop a “big challenges/big opportunities” agenda

With city council, employee, and stakeholder input, your executive team can develop a list of the top 10 adaptive challenges and opportunities that the city organization must address in some fashion in the next 3-7 years. This plan-ahead agenda becomes the basis for your team's strategic thinking sessions. (See Michael Mankins, "[Stop Wasting Value Time](#)," *Harvard Business Review*, Sept 2004.)

5. Schedule specific meetings to do strategic thinking

In one meeting, it is too difficult to combine the urgent operational business items with important longer-term strategic issues. Therefore, if your team meets weekly for an hour, the first three meetings of the month can focus on city council agenda items,

"THE PATH FORWARD EMERGES AS YOU MOVE FORWARD, NOT BEFORE."

budget, and operational issues. Then schedule 90 minutes for the fourth meeting of the month to discuss one of the big future challenges or opportunities on your agenda (i.e., how do we create a more inclusive and supportive workplace culture?).

In advance of the meeting, a team member or an emerging leader or two can summarize in writing the challenge or opportunity and several options on how the organization can respond. Then the team spends 90 minutes exploring additional dimensions of the challenge and other options. At the end of the meeting (or at subsequent plan-ahead meeting), the team decides on how to proceed and allocate talent and other resources for an experiment or pilot project.

With adaptive challenges, you cannot discern all the twists and turns of the strategic journey. There is too much uncertainty. All the team can do is to identify one or two action steps for a beta test or pilot. Amid uncertainty and complexity, action creates clarity. As Dan Rockwell has suggested, "The path forward emerges as you move forward, not before." (See "[Making Decisions When the Path Is Uncertain and Confusing](#)," *Leadership Freak* blog, Jan 20, 2020.)

6. Engage team members in leading multidisciplinary, cross-cutting work groups to follow up on your strategic direction

To put into action the team's strategic thinking and to cross silos, the work group should include subject matter experts and emerging leaders from throughout the organization and even outside stakeholders. The team member who leads the work group should be a non-expert who has a "beginner's mind" and is open to new ideas and perspectives. This kind of experience will help team members rise above their subject-matter expertise and learn a more general leadership role for their benefit and the benefit of the executive team. (See [Career Compass No. 72: How Do We Generate Creative Ideas?](#))

7. Focus on learning

As the first team addresses the “big challenges/big opportunities” agenda, it should focus on learning. Even with research conducted before launching a pilot project, a team does not learn before it goes. The team only learns as it goes. Along the way, the first team must debrief the strategic journey:

- What is going well?
- What is not going well?
- What are we learning to improve our efforts going forward?

A summary of these debriefs can be shared with one’s department in order to further promote further learning.

8. Rotate agenda-setter and convener roles

To promote a “leader-full” team (a wonderful phrase from Margaret Wheatley), the team can rotate who sets the agenda for regular non-strategic thinking meetings and leads those weekly meetings during the month. The convener roles for strategic thinking meetings can also be rotated. The convener for this once-per-month meeting will prepare the issue and options summary for the big challenge or opportunity and present it to the group for discussion.

*DEPARTMENT DIRECTORS MUST
MANAGE AND LEAD AT THE SAME TIME.*

9. Monitor team behavior

The team needs to monitor its own behavior. As part of the way your team does business, it can appoint on a rotating basis a team monitor who is responsible for assessing how well the team is doing in respect to its norms and expectations and report to the team once per month.

10. Hold the team accountable

Once a quarter, the team can quickly evaluate itself on how it is doing. A simple online instrument can help each team member assess team performance and query the following: “In helping the team achieve its first-team charter and live up to team norms and behaviors. . .

- How am I doing?
- How are other team members doing?
- How is the full team doing with respect to working effectively?

The team monitor can then present the evaluation results as part of the monitor's report to the team and facilitate a face-to-face team discussion and help the team decide on team improvement efforts. (See Michael Mankins, "[Stop Wasting Value Time](#)," *Harvard Business Review*, Sept 2004.)

Managing and leading at the same time

Department directors must manage and lead at the same time. Surely, they must manage the urgent operational and budget issues facing the department or the organization as a whole. To do so, they must **zoom in**. However, department heads must also lead. Leadership requires that they **zoom out** and reflect and act upon the big adaptive challenges and opportunities facing the city.

Only by developing a first-team mindset can our local government management teams fulfill both functions.

Given the uncertain, volatile, and messy environment of local government, we need effective first teams more than ever.



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 of Career Compass.](#)

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