

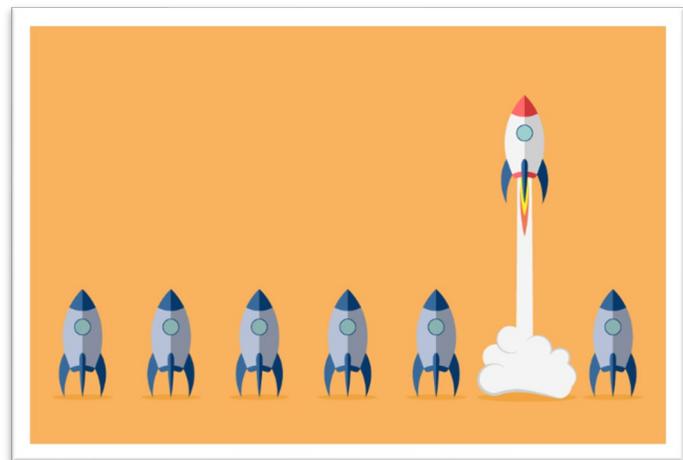
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Career Compass No. 97: Seven Ways To Boost Your Leadership Capabilities

How does one move into a management position when one has little management and leadership experience?

By Dr. Frank Benest | Oct 05, 2022

I'm a senior management analyst in a public works department in a large Southeastern U.S. city. I report to the public works director with whom I have a good relationship. I handle the department budget and am good at staff analysis but want to move into a management position in my department or some other department. I serve on several cross-department teams (i.e., the environmental sustainability team), so I have some exposure to non-public works functions; however, I don't formally supervise other staff or manage a program.



So, I'm stymied on how to gain the necessary experience to advance into management. How do I realistically get ready by developing some management and leadership experiences and skills?

You are experiencing a common dilemma: How does one move into a management position when one has little management and leadership experience?

Becoming the Best Version of Yourself

To begin the journey of leadership development, you must become more aware of how you interact with others in trying to exert influence and how others behave in leadership roles and situations. Specifically, what are your leadership strengths and weaknesses as well as those of others whom you observe?

Self-Reflection and Feedback

To maximize what you have to offer in a management position, you must leverage your strengths. (Typically, we worry too much about our weaknesses.) How do you identify your strengths? There are several ways:

- Do some self-reflection. Ask yourself:
 - Why would anyone follow me? (identify 2-3 reasons)
 - Why would anyone be reluctant to follow me? (identify 2-3 reasons)
- Review past performance evaluations, which will reveal your strengths.
- Have a conversation with your manager and ask about your strengths and any areas that need improvement so you can advance (it is best to do this in a development conversation as opposed to an annual performance review).
- Have a similar conversation with a formal or informal coach or a trusted colleague.
- Take an online assessment, such as “Strength Finders.”

“WE DON’T WANT TO CHANGE YOU. RATHER, WE WANT YOU TO BECOME THE BEST VERSION OF YOURSELF.”

Observation and Critique

To enhance your leadership behaviors, you should observe managers and formal or informal leaders. What do they do well? What don’t they do well?

When I was a young and inexperienced leader, I worked in a city government that was led during my tenure by three terrible city managers. I found them to be aloof and very status-oriented; they cared about themselves more than others; they focused solely on the city council and department heads; and they never truly engaged with employees. They demanded results but were not very effective in achieving them. I vowed never to repeat their mistakes when I advanced into senior management.

I am not suggesting that aspiring managers and leaders compare themselves with others. However, you can certainly learn what to do and what not to do through observation and critique.

Through self-reflection, feedback, and observation, you can get a feel for your strengths and potential as a leader, not to change you, but to become the best version of yourself.

The research on leadership development suggests four key findings:

“TRUE DEVELOPMENT DOES NOT HAPPEN THROUGH CLASSROOM EDUCATION.”

- **Learn by doing.** True development happens not through classroom education. Rather, growth occurs through a series of stretching job assignments coupled with helpful and candid feedback and coaching.
- **Understand the 70/20/10 ideal mix of development.** Again, we tend to focus on classroom training. The research identifies the following ideal mix of learning and development: 70% of your growth and development should come from learning through doing; 20% should come from coaching; 10% should come from classroom education.

How close are you achieving this 70/20/10 mix of development experiences?

- **Secure 2 + 1 Coaching.** Everyone (including world-class athletes) needs coaching. The minimum formula for coaching is “2 + 1.” You need a formal or informal coach within your department (your manager or someone else) who knows how the department works, and a coach (usually a senior manager but not necessarily) in another department who knows the organizational culture and politics of the agency. That’s the “2.” In addition, you should have a coach from another agency who knows the local government profession. That’s the “1.”

(See below for ways to secure a coach.)

- **Seek the “sweet spot” of learning.** The sweet spot of learning and development is when you get a stretch assignment where there is a 50-70% chance of success. If there is a 90% chance of success, there is no learning and development. Your boss is just giving you more work that you know how to do. If there is only a 40% chance of success, the assignment will be too stressful and you may feel overwhelmed and withdraw.

“THE SWEET SPOT OF LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT IS WHEN YOU HAVE A 50-70% CHANCE OF SUCCESS.”

To grow, you must get uncomfortable, but not too uncomfortable.

Practical Ways to Develop Your Leadership Competencies

Here are seven ways to develop your leadership skills and persona:

1. Actively schedule and participate in an ongoing series of development conversations

Invite a manager or formal or informal coach to coffee and ask to pick their brain about your career. To guide the conversation, you can ask:

- What are my strengths that I can leverage as I advance?
- What are some gaps in my experience or skills that I should work on?
- What are some options or different ways for securing these experiences or skills?
- What is a realistic step or two to advance in my career here in this agency or elsewhere?
- What is an upcoming challenge for our organization that I can get involved in as a formal or informal leader?
- What kind of support do I need?
- What kind of support or assistance can you provide?
- What is an experience from your career journey that may be relevant to me as I contemplate advancement?
- What are some professional associations and regional opportunities in which I could participate and stretch and grow?
- Who else can I talk to?
- Can you make an introduction for me?
- Can we schedule a follow-up chat after I clarify my thinking or take a step or two?
- How can I help you?

2. Get a formal coach

As stated above, everyone needs a coach or two or three. Your local government organization or your professional association may offer a formal coaching or mentoring program. Take advantage of this opportunity!

“TO GROW, YOU MUST GET UNCOMFORTABLE, BUT NOT TOO UNCOMFORTABLE.”

Through its Coaching Program, ICMA offers free one-to-one coaching through *CoachConnect*, an online coaches registry. Free coaching is available to any local government employee; you do not have to be a member of ICMA. So, go to *CoachConnect* at icma.org/1-1-coaching, register as a learner or coachee, review the profiles of the coaches, and send an email via the *CoachConnect* platform asking to schedule a telephone chat, zoom meeting, or in-person get-together with a coach. It can be a one-time or periodic conversation or an ongoing relationship.

Another option is to invite a senior manager from inside or outside the organization for an in-person or virtual cup of coffee and an informational interview. The result of this conversation is not only valuable information. You also want to “hook” the senior manager on your development potential so he or she will be on the lookout for opportunities for you and sponsor you for such opportunities. (See [Career Compass No. 78: Info Interviews—A Tool to Help You Advance.](#))

3. Actively seek options and opportunities to expand experiences

With the support of your manager or informal coaches, you can seek and secure new growth experiences, such as:

- An acting or interim management position (this is often the best way to gain management experience).
- A team leader of a capital improvement project involving different disciplines (architects, engineers, finance people, landscape architects).
- A leadership position on a newly formed department or cross-cutting, multi-department committee.
- A coordinator for a business or neighborhood outreach effort.
- Job rotation or exchange with another position.
 - Participation in a professional association or regional group committee.
 - Supervisor for a team of summer interns exploring a hybrid model of work for your department or a group of departments.

“IN WHAT AREAS CAN YOU BEGIN TO FLEX YOUR BEHAVIOR?”

Options thinking is critical. There is not one way but many ways to get the experiences and skills that you need.

4. “Flex” Your Behavior

In terms of expanding your portfolio of leadership behaviors in any given situation, you want to identify opportunities to flex your normal or “go-to” behaviors. Let me give you an example.

When I did a self-assessment at mid-career of my leadership strengths, I concluded that people tended to follow me because of my big ideas and my courage to pursue those ideas regardless of the obstacles. However, when I asked myself why people would be reluctant to follow me, I concluded that when I ran into a team meeting with my big idea to address a challenge, I enthusiastically advocated my idea and sucked all the air out of the room. Team members would say “Frank, great idea. We will follow you.” However, because it was not their idea, no one really followed.

Therefore, I had to flex my behavior. I started by asking two team members before the meeting to come to the brainstorming session and first present their ideas. I then experimented by going first to the least senior or least influential members of the team and asking them to share one idea or one possible solution. Then I practiced facilitating a discussion and weaved into the conversation all the good ideas (including my good idea). Of course, the resulting ideas were better and more robust than my idea and there was team ownership and commitment.

In what areas can you begin to flex your behavior?

5. Partner with another leader

No one leader has all the necessary leadership skills to succeed. Consequently, it is important to collaborate or partner with others.

Let's say that you find it difficult to facilitate a large department or community meeting. You can partner with a colleague who knows how to facilitate such a meeting. You can do the welcome, share some basic information, let your partner facilitate the discussion, and then end the meeting by summarizing a few themes and the follow-up.

"NO ONE LEADER HAS ALL THE NECESSARY LEADERSHIP SKILLS TO SUCCEED."

Together you lead. In the process, you learn by observing your partner, debriefing the experience, and slowly expanding your role and behaviors.

6. Seek growth experiences outside your organization

Don't limit yourself to learning and growth within your agency. To develop new leadership experiences and skills, consider these opportunities:

- Professional groups

Professional associations in your discipline or in general local government management (such as your state local government management association) are always looking for volunteers to serve on committees, write articles for their publications, or make presentations on conference panels. Your manager, colleague, or coach can make an introduction or you can simply raise your hand and suggest yourself. Volunteer to serve as a chair or vice chair. Or identify an emerging topic (developing hybrid work models in public works or retaining your public works talent) and develop a panel discussion for the next conference.

- Nonprofit organizations

Nonprofit organizations or community, school or neighborhood associations always need leadership talent. Volunteer and lead.

- Faith-based groups

Faith-based groups also need volunteers to take on organizational and leadership tasks. Demonstrate your leadership talent.

As a young parks and recreation professional, I wanted to move into human services management. Recognizing significant gaps in my portfolio of experiences and skills, I took the following actions:

- Joined the California Parks and Recreation Society, served on a committee, wrote a few articles on “hot” or emerging topics, and made several conference presentations.
- Volunteered at the local free clinic as a counselor to get some human services program experience.
- Joined a Latino community organization and volunteered to serve on their board and thereby developed some policy experience.
- Got elected to serve as the president of the employee association (no one else wanted the position so I raised my hand) and developed labor relations experience and negotiating skills.

At the end of several years, I was hired by another city as its assistant director of the human services department.

7. Start small

To further advance on your leadership journey, pick a behavior that you would like to enhance (such as speaking up in team meetings). Practice this skill, debrief with a coach or trusted colleague, make any adjustments, and practice some more.

When you have gotten better, pick another behavior that can propel you forward.

Two Career Journeys

Two of my colleagues actively demonstrated how to proactively develop their management and leadership experiences.

Melissa Stevenson Diaz served as the assistant to the city manager in Morgan Hill, California. She wanted to move into a deputy or assistant city manager position but needed a larger agency experience and a bigger-picture view. With the support of her city manager, Melissa applied to participate in the regional Management Talent Exchange Program sponsored by the regional city managers association. For three months, she served in the strategic planning unit for the large water agency in the region. Not long after her water agency experience, Melissa secured the position of deputy city manager in Fremont, California. Melissa is currently the city manager of Redwood City, California.

Kelly McAdoo was also an assistant to the city manager in Palo Alto, California. Kelly wanted to similarly advance to an assistant city manager position but had little program and personnel management experience. With the support of the assistant city manager and city manager, Kelly served for six months as the acting manager for the arts, open spaces, and sciences division in the city’s community services department. Shortly

thereafter, Kelly was selected as the assistant city manager of Hayward, California. Kelly is currently the city manager of Hayward, California.

Both Melissa and Kelly were self-reflective of what they had to offer and what new experiences they needed. While neither had expertise in water or community services, they got leadership experience and were able to advance.

70% Ready

Like most senior managers, I never had perfect training and experience for an advancement. I had to get myself ready by proactively seeking different opportunities to learn and grow.

It should be emphasized that I've never been 100% ready for a promotion or a new position of responsibility. At best, I was 70% ready, which, therefore, required that I had to focus on learning and growing and thus proving that I was up to the challenge. That was good for me and good for the organization.



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