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Career Compass No. 96: Why We Need Great Mid-Managers More than Ever

To reinvigorate our organizations post-pandemic, ultimate success depends on the actions of mid-managers. Positive change happens in the middle.

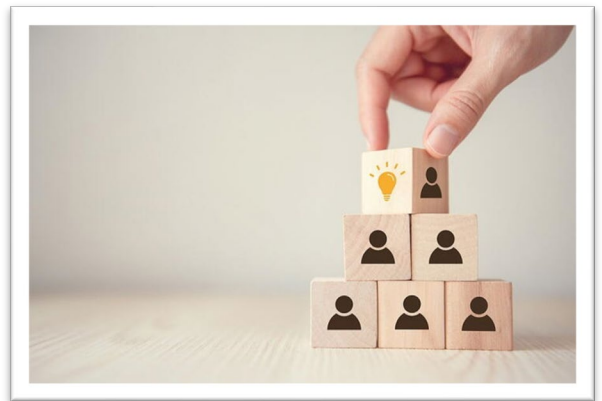
By Dr. Frank Benest | Jun 06, 2022 | ARTICLE

Dear Frank:

I'm a city manager in a mid-sized city. We survived the remote work phase of the pandemic, but are now struggling with the return-to-work phase. As city manager, I surveyed employees to identify their concerns and issues about returning to the office. Based on the survey, most employees who can do some work from home favor a hybrid model. The department heads and I are struggling with all kinds of issues:

- *What is the nature of our hybrid workplace?*
- *How do we promote equal treatment among mostly office vs. remote workers, and office/knowledge workers vs. field/service workers?*
- *How do we ensure the safety and health of all our employees?*
- *What are ways that we can retain our talent as we move forward?*
- *How do we counter all the exhaustion, discouragement and uncertainty experienced by staff?*

Do you have any suggestions on how we proceed and build a more energizing future for our organization?



All local government leaders are facing these kinds of organizational challenges as we begin to emerge from the pandemic shutdown.

Certainly, the senior leadership of the organization has a major role to play. However, I'd like to suggest that the most critical role is that of mid-managers. We in local government executive management must begin to redefine the role of mid-managers in our organizations, focus on upskilling, and provide much needed support.

The Role of Senior Leadership

As mentioned in other Career Compass columns, senior leaders must zoom in and focus on immediate concerns (such as health and safety protocols) as employees return to the office. Of course, it is not just about doing; it is also about communicating with the employees about what you are doing and why you are doing it.

At the same time, executives must zoom out and begin to reimagine the future of the organization, responding to questions such as:

- What are the big needs and demands of our community?
- How do we redeploy staff as needed?
- Going forward, what are the skills and competencies needed by employees?
- What kind of investments (i.e., technology, employee development) must be made?
- How do we enhance and enrich our organizational culture to better attract and retain staff?
- Are we as senior leaders modeling the desired new attitudes and behaviors that we desire to see in the workforce?

Just as you've engaged employees in back-to-work strategies, you must engage them in creating a new story for your organization's future.

"STORY-TELLING MUST BE FOLLOWED BY STORY-DOING."

Once senior management has begun to sketch out this new story for the organization, it needs to engage in "story-doing." Storytelling must be followed by story-doing. Story-doing is taking the tangible steps to make the organizational story come true.

The Great Resignation

In a recent survey by Monster, 95 percent of people are considering leaving their current jobs. According to a Microsoft survey of workers, a majority of employees are struggling or just surviving in pandemic work conditions, with 41 percent considering leaving their organizations this year. (See Nolan McNulty and Heather Roberts Washington, "[Empathy 2.0: The Answer to Changing Employee Needs](#)," Root blog, Sept 9, 2021).

The underlying causes of this Great Resignation moment include:

- Overwork, exhaustion, and burn-out
- A perception that employers did not exhibit much caring concern for employees during the shut-down and return-to-work phases of the pandemic
- A desire for flexible working conditions
- Less willingness by employees to tolerate poor relationships with their supervisors
- Uncertainty on many fronts

The Critical Role of Mid-Managers

While senior management has a must-do role, I believe that ultimate success in reinvigorating our local government organizations will depend on mid-managers. Positive change happens (or not) in the middle.

“POSITIVE CHANGE HAPPENS (OR NOT) IN THE MIDDLE.”

In all its research on employee engagement, The Gallup Organization has demonstrated that employees experience the organization via the quality of their relationship with their supervisor and their relationships with team members.

So, as employees return to work in one fashion or another, what should the role of mid-managers look like?

The Historic Role of Mid-Managers

Historically, local governments (like most private sector organizations) have developed hierarchical structures. The traditional roles of mid-managers have included:

- Passing on to their units communications and directions from the top.
- Supervising the day-to-day work of subordinates.
- Ensuring compliance and accountability.
- Tracking project status.
- Pushing out the work based on certain goals or metrics.
- Living within budget allocations.
- Relaying (hopefully) input and concerns from employees to the next higher level of management.
- Ensuring “no screw-ups,” especially in the risk-averse environments of local government.

The key skill set of a mid-manager has revolved around one’s ability to direct and command, communicate, and ensure accountability. As discussed in [Liz Wiseman’s book *Multiplier*](#) (2010), many mid-managers spend most of their time in telling direct reports what to do and then testing them to see if they complied. As a result, these mid-managers are “diminishers”—they diminish the capabilities of others. In contrast, some managers are “multipliers” who support direct reports in stretching and growing and thus amplify their capabilities.

Historically, mid-managers have been promoted into their management roles because of their well-developed technical skills. They often fail because of their poor people skills.

What Has Changed?

Of course, the pandemic has changed us and our organizations. However, the research suggests that the pandemic-related shut-down has just accelerated a move toward new

realities such as demands for more flexibility and autonomy and the need to spur on innovation as we confront socioeconomic issues (i.e., homelessness) or environmental challenges (i.e., climate change).

“THE PANDEMIC HAS ACCELERATED A MOVE TOWARDS NEW REALITIES.”

In responding to these pressing demands, one problem is the disconnect between senior leaders who want to return to normal and employees who demand different work conditions and relationships. In a McKinsey survey, three-quarters of the top executives were focused on the details of returning to work and normalcy. These senior leaders seemed to perceive a “finish line” or arriving at a stable status quo in the workplace. An equal 75 percent of the 5,000 employees surveyed disagreed. There was no perceived status quo or “finish line” in sight. Line workers perceived a sea change in how work gets done. . .and what work looks like.

McKinsey researchers concluded that employees seem to have a “greater grasp on the reality that uncertainty is our new normal.” They also suggest that the short-term view of senior leadership may actually increase attrition since employees may conclude that their leaders are clueless. (See Larry Robinson, [“The Return to the Office Is a Reckoning for Leaders Locked in the Past,”](#) *SmartBrief* blog, Aug 27, 2021.)

Based on this research, there is no “finish line.” We live in a new era of uncertainty and turbulence. It is all about adaptability.

Redefining Productivity and Accountability in the Post-COVID Era

To transform the role of mid-managers, we need to redefine our traditional notions of productivity and accountability. In command-and-control environments, productivity is about ensuring time on task, completing tasks, and/or focusing on outputs. In a facilitator and coaching environment, productivity is about achieving certain outcomes or results (i.e., vaccinating residents, helping business stay open, moving homeless people into housing).

In a mechanistic management model, mid-managers ensure accountability. By laying down certain milestones and performance measures for the team and then providing over-the-shoulder supervision, mid-managers only get a minimum level of performance and compliance because the manager “owns” the measurement. Of course, in a hybrid work environment, it is now difficult to walk around on a daily basis and directly supervise the work of team members.

If the team identifies the meaning behind the work and sets the outcomes and metrics to be achieved (within certain guiderails), there is shared accountability and ownership. According to Dan Rockwell, a great mid-manager creates colleagues, not passive followers. (See "[How to Be a Leader People Love to See](#)," *Leadership Freak* blog, July 6, 2021.)

"TO TRANSFORM THE ROLE OF MID-MANAGERS, WE NEED TO REDEFINE OUR TRADITIONAL NOTIONS OF PRODUCTIVITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY."

What Do Employees Need in Era of Anxiety?

In this new era of anxiety and uncertainty, mid-managers must emphasize behaviors that respond to what employees need and want. From their managers, employees need: **Empathy:** In the post-pandemic world, employees need supervisors and managers to ask questions, listen deeply, and understand the challenges that workers are experiencing and what they are feeling. Of course, empathy requires that managers also respond in tangible and caring ways. (See [ICMA Career Compass No. 86: Empathy is a Superpower](#).)

To support the importance of empathy, The Gallup Organization reports that a key driver of employee engagement is caring ("My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person.")

A focus on purpose: As Daniel Pink suggests in his book [Drive \(2009\)](#), "meaning is the new money." A sense of purpose is one of three key self-motivators. (The other two self-motivators are autonomy and mastery.) 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](#).")

Transparency: In the midst of so much uncertainty, people desire information. People want to know the big picture. Employees need to hear from their managers what they know and what they do not know. In a turbulent environment, people are distressed and fearful and only hear 20 percent of what we are saying. Therefore, when we managers think that people are tired of hearing from us, we need to communicate some more.

A sense of direction with a focus on priorities: People are feeling overwhelmed with demands from governing boards, top management, and stakeholders, as well as from their families. In their work life, they yearn for a sense of direction even though long-term planning is impossible in the uncertain world of local government. So employees

want to know what is our direction and what are one or two priorities. (See [ICMA Career Compass No. 94: 10 Principles for Leading in Turbulence.](#))

Optimism and can-do attitude: In the aftermath of the pandemic and the lockdown, employees need hope about a better future. While managers cannot predict with certainty how things will get better, they can explore with their teams what a better future looks like and then take steps within their spheres of control and influence to shape that future.

Calmness and steadiness: We all are experiencing disruption. Managers can model calmness and focus their teams in a steady manner on taking steps forward on a few distinct priorities.

Willingness to act: It is easy for us to feel overwhelmed. Effective managers demonstrate a bias for action. Managers with their team members can identify the direction, take a few steps forward, and then pivot as necessary. As Dan Rockwell in his *Leadership Freak* blog often emphasizes, action clarifies the path forward.

Openness to experiment and learn: Given the adaptive challenges facing local government, there are no right or wrong solutions. We need to try things out. “Think big, act small.”



“THINK BIG,
ACT SMALL.”

During the shutdown, local government teams experimented and implemented a number of micro-innovations (i.e., instituting online development permitting, closing downtown streets so restaurants could create spaces for outdoor eating, conducting virtual public meetings, housing homeless people in hotels). Most of these micro-innovations were good enough “70 percent solutions” that need finetuning over time.

We cannot learn before we go; we learn as we go.

Connection: Due to the pandemic, people are feeling disconnected. Employees more than ever want a sense of belonging. They also want to feel that their organizations, especially their managers, care about them. We are all social animals and seek community. Thus, many employees are beginning to look for new organizations because they don’t sense that their current employers have demonstrated a genuine caring attitude toward them during the lockdown.

In the post-pandemic environment, people are longing for a “culture of connection.” (See Michael Lee Stallard, “[Hope Employees Return to Work? Start Here.](#)” *SmartBrief*, May 11, 2021.) The role of a mid-manager is to serve as a

“connector,” helping team members connect within the team and across organizational boundaries. (See Zahira Jaser, “[The Real Value of Middle Managers](#),” *hbr.org*, June 7, 2021.)

“DURING THE PANDEMIC, THE MICRO-INNOVATIONS WERE GOOD-ENOUGH 70% SOLUTIONS.”

Redefining the Role of Mid-Managers in the Post-Pandemic

It used to be that “soft” people skills were a “nice-to-have” competency. Now in the post-pandemic era, mid-managers exhibiting people-oriented skills is a key business necessity.

Given this much greater emphasis on human interaction and engagement skills, what are the new roles for mid-managers? In my view, these roles include:

1. **Culture-builder:** Culture is defined as the way we do things around here. It entails the attitudes and behaviors of organizational members. In any organization, there is rarely just one culture; there are typically many cultures. It is the role of the manager to build with team members a positive mini-culture or “cultural oasis.” (See [ICMA Career Compass No. 51: Building a World-Class Culture](#).)
2. **Coach:** Coaches help players become the best they can be. They perceive the potential of the player and provide opportunities, guidance, resources, and encouragement. They are “multipliers,” amplifying the capacities and capabilities of others.

The Gallup research suggests that the one way to enhance employee engagement, commitment, and performance is for the manager to conduct one coaching conversation with a direct report every week or month. (See Jim Clifton, “[Gallup Finds a Silver Bullet: Coach Me Once Per Week](#),” *gallup.com*, May 27, 2021.)

A good coach asks open-ended “catalytic” questions:

- For you, what is the personal meaning or purpose behind this project?
- What values, ideas, or goals are we fighting for?
- What does success look like?
- What energizes you about this project?
- What are your concerns?
- What do you desire as a role?
- What do you want to learn?
- What are one or two steps forward for you?
- How can I support you as we move forward?

3. **Barrier remover:** A key role for mid-managers is to remove obstacles for team members. This may include securing IT support; reaching out to another department to provide assistance; securing more time or budget for a project; or finding the right training resources for staff.
4. **Talent developer:** In the post-pandemic world of local government, it's all about talent. Local government agencies cannot respond to community and regional demands without talent. Consequently, we need to better attract, retain, and develop talent. The great ideas of governing board members or top management are inconsequential without talent to shape those ideas for the better and make them come alive.

Talented employees are “free exiters”—they can freely exit or leave the organization. “A” and “B” players have the skills and confidence to leave an organization and find a more supportive organization elsewhere. A 2021 Korn Ferry survey found that 32 percent of employees intend to quit their current job because they don't like the culture. (See [HR Dive blog, August 9, 2021](#).)

*“TALENTED EMPLOYEES
ARE FREE-EXITERS.”*

Culture, especially a culture that focuses on growth and development, can create organizational “stickiness.” (See [ICMA Career Compass No. 85: To Thrive in Post-Pandemic, Enhance Employee Experience](#).) The Gallup Organization has found that employees are more productive, committed, and engaged when they report that

- This last year, I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow.
- In the past six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress.
- There is someone at work who encourages my development.

Seven Tangible Steps to Transform the Role of Mid-Managers

Mid-managers feel overwhelmed by the demands of senior management and those of front-line employees. Mid-managers are overloaded with responsibility for others—responsibility for their safety, productivity, and well-being. In fact, Gallup reports that mid-managers have higher levels of stress than their front-line subordinates (because of more responsibility) and more stress than senior managers (who have more control). (See Jim Clifton, “[Gallup Finds a Silver Bullet: Coach Me Once Per Week](#), *gallup.com*, May 27, 2021.)

So, how do we in top management enrich the role of mid-managers and invest in them, and in the process transform our local government organizations?

Develop a well-communicated rationale for transforming the role of mid-managers. To focus on the needs of employees, ask employees what they need in the post-pandemic environment. Understanding that positive change happens in the middle, discuss with senior managers and mid-managers that the organization can only win the war for talent on culture, especially one focused on caring, belonging, and growth and development.

Don't force great professional and technical staff to become managers as the only way to advance. Some people do not have the interpersonal skills to support "the other" and are, therefore, not suited for management. Yet, we continue to force good technical people into mid-manager roles as the only way that they can get more compensation and other rewards. We need to expand professional and technical career ladders so that great staff people without good people skills can still advance into well-paying "senior" roles and get recognized for their competencies and contributions. (See Brian Elliott, "[It's Time to Free the Middle Manager](#)," [hbr.org](#), May 21, 2021.

Focus on role-modeling by senior leaders. Senior managers must model the way and demonstrate through their attitudes and behaviors the emphasis on a more caring and growth and learning-oriented culture. For instance, if coaching is a critical element of the new culture, senior managers must actively coach their direct reports. Modeling is the most powerful way that adults (as well as children) learn.

*"EMPLOYEES MORE THAN EVER
WANT A SENSE OF BELONGING."*

Free up time and energy of mid-managers. In their current role, mid-managers are overwhelmed with reporting to higher levels of management, responding to requests for information, completing administrative reports of all kinds,

attending meetings all day, and engaging in over-the-shoulder supervision to ensure compliance and no mistakes. For managers to try out and practice new roles based on the needs of their team colleagues and the adaptive needs of the organization, top management must consciously work to eliminate some of these non-value-added activities.

Invest in the development of mid-managers. If we are to transform the role of mid-managers, we must train and upskill them. Based on the rationale for transforming the role of mid-managers, the HR department must develop a well-thought-out training program for new as well as current managers. Training and development for managers should emphasize enhancing their human interaction skills, providing one-to-one coaching, promoting employee engagement, exhibiting emotional intelligence, and building a positive team culture.

Based on employee feedback, San Mateo County, California, developed an upskilling development program that included coaching for its managers. Internal coaches are other managers who have been professionally trained and exhibit the skills that the

organization wants to see in their managers. Each new manager is provided with the opportunity to select an internal coach to work with them for six months. Additionally, all supervisors and managers can access an SOS (supervisors online support) intranet site offering videos, development opportunities, and other resources to support their success. ([See SOS: Supervisors' Online Support | Human Resources Department \(smcgov.org\)](#)). They can also get support and advice from their peers via a collaboration platform.

Provide an opportunity for mid-managers to connect with each other. Managers have increasingly lonely jobs and often do not experience much organizational support. Some organizations thus regularly conduct manager forums so that all managers know the big picture, can align with new directions and strategy, and most importantly, connect with other managers.

Evaluate, reward, and celebrate mid-managers based on their new role definition. Instead of solely evaluating and rewarding managers on the amount of work they and their team push out, evaluation metrics must be aligned with the people skills and behaviors that are now needed by employees and the organization. Compensation should follow. As a best practice, organizations should celebrate those managers who are exemplars.

A Call to Action

If our local governments are to thrive, not just survive, in the post-pandemic world, we need to better attract, retain, and develop our talent. As McKinsey reports, human capital is now scarcer than financial capital. (See "[Culture in the Hybrid Workplace](#)," *mckinsey.com*, June 11, 2021.)

"HUMAN CAPITAL IS NOW SCARCER THAN FINANCIAL CAPITAL."

All the big organizational challenges that local governments face as they emerge from the pandemic require positive change in the middle, and, therefore, the need to redefine the role of mid-managers. If we do transform their roles, managers will not only be more satisfied, but our agencies will thrive as we become more human-centered organizations. Let's use the post-pandemic threats to revitalize our local government organizations.



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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