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## Career Compass No. 101: Now Is the Time to Reinvest in the Front Line

During the pandemic we supported remote and hybrid work, but community members experience local government through front line staff. It's time to reinvigorate the front line.

By Dr. Frank Benest | Apr 24, 2023 | ARTICLE

*I am the public works superintendent overseeing the field operations division in a mid-sized city in the Western United States.*

*Top management has spent a lot of time in the past three years focused on supporting remote and hybrid workers. We have been concerned about ensuring their health and safety, helping them with tech support, providing more flexibility and autonomy, and trying to connect with them. Our city has made some good strides in developing a hybrid workplace model for these employees who now work some days at home.*



*Here's the problem: we seem to have further created a two-class workplace. With most of the attention and support focused on remote employees, frontline workers who cannot work from home feel ignored, devalued, and unappreciated. Frontline workers feel that they have little flexibility, suffer long and costly commutes, find it difficult to balance work and personal lives, and continue to be exposed to COVID and other respiratory diseases. In-person employees seem to also get the brunt of increasingly rude and uncivil behavior from dissatisfied customers.*

*To make matters even worse, we have a significant number of vacancies, leading to overwork and burnout. With this kind of staff churn, it has been difficult to maintain needed*

productivity and service levels. I believe that we need to refocus on the frontline. Do you have any suggestions?

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Yes, at the beginning of the pandemic, we paid a lot of attention to and honored frontline “essential” workers across the economy, including nurses, police officers, paramedics, firefighters, grocery clerks, restaurant wait staff, custodians, and other workers who served us in-person despite the possibility of COVID exposure. Across the economy, many of these essential service workers (not all) tended to be lower paid, less educated, and people of color. Compared to those of us who could work from home, frontline workers also had a greater struggle dealing with childcare and eldercare needs. (See Francine Blau et al, econofact.org newsletter, [“Essential and Frontline Workers in the COVID-19 Crisis,” March 22, 2022.](#))

*“GIVEN ALL OUR ATTENTION TO REMOTE AND HYBRID WORK, WE HAVE FORGOTTEN ABOUT THE NEEDS AND SACRIFICES OF FRONT-LINE EMPLOYEES.”*

After three years of COVID, it now seems that we have forgotten about their needs and sacrifices. I agree that it is time to refocus on the frontline (FL) of local government service.

## **Who Is the Frontline?**

For the purposes of this column, I’m defining FL workers as those in local government who must provide services in-person, either onsite in a public facility or in the field. FL employees include most police and fire staff, dispatchers, health care workers, home health aides, maintenance and utility crews, counter staff, inspectors, librarians, and recreation leaders.

Not all FL workers face identical challenges. For example, public safety employees have greater training opportunities than counter staff or maintenance workers.

## **Why Focus on the FL?**

During the pandemic, we rightfully emphasized helping remote workers maintain some level of local government services and responsiveness to the public.

In my view, local government management has done a fair to good job in:

- Ensuring that remote workers have the technology that they need.
- Creating flexible and hybrid schedules.
- Moving from over-the-shoulder supervision and accountability measures to focusing on tangible deliverables and other outcome-based measures.

- Fostering an environment of experimentation, which has led to creative problem-solving and many micro-innovations (such as digital services, streamlined contracting).
- Trying different ways to communicate with remote employees and helping them feel connected to other team members, managers, and the organization.
- Showing appreciation for the work that remote workers accomplished.

Having said that, we do need to now pay attention to the needs of FL staff and reinvest in them. This is a key business imperative for a number of reasons.

First, community members often experience their local government through the interactions with FL staff. If these interactions are not satisfactory due to unengaged and de-energized staff, the reputation of the local government agency is damaged and the agency loses political support.

Second, if we in local government management tend to ignore the needs of FL staff, we will fuel growing disengagement. Poor employee engagement leads to lower performance and productivity, more costs (including absenteeism), and staff churn.

Third, the best solutions often come from the FL. FL employees know best about service challenges and can offer critical insights and creative ideas and solutions.

Therefore, what are some strategies to develop a more engaging and energizing organizational culture to support the FL?

## **Eleven Strategies to Support and Invest in the FL**

In suggesting strategies to invigorate the FL, I am not advocating that local government managers begin to ignore the needs of remote and hybrid workers. In fact, I have earlier encouraged local government leaders to use the transition to hybrid models as an opportunity to reset culture for the whole organization. (See [ICMA Career Compass No. 95: Use the Return-to-Office as Your Opportunity to Reset Culture.](#))

All local government employees would benefit from many of the strategies listed below. However, it is time to consciously reinvest in the FL.

Whether you are the city manager, county administrator, special district general manager, or other senior manager, you can directly implement or advocate for the 11 strategies identified below to strengthen the FL, most of which are no- or little-cost actions.

### **1. Publicly state your intent.**

To create a state of readiness for enhancing FL culture, it is important to state your leadership intent. In group meetings and in written communications, you should

emphasize that one of your priorities moving forward is to better respond to the needs of FL staff and then outline how you intend to proceed. Publicly stating your intent not only readies the environment but bolsters your commitment and accountability as a leader to do something positive.

## **2. Spend time with the FL, ask questions, respond.**

As a leader, your most precious asset is where you spend your time. Recognizing all the demands on local government managers, it is critical to spend time directly interacting with FL staff.

In a recent article “[CEOs Have Lost Touch with Front-Line Workers](#)” (hbr.org, Nov 9, 2022), Bill George, a former multinational corporation CEO, advocates that chief executives and other top managers spend at least 30% of their time interacting with FL employees. In these one-to-one conversations and small and large group interactions, senior leaders can ask powerful questions, such as:

- With respect to your work, what is particularly meaningful to you?
- What are the challenges you face in providing internal or external service?
- What kind of specific obstacles do you face in providing quality customer service internally or externally?
- What kind of tech or other support would make your job easier?
- While maintaining or enhancing customer service, in what areas can we provide more flexibility and autonomy for you?
- What do you want to learn in the coming year?
- What are your career aspirations? How can we as an organization be supportive?

Once you have these types of conversations, you can summarize common themes, share the themes with the FL and top executives, and respond in some fashion wherever possible.

## **3. Respond to commute and family support challenges.**

Because FL employees often struggle with long and costly commutes and child and eldercare costs, leaders can free up monies for commute and child and eldercare subsidies and/or work to provide family support resources (i.e., onsite childcare or subsidized slots with outside providers or enhanced family support info and referral services). While such subsidies or program efforts are new costs, they do help reduce the two-class nature of the workforce.

## **4. Promote learning and development.**

A key investment in the FL is offering learning and development opportunities. Like most employees, FL staff desire new learning to master their craft and help them

advance in their careers. The organization can identify specific career paths to help people move up in operations or move away from the FL.

Key learning activities include development conversations with their managers, stretch assignments, technical training, team leadership opportunities, job rotations, career development workshops, and opportunities to get coaching. Learning activities are relatively cheap and they demonstrate that management cares about FL employees.

Professional and key technical staff get all the training and career development attention. (Public safety personnel are the exception.) It may be helpful to track the time to promote FL workers, as well as professional staff.

Of course, we need to train and upskill managers (more on this later) so they can reconceptualize their roles to include this kind of support for learning and talent development.

#### **5. Support FL staff who often deal with angry customers.**

In a special report from the Harvard Business Review “[Incivility on the Front Lines](#),” (Dec 1, 2022), research indicates that that 76% of FL workers experience incivility from customers at least once per month. These experiences create a mental and physical toll on employees. Difficulties dealing with rude or angry customers also undercut the organization’s service ethic.

*“TO COUNTER INCREASINGLY DIFFICULT INTERACTIONS WITH CUSTOMERS, MANAGEMENT CAN PROVIDE TRAINING ON HOW TO ‘LISTEN WITH EMPATHY’ AND DE-ESCALATE DISRUPTIVE SITUATIONS.”*

To counter increasingly difficult interactions with customers, senior management can certainly provide training for FL workers on how to “listen with empathy” and problem solve with customers, as well as how to de-escalate disruptive situations. Top management can also support FL staff by developing a code of acceptable conduct or behavior by customers and supporting staff in dealing with customers who do not abide by these standards. (See Christine Porath, “[Help Front-Line Workers Deal with Uncivil Customers](#),” hbr.org, Nov 9, 2022.)

#### **6. Help FL employees recraft parts of their jobs.**

Through conversations with FL staff, managers can help employees identify the activities in which they can leverage their strengths, emphasize the parts of their jobs that they love, and minimize the parts that they loathe. Ample research indicates that if employees with the assistance of their managers can ensure that at least 20% of the job is work that they love and less than 20% is work that they hate, employees will be more

productive, engaged, resilient, and happier. (See Marcus Buckingham, "[Designing Work That People Love](#)," Harvard Business Review, May-June 2022.)

Again, helping employees recraft a portion of their jobs enhances productivity and demonstrates that the organization cares about them.

## **7. Conduct "stay interviews."**

To help recraft jobs and retain FL talent, managers can be trained to engage employees in "stay interviews." Rather than wait until the employee leaves the organization and then conduct an exit interview, once or twice a year conduct a stay interview consisting of some of these questions:

- What do you like most about your work? Why?
- What keeps you here?
- What would entice you away?
- What do you want to learn this year?
- What makes for a great day at work?
- What do you wish you had more time to do?
- What brings you down on the job?
- Do you feel recognized for your accomplishments?
- What strengths or talents do you have that aren't being used?
- What part of working here strikes you as ridiculous?
- How can I or the organization help you reach your career goals?
- If you could wave a magic wand, what changes would you make in the work environment?
- What threatens your peace of mind, your health, or personal fulfillment?
- What can we do to ensure we keep you with us?

Of course, they must do something in response to the stay interviews with individual employees.

(See [ICMA Career Compass No. 80: To Retain Your Talent, Use Stay Interviews.](#))

## **8. Provide more flexibility and autonomy for the FL.**

Depending on the nature of the job, managers must find ways to provide more flexibility and autonomy for FL staff. For instance, with respect to more flexibility, is it possible to creatively fill in for the staff person on the counter so he or she can have one remote workday per week to do administrative support activities? Can building inspectors do some work from home? Can a FL supervisor do one day of work at home and allow a lead worker to do more supervision? In terms of providing more autonomy, can a field crew within certain parameters decide how to approach a problematic field situation? Can FL teams decide on their own budget priorities for the coming year?

Flexibility and autonomy are critical self-motivators (see Daniel Pink, [Drive, The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us](#), 2009) and should be integrated into the jobs of FL as well as remote workers.

To effectively provide more flexibility and autonomy, we need to reconceive how we measure productivity. Up until the pandemic, managers tended to measure productivity with over-the-shoulder supervision and a “butts in the seat” approach. With remote work, this traditional method of measuring productivity is no longer is feasible. Thankfully, due to the pandemic, managers have been forced to focus on

tangible deliverables and other outcomes achieved.

*“TO EFFECTIVELY PROVIDE MORE FLEXIBILITY AND AUTONOMY, WE NEED TO RECONCEIVE HOW WE MEASURE PRODUCTIVITY.”*

I suggest that managers of FL in-person workers can adopt the same approach and find ways to provide more flexibility and autonomy on how the work

is done (within certain guide rails) and then measure what is produced, not time on task or presence in the office or the field.

By pushing decision making down to the FL, the manager creates ownership and promotes accountability. It also generates trust. As Dan Rockwell states: “Delegating tasks creates workers. Offering authority invites ownership.” (See Leadership Freak blog, [“You Want People to Take Ownership—But How?”](#), Oct 29, 2021.)

## 9. Promote social bonds in the FL.

People will tend to be more engaged and productive, stay with an organization, and be more resilient if they experience strong social support. The Gallup Organization notes that a key determinant of employee engagement is “I have a best friend at work.” (See Marcus Buckingham, [First Break All the Rules](#), 1999.)

To promote social bonds, a manager or any team leader can initiate certain team rituals creating a sense of connection. For instance, each team meeting can start with a “Take 5” during which people share a non-work

item. Or the team leader can ask everyone to share their favorite coffee or tea mug and tell everyone why it is their favorite cup. Social activities (for example, a once-a-month potluck lunch) enhance social bonds. (See [Career Compass No. 79: Leading By Connecting](#).)

*“TO PROMOTE SOCIAL BONDS, THE MANAGER CAN INITIATE CERTAIN TEAM RITUALS.”*

## 10. Celebrate the Frontline.

With our focus on remote and hybrid workers, we have forgotten the frontline. We need to create more of a culture of appreciation in our organizations. According to the Gallup Organization's research on employee engagement, employees need recognition of their efforts at least once every seven days. Managers need some simple training on different ways to show appreciation and how to customize that appreciation according to the needs and desires of the employee. In addition, it is important for the manager as well as coworkers to communicate gratitude, not just for the work but also for the person and what they personally and professionally bring to the team.

A once-a-year employee appreciation breakfast or lunch is simply inadequate. The manager needs to help employees create rituals of appreciation that are incorporated into daily work life (for example, a team acknowledgment item first thing on every staff meeting agenda or at the beginning of every tailgate safety meeting). (See [Career Compass No. 99: Harness the Hidden Power of Rituals.](#))

## 11. Upskill FL managers.

To better engage and energize FL staff, we need to focus on the relationship between the direct supervisor and the employee. Talented employees join an organization because of higher compensation, career advancement, or an opportunity to do work they love. They leave an organization because of a poor relationship with their direct boss. (See Marcus Buckingham, *First Break All the Rules*, 1999.)

Almost all the strategies that I suggest require upskilling managers who supervise FL workers. FL managers must be better trained to conduct development conversations and stay interviews, integrate learning into day-to-day jobs, promote flexibility and some measure of autonomy, rethink how to measure productivity and ensure accountability, learn how to better connect with team members and build trust, and express gratitude in everyday ways.

Upskilling managers is a key investment.

## Enhance Organizational Culture

We are at a critical juncture as local government transitions to the post-pandemic. To enhance productivity, attract and retain talent, and promote creative problem-solving, we need to enhance organizational culture.

*"A NEGLECTED FRONT-LINE EXACERBATES A TWO-CLASS WORKFORCE OF HAVE'S AND HAVE-NOT'S."*

To be effective, every organization needs an underlying mission and strong values shared by all employee groups and relative cohesion in the entire workforce. A



neglected FL undercuts that sense of unity and cohesion and exacerbates a two-class workforce of have's and have-not's.

I am not suggesting that efforts (providing learning and development, offering more flexibility and autonomy, demonstrating appreciation) be solely focused on FL workers. A more vibrant culture supports all employees. However, given the current realities of FL workers, local government leaders need to ask themselves this question: To thrive in post-pandemic, how do we now support in-person workers and enhance their employee experience?



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