

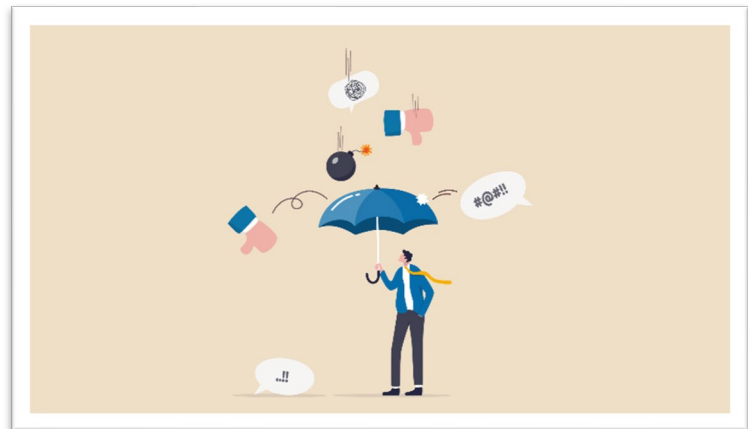
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## Career Compass No. 102: Responding to Public Criticism

As we advance in our local government careers, we will all face public criticism—sometimes fairly, sometimes not. How will we respond?

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

*I am a public works director in a medium-sized city in the Bay Area of California. Our community recently experienced a 75-year flood. The waters in the creek surged out of the creek's natural channel flooding homes in adjacent neighborhoods. There was a lot of damage but thankfully no loss of life.*



*A week after the immediate flooding, an angry mob of affected residents came to a council meeting, attacking me and the public works crews for failing to protect the community. Several residents called me incompetent and strongly urged the council and city manager to fire me.*

*I was livid. In responding to the criticism, I strongly defended the public works staff, while stating that a 75-year flood could not have been anticipated. I did acknowledge that we in public works were not fully prepared for the scope of the flooding; we didn't have enough staffing to respond; we didn't have sufficient sandbags for the residents; and the department didn't have access to enough pumps to help residents whose basements or first floors flooded.*

*I did point out that we cleaned out debris from the creek before the flood and our creek monitor on the city's website did show the creek waters were surging.*

*After a week of working long hours, I was exhausted and made a comment that “no one was killed.” Audience members reacted poorly and said I didn’t care. To make matters worse, several of the governing board members jumped in and criticized our staff.*

*In retrospect, I did come off as too defensive and emotional. I tried not to blame the residents who have historically opposed efforts by the county-wide flood control district to cement the natural creek or undertake other flood control projects.*

*This criticism from affected residents will not quickly cease. How do I respond better the next time?*

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As a local government leader, you will face at some time or another public criticism. People expect that government will protect them and get angry when they suffer some damage (or in some cases even inconvenience). Given the growing lack of civility, people go beyond sharing their concerns and sometimes attack public officials and public employees. Since local government is the closest unit of government to the people, all of us working in the trenches of local government will experience the ire of dissatisfied residents, businesspeople, and other stakeholders, even if the criticism is not justified.

## **Understand that Criticism Comes with the Job**

Most of us experience a certain amount of joy as local government professionals. We get the opportunity to build community and make a positive difference in the lives of people. However, with these joys comes the reality that people get to criticize their government, especially at the local level, and hold us accountable and demand better performance. It’s part of the job.

In addition, public criticism is one of the primary ways we correct things and make improvements. While it is human nature to react defensively to what we may consider an unfair attack, we leaders need to acknowledge criticism and consider corrective actions to improve performance.

*“PUBLIC CRITICISM  
COMES WITH THE  
JOB.”*

## **Tips to Cope When You Are Under Fire**

### **Before any Public Criticism**

In addition to acknowledging that public criticism is part of your messy world, you must anticipate the criticism whenever possible so you are not caught off-guard. In your case, you and the other senior leaders should have known there was going to be a lot of unhappy if not angry residents showing up at the council meeting. You could have prepared with colleagues on how you and other city officials were going to respond.

You could have done a quick-and-dirty debrief of the flooding incident with the city manager and other department heads:

- What went well?

(For instance, public works crews with volunteers cleared the creek of debris in anticipation of the flood; the creek monitor on the city's website worked well.)

- What did not go so well?

(For instance, the city did not have enough sandbag stations available for residents.)

- What did we learn to deal with future flooding?  
(For instance, we need quick access to more pumps; we need additional ways to alert residents of anticipated flooding.)

Furthermore, the city manager and you could have quickly shared the debrief with the mayor and other councilmembers so they were not surprised by the onslaught of angry residents and hopefully more prepared to respond in a balanced way.

As part of your preparation for the council meeting or any community meetings that would attract critical residents, you could have also done a simulation or roleplay of angry residents blasting the city staff and then practice your response. Just hearing in advance how people might attack you and others could help you deal with your emotions at the meeting.

*"YOU MUST ANTICIPATE THE CRITICISM SO YOU ARE NOT CAUGHT OFF-GUARD."*

Assuming that you can anticipate the onslaught of criticism, it would also benefit you to get guidance from a few trusted advisors or coaches inside and outside the organization. Just talking through with a

trusted colleague what you anticipate and how you plan to respond without defensiveness will give you a measure of confidence.

Finally, since you can count on public criticism at some point in your tenure, it is necessary to develop and have already in place positive relations with the city manager, councilmembers, and key stakeholders (such as neighborhood leaders). By performing well over time and developing positive relationships and rapport, you create a solid bank account of credibility and trust. If you've made a lot of deposits into your bank account, you can survive some withdrawals.

### ***Frank's Experience of Fueling the Fire***

*While I was city manager of Palo Alto, California, another city across the San Francisco Bay experienced a tragedy. A couple of firefighters died responding to a structure fire.*

*The Palo Alto firefighters union wanted to send to the memorial service a number of Palo Alto firefighters on overtime in a fire truck. I told the union that the city would not pay OT and that we would not take a truck out of service, but they could take an older reserve unit. Finally, the union demanded that I order the city flags lowered to half-mast. I checked with the city clerk who deals with flag protocols, and she told me that this demand was not aligned with city, state, or federal practice. Therefore, I did not authorize the lowering of the flags.*

*At the council meeting that week, a local reporter approached me at a break and asked why I was resisting firefighter participation in the funeral honoring their fellow firefighters. I was exhausted after a long day of meetings plus a council meeting that started at 6 p.m. and was going to continue past midnight. After defending what I was prepared to allow, I told the reporter that “we don’t lower the flags willy-nilly.”*

*That remark was printed in the local newspaper and shared by our union members with the international association of firefighters and then included in the association’s e-newsletter. As a result, I received (and the city council received) hundreds of emails from firefighters and family members from across the country regarding my insensitivity and some demanded that the council fire me. In a private meeting, the mayor told me that she was disappointed with my comment.*

*It was, of course, the wrong way to react to the reporter’s inquiries. I was forced to apologize to the union leadership; I made a public apology at a council meeting; and I visited fire houses to personally apologize to our firefighters. I was stressed and exhausted when I made the comment, but that is no excuse.*

*As a result of the visits to the fire houses, we scheduled an additional memorial ceremony of our own in the City Hall plaza, which I attended.*

*I lost some credibility, but I did survive. In hindsight I recognized that by openly admitting my mistake and making amends, I showed my vulnerability and built a stronger relationship with the firefighters.*

**“HUMANS NEED TO  
BE HEARD BEFORE  
THEY LISTEN.”**

### **In the Heat of the Moment**

Even with a lot of preparation, it is natural to get defensive and respond emotionally to an attack. Having said that, I am suggesting some tips to respond in a positive way and ensure your survival even though some people might want you fired.

Simply put, how you respond in the heat of the moment is critical. Here are some suggestions:

*"IT IS NATURAL TO  
GET DEFENSIVE  
AND RESPOND  
EMOTIONALLY."*

### 1. Take a deep breath

If a speaker at a council meeting or other public meeting criticizes you or even attacks you, take a deep breath or two or three. Deep breathing helps you slow down, gather your thoughts, and hopefully keep your emotions in check.

In addition to a few deep breaths, unclench your fists. Dan Rockwell suggests that a leader under fire in a public meeting open his or her hands palms up under the table in order to minimize a desire to fight back. (See Leadership Freak blog, "[Under Fire in a Public Meeting](#)," Oct 25, 2013.)

### 2. Listen to understand, demonstrate empathy

While you may not agree with what the speaker is saying, listen intently to understand (not rebut). If you can empathize with the person and his or her concern or misfortune, you will be better able to respond effectively. (See [Career Compass No. 86: Empathy Is a Superpower](#).)

### 3. Show some curiosity

At a typical council or board meeting, you don't want to get into a give-and-take with a complainant. However, in a more informal meeting or setting, it is wise to show some curiosity about the person's situation and ask the person to "tell me more."

### 4. Use a "gem statement"

Start any response with what the columnist David Brooks calls a "gem statement"—a broad and positive statement that we can all agree on. Keep the gem statement front and center.

In your case, an appropriate gem statement could be: "As a city government, we are committed to doing our best to protect our residents and their property, especially in a disaster." Even if we disagree with what needs to be done, we can agree on a gem statement. (See "[Nine Nonobvious Ways to Have Deeper Conversations](#)," New York Times, Nov 19, 2020.)

### 5. Acknowledge what you hear

People want to have their say. Again, even if you don't agree with what a speaker is saying, acknowledge what you hear. For example

- "I hear that you don't think that the city protected your property during the flood."
- "Yes, we as a city were not fully prepared for the flood."
- "Yes, we didn't have enough sandbag stations available to the public."

As Amanda Ripley states: "Humans need to be heard before they listen." (David Brooks, "[Nine Nonobvious Ways to Have Deeper Conversations](#)," New York Times, Nov 19, 2020.)

## 6. Present the facts; avoid defensiveness

When there is great contention, we should try to state what we know. In your case, the facts include:

- We experienced a 75-year flood.
- We were not fully prepared.
- Our public works crews worked long hours in responding to the damage.
- The city took some preemptive actions, such as clearing the creek of debris and providing some sandbag stations for residents; however, those actions were insufficient.
- There was significant property damage, especially to residences in the flood zone.

By presenting the facts as you know them and avoiding defensiveness, you don't feed the anger of the mob.

*"DON'T FEED THE  
ANGER OF THE  
MOB."*

## 7. Admit mistakes

As part of your response, it is necessary to admit where you made mistakes or failed. For example

- "We did not have enough sandbag stations for residents."
- "We did not have enough pumps to help residents with flooded basements."

## 8. Offer to meet with residents offline

It is almost impossible to engage residents in a constructive discussion at a council or board meeting. Therefore, show your openness to have a dialogue and mutually problem solve by inviting angry residents to meet with you and appropriate staff offline. Remember, if you are to have an authentic conversation with others, you must be open to truly listening and to the possibility of changing your mind as a result of the conversation. (See [Career Compass No. 61: Leadership is the Art of Conversation.](#))

## 9. Identify corrective actions

After acknowledging mistakes or failures, you must identify possible corrective actions. In your case, it would be important to commit with the support of the city manager to investigate and report back to the city council and community some of the following actions:

- Providing more sandbag resources.
- Utilizing a more robust alerting system for disasters.
- Proposing several capital improvements to prevent creek overflowing.
- Ensuring that public works crews have access to the right equipment (i.e., more pumps).

- Increasing the supply of emergency responders (other city staff and volunteers) for the next serious flood.

As much as possible, you want to look forward, not back.

#### 10. Model attitude and behavior

Modeling is a powerful way to lead. Residents and staff will tend to take their cues from you. If you are factual, nondefensive, respectful, and forward-looking, they will tend to follow your lead.

#### After Any Public Criticism

As a first step in following-up, it is essential to perform a formal and robust debrief of the flooding incident and how the city and other agencies responded. You should typically engage an array of policymakers and stakeholders:

- City council/Governing Board.
- City or county manager.
- Public works employees.
- Other departments.
- Neighborhood leaders and environmental advocacy groups.
- Other government entities (i.e., county-wide flood control district).

Based on the formal debrief and all the calls for improvements in emergency response, you can identify appropriate proposals to consider going forward. This engagement effort will generate a lot of ideas, and in the process, you must help get everyone's fingerprints on the final proposals to create further support.

Of course, you want to share the written debrief report widely and thus promote your recommended responses as part of a campaign to secure approvals of your proposals. You need to create a state of readiness as you eventually seek formal approvals from the council and other government agencies as well as budget resources.

Finally, as the public works director, you need to have a series of conversations with the PW employees to demonstrate your appreciation for their efforts during the flooding, allow them to express their feelings regarding the public criticisms, and generate their own ideas for improvements.

*"YOU WANT TO  
LOOK FORWARD,  
NOT BACK."*

## Forget Fairness

In your career, you will be criticized—sometimes fairly, sometimes not. This is the lot of public leaders. (See Ron Carucci, “[How Leaders Should Handle Public Criticism](#),” hbr.org, Dec 12, 2022.)

“IN YOUR CAREER, YOU  
WILL BE CRITICIZED—  
SOMETIMES FAIRLY,  
SOMETIMES NOT.”

Great leaders are self-aware and self-reflective. A self-critical response when you are under fire demonstrates that you are a true leader.

For all leaders, being criticized in public is a defining moment—how will you respond?



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. [Read past columns](#) at [icma.org/careercompass](https://icma.org/careercompass).

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