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Career Compass No. 105: How Do You Show Up as a Leader?

People count on you as a leader. Amid all the demands and distractions, how do you show up, being present, focused, and energized to serve others?

By Dr. Frank Benest | Dec 15, 2023 | ARTICLE

I'm an HR division manager in an urban county. I've gotten some feedback that I seem distracted in my one-to-one meetings and when I lead my division staff meetings. People also get upset when I sometimes cancel and reschedule meetings because of more urgent demands on me.

Well, I guess that I am distracted. I have a lot of work that is on my plate; I'm overwhelmed with meetings and email; we're down several positions; and I feel some uncertainty and anxiety about the future (as do my staff). And, the other HR division managers apparently feel the same way.

Another problem is that I sometimes feel exhausted by mid-afternoon. I don't have much energy to carry me strongly throughout the workday.

I want to be a good leader for my division team members, but how do I deal with the frustration that my staff feel? How do I deal with my own frustration and anxiety?

Response

First of all, let me acknowledge that the role of local government mid-managers is more difficult than ever. Demands keep coming. Retaining talent is challenging. Many staff



work from home or have hybrid schedules. The future of any local government organization is uncertain.

Second, I commend you for wanting to be a good leader. Leadership is not about responding to our own needs and wants. Rather, it is about serving others and responding to their needs. As Dan Rockwell states, “Leaders show up to serve.” We leaders get meaning and in some cases joy by serving others.

Because of all the daily challenges facing you and your division staff, you as a leader must decide on how you are going to show up. As a leader, it is your responsibility to be present, focused, and energized. It is of course easier said than done. As a long-time manager and chief executive in local government, I too often felt overwhelmed, distracted, and anxious. If I were going to serve as a good leader over the long haul, I had to figure out how to better manage myself.

Here are some thoughts and possible approaches.

Focus on the Joy of Leadership

Leadership is difficult. However, oftentimes we leaders spend too much time focusing on the challenges of leadership and bemoaning the resistance to our efforts. To show up with positive energy and enthusiasm, we need to first acknowledge and keep front-and-center the joy of leadership. Through effective leadership, you can make a positive difference for your team, your organization, and the communities that you serve. Yes, while leadership is difficult, the opportunity to lead and contribute is a blessing.

Determine Leadership Intent and Assess Gaps

To get started, you must decide your intent as a leader. How do you want to show up?

If you want to show up being fully present, focused, energized, and engaged, then you need to state that intent to yourself, your division team, and others (such as your HR director and any informal or formal coaches). By making this a personal and professional goal and publicly stating your intent to do a better job in this area, you are more likely to take some steps to improve.

Leadership starts with self-awareness.

In addition to stating your intent, you must also assess how you currently show up. Are there any gaps between your intent and current realities? For example, do you sometimes:

- Show up in the morning feeling overwhelmed or frazzled?
- Cancel one-to-one check-ins with direct reports or cancel staff meetings?
- Feel overwhelmed by your to-do list?

- Run from one meeting to another
- Feel exhausted by the afternoon?
- Check your phone or computer during meetings?
- Get distracted by your inner voice during one-to-one conversations?

In short, how are you seen and experienced by others? As one example, do people feel that you see one-to-one meetings as an intrusion?

Reflect by yourself as well as with a few trusted staff or colleagues. What are their observations?

As Bill George states: “Leadership starts with self-awareness.” (See [Bill George, Discover Your True North, 2015.](#))

Ask Yourself What Followers Need

As part of the effort to determine your leadership intent, ask yourself “What do my followers need in this moment?” For instance, does a staff member or the division team need me to:

- Be calm and steady?
- Listen and acknowledge challenges?
- Identify the “big why” of an important project?
- “Zoom in” to focus on what’s the immediate need?
- “Zoom out” to focus on the big picture?
- Figure out with the team a path forward even if the team will have to pivot along the way?
- Take action (even if it’s only one step forward) with confidence amid the uncertainty?
- “Increase the heat” if people are not sensing the necessary urgency?
- “Lower the heat” if people feel overly stressed?
- Focus on what we are learning as the team makes some missteps?
- Emphasize the progress being made even if the project is taking a long time and momentum is threatened?

As a leader, it is not about what you need. It is about what your followers need.

Focus on Positive Ways to Show Up

Given your intent as a leader and what your followers need from you, you might want to identify some specific ways to show up. You might desire to be experienced by the other people as a leader who is:

- Fully present
- Committed to connect
- Calm and focused
- Curious (“tell me more”)
- Enthusiastic about the other person’s project
- Forward looking
- Encouraging

- Enabling of others
- Eager to support (without taking over)
- Thankful

With respect to these behaviors, “Being present is bringing your best self to what you are doing now.” (See [Dan Rockwell, Leadership Freak blog, “7 Simple Practices That Enable Being Present,” Feb 7, 2023.](#))

Start Small

To become more fully present at work, it is a good idea to start small and then build on a few good habits. For instance, a few small steps could include:

- Don’t start your day at home or at work by checking your email. Begin the day by identifying one do-able goal or task to accomplish in the morning and one do-able goal or task to accomplish in the afternoon.
- Turn off any notifications on your phone or computer so you don’t get distracted during your conversations and meetings.
- Shorten your meetings from 60 to 50 minutes so you have time to think about the conversation and interaction, jot down any follow-up items, and then focus on your next meeting.

(See [Dan Rockwell, Leadership Freak blog, “Enjoy Big Differences from 7 Delightful Small Things,” April 22, 2022.](#))

Adopt a Few Rituals

Rituals are defined as a prescribed set of actions regularly repeated in a precise manner by an individual or members of a group. Rituals help us achieve some sense of control and comfort amid a lot of uncertainty. (See [Career Compass #99 “Harness the Hidden Power of Rituals.”](#))

A few rituals can help us keep engaged and energized. I find that evening and morning rituals are particularly helpful. For instance, I end my day by reviewing the next day’s schedule and identifying a few do-able priority tasks for the next day. This ritual helps clear my mind so that I can go to sleep without too much worry about the coming work day.

I also have a few morning rituals. I start by taking a walk to fetch several newspapers. I then enjoy my morning coffee and oatmeal as I read the newspapers. Once I’m done, I say to myself, “OK, Frank. You are ready to take on your work for the day.”

Other people do not schedule any meetings for the first hour at work so they can start a priority morning task and be focused on that task. As another ritual, others set aside several mornings per week to walk around the office, chat with staff, inquire about their

families, talk about sports, hobbies or other leisure activities, and express appreciation (about anything).

Clear Your Mind and Focus

Before a meeting with a direct report or your team, it is helpful to get grounded, clear your mind of distractions, and get focused.

Bain and Co. identified 33 key leadership traits and found that mindful presence (called “centeredness” in the study) was the number one trait of successful leaders. The research indicated that showing up fully present created better connection with staff, increased employee engagement, and improved performance. (See [Rasmus Hougaard and Jacqueline Carter, “If You Aspire To Be a Great Leader, Be Present,” hbr.org, Dec 13, 2017.](#))

Before an important meeting or presentation, you can clear mind and get focused by intentionally pausing, closing your eyes, and taking a deep breath or two. Or, take a short walk. When you are in the meeting, consciously sit up or stand up straight, uncross your arms, and smile a little. (See [Rasmus Hougaard and Jacqueline Carter, “If You Aspire To Be a Great Leader, Be Present,” hbr.org, Dec 13, 2017.](#))

Enhance Your 1:1 Meetings

One-to-one meetings are a critical opportunity to connect with direct reports and support them. However, many of us managers feel overwhelmed by these 1:1 meetings. Either we cancel and reschedule these 1:1’s, or we aren’t fully present and don’t maximize the opportunity.

Being present honors the person in front of you.

One problem is that sometimes our “inner voice” distracts us from truly listening. Our inner voice may say “I wish he would stop talking.” Or, “I know what she’s going to say.” Or, “I wonder when Joe will respond to my text.” The end result is that staff people feel frustrated or unheard.” (See [Rasmus Hougaard and Jacqueline Carter, “If You Aspire To Be a Great Leader, Be Present,” hbr.org, Dec 13, 2017.](#))

Another typical problem with 1:1’s is that the manager overly focuses on accountability, trying to ensure that the staff person is meeting timelines on key deliverables. It is no wonder that employees dread or at least don’t enjoy these accountability oriented meetings. (See [Career Compass #53 “How Do I Hold People Accountable?”](#))

You want to create a “safe place” so that the staff person can express any problems or frustrations and share possible steps forward without you as the manager stepping in and fixing the problem. (See [Rasmus Hougaard and Jacqueline Carter, “If You Aspire To Be a Great Leader, Be Present,” hbr.org, Dec 13, 2017.](#))

An alternative approach is to inquire about the person, one's family, and/or one's personal pursuits, as well as share similar information about yourself. Then you can focus on the staff person's projects by asking a few questions:

- Why is this project important to you? (Purpose is the great self-motivator.)
- What is challenging?
- What are you learning?
- What will you focus on in the next two weeks?
- What is your next step or two?
- How can I support you?

Leading is often more about asking questions than providing answers.

One-to-one interaction can be enhanced by moving away from your desk (which acts as a barrier between you as the superior and the staff person as the subordinate). You can both sit around a table or in chairs across from each other. An even better setting for some of your 1:1s could be meeting at a café or conducting a walking meeting.

The key point is to enhance 1:1 meetings by being fully present, open, supportive, and forward-looking. As Dan Rockwell suggests, "Being present honors the person in front of you." (See ["7 Simple Practices That Enable Being Present," Leadership Freak blog, Feb 7, 2023.](#))

Lean on Others

A leader cannot lead alone. Some leaders feel that it is lonely at the top. I believe it is lonely only if we isolate ourselves.

Loneliness is an epidemic in America. The U.S. Surgeon General reports that a majority of American adults feel lonely. (See [U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation," May 2023.](#)) This sense of loneliness may be even greater for those of us with managerial responsibilities. (See [Career Compass #60 "I Don't Like My Mid-Manager Job!"](#))

People count on you. Whom do you count on for support? (See [Dan Rockwell, Leadership Freak blog, "Comedy Makes Pfizer's Corporate Affairs Officer Feel Alone," March 29, 2023.](#)) Whom can you take into your confidence as you try to exert positive influence and show up energized? This informal support group may include another manager, a trusted colleague or team member, or an informal coach. With these supporters, you can share your intent and goals, recent missteps, and concerns. Trusted advisors can provide feedback or simply listen and provide emotional support.

Lean on others.

It is also a good idea to share some of your leadership tasks. Lean on others. For instance, you can rotate the role of the convener and facilitator of division meetings

among your staff members (and in process further develop them). It is difficult to show up with energy and enthusiasm if you feel alone.

Re-Edit the Movie

To assess how you are actually showing up on a daily basis, examine your day by asking yourself these questions:

- Which conversations or interactions with others went well today? Which ones did not go so well?
- How did the direct report or team feel at the end of the conversation or interaction with you?
- How did they experience you?
- To what extent did you fulfill your leadership intent or otherwise show up as your best self?

As part of this daily self-assessment, some leaders review key conversations or interactions at the end of the day as if they were watching a movie. If the conversation or interaction was problematic, they rewind and replay the movie in their head and then edit it noting the improvements they will make so that the interaction is better next time.

If the interaction was not experienced well, one leader is reported to phone a direct report or colleague on the way home. The leader says “I don’t feel good about our conversation today.” Rather than blaming the other person, the leader owns the conversation and the outcome and may ask how they can improve the conversation the next time. (See [Dan Rockwell, Leadership Freak blog, “4 Questions That Guide Your Most Important Conversation,” May 31, 2023.](#))

Audit and Replenish Your Energy

Throughout my career I took great pride in having a lot of enthusiasm and energy. As suggested by Peter Drucker, a leader’s role is to manage one’s energy and the energy of others. Dan Rockwell agrees that “personal energy is more important than skills, talents, and resources.” (See [Leadership Freak blog, “20 Questions That You Can Use To Audit Personal Energy,” March 24, 2022.](#))

You are responsible for your own energy. The problem is that your energy needs to be sustained and regularly replenished. The first thing to do is to audit your personal energy. Using a 1-10 scale, ask yourself:

- I know my most productive time of day.
- I take breaks during the day.
- I regularly express gratitude.
- I eat healthy foods.
- I have a consistent bedtime.
- I know what today’s priority is.
- I frequently do things I love to do.

- I usually get the day's work done.
- I use my strengths every day at work.
- My work aligns with my values.
- I enjoy a hobby or some leisure pursuit.
- I exercise regularly.
- I connect with friends every week.

Which items most influence your energy in a positive way? In a negative way? (See [Dan Rockwell, Leadership Freak blog, "20 Questions You Can Use to Audit Personal Energy," March 24, 2022.](#))

I know that I am more energized in the morning hours so I focus on key priorities after finishing my morning coffee and reading the newspaper. To refill my energy tank, I take a walk in the mid-afternoon after focusing on work projects in the morning and early afternoon. After my walk, I can return to work. Certain people energize me so I regularly schedule a cup of coffee or a drink with them to reconnect and discuss my projects and life in general.

Do Less, Be More

I know that you as an HR division manager are trying to push out the work assigned to your division. As a leader, your role is to help your team become more productive. The key is how you show up and interact with people. Do less, be more.

You can make a big difference in the lives of others by being self-reflective, deciding how you want to show up and be present with others, and taking small steps to become a better leader. I am not suggesting you change who you are. I am suggesting that you can become your best self.

As Harry Kraemer, former CEO of Baxter Pharmaceuticals, stated, "If you don't know yourself, how can you lead yourself? If you can't lead yourself, how can you lead others?" ([Dan Rockwell, Leadership Freak blog, "Journey To Silence," April 5, 2011.](#))



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