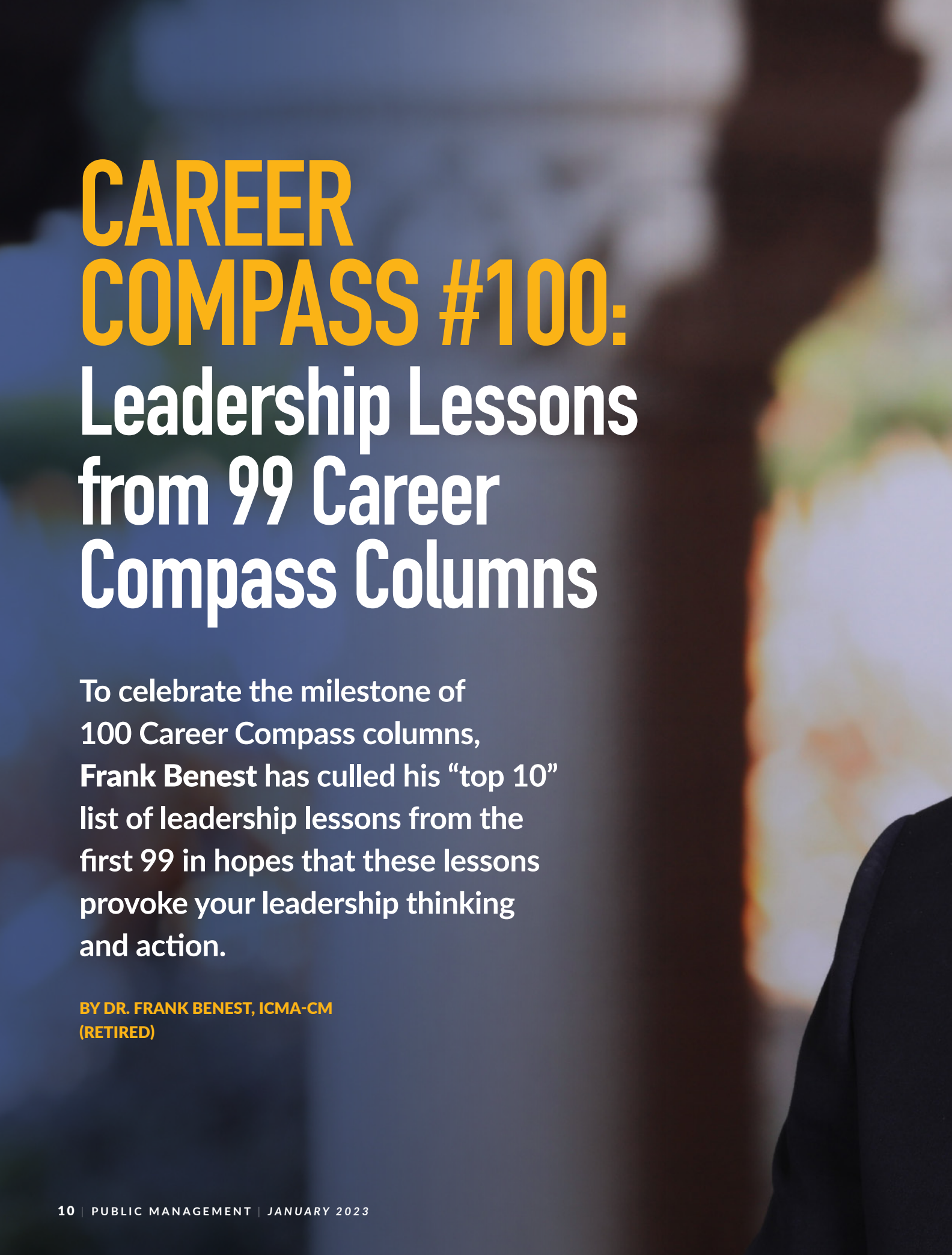

CAREER COMPASS #100: Leadership Lessons from 99 Career Compass Columns

To celebrate the milestone of 100 Career Compass columns, **Frank Benest** has culled his "top 10" list of leadership lessons from the first 99 in hopes that these lessons provoke your leadership thinking and action.

BY DR. FRANK BENEST, ICMA-CM (RETIRED)

#1 Leadership starts with self-awareness.

To exert positive influence, a leader must strive to be self-aware and self-critical. Self-awareness includes understanding your own values, strengths, and areas for growth and development. It also includes awareness of your "gifts" that you as a leader are compelled to give away. »

Reflecting on my life story, I have come to understand that my gift is courage. People tend to follow me because I am willing to take risks in pursuit of worthy ends. I know that I can leverage this gift and attract followers. However, when I over-do this gift, my risk-taking becomes recklessness. Given this tendency, I endeavor to surround myself with trusted and truth-telling coaches and colleagues who can help me avoid unwarranted gambles.

Strong leaders leverage their strengths instead of focusing on their weaknesses. To minimize the impact of their weaknesses, good leaders "flex" their behavior. For instance, those of us who tend to talk too much and dominate meetings may structure team meetings so that we first ask for ideas from others, acknowledge different perspectives, and speak last. If you are not good at conducting large community meetings, you may partner with a colleague who knows how to facilitate large gatherings of people.

(See Career Compass #19 "Why Should Anyone Follow Me?" and #22 "Overcoming Your Blind Spots.")

#2 People choose to follow.

Even if you are a chief executive of a local government agency, your positional or formal authority can only force a minimal level of compliance on the part of employees or others. To create followers, formal authority is helpful but completely insufficient. People decide to follow (or not) because of a leader's interpersonal (even moral or spiritual) attributes.

Given that leadership is based on your people skills, you can lead from any place. Leadership has nothing to do with position. Leadership is all about exerting positive influence.

(See Career Compass #41 "The Post-Heroic Leader, #92 "Leveraging Six Sources of Influence," and #5 "Developing Leadership Skills When You Have No Formal Authority.")

#3 Relationships facilitate results.

For most of my career as a city manager, I was more results-oriented than relationship-oriented. Only when I became more seasoned did I realize that a leader produces results through relationships.

People tend to follow you if they have a positive relationship with you and feel connected to you.

(See Career Compass #79 "Leading by Connecting.)

#4 Leadership is all about engaging others in conversation.

Leading is often about connecting with others through conversation. Conducting authentic conversations can help you:

- Glean critical information from others, especially "soft" data (their values, interests, concerns, and fears).
- Address those concerns.
- Incorporate the ideas of others into any proposed actions.
- Create relationship and connection.

It is not an authentic conversation if you as the leader are not truly open to the conversation and different perspectives and ideas. The key questions for leaders are: "Am I truly open to be changed by this conversation?" and "Am I willing to constructively respond based on the conversation?"

Conducting authentic conversations requires humility. Humility is a modest view of our own importance. Humility acknowledges that leaders are dependent on others to generate good ideas and different perspectives as well as to achieve good results. Humility is a critical leadership competency.

(See Career Compass #61 "Leadership is the Art of Conversation," #76 "Humble Leaders Get Results," and #89 "Avoiding the Arrogance of Expertise.")

#5 Empathy is a superpower.

Empathy is defined as seeing the world through the eyes of the other person. It is the ability to understand, acknowledge, and consider (and hopefully respond to) the unique hopes, fears, ideas, and perspectives of the other person.

Why is empathy so critical in the uncertain environment of local government? First, empathy allows you to create relationship and connection. Second, in times of adversity, organizations need employees and other stakeholders to adapt. A leader cannot exert influence and promote adaptation without acknowledging the hopes, values, and fears of others and then tying positive change to those values and concerns.

Leaders need data from employees and other stakeholders. This includes not just facts and figures but also their beliefs and values based on their life experiences and their current feelings and emotions.

The best way to promote empathy is to engage in authentic conversation and ask questions, such as:

- Why is this issue important to you?
- If we figure out how to address this issue or problem, what is your hope?
- What would success look like?
- What are your concerns?
- What are we missing?
- Who are we missing?
- How might we address this issue or problem?
- If you were to join the effort to address this issue, how could I support you?

Leadership is as much about asking questions than providing

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A LEADER PRODUCES RESULTS THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS.

answers. Of course, after generating this "soft" data, it is critical to respond to the data in some concrete fashion.

(See Career Compass #86 "Empathy Is a Superpower.")

#6 Effective leaders avoid seeking buy-in.

Even if you are trying to secure buy-in for a worthy idea or project, you will ultimately fail. Elected officials, employees, and outside stakeholders can smell the search for buy-in a mile away. Seeking buy-in is often manipulative. You are trying to "sell" your idea or program and therefore people will resist.

Instead of buy-in, leaders should engage decision-makers and other stakeholders, including employees, in a series of conversations and identify their interests, concerns, and ideas. You can then work to incorporate their ideas and address their concerns so that they get their "fingerprints" on the proposal (so the proposal becomes "our" proposal, not "my" proposal). Your original idea that is reshaped with the input of others is typically a better and more realistic proposal.

Once you identify a stakeholder's interests, it is helpful to "frame" the proposal in terms of those interests. By properly framing an issue or idea, others will be able to consider the positive possibilities of the proposed action. After providing the basic information to all stakeholders, you frame an issue differently for different groups. For example, if you want to pursue a clean energy project, you may want to frame the project either as a "save the planet" effort or a "jobs" program, depending on the interests of the key players.

You may also want to call the project a pilot or an experiment. With pilot projects, you expect and learn from mistakes. Decision-makers are often open to pilots since they are "reversible." In pursuing your agenda as a leader, it is often important to "think big but start small."

(See Career Compass #47 "Leadership Myths Debunked" and #18 "Taking Smart Risks.")

#7 Leaders must remember "why" they exert leadership.

When facing a challenge, we often run into staff meetings and focus the discussion on "what" we need to do and "how" we need to do it. It is important that we start with the "why" for ourselves and others.

Everyone has their own "why" based on their values and passions. My "why" may be promoting social justice or building community. Others may value environmental sustainability.

There are no easy technical solutions to the big adaptive challenges, such as homelessness or climate protection. It is hard to sustain your leadership efforts when you are continually criticized or blocked in trying to move forward on a worthy initiative. Therefore, it is essential to remind yourself of your "why" and engage others in their "why" or purpose.

Exerting leadership is difficult but our contributions expand our lives and who we are.

(See Career Compass #57 "Leading by Living Your Values.")

#8 Successful leaders are storytellers.

In local government, you certainly need data and sound analysis to persuade

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SEEKING BUY-IN IS OFTEN MANIPULATIVE.

decision-makers. While data is necessary, it is completely insufficient. Storytelling is the most powerful way to communicate and lead.

While professionals and administrators are driven by "what I know," elected officials are often driven by "what I believe." The narrative (or story) is key to persuading elected officials and community stakeholders.

To be authentic, stories must be aligned with the data. Stories put a human face on the data, make the data come alive, and move people to action. Data does not change behavior—stories do. Stories are "data with a soul."

(See Career Compass #50 "Story-Telling: A Powerful Way to Lead and Communicate.")

#9 Amid turbulence, great leaders point the way and serve as multipliers.

In this era of great uncertainty and turbulence of all kinds, an effective leader provides "clarity" of where their team is going and "flexibility" on how to get there. In turbulence, long-term planning is useless. Within certain guiderails, people must have the autonomy to "figure it out."

With the end-goal in mind, successful teams take a few steps forward, pivot as necessary, and learn as they go. The role of the team leader is to help the team figure out the direction; send the team on its way; support team members; and promote learning, shared accountability, and adaptation.

As they help their teams adapt, effective leaders are "multipliers" (not "diminishers"). They amplify the smarts and capabilities of those around them. They help people stretch, learn, and grow.

In contrast, diminishers tell people what to do and then test them to see if they did it the "right" way. (With adaptive challenges, there is no right way.) By "telling and testing," these kinds of managers diminish the capabilities of those around them. They are know-it-alls, not learn-it-alls.

(See Career Compass #94 "10 Principles for Leading in Turbulency, #84 "We Need Adaptive Leaders Now," and #41 "The Post-Heroic Leader.")

#10 Effective leaders are culture-builders.

Leaders are ineffectual without great followers. Therefore, to become an effective leader, you must attract, retain, and grow your organizational talent.

You cannot win the war for talent on salary and benefits. Competitive compensation is necessary but will not carry the day. A leader attracts and retains talent based on organizational culture.

Culture is "the way we do things around here." Values, beliefs, and behaviors create and sustain organizational culture, whether it is at the organization-wide level, at the department or division level, or at the team level.

In an enriched culture, employees conclude that:

- I have a sense of purpose in my work.
- I belong here.
- People care about me.
- I have some flexibility in how I do my work.
- I feel appreciated.

Formal and informal leaders are culture-builders every day. Their values and most importantly their behaviors build and sustain a positive culture. They "model the way." (See Career Compass #51 "Building a World-Class Culture" and #85 "To Thrive in Post-Pandemic, Enhance Employee Experience."

Conclusion: Leadership Is an Art

Leadership is an art, not a science. In local government, leadership is exerted in a messy and uncertain world. You achieve artistic mastery amid uncertainty by being guided by your purpose and values. However, you may not have the right answer and anybody can block you. The key challenge for leaders is "how do I get to 'yes' when anybody can say 'no'?"

Given this political reality, you need to engage in authentic conversations with decision-makers, employees, and other stakeholders. In these conversations, you must ask questions and collect soft as well as hard data, incorporate the ideas of others, figure out a direction, take a few steps, pivot as necessary, and learn as you go.

Good leaders are agile learners. They are always asking themselves and others:

- As we proceed, what is going well?
- What is not going so well?
- What are we learning to apply as we continue the journey?
- How can I better support you on our journey?

To be a good leader, you obviously must give a lot of yourself. But as you give a lot, you get a lot.

I plan to continue writing Career Compass columns for the ICMA Coaching Program (at least for a while). I hope that these advice columns are worthy of your consideration as you continue on your leadership adventure.

Remember, through leading in pursuit of noble goals, you make a positive contribution to the lives of community members and those who serve with you. PM

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