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Career Compass No. 94: Ten Principles for Leading in Turbulence

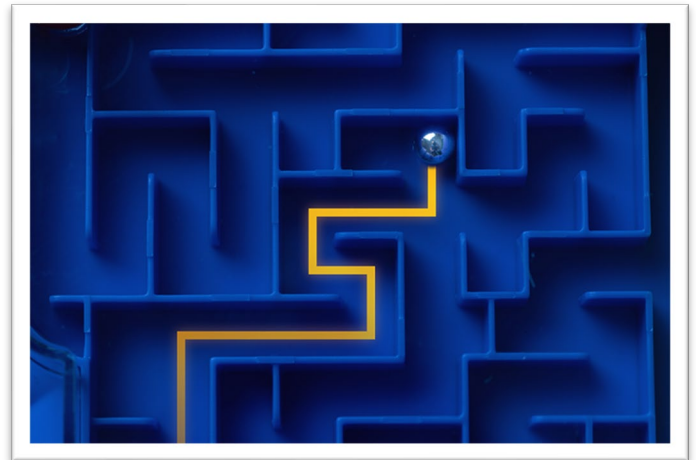
Leading during rocky times doesn't come naturally to many, but contentious leadership and courageous engagement can help gather the chaos into manageable focus.

By Dr. Frank Benest | Feb 02, 2022 | ARTICLE

Dear Frank -

I'm the public works director of a medium-sized coastal city. Our city government is facing a lot of uncertainty and turbulence:

- *Our hybrid model of work is yet undefined.*
- *We are unsure if tax revenues will return to pre-pandemic levels.*
- *Some key talent has fled the organization.*
- *We face a host of external challenges, such as addressing climate change and demands for police reform, dealing with a big increase in homeless encampments, and promoting small business development.*



I am being asked to lead an ill-defined levee project to protect the community against sea level rise. Some neighborhood groups and businesses near the bay are advocating for the levee project but other groups offer different options to respond to sea level rise, or question the need, scope or financing of the levee. We all sense growing conflict.

The city council, city manager, and public works staff all look to me for answers. I don't know what to do. As we face this daunting challenge of sea level rise, I'm a bit fearful for the community, our organization, the department, and myself.

Can you suggest some ways I can get unstuck and help us move forward?

Yes, more than ever, local government leaders face a lot of uncertainty and turbulence, which in turn create confusion and frustration. In this environment, it is easy to become fearful and thus immobilized.

Sea level rise, as well as the other big problems of the day, are not technical challenges. Technical or “tame” challenges have known solutions and can be addressed by management using their knowledge and their formal authority. For instance, if people in your community vote to issue and pay for bonds in order to build a defined levee project, the actual construction is a technical challenge.

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However, the decision to build a levee as one option to address sea level rise, the scope of the project, and how to finance it are all adaptive challenges. Adaptive or “wicked” challenges have no right or wrong solutions; every stakeholder group is driven by different values and have their own preferred solutions; and there is a lot of resulting conflict. Adaptive challenges can only be addressed by leadership, which brings people together to figure out what might work.

In this kind of turbulent environment, we need leaders to step forward and fill the leadership vacuum. People inside and outside city/county/town hall are desperately looking for leadership. Many so-called leaders are really LINOs (leaders in name only). LINOs have titles of authority but are afraid to act and lead since they may be blocked by stakeholders or may be criticized if they do act. Therefore, they hunker down.

With adaptive challenges, we need real leaders, regardless of position or title, who decide to step forward and exert positive influence.

Why Is Turbulence Helpful?

While many of us long to return to normal, turbulence is actually helpful in many ways. For instance, turbulence

- Challenges old ways of thinking and acting. (“Mistakes are bad and are to be avoided at all costs.”)
- Disrupts stagnant patterns. (“This is the way we’ve always done it.”)
- Drives self-reflection. (“Why do I care about this problem?” “What is my responsibility to step up as a leader?” “What values drive me in this situation?” “What do I fear?” “What do I commit to?”)

- Invites creativity and innovation. (“How do we cut recruitment time by 50%?” “How do we change our organizational culture to better respond to the next normal?”)
- Forces us to consider new players and potential partners inside and outside the organization.
- Generates opportunities for great learning and growth. (“What can I learn from confronting this challenge?” “How might I grow professionally and personally?”)
- Creates great opportunities to make a positive difference internally and externally.
- (See Dan Rockwell, [“7 Power Trips for Facing Turbulence,”](#) Leadership Freak blog, July 3, 2014.)

Before Leading Others, Lead Yourself

To step up as a leader and exert positive influence regardless of your position, you must slow down, take a deep breath, reflect and “lead yourself.” First, you need to acknowledge that you and your team face an adaptive challenge that does not have a right or wrong solution.

“THERE IS LESS PRESSURE ON US AS LEADERS IF ... SHIFT FROM A “KNOW-IT-ALL” TO A “LEARN-IT-ALL” MINDSET.”

Second, you must embrace the discomfort of not knowing. We successful leaders have built careers on “knowing” and “finding the right answers.” Therefore, we need to acknowledge that not knowing and

making missteps are part of the normal process of learning. It is helpful to reframe the challenge as a great opportunity to learn, make a difference, and grow. There is less pressure on us as leaders if we follow the advice of Satya Nadella, CEO of Microsoft, who suggests that we shift from a “know-it-all” to a “learn-it-all” mindset. (See Rebecca Zucker and Darin Powell, [“6 Strategies for Leading Through Uncertainty,”](#) hbr.org, April 26, 2021.)

Finally, to overcome any feeling of being “stuck,” it is helpful to reflect on past experiences when you successfully took on great challenge and adversity. Ask yourself:

- How was I creative when I wasn’t sure what to do?
- What personal qualities or attributes helped me work through the adversity? How are those qualities relevant today?
- How am I different because I did work through the past difficulty? How will I be different working through this difficulty?
- What relationships and support helped me address the adversity? Can I tap into similar relationships and support as I deal with the current challenge?
- What makes me proud when I think about working through the past uncertainty and turbulence?

- What might I do today that will become a point of personal pride when this challenge is over?

Use these questions for personal reflection. Use them also to help your team as it struggles to confront adaptive challenges, such as sea level rise. (See Dan Rockwell, [“How To Lead Through Turbulence and Uncertainty with Clarity and Confidence,”](#) Leadership Freak blog, March 18, 2020.)

10 Principles

To support your leadership efforts in dealing with sea level rise, I am suggesting 10 principles for leading through turbulence.

1. FOCUS ON RELATIONSHIPS

Your formal authority as a senior manager can only force a minimal level of compliance from others. However, people will tend to follow you, especially amid uncertainty and adversity, because of their relationship with you.

Therefore, you must identify key stakeholder groups inside and outside the organization, start a series of conversations, identify their interests and concerns, and most importantly get to know them. (See [Career Compass No. 86: Empathy Is a Superpower.](#))

2. ENGAGE OTHERS IN AUTHENTIC CONVERSATIONS

Given that every stakeholder group will have its own preferred solution to any adaptive challenge, you must start of series of conversations. Authentic or “real” conversations are two-way dialogues aided by leaders who

- Ask open-ended questions, such as:
 - With respect to addressing this challenge, what are your hopes and dreams?
 - What are your concerns and fears?
 - What does “success” look like?
 - What useful role would you like to play?
 - How can we collaborate together?
 - Given all that we’ve discussed, what would be useful in moving forward?
- Acknowledge and restate their concerns (take every concern seriously, even though you may not agree).
- Identify themes and share them with all the groups involved in the conversations.
- Incorporate the ideas of others (let others get their “fingerprints” on proposals).
- Emphasize “gem statements” that forge connection (“I care about the safety of your family and all our families, even if we may not agree on what measures should be taken.”)

In authentic conversations, you do not have to be right. (See [Career Compass No. 61: Leadership Is the Art of Conversation.](#))

Authentic conversations create connections and trust. We cannot move forward with others without trust-building.

3. EXPRESS YOUR VALUES

When confronted with so many different preferred options and solutions, including taking no action at all, identify and express your own values and let those values play a role in shaping your actions. If community safety, fairness and justice, and partnership are values for you, you may assert that

- Long-term safety for the community comes first.
- We do not want our actions to hurt one group vs. another group or adjacent communities.
- We need to acknowledge the negative consequences of our eventual solution and mitigate those consequences to the best of our abilities.
- We seek regional collaboration in crafting a solution.

4. FORGET LONG-TERM PLANNING; FOCUS ON THE GENERAL DIRECTION

Long-term planning with 5-, 10-, and 20- or 30-year goals and metrics might work in a stable environment, but not in the uncertain and turbulent world of local government. For instance, working on protecting your coastal community from sea level rise will be a journey with many twists and turns. After many conversations with key players, you can lay out the general direction of your lengthy journey, but you won't know the precise destination.

*"THE BEST YOU CAN DO IN
UNCERTAINTY IS SET THE DIRECTION
AND IMPROVISE."*

As Dan Rockwell has admonished, "the best you can do in uncertainty is set the direction and improvise." (See "[The 7 Laws of Planning in Turbulence](#)," Leadership Freak blog, Aug 22, 2018.)

5. RESIST QUICK SOLUTIONS

While some neighborhood groups and councilmembers may be advocating for a levee, it might not be the only or best solution among the different options. If people are looking to you for leadership, you might become too immersed in the demands for a levee.

Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky, in their book *Leadership on the Line*, suggest that leaders “get off the dance floor and move to the balcony” in order to get a wider view of the challenge and all kinds of possible responses.

To help you “zoom out,” get this wider perspective and examine your assumptions and biases, you ask yourself, your team, and other agency officials and players some key questions:

- Based on the best current research and evidence, what will be the average daily tides in 10, 20, 30 and 50 years?
- What bayfront public facilities (i.e., sewage treatment plant, ballfields, trails) are jeopardized and may need to be relocated?
- Where can we “retreat” and let sea level rise happen naturally?
- What don’t we want to protect?
- If we take certain actions (i.e., build a levee) what effect will that have on adjacent communities?
- Where must the city insist on no new development?
- What is the cost of any opportunities or of doing nothing?
- Where may we work to restore marshlands as the sea level rises? What are the environmental benefits of restored marshlands?
- Which groups will be disadvantaged by any of the proposed measures and how do we mitigate those consequences?

The responses to these questions will help shape your thinking.

Even though proven leaders have a bias for action (see Principle 6), you must resist quick solutions and balance the need for action with a more disciplined approach for understanding the complexities of the challenge and your own assumptions. (See Rebecca Zucker and Darin Rowell, “[6 Strategies for Leading Through Uncertainty](#),” hbr.org, April 26, 2021.)

6. DO SOMETHING

Once you know the general direction and develop some initial goals, you must then take one or two steps forward, debrief with your team and other stakeholders, and pivot as necessary.

Some initial steps might include:

- Put together projections of sea level rise in 20, 30, 50 years and identify the consequences for your community.
- Conduct a structured series of one-to-one conversations, focus groups, and/or community forums on the sea level rise challenge.
- Research what other coastal communities have done to deal with sea level rise.
- Identify options, costs, and consequences.

- Recommend a small pilot project or initial phase of work, such as restoring some wetlands or creating a retention basin (“think big, start small”).

While many may be fearful of taking any action in the face of uncertainty and thus become immobilized, good leaders understand that action clarifies the path forward. The path forward emerges as you take action, not before. (Dan Rockwell, Leadership Freak blog, [“Making Decisions When the Path Is Uncertain and Confusing,”](#) Jan 1, 2020.)

7. EXPERIMENT AND LEARN

Once you have engaged internal and external stakeholders and studied various options, you take some steps forward. Since you will undoubtedly be criticized by some groups, call any action a pilot (even if it isn’t a pilot!). Even if your initial small project effort involves some mistakes, a pilot or “experiment” can be justified as a way to learn what works, what does not work, and what adjustments must be made.

“ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES ARE CONSTANTLY SHIFTING AND MORPHING. CONSEQUENTLY, YOU MUST ALWAYS BE OPEN TO COURSE CORRECTIONS.”

In this process of moving forward, you must let go of perfection. Adaptive challenges are constantly shifting and morphing. Consequently, you must always be open to course corrections.

Again, you learn as you go.

8. DON'T GO IT ALONE

Given the complexity and uncertainty of adaptive challenges, leaders must reach out to other colleagues and form partnerships. Even though everyone is looking at you for leadership, don’t go it alone. (See Rebecca Zucker and Darin Rowell, [“6 Strategies for Leading Through Uncertainty,”](#) hbr.org, April 26, 2021.)

Partnerships are essential because they:

- Provide different ideas and perspectives.
- Contribute resources, including staff time and funding.
- Provide social support as you deal with divisiveness and conflict.
- Give you political cover.

Addressing any adaptive challenge creates risk for you as a leader and your team. Partners help you “spread the risk.” It is more difficult for a special interest group

or an elected official to criticize your recommended project (or you personally) if your effort engages other respected partners, such as local environmental groups or other government agencies.

9. LEAD WITH HUMILITY AND CONFIDENCE

Leading in turbulence requires humility. You must be open to different values, program ideas, and policy perspectives. You don't really know what will work and what won't work. You cannot commit to only one way.

Intellectual humility is all about curiosity. As Warren Berger asks in *The Book of Beautiful Questions*, are you a soldier defending territory or a scout wanting to discover new territory?

Most importantly, you cannot learn if you are not humble. Arrogance doesn't allow learning from mistakes and making adjustments. Humility is all about acknowledging missteps and making course corrections.

Even though one must be open and humble, a leader must act with confidence and optimism. An effective leader dealing with adversity models confidence. Otherwise, it is doubtful that the team will follow.

In his book *Good To Great*, Jim Collins writes about the Stockdale Paradox. When Admiral James Stockdale was imprisoned in the Hanoi Hilton during the Vietnam War, he had

“AN EFFECTIVE LEADER DEALING WITH ADVERSITY MODELS CONFIDENCE. ”

to remain strong for his men in prison even as he was being tortured. Stockdale had to help his men face the brutal realities that they were not going to be released by Christmas or Easter, but they would eventually prevail and be released. As Stockdale explained, a leader must help others confront the brutal facts of their current situation, yet retain the faith that they will prevail in the end despite the adversity.

To help your team members act with confidence and optimism, you can ask them to:

- Face the brutal facts of the situation and acknowledge uncertainty.
- Clarify their values and what is important to them.
- Recall past successes dealing with adversity and what helped them prevail.
- Inventory their strengths and capabilities.
- Call everyone to bring their strengths to the challenge.
- Identify one or two steps forward.

In the midst of the adversity and “messiness” of local government, “optimism is seeing the possibility of a bright or better future while taking actions to create it.” (Dan Rockwell, “[4 Steps Towards Optimism](#),” Leadership Freak blog, Oct 16, 2015.)

10. FOCUS ON CELEBRATING PROGRESS

When it takes so long to actually do or accomplish anything in the world of local government, leaders must focus on progress. Progress helps team members and other stakeholders keep self-motivated.

By focusing on achieving certain milestones along the way, you can also create celebration points. Celebrations (team shout-outs, coffee and bagels at a staff meeting, an ice cream social) reinforce movement forward and sustain the team on its journey.

Leading Requires Courage

Amid uncertainty and turbulence, we need our best leaders. However, the tendency for leaders is to hunker down and “hide out in their offices.” To fulfill your leadership role and responsibility, you must be courageous.

Courageous people acknowledge and confront their fears. . .and then they act anyway. There is risk for them and others, but they know that there is more risk if they do not act.

So, how do you show up as a leader? Fearful leaders end up with cautious teams. Forward-looking leaders create optimism for others. (See Dan Rockwell, [“Embracing the Power to Predict the Next Normal,”](#) Leadership Freak blog, Aug 25, 2020.)

Leadership is one of the great opportunities provided by our careers in local government. As a leader, you personally get the opportunity to grow through adversity.

Moreover, you get the opportunity to contribute. You cannot make a bigger difference in the lives of others in your organization and community than leading through turbulence.

Be grateful.



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