

Career Compass No. 14: Selling Your Ideas

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Even when we have a great idea, sometimes it's hard to convince the powers-that-be that a) it's workable, and b) now is the time. In this installment of Career Compass, Dr. Benest suggests some steps you can take to take your ideas from blueprint to implement.

I have a great idea. The utility department operates a small electrical substation on land located downtown. As the housing coordinator, I want to propose that the utility department consolidate this small substation with another small substation, freeing up city-owned land downtown for an affordable housing project serving low-income working families. The problem is that I've had difficulty selling my ideas in the past to top city management and other decision-makers. What do you suggest?



We can't solve the big problems facing our local governments and communities without great ideas. However, you've got to sell your great ideas or they are impotent.

So, here are my seven tips on developing support to implement good ideas:

1. Start with the problem. Before you propose a solution, you need to spend time talking to colleagues and outside stake-holders (including potential opponents) about their perceptions of the problem. Is the problem the lack of affordable housing for everyone or just for certain income groups or household types? Are land costs the big issue in your community or is it political opposition to affordable housing, or both?

2. Integrate the interests and concerns of others. Again, before proposing the solution, you need through your conversations to identify the interests and concerns of different groups.

For instance, the utilities department management may have no interest in affordable housing, but they may be concerned about the high costs of maintaining many small substations. Consolidating substations, as you propose, may decrease their costs. Top city management may not be a big advocate for affordable housing for low-income families but may be concerned about the difficulty of recruiting city employees given the high-cost of housing in the community. Or they may be concerned that many first-responders to emergencies live so far away from the city. Therefore, you may wish to incorporate some city workforce housing into your eventual proposal.

3. Identify a group of potential supporters. It is a good move to informally convene a group of insiders and outsiders to discuss responses to the affordable housing challenge in your community. This group should represent “referent groups” who are respected by decision-makers. In addition to providing good data about the problem and possible solutions, group members will become good ambassadors for the eventual solution because they have influence with decision-makers. They will also be able to suggest ways to market the proposal once it is unveiled.

4. Build a broad and engaging vision. Based on your conversations with diverse groups, you are now able to build a broad and compelling vision for your idea that resonates with many different stakeholders. For example:

- Given the high-cost of housing in the community, will the idea help your local government attract employees to its workforce?
- Will the idea provide housing for the working poor who have the greatest need for affordable housing?
- Does the vision include a beautiful and well-designed complex adding value to the downtown?
- Will the proposed housing be a “green” building?
- Will the housing be located near transit, schools, parks, and services?

5. Develop different “frames” for the idea. As suggested above, you must practice “positive regard” and get into the heads of different players, acknowledging their values, goals, hopes and fears. Once you identify their goals, interests and concerns, you can frame your idea in different ways for different decision-makers and influentials.

6. Tie your idea to larger agendas. To better market your idea, you should tie it to the larger agendas of the governing board, top management, or other players such as the downtown business community or neighborhood groups. For example, do the governing board and neighborhood associations have a stated goal to reduce traffic congestion related to a jobs/housing imbalance? If so, by linking your idea to this agenda, your proposal becomes more powerful.

7. Put a human face on your idea. It is certainly necessary to provide hard data about the need for affordable housing for low-income working families. However, data is necessary but insufficient. You also must humanize the issue for everyone. Perhaps you and others

can visit some other communities that have developed projects similar to what you are proposing as a means to:

- Highlight successful case studies
- Feature profiles of several families who are being served and in turn contribute to their communities
- Identify some powerful stories supporting your idea

Stories about real-life people are the most powerful way to communicate.

In summary, great ideas do not sell themselves. You need to build a broad and engaging case including data, stories, and influential partners in order to secure support for your proposal.



Career Compass is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff, and appears in ICMA's [JOB newsletter](#) and online. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's senior advisor 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.