

Career Compass No. 19: Why Should Anyone Follow Me?

by Dr. Frank Benest

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In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Benest helps us understand the importance of trusting ourselves and being confident so that we can lead at every level of the organization.

I'm an early-career program specialist who wants to be a leader in my special district organization. I want to know how I can develop my leadership skills even though I'm not a manager. I know you have said that anyone can lead but why would anyone follow me if I'm not in a "leadership" role?

People decide to follow. It is a choice. Jim Collins states that you know it is leadership when followers can decide **not** to follow.

Non-managers often bemoan the fact that they do not have any formal authority. It is true that formal authority is helpful, but you need to recognize that formal management authority can only force a minimal level of compliance and performance. As opposed to management, leadership is not based on your formal authority but rather on your interpersonal attributes, even your moral or spiritual traits. Leadership is about winning the hearts and minds of people who choose to follow your lead.



MY MOM ROSY

So what are your values and other attributes that would attract followers? Here is one way to find out. Identify a person who earlier in your life significantly influenced who you are and most shaped your values.

In my case, it was my mother Rosy. Rosy was an Arab woman who grew up in Beirut, Lebanon. As a young single woman, Rosy bravely traveled by herself during World War II to Baghdad, Iraq, to teach in the Jewish community. After the war, Rosy decided to come to America. She met my father on a freighter coming to the U.S. and ended up in Kansas where she gave birth to my brother and me. After a divorce, Rosy joined VISTA (the domestic version of the Peace Corps) and taught migrant farm workers, coordinated student housing at a university, and returned to school and became a gerontologist.

Besides basic ethical behavior, my mom Rosy taught me to:

- Never give up (Rosy flunked her drivers test 12 times in a row before passing on the 13th try!)
- Serve others
- Apply your energy to make a difference
- Face your fears and then do what's right
- Embrace learning (including learning through mistakes) throughout your life
- Be strong and sufficiently confident in yourself to be self-critical
- Work hard at something worth doing
- Give a lot and you'll get a lot (Rosy decided that her tombstone should read "I Care!")

While I do have specific skills (I'm a good communicator; I am good at strategy), people do not gravitate to me because of my positive authority or my skills. They follow me because I care; I want to make a difference; I will do whatever it takes; and I display courage. People follow me because of the values that I learned from Rosy at an early age and exhibit on a daily basis.

SELF-REFLECTION

My mom taught me to be self-reflective. In critiquing my leadership capabilities, I have come to conclude that I need to learn several new behaviors if I am going to better exert leadership in the service of others:

- More profoundly listen to others without evaluation
- Respect different values, perspectives and interests
- Integrate different interests and values into any proposal or venture that I want the group to pursue
- Facilitate, not direct action

Since I left my long-time City Manager career, I have been trying to better learn these behaviors. In my "encore" career, I have been experimenting as a group facilitator and consultant. Successful consultants listen well; withhold judgment; identify different needs, perspectives and interests; and incorporate these views and interests into a plan. I am becoming a better (and more humble) leader as I facilitate and consult.

EXHIBITING LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOR

To demonstrate and practice day-to-day leadership on the job, try these suggestions:

- Talk about important values in conversations with colleagues
- Listen to co-workers and other stakeholders and integrate their interests into the work plan
- Speak up at a staff meeting, recommending how the team should proceed
- Verbally support the leadership endeavors of others
- Actively help others on the team accomplish collective goals
- Model hard work, service and tenacity
- Treat every obstacle as a barrier to jump over (or work around)
- Work with others to find creative solutions

KEY QUESTIONS

To become a better leader, ask yourself these critical questions:

- *What are my values?*
- *What are some behaviors that can enhance leadership capacity?*
- *In what kind of situations can I demonstrate my values in active and tangible ways?*
- *What are some experiences that will help me further learn these behaviors?*

As you address these questions and take on new experiences, you will become a better leader. As John F. Kennedy once remarked, “Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.” To succeed, our local government organizations need leaders at all levels, not just at the top. As Margaret Wheatley suggested, great enterprises are “leader-full” organizations.

The simple question—“Why should anyone follow me?”—is very provocative. Addressing this question can lead you to explore who you are and how you can exert leadership for the benefit of others.



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.