

## FEATURES

# 39 Best Practices for Preparing the Next Generation

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by Frank Benest

Preparing for a senior management position is of course the responsibility of the aspiring manager. Top executives in the local government organization, however, can provide specific support and a structure for developing talent. This article describes the best practices of city and county managers who have focused on their developmental role in preparing the next generation.

Although each senior manager is unique, and though organizations are of different sizes and have different capacities, traditions, and cultures, the following 39-point menu offers choices for every senior manager. Top executives in local government can provide support and a structure for developing talent.

### Personal Outlook

Specific practices, programs, and other efforts to groom up-and-comers flow from positive attitudes:

- 1. Acknowledge that the profession as a whole and your own organization in particular need to secure replacement talent for top positions.** City and county managers and other senior managers need to educate themselves on this quiet crisis.
- 2. Recognize talent development as a primary role, of equal importance to other executive management tasks.** If the longer-term developmental role is not a primary responsibility, it will get shoved aside by urgent, shorter-term challenges. But if something is believed important, it will occupy time and attention—an executive's most significant resources.
- 3. Understand that the chief executive is first and foremost a role model.** The most powerful way in which adults, as well as children, learn is through the modeling of behavior. Managers must therefore recognize that their every action will be observed by subordinates and will serve—for better or worse—to shape their successors' attitudes and behaviors.
- 4. Develop a more risk-taking attitude.** Many senior managers are risk-averse, but managers who consciously develop talent must be open to mistakes. Managers should encourage up-and-comers to stretch, take on new roles, and make mistakes—even visible ones. Learning and growth occur after missteps, even failures.
- 5. Adopt a broader notion of professional legacy.** A legacy includes not only specific community improvements but also talent development.

### Specific Practices

Once the chief executive and other senior managers have decided to develop talent, they can choose from the best practices that engage aspiring managers in experiences that promote learning by doing, instead of learning by formal education and training only.

To identify best practices and to explore obstacles that are perceived to get in the way of younger people becoming the successors to top management positions, the League of California Cities first surveyed aspiring managers and conducted focus groups. Younger respondents cited: the lack of time spent with senior managers; few direct supervisory responsibilities; a lack of broad experience, especially line authority over different functions; an absence of a big-picture view of the organization; minimal organization visibility; and little sense of real politics. For these reasons, many best practices exist for countering these major obstacles:

**6. Articulate to the whole organization, and especially to the management team, the need to develop replacement talent as a key organizational challenge.** Without an understanding by management of the replacement-gap problem, other staff will not comprehend and may even resent efforts of the chief executive or other senior managers. In addition, many of the best practices must be shared across top management to be effective.

**7. Identify up-and-comers from throughout the organization (not just the city or county manager's office) who have the talent and the potential to lead.** Because senior managers have limited time and attention to invest in developing talent, top management must focus time and resources on those most likely to develop as potential successors.

**8. Devote sufficient time to up-and-comers.** Time and attention are an executive's primary resources to invest. Spending time with aspiring managers will signal the executive's interest in them and will act as a significant motivator.

**9. Engage aspiring managers in conversations of substance.** Assistants and staff learn best through the modeling of behavior, and behavior can be more clearly understood if the leader converses with them about specific situations. Such conversations can focus on the context and demands of a problematic situation, the approach of the leader in addressing the problem, and what was learned.

Through such informal conversations, aspiring managers can learn about the big picture and the politics of the organization, the complexities and subtleties of relating to councils and other governing boards or external entities, and, more generally, how senior managers think and strategize. During these conversations, the senior manager can also provide informal and ongoing performance feedback.

**10. Share your personal experiences and professional journeys with aspiring managers.** A great way to engage a talented employee in one of these conversations is to share your personal journey, including your first interest in public service, transforming experiences, stops along the way of your career adventure, missteps and other challenges, significant mentors, and achievement of career goals. Such personal stories are powerful, and they encourage up-and-comers to create their own career journeys. During these informal development conversations, the executive—to assess how assistance might be offered—also can ask the younger person about dreams, goals, and career plans.

**11. Give aspiring managers a broad range of technical assignments.** Potential successors must acquire experience in budget, personnel, labor relations, contract management, legislative analysis and advocacy, and intergovernmental or external relations. In e-mail surveys and focus groups conducted as part of research being pursued, management assistants clearly felt that they lacked opportunities to develop a broad range of these hard skills and technical responsibilities.

**12. Place aspiring managers in a variety of departments, especially line departments.** They need to get a good, basic education in public works, public safety, recreation and community services, and utilities, as well as in administrative support areas such as finance and human resources. Upward-looking young people will become familiar with the differing styles of senior managers: their philosophies, organizational perspectives, and problem-solving approaches. They will have a chance to identify people they wish to emulate (or not) as they progress in their careers.

**13. Assign lead authority in managing special projects.** Often, talented support staff are assigned only to support roles in multidepartmental, special-project teams focused on downtown development, infrastructure, neighborhood services, affordable housing, citizen participation, and other cross-functional needs. As a stretch assignment, the executive can ask them to lead the special-project teams (this will include the authority to direct team members) and then, of course, can announce the assignment and publicly articulate these leadership roles.

Involvement with multidepartmental teams also offers the aspiring leader a bigger-picture view and various organizational perspectives. As part of the learning process, the junior manager acting as team leader could debrief with the executive who convened or sponsored the team and receive any feedback and advice. It is interesting to note that, in e-mail surveys, managers often cited inadequate soft skills as key impediments to the advancement of assistants; in surveys of assistants, however, the assistants often emphasized the need to build hard skills in order to move up in management.

**14. Provide direct supervisory authority, especially through the positions of acting manager or interim manager.** One critical gap in the skills portfolios of management assistants, analysts, and other administrative staff is the lack of experience in direct supervision of employees. In our surveys, both managers and assistants strongly suggested that local government managers fill vacant supervisor and manager positions at the unit, division, and department levels with interim or acting managers from the up-and-comer group.

To increase the support structure for interim managers, senior managers could match them with other senior managers who could assist them. In addition to the experience of direct line authority over employees and service programs, acting supervisors—with the active support of higher-ups—can gain a wealth of organizational knowledge, self-confidence, and new contacts.

**15. Structure the assignment to include council, board, and/or commission interaction.** Aspiring managers often do not have much contact with members of governing boards, official advisory commissions, or citizen committees. Consequently, they do not develop the necessary political acumen for more responsible management positions, or they often fear the sometimes messy, rough-and-tumble interaction with boards and advisory groups. Stretch assignments should include taking a project from idea conception to council or board approval; this should involve writing the staff report and making any public presentations.

**Succession planning minimizes the concern raised by aspiring managers in our e-mail survey that “moving one’s family around the state or country” was a key obstacle to becoming a city or county manager eventually.**

**16. Assign liaison responsibilities.** Up-and-comers, with adequate support, can serve as liaisons to council and board standing or ad hoc committees, advisory commissions, citizen committees appointed by the council or chief executive, and/or external groups like the chamber of commerce and neighborhood associations.

**17. Put an assistant in charge of agenda planning or budget.** If the assistant manager, assistant to the manager, or principal analyst coordinates council agenda planning, budget development, or a capital improvement project, that person will learn to deal with complexity, receive a lot of visibility, and have to interact with department directors, the mayor, and councilmembers regularly.

**18. Articulate the rewards of local government management.** City and county managers complain too much about unreasonable or meddlesome elected officials, less-than-competent employees, and hypercritical citizens. Although it is sometimes healthy to share the challenges of

our positions, it is also important to promote the benefits, rewards, and joys of our jobs throughout our organizations as well as in professional settings.

Assistants do not always perceive sufficient rewards to offset the problems, stresses, and even the occasional abuse involved in the top job. In our e-mail survey, assistants cited (in addition to good pay and good benefits) several rewards of local government management:

- Making a difference in the community.
- Improving the organization.
- Addressing diverse and stimulating challenges.
- Serving as a linchpin among council, staff, and community.
- Engaging citizens, other government agencies, and community organizations in solving problems.

These are the rewards of city and county management that resonate with our successors. Therefore, we need to articulate the joys of leading. Otherwise, why would bright and talented local government staff aspire to the position of chief executive?

**19. Urge aspiring managers to involve themselves in the profession.** Many chief executives cited as critical their involvement in their state associations, area manager groups, ICMA, associations of assistants, and the like. Managers can support aspiring managers by budgeting funds for their professional development activities, encouraging their involvement, giving them committee work, and even inviting them to accompany the chief executive to a luncheon of area managers or to a state conference of managers.

**20. Encourage aspiring managers to complete an M.P.A. or an M.B.A. degree.** An M.P.A. or M.B.A. not only provides a solid education for local government management but also screens in those eligible for advancement. Senior managers can help aspiring managers secure graduate degrees by providing tuition reimbursement, flexible schedules that permit class attendance, and work projects that can double as class projects.

**21. Authorize an up-and-comer to troubleshoot and fix an organizational problem.** Such an assignment provides high visibility for the troubleshooter, as well as practical experience in problem solving, dealing with sensitive or controversial situations, and resolving conflict.

**22. Include the assistant to the manager on the executive team,** rotate management assistants through the executive team, and/or encourage department heads to bring a division chief or a management assistant periodically to executive team meetings. Participating in executive team discussions or just listening to team dialogues affords a big-picture view of the organization, educates aspiring managers about the politics of the community and the organization, widens contacts, sends a positive message about developing talent, and serves as a reward in itself.

**23. Ask the assistant to give you input into the annual performance evaluations of department directors** (and let this input be known!). Because management assistants in the manager's office, as well as assistant managers, often have significant interaction with department heads, chief executives can request their input during performance evaluations. Acknowledging this practice will certainly make it easier for assistants to secure cooperation from department heads. In addition, it will train aspiring managers to evaluate performance and to understand the criteria by which the chief executive evaluates.

**24. Teach how the manager deals with demanding, bullying, or otherwise troublesome elected officials.** Because assistants may feel intimidated by overly demanding elected officials, the manager can use a conflict situation with a councilmember or a board member as an object

lesson for aspiring managers. Remembering that the best way to teach is through modeling, the manager, in a conflict with a councilmember, could reflect with an assistant about possible respectful yet assertive responses. The assistant will get some ideas about how to interact appropriately with councilmembers, even in difficult situations.

### **Structured Programs**

In the face of the growing replacement gap in senior management, some local governments have developed formal programs or other structured mechanisms to develop talent and potential successors:

**Managers must recognize that their every action will be observed by subordinates and will serve—for better or worse—to shape their successors' attitudes and behaviors.**

**25. Set up a pool of management assistants who rotate among various departments.**

Departments should be required to conduct a structured orientation for the management assistant with respect to the department as well as new duties. Some programs also set criteria to ensure that the department gives substantial work assignments to management assistants.

**26. Involve management assistants from various departments in quarterly seminars led by the chief executive or senior managers.**

The senior manager might share a personal journey and discuss a key organizational challenge in an interactive fashion. Participants then might be asked to share and reflect upon their own work and project experiences in the departments. One or two participants might also be assigned to discuss an article or training experience or asked to share a learning report. The seminar format is an opportunity to network, connect with senior managers, and exchange information.

**27. Assign a team of management assistants from various departments to conduct an ongoing or special project of organizational significance.**

After collecting data and analyzing the problem, the team can present its recommendations to the department heads and the chief executive for consideration. In addition to team building and problem solving, this experience supplies visibility and leadership development, as well as project management opportunities.

**28. Create a leadership academy or management certificate program for aspiring managers.**

Some local governments are large enough to establish their own academy or certificate program or jointly develop and fund the program with other local governments or through a community college, local university, or even the chamber of commerce. The curriculum often includes leadership philosophy, development of hard and soft skills, a class project, and networking opportunities. Department directors and other managers often nominate the participants.

**29. Build career ladders, or appoint intermediate positions** (for example, principal analyst or assistant to the manager) so that management assistants can move up in the organization and gain additional responsibility, authority, and management experience. A ladder of move-up positions and a tradition of upward mobility also help the organization better retain its talent.

**30. Establish a formal succession plan for the organization.** This is the most structured mechanism for ensuring that ready and able successors are available when senior managers leave or retire. Succession planning is common in the private sector and can be adapted to the public sector, including local government. Although the plan may reside organizationally in the human resources department and be managed by the human resources director, it is the responsibility of the executive team to develop, implement, and revise the succession plan as circumstances change. A typical succession plan identifies:

- Key management positions for which internal successors must be groomed.

- Knowledge, skills, competencies, and experiences required of successors if they are to move up.
- A ladder of succession, including rungs of increasing responsibility and authority.
- The specific group of employees to be developed over time.
- Mentors who will informally or formally coach the potential successors.
- Internal and/or external training, opportunities, and special assignments that will assist in the professional development of each designated employee.

In addition to providing ready and able successors, a formal succession-planning process better retains staff. Succession planning also minimizes the concern raised by aspiring managers in our e-mail survey that “moving one’s family around the state or country” was a key obstacle to becoming a city or county manager eventually.

**31. Develop a certain number of special assignments in various departments for potential successors.** Usually, these assignments are time-limited for six to eight months and entail a specific project with certain tangible outcomes or results desired by the end of the project period. Departments may bid on the limited number of special-assignment slots, and employees from other departments can formally apply.

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Special-assignment opportunities can be advertised over the organization’s intranet. Although special assignments must produce tangible results, it is equally important that they provide new learning experiences, perspectives, and contacts. Funding is often given to the donor department to “fill behind” the employee loaned on the special assignment.

**32. Trade a management assistant or other aspiring manager to a neighboring local government.** This is a good option for smaller organizations that cannot provide much mobility or many development opportunities for aspiring managers. Trading talent for a time-limited period furnishes up-and-coming managers with experience in different organizations, as well as new skills and learning opportunities they can bring back home.

#### **Other Ideas**

Here are some other ideas for developing and preparing aspiring managers:

**33. Offer a short career development course within the organization** (or through adult education or a community college). The course would focus on how to develop one’s portfolio of skills and experiences, write a winning résumé, interview for promotions, and attract the attention of executive recruiters.

**34. Ensure that there is no gender discrimination, ethnic bias, or harassment in the organization.** The majority of employees entering the workforce in the coming years will be women and people of color. One focus group concerned with women in management identified harassment, especially sexual harassment, as a specific barrier to women’s advancement. One participant recounted the instance of a male manager who harassed his female subordinate and was subsequently promoted, which sent a clear message to the organization; the female subordinate

was devalued and shamed and eventually left the organization. Harassment of any kind is morally, ethically, and legally wrong. During a talent shortage, it is also stupid.

**35. Encourage talented mid-career managers to enroll in workshops for future managers.**

In California, the California City Management Foundation funds and organizes an annual “Future City Manager” workshop. Space is limited, so participants must apply and be recommended by their managers. The format includes small groups and individual sessions. The instructors are a team comprising both well-established and first-time managers. Everyone shares personal journeys and discusses in an interactive setting the rewards, challenges, and skills of local government management.

**36. Include talent development as part of ICMA’s code of ethics or knowledge assessment process.**

If ICMA were to incorporate talent development into the code of ethics or into its knowledge assessment, it would certainly highlight this important role for managers and elevate its significance in the field of local government management.

**37. Attend workshops, query colleagues, read the literature, and learn from the private sector.**

To the extent that developing talent or successors is a professional crisis, local government managers need to “go to school” on the issue. Educational resources could include ICMA University classes, workshops at state association conferences, learning from colleagues who have begun to address the challenge, and reading the literature on succession planning and related topics.

**38. Encourage your state association or group of area managers to host networking and/or educational events for up-and-comers.**

Such events provide important information, widen networks, and motivate aspiring managers. Or better yet, a group of area managers can identify regional issues—urban runoff, affordable housing, and transportation challenges, for example—for assistants to analyze and recommend solutions to the managers as a group. Of course, assistants can also be included as full members of area managers’ groups.

**39. Participate in the annual conference of assistants.** By attending a conference of assistants, senior managers demonstrate that they care, and they provide attendees with an opportunity to enhance their networks. Local government managers can also serve on session panels, critique résumés, participate in mock interviews, and meet assistants informally at the social events.

**A Legacy**

Not every best practice is suitable for a particular chief executive or organization. By adopting a mix of these practices, however, all managers can effectively develop successes and leave long-term legacies for their communities and for the profession.

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