

## Career Compass No. 16: Should I Consider a Lateral Move?

by Dr. Frank Benest

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There are times in our climb up the career ladder where either there's someone's blocking the ascent, or you're at the top rung. At times like these, the ladder next to us might offer more vertical movement.

*I've been working in a mid-level position in my local government agency for three years and am getting bored. I want to advance but due to budget constraints there are fewer promotional opportunities in my organization as some supervisory and management positions get consolidated when people retire or leave. However, there are mid-level positions that have come open in other departments for which I am qualified. Should I consider a lateral move in my organization even though it may not be a promotion and the money is about the same?*



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As you might expect, the answer is, "it depends". You may wish to consider a lateral move, especially under some of these circumstances:

1. You work for a good local government that has a sound reputation and treats its employees well.
2. You are bored and deal with the same reoccurring problems and there seems little more to learn.
3. Your supervisor is over-controlling, uninterested in you or your work, and/or unwilling to support your growth and development.
4. You have been in your current position more than two years. (The ICMA Code of Ethics indicates that a two-year commitment is a minimum; even if you are not an ICMA member, a two-year minimum tenure is a good standard.)

5. Your position is fairly focused or limiting and does not offer a broad range of experiences or relationships inside and outside the organization.
6. You want new and broader experiences but perhaps not more responsibility or stress because of family commitments or because you are taking courses or earning a graduate degree.

In considering a lateral move, you should recognize that most good organizations encourage or are at least open to lateral moves for its well-regarded employees.

**First**, it is easier and less costly to fill a position if there are qualified in-house employees interested in the position. **Second**, good organizations encourage lateral moves in order to keep talented employees who are no longer challenged by their current jobs. **Third**, lateral moves are a wonderful way to prepare emerging leaders for management positions when they become vacant (as they most certainly will as baby-boomer professionals retire over time regardless of current budget problems and consolidations).

As you keep your eyes and ears open for a possible lateral move, here are some criteria to evaluate the opportunity:

1. Will the new position offer new experiences, skills and relationships inside and outside the organization?
2. Is the new position more visible to top management or considered more critical to the most important challenges facing your local government (e.g., neighborhood revitalization, environmental sustainability, infrastructure management, economic development, land use planning, budgeting)?
3. Would you be working for a well-regarded supervisor or manager who would support your growth and development?
4. Would you have the opportunity to supervise one or several other employees or oversee a small program budget, thus broadening your management experience?
5. Does the position offer diverse kinds of experiences that would keep you energized?
6. Is the position in a department where there tends to be more positions and opportunities to advance?

**Finally**, if you think that a lateral move may meet some of your considerations, you need to check it out thoroughly before applying:

1. Schedule an informational interview with the supervisor or manager overseeing the position. Discuss your interests and probe the opportunities provided by the position.
2. Take out for coffee several employees who work in the department in which you are interested. In these one-to-one conversations, discuss the nature of the work and the potential new supervisor and top management of the department.
3. Explore the opportunity with an informal coach inside or outside the organization.
4. Check on what kind of persons in the position have been previously successful with what kinds of skills. Also find out if they have been able to advance.

If such a lateral move makes sense given your professional and personal needs, go for it. In the process, you will broaden your portfolio of experiences, skills and relationship; learn a lot; and make a continuing contribution.

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*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](mailto:careers@icma.org) or contact Frank directly at [frank@frankbenest.com](mailto:frank@frankbenest.com).