



Career Compass No. 54:

How Do I Position Myself for Advancement?

In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Frank Benest provides valuable suggestions on moving up in your organization when the path to advancement is not clear.

by Dr. Frank Benest

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I'm a mid-career program supervisor in a parks and recreation department of a mid-sized city in the southeast. I've served in my position for four years and am well-regarded by my manager and the program group that I supervise. I have learned a lot and produce a lot. I also try to stay up-to-date by attending statewide parks and recreation conferences. In addition, I recently earned a master's in recreation studies.

I'd like to move up into management. I have a lot to offer but I feel stymied. My recreation manager is not going anyplace, and there does not seem like there is much opportunity to advance upward in my department.

How do I position myself for growth and advancement? Can you help me figure it out?



**Career advancement opportunities looking bleak?
Keep looking.
You can find them right around the corner.**

DR. BENEST: I understand feeling stymied. In my career, I was a community services manager and did not immediately see a path forward in my own organization. I, too, had to figure it out.

Approaches to Advancing

Given my own efforts to advance in my career, plus the experience of coaching aspiring managers, I suggest the following approaches:

1. DO SOME SELF-ASSESSMENT

Given that you want to move into management, reflect upon your experiences, knowledge, and skills. With respect to operational knowledge and technical skills, plus “soft” leadership skills:

- Where are you strong?
- Where do you have experience, knowledge, or skill gaps?
- How do you fill those gaps?

2. GET SOME FEEDBACK

You might want to meet with the city’s HR director who can review your professional experience and skills and amplify on your own assessment. For instance, the HR director may suggest that you acquire more experience and knowledge in budgeting, community engagement, and /or formal presentations to boards and commissions.

You might also want to meet with the parks and recreation director and/or the recreation superintendent for their feedback on how you can better position yourself to advance into management.

To round out this assessment activity, schedule a talent development conversation with a formal or informal coach ([Career Compass No. 48 "How Do I Benefit from a Coach?"](#)).

3. FOCUS ON “LEARNING BY DOING”

While it is tempting to take some training workshops or classes, these classroom education experiences by themselves do not produce authentic learning (new learning leads to changed or new behavior). It is only if you apply what you are presented in the classroom that you truly learn and acquire new skills and behaviors.

Therefore, to accelerate your development, you must secure a series of stretching job assignments coupled with helpful and candid feedback or coaching. For example, if you have some experiential gaps in budgeting or citizen engagement, how do you get those opportunities?

4. LOOK FOR ACTING POSITIONS, JOB ROTATIONS, OR SPECIAL ASSIGNMENTS

Most of our local government organizations are experiencing a “retirement wave” of baby-boomer managers and professionals who are exiting full-time careers. Many of our agencies are coping with a number of management vacancies and are using “acting managers” to fill those positions until

permanent replacements are found. Acting or interim positions are energizing opportunities to acquire new experiences, learn new skills, and demonstrate your competence.

Another option is seeking a job rotation opportunity, either in your department or another department. Since many local governments recognize that they face a major talent challenge, they have begun to institute job rotation programs to grow talent.

Even without a formal job rotation program in place, you can participate on a special project group or cross-cutting team. For example, you can volunteer to help the assistant parks and recreation director develop the department budget or request to serve on a multi-department group shaping a new land development proposal or dealing with homelessness in your community. You can also suggest that you be appointed as a department liaison to the chamber of commerce or a parks and recreation board or commission committee.

5. SEEK THE “SWEET SPOT” OF LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

The key issue in securing these new “doing” opportunities is to ensure that they are in your “sweet spot” of learning and development. The sweet spot of learning and development is when you have a 50-70% of success. If you have a 90% chance of success in addressing a new assignment, it is too easy and you won’t be stretching and growing. It is just more work on your plate. If you have a 40% chance of success, the assignment may overwhelm you and you may withdraw or feel too insecure. Seek the “sweet spot.”

6. JUMP IN

When you accept an acting position or a job rotation, don’t expect to be totally prepared. (This also applies when you secure a new permanent position). Most of us are not completely “ready” for new leadership assignments, so we must figure it out as we go along. We try out some things; get feedback from team members, supervisors, and coaches; and fix things up as we go along.

Learning agility and FIO (“figure it out”) skills are the key competencies as you advance.

7. ENLIST SUPPORT OF YOUR BOSS AND OTHERS

If you want an interim management or rotational opportunity or a special assignment, you might need the support of your manager or department director. You want them to agree to engaging you in a new experience. You also want them to be on the lookout for you and identify any interim assignments or other opportunities.

One way to secure active support is to directly ask for it. If you are a good performer, top managers want to keep you engaged and happy. They don’t want to lose you. When organizations are experiencing talent shortages, you have some leverage—be nice but use it!

The second and less direct way is to engage higher-ups (parks and recreation director, HR manager or director, assistant city manager, community development director) in talent development conversations. As part of one—or better yet several—development conversations, you can enlist their active support. For instance, ask them how they can help you by suggesting specific assistance in securing a special assignment or team leadership opportunity or by making an introduction. As a follow-up to the conversation, they can then suggest your participation on a multi-department team that is being formed or an acting manager position in the parks division or public works department.

Remember, coaches love to coach and be helpful.

8. SECURE NEW TRAINING OR EDUCATION

Recognizing your assessment of strengths and gaps, you might want to get some additional training or education. If you don't have any labor relations experience, take a workshop on the topic. You have a master's degree, which is excellent. However, you might also want to get a certificate from a university or professional organization in a management or leadership skill area, such as contract management, civic engagement, land use development, or environmental sustainability.

ICMA provides many mid-career opportunities for professional development, such as [Local Government 101](#), [Local Government 201](#), [Emerging Leaders Development Program](#), and the [Mid-Career Managers Institute](#). These are great opportunities to learn, since they involve general management and leadership outside your operational area of expertise. [Visit ICMA University](#) for more information.

Remember that there is no true or authentic learning unless you apply the classroom learning on the job or in real life.

9. SEEK LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES IN PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Go beyond attending parks and recreation conferences. Most professional organizations need volunteers for professional committees. These are wonderful opportunities to build your leadership capabilities. Simply volunteer or ask a well-respected colleague (your director? a coach?) to recommend you for a committee. As you take on this professional committee work, you learn new stuff, grow your skills, and get visibility.

Your committee work can then lead to a board of directors or elected position in the professional association.

10. EXPAND YOUR NETWORK

You can grow your network by having coffee with key players in your organization, getting actively involved in committees through your professional organization, or attending a professional skills development workshop or ICMA certificate program.

A robust network can help you.:

- Learn about new topics and developments in your field
- Get career guidance or advice on problematic work situations
- Enlist the active support of others in achieving your career objectives
- Have fun.

(See [Career Compass No. 30 “Building a Powerful Network”](#))

11. GET A COACH!

Everyone needs several formal or informal coaches. Coaches are catalysts in helping us accelerate our development and take charge of our talent and careers.

To find out how to get a coach, benefit from coaching, and become a “winning player,” you can take advantage of the [ICMA Coaching Program](#). (You do not have to be an ICMA member to take advantage of these coaching resources.)

To learn about the coaching relationship, check out the new video [“Being a Great Coach and a Winning Player.”](#) To learn how to benefit from coaching, see [“Being a Winning Player—take charge of your talent”](#) and [“Talent Catalyst Conversation—watch coaching in action.”](#)

On the ICMA Coaching Program [“1-1 Coaching”](#) webpage, you can also find these training materials:

1. Outline for “talent catalyst conversation”
2. Handout “ABC’s of 1-1 Coaching”
3. Handout “Being a Great Coach and a Winning Player.”

A coach can be a catalyst for your growth and development.

12. BUILD A POWERFUL PERSONAL BRAND

To position yourself for advancement, you need people to know more about you than your position and duties in the organization. You need to assert your value and distinctive identity or “brand.” A personal brand is based on what is unique about you and what you have to offer. It is about your extraordinary knowledge, skills, aptitudes, and capabilities. A brand is often tied to your passion.

A brand can:

- Lead to attractive assignments and projects.
- Protect you when top management needs to eliminate positions and lower headcount.
- Shape the perceptions of others so they see you in terms of your strengths and assets as opposed to your weaknesses or deficiencies.

- Enhance your "promotability" inside the organization or lead to new opportunities in another organization.

We operate in a "project world"—most important work is done in teams that cut across division or department boundaries. In fact, a career is increasingly a portfolio of important projects. Therefore, a powerful brand will help you secure the best project work. Consider these typical conversations and assignment decisions:

- "Mary is smart and an agile learner. She will solve this perplexing problem. Let's assign her the challenge."
- "Jose is a doer and gets things done. I want him on my team."
- "Joanne knows how to engage neighborhood and community groups. Let's appoint her to lead the project."

The process of uncovering your unique personal brand involves an inventory of your assets, getting feedback from others, focusing on a few high-value areas, writing a brand statement, providing "proof points" validating your brand, and then promoting and leveraging your brand ([Career Compass No. 23 "Building a Powerful Brand"](#)).

In my encore career, my brand statement is that "I want to be known for my training and coaching skills so I can help develop the next generation of local government managers."

To help you discover, formulate and leverage your personal brand statement, visit the [ICMA Coaching](#) and click on "[Talent Development](#)." The ICMA Coaching Program provides a guide, "Take Charge of Your Career—creating a powerful brand" plus a video explaining the power of brands.

Consider a Mix of Development Activities

The ideal mix of development activities follows the 70/20/10 rule. Seventy percent of development should involve "learning through doing" (stretching job assignments). Twenty percent of development activity should focus on coaching. And ten percent of development activity should involve classroom training or education.

Once you do an assessment and get feedback from others, you might want to consider a high-intensity development activity such a Leadership Academy, an acting manager position, or a job rotation. These high-intensity activities add a lot of value yet take energy, time, and commitment.

You might also want to consider a low-intensity, less impactful yet valuable development activity such as participating in an [ICMA Coaching Program webinar](#) or a lunch-and-learn program with your agency.

A mid-intensity activity with high-pay-off would be engaging a coach or two.

We all have personal and family lives and want to continue to perform well in our current work assignments. Therefore, a mix of high-, medium-, and low-intensity development activities may be appropriate. An appropriate mix won't overwhelm you but spur on development and position you well for advancement.

Take Charge of Your Career

Don't wait for opportunities to present themselves. To take charge of your talent and career (see Don Maruska and Jay Perry, [Take Charge of Your Talent: Three Keys to Thriving in Your Career, Organization and Life](#)):

- Reflect
- Assess
- Engage in learning and growth activities, especially learning by doing
- Get a coach
- Do something!

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.