Navigating Through Transitions
CCAC Annual Conference
April 18, 2018
Berkeley, CA

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Frank’s Personal Experience

☐ My house fire
☐ What did Frank learn from experience?

A Couple of Quotes

“It is neither the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.”

Charles Darwin
A Couple of Quotes

“The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read or write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn & relearn.”

Alvin Toffler, futurist

unlearn.

Navigating Thru Transitions

- “In past 24 months, what has been a personal experience with transition (positive or challenging)?”
  - What was specific experience?
  - What was difficult?
  - How did I feel?
  - What steps did I take to more effectively navigate the transition?

Navigating Transitions

- Sense of loss
- Need to navigate the “neutral zone” — limbo between the old reality & new one
- Key question — how do I respond?
3 Reactions to Change

1. Embrace the change
2. Try to be neutral
3. Resist the change

Some Approaches

- Vent a little
- Reflect
- Develop “a new beginning” mindset
- Engage in conversation
- Avoid isolation; seek social support

Some Approaches (con’t)

- Focus on learning
- Share the burden
- Get coaching
- Shape the change
Overview

1. Drivers of disruption
2. The big challenges facing local govts
3. Technical vs. adaptive challenges
4. Indispensable competencies for 21st century leaders

Overview (con’t)

5. Taking “smart risks”
6. Resources
7. “Just one commitment”
8. Reactions

Drivers of “Disruption”

“What are the mega-forces disrupting local government?”
Drivers of Disruption

- Unsustainable cost structures
- Out-of-whack tax system
- Structures, processes, & rules oriented toward static world
- Technology
- Demographic, generational, value shifts

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Drivers of Disruption

- Problems are complex, difficult to solve, emotion-laden, & divisive
- Power is diffuse (“veto” power)
- No one institution can solve any problem
- Citizen mistrust in all institutions including govt

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Leading in Disruptive World

- Leaders must understand change is accelerating & discontinuous
- To confront any major challenge, leaders must cross boundaries & engage others
- Leaders must focus on experimenting, getting it “roughly right,” & fixing things along the way
- Learning is the key to adapting
“Are we learning as fast as the world is changing?”

Gary Hamel

The Big Challenges

What are 2-3 very big challenges that you’d like to help your organization address in the next 5 years?

The Nature of the Challenges

- **Technical challenges (“tame”)**
  Solutions are known & can be addressed through management

- **Adaptive challenges (“wicked”)**
  Solutions are unknown, often involve value conflicts, & require leadership at all levels

“Right Answer”
The Essence of Leadership

“Leaders do not force people to follow—they invite them on a journey.”
Charles Lauer

The Importance of People Skills

80 percent of management failure is related to poor people skills.

“Why would anyone want to follow me?”

- Identify 2-3 reasons that people would want to follow you
- Identify one trait that would cause people to be reluctant to follow you
Expanding Portfolio of Behaviors

- Leverage your strengths
- “Flex” behavior
- Find a “wingman”
- Get a coach
- Announce your intent; ask for support
- Try something out, practice, debrief; practice some more

Indispensable Competencies

- Active futures orientation
- Boundary-crossing & partnering skills
- Learning agility
- Ability to start conversations & tell stories
- Ability to create meaning
- Ability to develop talent
- Resiliency

Risks in Uncertain Environment

- In my professional or personal life, what was a risk that was worth taking?
- Why was I able to pull it off?
Taking “Smart Risks”

1. Consider risks only if they are important to you & are aligned with your passion
2. Calculate the costs of doing nothing (status quo option)
3. “Ready, fire, aim”
4. Use a respected sponsor
5. Spread the risk

Taking “Smart Risks” (con’t)

6. Tie change project to another initiative or investment already underway
7. Pilot everything
8. Take incremental steps & ramp up over time
9. Debrief experience as you go along
10. Seek guidance from your “dream team”

Resources

- William Bridges, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life Changes*
- Kevin Duggan & Frank Benest, “Navigating Through Transitions—Strategies to Help You Cope with New Realities,” *PM Magazine*
- Career Compass columns
  - “Bouncing Back from Defeat”
  - “Engaging Employees for Success”
  - “Leadership is the Art of Conversations”
Resources

- ICMA Coaching Program
  - www.icma.org/coaching
  - Webinars
  - One-to-one coaching + new training videos
  - Speed coaching
  - Career Compass columns
  - Women Leading Govt
    - www.icma.org/wlg

“Just One Thing”

- “What is just one thing I commit to do to better adapt to change?”
  - MY COMMITMENT

Reaction Panel

- What resonated with me?
- What did not resonate with me?
- What do I have to add?
hen managers think of transitions, they might recall their first manager job, when they moved to a new organization, or perhaps even an involuntary departure from a position. In the first two cases, managers are generally excited about the opportunity even though they recognize that there will be challenges in establishing themselves. In these situations, managers are open to new challenges, experiences, relationships, learning, and growth.

In the case of an involuntary transition, while not usually feeling positive about the circumstances, managers clearly face a challenge in both adjusting to changed circumstances and developing a new direction.

Many Types of Transitions

Local government managers may not recognize that they also periodically experience other kinds of transitions in addition to job changes. These transitions can significantly affect them, both personally and professionally. Recognizing when these transitions occur and then developing and implementing effective strategies to navigate through them can be critical. Such transitions might occur when managers are experiencing some of these changes:

• A new governing body member (or members) whose election may have changed the dynamics of the board.
• A new department head.
• New political demands by a vocal neighborhood, business, or ethnic group.
• A natural or human disaster or a significant incident that totally disrupts the organization or the community.
• Increased media scrutiny and criticism.
• Changing financial condition for the organization.

All of these disruptive situations require a mindset that allows managers to recognize that they are in the midst of a transition and must find ways to adapt to the new political or organizational circumstances. Not fully appreciating the impact of a transition can undercut a person’s ability to lead or at worst, places a person at odds with new realities, thus putting the manager at risk—personally and professionally. The risk derives from being in a circumstance where you need to respond effectively to changing conditions, but a failure to fully appreciate and understand that a change has occurred results in an ineffective or delayed response.

While it is fundamental to our professional responsibilities that we adapt to changing circumstances, including a new policy direction, there can be a natural tendency to rationalize that continuing along the same path is the reasonable path to take.

Change vs. Transition

William Bridges, in the book Transitions: Making Sense of Life Changes, differentiates between change and transition. Change is situational—a new job, role, team, or community demand. Transition is the psychological process we go through in order to come to terms with the new situation. Change is external; transition is internal.

Change happens; so do transitions—with or without our consent. To effectively deal with transitions and adapt, we must first recognize the nature of the transition process. One of the greatest potential barriers in effectively dealing with change is failing to fully appreciate when change is indeed occurring and its true impacts. In terms of processing change, denial can be the most challenging impediment to effectively...

STRATEGIES TO HELP YOU SUCCESSFULLY COPE WITH NEW REALITIES

By Kevin Duggan, ICMA-CM and Frank Benest, ICMA-CM
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**TAKEAWAYS**
- Understand how the range of transitions can impact a manager’s professional success.
- Recognize when a transition is taking place in order to adapt.
- Learn to develop strategies to navigate the neutral zone between old and new realities.
dealing with change and the necessary transition that must follow.

Transitions often include a sense of loss. In fact, Bridges notes that transitions start with an ending. When we leave an organization for a new one, we have lost our team.

When a new governing board majority identifies a different policy agenda, there is a sense of loss when we are required to adapt to a new direction. New political demands require an ending to an old way of doing business.

Simply put, the first step in managing transition is letting go.

The second step, according to Bridges, is navigating the “neutral zone”: the limbo between the old reality and the new. It is the feeling that the old way of doing things or relating is gone and the new way is uncomfortable. It is an emotionally difficult place to be.

In response to finding ourselves in this psychological neutral zone, we can try to ignore it, rush through it, or escape from it. These reactions will mean that we will have difficulty making the change work for us and our team. If we recognize that we are struggling with a transition, we can use the neutral zone to find creative solutions to new demands and learn and grow.

**Strategies to Manage Transitions**

Once cognizant that there are many kinds of transitions (some of our own choosing and some forced on us), managers can more consciously use a set of strategies to successfully navigate them. These approaches include the following:

1. **Vent a little.** If we are feeling put upon and forced to change, it is accept-

able to blow off some steam as long as it is with a trusted family member, friend, or colleague in a safe environment.

2. **Reflect.** Local government managers tend to be an action-oriented lot. Typically, we do not spend much time reflecting. To sense that we are experiencing a transition, we need to reflect and ask:

   - What is changing and what is the impact?
   - If I am feeling negative and put upon, why is that so?
   - What is causing me to be reactive and defensive?
   - How am I behaving with others?
   - Am I effectively responding to this change, or simply denying or resisting?

Some colleagues have used various methods to promote self-reflection. One wrote in a journal when he was recovering from cancer treatment. Others have turned to spouses or counselors to reflect as they experience the neutral zone.

Many of us simply schedule quiet time to reflect about feeling unsettled. Simply getting away from the work environment—to walk, jog, ride your bike, take a vacation, or attend a retreat or other professional development opportunity can get a person away from the immediate environment and provide time for reflection on what is happening.

3. **Use a new manager mindset.** The reason most managers succeed in a new job is because they are more or less prepared and approach it with a new manager mindset. As new managers, we typically:

   - Are open to the new experience.
   - Are curious.
   - Collect data.
   - Consider different perspectives and do not rush to judgment.
   - Want to learn.
   - Build relationships and rapport.
   - Engage people at all levels, internally and externally.
   - Develop a plan/strategy.
   - Implement our plan/strategy with energy and enthusiasm.
   - Assess, after a period of time, how the plan implementation is proceeding.

This kind of mindset will help managers deal with other transitions as well.

4. **Approach transitions as opportunities for a fresh start.** As an established executive, managers may bemoan a possibly disruptive new councilmember or a new advocacy group demanding political change. We may hope that the established political agenda or ways of doing business will not undergo a dramatic shift, making it difficult for us or our team.

   If the transition is approached as an opportunity for a fresh start, however, managers can focus on building positive relationships and rapport. While a transition may be difficult and may not always be positive, it can be a reinvigorating challenge that can become a source of professional and personal growth.

5. **Engage in conversation.** As the poet David Whyte suggested at a presentation to the 2000 annual conference of the City Managers Department, League of California Cities, leadership is the art of conversation. In the midst of
transitions, managers need to engage people internally and externally in open-ended conversations, welcome different perspectives and interests, and question long-held assumptions as they adapt to change.

You might, for instance, be a police chief in a community that has quickly undergone demographic change. With the arrival of a number of Spanish-speaking immigrants, the community is experiencing a day-worker challenge in the downtown area. Established residents and merchants are demanding action to rid the downtown of the day workers.

Some councilmembers are beginning to consider a new ordinance to ban the solicitation of work from street corners. As police chief, the manager turns the problem over to you.

While your first reaction is to target special enforcement, you wonder if that is the right approach. After some soul-searching, you engage merchants, neighborhood and church leaders, and new immigrant group members in a series of conversations to explore possible responses. These efforts eventually lead to a pilot day-worker center operated by a local church.

6. Avoid isolation. During uncomfortable transitions, we may isolate ourselves. Social support is one of the keys to dealing with the emotions of transition.

We need to find the opportunity to share with trusted colleagues, informal coaches, friends, and family members the challenges of our situation, concerns and doubts, some possible solutions, and then get feedback.

7. Focus on learning. If we reconceptualize the challenge as an opportunity for learning, the transition can be a time of creativity and growth. Learning activities might include:
- Conducting a review of the literature.
- Talking to colleagues.
- Interviewing experts.
- Engaging non-subject matter experts from different disciplines in brainstorming different approaches.
- Trying out a pilot response, which we fine-tune based on initial experiences.

Given your busy life, you may not have the time to do all of the above; however, one or more of these learning strategies may help you gain perspective and insight.

As we go through the transition, we must continually debrief: What is going well? What is not going well? How do we feel? What are we learning?

8. Share the burden. Even if we understand that we are going through a transition, we do not have to do all of the relationship building, creative problem solving, and learning ourselves. As we engage internal staff and outside stakeholders, we can share the learning and leadership work.

Helping Others Cope

As managers experience transition and try to personally cope with it, they as leaders need to help others cope with transition, too. Since colleagues may be struggling with the new realities of layoffs, organizational restructuring, different reporting relationships, or outside political demands, they will certainly need emotional and other kinds of support.

As leaders, managers can help colleagues by encouraging conversations that over time:
- Provide a safe environment to vent.
- Acknowledge feelings of loss and any sense of unfairness or resentment.
- Encourage, ultimately, a search for opportunity, experimentation, and learning in response to change.

Shaping the Change

If we recognize transitions in their many forms, acknowledge the loss involved, and work through the emotional neutral zone between the old and new reality, then we have the chance to help shape the change.

We will likely be able to effectively cope with the transitions that inevitably occur in our professional lives if we:
- Understand the various types of transitions that can impact us professionally and personally.
- Are alert to when they occur.
- Learn to accept the new reality.
- Develop and implement strategies with energy and enthusiasm.
- Periodically review and adjust strategies based on the results we are experiencing.

Properly handled, transitions give managers the opportunity to confront challenges and adversity, re-engage, learn, and renew themselves and their team.

ENDNOTES


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I’m a human resources manager in a large city organization. Since I would like to enhance my leadership capabilities, I asked the HR director if I could lead a redesign of our recruitment process. Given my extensive experience and expertise in recruitment, she agreed. Currently, we have over 72 positions vacant city-wide. It takes approximately five to six months, beginning to end, to fill a vacancy.

In competing for talent, my city government is losing opportunities to other organizations because early and mid-career professionals won’t wait around for us to complete our cumbersome process. To make matters worse, our organization struggles to meet the goals set by the city council and city manager with this continuing high level of vacancies.

I’ve had many discussions with department heads and hiring managers in all the departments but there is no buy-in. Everyone wants to maintain in one way or another what they are used to doing. Even my own HR recruitment staff people do not feel any sense of urgency.

I have drafted a new streamlined recruitment process and have shared my proposal with all the key players but they all seem to have a different concern or problem. They just don’t seem to get it.
Everyone wants to hire talent quicker but no one seems motivated to significantly change the process. How do I get buy-in to the streamlined process? Can you suggest how I better approach this challenge?

**DR. BENEST:** Congratulations on taking on this leadership challenge. I sense that you are committed to making a positive difference for your organization.

The problem is that you seek “buy-in.” You have a plan to change things (in your mind for the better) and you want to sell it to others. Seeking buy-in is fundamentally manipulative, and people can immediately sense it, and, therefore, they resist your efforts.

Instead of trying to persuade people, you need to engage colleagues in HR and in other departments in authentic conversations.

**WHAT ARE AUTHENTIC CONVERSATIONS?**

Authentic conversations are those conversations in which you are truly open to the conversation and wherever it may lead. In my experience, authentic conversations are not the same as the usual business discussions. Authentic conversations are those in which you are trying to genuinely learn from the other person, not teach or persuade. Here are my suggestions to become more self-fulfilled in your position.

**WHY DOES LEADERSHIP REQUIRE AUTHENTIC CONVERSATIONS?**

You are facing an adaptive (not a technical) challenge. You may think that you are addressing a technical challenge with an evident technical solution, and people just “don’t get it.” However, in reality, you are facing an adaptive challenge because all the stakeholders have their own preferred solutions and can easily block your technical solution. Your technical expertise and any formal management authority are insufficient to carry the day.

As opposed to technical problems, adaptive challenges are those problems where there are no right or wrong answers. Stakeholder groups all have different interests and concerns and they can each “veto” your plan. Adaptive challenges require leadership, not management.

You lead by starting conversations, convening people, focusing on shared purpose, responding to the concerns and fears, solving problems together, and mobilizing action. Your job as a leader is to get to “yes” when everyone can say “no.”

**WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF AUTHENTIC CONVERSATIONS?**

Authentic conversations have great value. They can help the leader:

- Probe for critical information and identify the critical interests, hopes, fears and concerns of stakeholders.
- Create consensus about the problem.
- Promote empathy on the part of those engaged in conversation.
- Create relationships and connections (people won’t tend to follow you if they do not feel connected to you).
- Generate commitment and action.
• Demonstrate that you care.
• Create the opportunity to build trust.

WHAT ARE THE KEY INGREDIENTS TO AUTHENTIC CONVERSATIONS?

1. Demonstrate curiosity

One must enter the conversation with a curious or inquiring mind. You want to understand the person’s situation, his or her interests, and concerns. It is not about selling your solution.

The Buddhists say that one must avoid an “expert’s mind.” An expert’s mind is a “full” and thus a closed mind. There is no room in an expert’s mind for new views and approaches. Therefore, the Buddhists suggest that one approaches a difficult challenge with a “beginner’s mind.” A beginner’s mind is an empty mind and thus open to different approaches.

Authentic conversations will help the leader become a “learn-it-all” (as opposed to a “know-it-all”).

2. Seek different kinds of data

Instead of seeking only technical information, you must probe for other kinds of data, including hopes, fears, concerns and problems, values, and perspectives.

3. Ask powerful questions

To inquire and get the right kind of data, the leader must come prepared to ask powerful, open-ended questions, such as:

- What are your current frustrations with the city’s recruitment and hiring processes?
- Can you share with me some specific examples or experiences about recruiting and hiring that frustrated you or your department staff?
- If we could hire talented employees in a quicker fashion, how would that support your department efforts?
- Given your needs, what would an effective recruitment process look like?
- As the city revises its recruitment process, what are your fears or concerns? What is behind your fear or concern? (Listen for things they may be protecting, which are important to them.)
- What happens if we do nothing?
- How might we transform the process to meet your needs?
- Who might know more about this challenge in your department?

4. Actively listen

Active listening requires that you ask open-ended questions, listen intently, avoid distractions (including conversations going on in your head), ask probing follow-up questions, and then summarize and paraphrase what you heard. By acknowledging the other person’s interests, hopes, values, and concerns, you demonstrate that you truly “heard” the person.

Listen more than you talk. Typically, a good conversationalist listens twice as much as he or she talks.
Furthermore, listen deeply. Don’t immediately seek to rebut (“yes, but”). Instead, say “tell me more.”

**5. Demonstrate empathy**

By acknowledging the experiences of others and their hopes and fears going forward, you demonstrate empathy. Empathy is the ability to understand and share the experiences and feelings of others from their perspective, not your own.

By putting yourself in the place of others, you create empathy, which in turn promotes relationship and connection.

**6. Reflect on what you heard**

All leadership requires reflection. You need to spend some time reflecting and considering the information that your conversations have generated. Specifically, you must struggle to understand the source of any resistance. Is it about certain technical aspects of the redesign? Is it about autonomy or authority? Do people need more time to digest any possible changes? Are there perhaps other ideas or suggestions that you should consider?

You can reflect by reviewing your notes from the conversations or by keeping a log or journal. Some people like to reflect alone at a café or during walks. I like to reflect and condense information by talking to others (perhaps a trusted colleague, a spouse or partner, or coach).

**7. Be willing to change your perspective**

Demonstrate that the conversation mattered. As a leader, you must show in tangible ways that the conversation influenced your thinking and the proposal. Otherwise, the conversation is not “authentic;” it is merely talk. To influence others, you must let them influence you. And you must provide feedback to the person about how the conversation changed your perspective or idea.

**HOW DOES ONE RESPOND TO RELUCTANCE OR RESISTANCE?**

Even if you do not agree, you never want to minimize concerns or problems identified by HR staff or department managers. As Dan Rockwell points out in his *Leadership Freak* blog “How To Cuddle Up with ‘No’ and Win with Doom and Gloomers” (Oct 17, 2017), when you trivialize the concerns of others, you are seen as closed and stubborn.

So, how does a leader legitimately deal with the problems and concerns generated in conversation with others? First, as suggested above, you need to acknowledge the problems expressed during the initial conversation.

Second, don’t try to immediately respond in the first conversation to all the fears, problems, and/or concerns identified by the other person. As suggested by Sally Blount and Shana Carroll in an *hbr.org* blog piece (May 16, 2017), “Overcome Resistance to Change with Two Conversations,” the leader needs to engage an important stakeholder in at least two conversations, if not more. In the second conversation, you aim to demonstrate that you heard the concerns of the person. Based on the first conversation, you outline in the second conversation what will be different, or not, in your
approach and explain why. You want the other person to feel that their issues have genuinely shaped your thinking about the redesign.

According to Blount and Carroll, the time between the two conversations is important. They recommend that you get back together for a second or subsequent conversation in two to seven days. If you respond too quickly, either in the initial conversation or a day later, the stakeholder may not feel that you have fully considered their concerns or suggestions. If you wait longer than seven days, they may feel forgotten and dismissed.

During the subsequent conversations, you can ask some additional questions. For example, how might we test out our ideas? What might a pilot program or beta-test look like? Who needs to be involved? What would success look like? What’s the next step that doesn’t require much commitment? (See Dan Rockwell, Leadership Freak blog, Oct 17, 2017.)

If you don’t integrate the interests of others and legitimately respond to their concerns, they will block you. While you cannot solve every problem, or make every concern go away, you do need to get their “fingerprints” on the solution so it becomes their solution. As you incorporate the ideas of others and minimize their problems, the solution tends to become more robust and elegant.

As American military strategy suggests, be clear about purpose and direction, yet flexible about how to achieve it.

WHAT ARE OTHER TIPS TO PROMOTE AUTHENTIC CONVERSATIONS?

Here are some other ideas on how to promote authenticity in your crucial conversations.

1. Start with the “why”

We often jump into discussions by focusing on the “what” (streamline the recruitment process) and the “how” (cut out steps, change who does what). Instead we must first focus on the “why” for redesigning the recruitment process, such as:

- Finding the best talent for the organization.
- Filling vacancies quicker so the organization can meet its goals.
- Being more competitive for talent vis-a-vis other public, private, and nonprofit organizations.

People will be more open to the “what” and “how” if they are aligned with the “why.” (See Simon Sinek’s TED Talk, “How Great Leaders Inspire Action.”)

2. Frame the issue differently for different stakeholders

So that different stakeholders are open to considering potential solutions, you need to frame the issue given their interests. Just as a blue frame brings out the blue in a painting, the correct frame helps someone consider an idea or viable solutions based on their values or interests.

Therefore, if we want a department director to consider different approaches for redesigning the recruitment and hiring process, you may ask “How does a new process help you keep your authority to hire the best talent in the quickest fashion?” For HR staff, you might ask, “How do we in HR ensure that the city selects talent based on merit in an impartial yet quicker fashion?”
By framing the issue differently for different groups, you are not attempting to manipulate people. You are merely trying to get them to consider an opportunity.

3. Minimize distractions

If you are going to have a meaningful and constructive conversation with someone, you need to be prepared, be present in the moment, make eye contact, and minimize any distractions. In addition to scheduling ample time to ask questions and explore issues, you might want to talk sitting next to each other without a desk or table separating you, put your smart phone away, or better yet, meet at a café or take a walk together.

4. Show patience

Engaging others in multiple conversations takes time. You must show some patience if you are getting people aligned on purpose and intent, identifying themes from all your conversations, and then modifying your proposal to incorporate the interests and concerns of others. At that point, you can pick up speed because you have addressed the significant issues that people have.

Patience and urgency can co-exist. Go slow to go fast. (See Career Compass No. 56: “The Paradoxes of Leadership.”)

5. Ask people to share experiences and stories

As you engage others in conversation, ask them to share personal experiences with respect to the recruitment and hiring process. These vignettes or stories are powerful ways to illuminate issues and discern themes. Plus, people typically love to talk about their own experiences and tell stories.

Later in the process, you can share these stories with decision-makers and other stakeholders. You certainly need technical data and facts (for instance, the average number of vacancies at any given time city-wide, the time a typical recruitment takes from beginning to end, the percent of applicants who are no longer available by the time interviews are conducted). However, data is necessary but completely insufficient. Stories make the data come alive and often compel people to act. (See Career Compass No. 50: “Story-Telling—A Powerful Way to Lead and Communicate.”)

WHY SHOULD LEADERS RESIST THE URGE TO FIRST CALL A MEETING?

When facing an adaptive challenge in local government, oftentimes our first inclination as leaders is to call a meeting of internal or external stakeholders. Why should we resist this urge?

When addressing an adaptive challenge, each stakeholder group has its own preferred solution or approach. Therefore, if you begin the process by organizing a meeting of stakeholders, you might be just exacerbating conflict. A meeting might harden the differences in values and approaches, and everyone then takes a position for or against the approach.

Consequently, you must start with one-one-conversations during which you probe for values, interest, hopes, fears, and concerns. Once you respond in tangible ways to the issues and themes that emerge from your initial conversations, you can call a meeting and identify the purpose and “why” that you all share. You can then explore where there is alignment on key elements of the redesign and what problems remain to be addressed by the group.
HOW DOES CONVERSATION CONTRIBUTE TO LEADERSHIP?

If you listen intently, ask questions, consider other viewpoints, and modify your solution or approach based on the conversation, you are showing respect for the other person and the reality that he or she experiences. You are also creating trust, which is the critical currency for any leader. People tend to follow leaders who build relationship and connection. It is through relationships that leaders produce results.

CREATING A CULTURE OF CONVERSATION

The poet David Whyte defines leadership as the art of conversation. Leaders ask themselves:

- With whom do I need to have a conversation?
- What do I want the content of the conversation to be?
- What do I need to learn?
- Am I willing to revise my perspectives based on the conversation?

In authentic conversation, you don’t have to be right. Remember, adaptive challenges have no right or wrong answers.

As the actor Alan Alda suggests, listening and engaging in authentic conversations involves the “willingness to let the other person change you.”

If you lead by engaging others in conversation, you are modeling behavior and encouraging others to listen, consider other perspectives, and change the world together for the common good. Over time, you are helping your organization create a culture of conversation and positive change.

Sponsored by the ICMA Coaching Program, 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. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future Career Compass, e-mail careers@icma.org or contact Frank directly at frank@frankbenest.com. Read past columns at icma.org/careercompass.
ICMA CoachConnect

Find a volunteer coach through the ICMA network of coaches who are helping prepare our nation’s local government professionals.

Visit coachconnect.icma.org to get started:

- Create an online profile so coaches can get to know you better (uses the same login as your free or member ICMA account).
- Search by department, subject expertise, or by scope of work to discuss challenges specific to things like community engagement, public safety, or overcoming bias.
- Search by state to find someone in your community, state, or region.
- Search by gender to gain insight from women or men who can share their firsthand experiences.
- Work with your coach to establish how and when to meet, and the length of your coaching relationship.

Whether you are an emerging professional or seasoned manager, everyone at any stage of their career might want coaching. Seek career guidance and gain new perspectives by reaching out to ICMA coaches ready and eager to help you.

Players find coaches by department, subject expertise, or by scope of general workplace navigation, such as work/life balance, breaking into local government, veteran background, or career advancement.

Members and non-members of ICMA at any stage of their career can find a coach to help them with their career, a second opinion on a community issue or project concern, or the work-life balance challenges of the profession. Connect online. It’s that easy.

Need help getting started? Go to icma.org/1-1-coaching to review Being a Great Coach and a Winning Player and additional resources, or contact coaching@icma.org for assistance.