

Career Compass No. 39: The Courage to Do the Right Thing

In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Benest helps us find our backbone.

by Dr. Frank Benest

April 26, 2014

I am a Finance Department manager in a city that is facing a deteriorating fiscal situation and the organization is depending on our budget team to come up with reasonable solutions. Here's my problem. The Finance Director is moving ahead in recommending a city budget that contains in my opinion (and I believe in the opinion of a few other team members) some faulty assumptions.

We've had several budget team meetings but no one has directly questioned the Finance Director who is a strong-willed individual who demands loyalty. I feel the need to speak up but I may suffer negative consequences or retaliation. To be honest, I'm afraid that I won't be seen as a team player and my future prospects may be jeopardized. I've asked another Finance team member for advice but she suggests that I just go along—it's not worth taking on the Finance Director.

Having said all that, I believe that it is my professional responsibility and ethical obligation to call out some of these questionable assumptions.

I am energized by my role and responsibility in the City organization but I do not know what to do. Can you help?



My coach said I can do this.....gather some supporters...hold my breath...LEAP!

In our professional (as well as personal) lives, there is often a need to speak up or take other action but we fear the negative consequences. Typical situations may occur when you feel the need to...

- Say something that a person of authority and power doesn't want to hear
- Inform a higher authority of a serious ethical breach on the part of a co-worker
- Lead a needed organizational or community project that will face significant opposition
- Oppose a development project proposed by a powerful developer who has influence with the Council
- Promote the best candidate for the organization even though the selection is unpopular with employees or some Council members

All of these situations, including your dilemma of "speaking truth to power," invoke personal fears. We must act yet we fear to act because of the possible consequences.

During my career as a local government manager, I often feared what would happen if I spoke up or took unpopular action. I especially feared that...

- I would be ignored.
- I would lose City Council or organizational support.
- Colleagues would not like me.
- My efforts would fail and others would perceive me as an ineffectual leader.
- If I failed, I would be less likely to be followed in the future.

Yet-- in spite of these fears--our values, professional ethics, or responsibilities to others require us to act anyway.

In encouraging you to take action, let me emphasize one caveat. When we feel compelled to act, it is important to consider the “how” of taking action. The WAY we do something can determine how others react to our action.

Taking Action In Spite of Our Fears

So, how do we deal with personal fears so we can act on our values or convictions? Here are some ideas.

1. BE CLEAR ABOUT THE POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES OF TAKING NO ACTION

If you act, there may be consequences. If you don't act, there will also be consequences. For example, in your case, keeping quiet may likely result in an adopted budget that is unrealistic. Because the City would not have confronted its fiscal problems earlier on, the consequences may include much greater budget cuts or even lay-offs at mid-year or next year affecting service recipients and employees (and their families). More severe cutbacks later on will be much more difficult to manage. In addition, the reputations of the Finance Department and its managers may be damaged by recommending an out-of-whack budget.

2. ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR FEARS

All of us have personal fears. Fears are stories that we all tell ourselves. Anyone who says that they have no fears is lying.

Courageous people tend to do two things. First, they acknowledge their fears and often share their fears with trusted colleagues, friends or family members. Saying what you fear allows you to address your fear in one way or another. Undefined or unacknowledged fear inhibits action and incapacitates us.

Second, after acknowledging their fears, courageous people act anyway.

3. ASK YOURSELF: “WHAT’S THE WORST THAT CAN HAPPEN?”

My mother Rosy always asked me as a young man two important questions: “Frank, what’s the worst that can happen?” And then, “How likely is the worst thing that can happen?” For instance, if I took action,...

- Would I really get fired?
- Would people stop following me?
- Would my reputation be seriously damaged?

Once I acknowledged that most of these negative results were not likely, my mom urged me to “go for it.”

4. CALCULATE YOUR BANK ACCOUNT OF CREDIBILITY

As good performers and leaders who exert positive influence, we continuously make deposits into a bank account of credibility and support. However, we tend to undervalue how much we've accumulated into our account. If we fail to bring a controversial project across the finish line or if top management disapproves of us questioning some action, we are merely making a “withdrawal” from our bank account. If we've deposited over time \$100,000 into the account, we can survive a \$10,000 withdrawal.

5. ENSURE THAT COURAGEOUS ACTION IS ALIGNED WITH VALUES AND PASSION

You are more likely to take action if your courageous act is aligned with your values, ethics and passion. In my case, I have always been committed to affordable housing. Given this passion, I am more likely to take action to promote a housing project for low-income families even in the face of criticism or opposition.

6. SEEK ALLIES

Before taking action, seek out colleagues (not just the one other Finance team manager) to verify that they have the same

concerns. Assuming that a colleague or two shares your worries, suggest that they join you at the upcoming budget team meeting in expressing your collective misgivings. Or, if they hesitate to join you, ask if you can mention that they too share your concerns when you bring up the issue at the meeting.

Even if they are too afraid and won't publicly support you, you will at least know that you are on the right track.

7. DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN A CALCULATED RISK WORTH TAKING AND A RECKLESS ACTION

During my long career, I've taken a number of courageous actions in leading efforts to promote homeless or day-worker projects or to restructure labor contracts, all in the face of significant opposition. Unfortunately, I have also been reckless on several occasions even though I thought at the time that I was being courageous.

One such experience was opposing citizen oversight of the Police Department. Some community activists urged the Council to directly supervise the department or appoint a Citizen's Police Commission to oversee the police and ensure that police officers did not racially profile citizens. As City Manager, I did not think there was much evidence to support such radical proposals. At several heated public hearings, I took what I thought was courageous action opposing the proposals as interference with professional policing and undercutting the Council/Manager form of government. During one hearing, a respected Council Member suggested an Independent Police Auditor on contract who would evaluate any citizen complaints and police procedures. Even though the Police Chief (who was a trusted colleague and confidante) thought that this was a good compromise, I held my ground and recommended against the contract and lost some credibility with the Council.

As it turned out, the Police Auditor has served a useful purpose in validating most police actions while making sound recommendations to improve policies and procedures. My opposition did not serve me or the organization. It was reckless.

There is smart courage and then there is reckless, stupid courage.

8. GET SOME ADVICE

It is extremely helpful to have an informal coach inside or outside the organization who can ensure that your reasoning is sound, validate your concerns, and provide perspective. A coach can also help you confront your personal fears, assess the probable consequences of any action, suggest how to seek support for your action, and help you rehearse what to say and how to say it.

We all have a lot of nay-sayers in our lives. Coaches can be yay-sayers.

9. SEEK SOCIAL SUPPORT

Even if family members, friends or colleagues don't have any practical advice, they can listen to your concerns and fears. Most importantly, they will validate (without saying much) that they care for you, support you, and are proud of you regardless of what happens.

Social support is critical when you are trying to do the right thing.

10. PREPARE YOUR BOSS

In private, query the Finance Director about the numbers and his rationale for being aggressive in his financial projections. As Steven Covey advises, "seek to understand before being understood." If you then still have misgivings, let your boss know that you have concerns so he will not be surprised at the team meeting. If a group shares your misgivings, also let him know.

11. PRACTICE, SMILE AND BE OPEN

Make a few notes of the key points or questions that you want to raise. Practice making your remarks. And smile while you deliver them. Avoid grimacing, frowning and making "closed off" gestures like crossing your arms. Smiling makes it easier for you to deliver the message and makes it easier for your boss to accept it.

12. MINIMIZE THE POTENTIAL FALL-OUT

Taking courageous action is a calculated risk. The way in which you speak truth to power or take other courageous action may help minimize any fall-out. For example, you may wish to state your concerns as questions to be addressed by

the budget team:

- “Can you tell me more so I can better understand the validity of our assumptions?”
- “If we are questioned by the City Manager or City Council, do we have solid data to support our projections?”
- “What are the upsides and downsides about being more conservative in our projections?”
- “If we are wrong about our revenue or expenditure projections, what are the consequences for the organization and the community?”

It is also important not to accuse anyone. You should use “I” or “we,” not “you.” For instance, “I have a concern that these projections need more work.”

You can also tie your ethical concern to a priority of the City Manager or the Council. For example, you may suggest that “The Council has an established priority of creating a sustainable budget. Do we think that this proposed budget is sustainable over time?”

13. REFERENCE YOUR PROFESSIONAL CODE OF ETHICS

Your professional code of ethics can give you some cover for speaking up. As one example, the [ICMA Code of Ethics](#) requires that we as local government managers maintain the public trust (Tenet No. 2), be dedicated to the highest ideals of honor and integrity (Tenet No. 3), and serve the best interests of the public (Tenet No. 4).

The [Government Finance Officers Association](#) (GFOA) also has a code of professional ethics which stresses professional integrity, especially in presenting financial information to public officials and the public (Tenet No. 4).

You can say: “Our code of ethics compels us to provide the most valid and reliable data to our elected officials. Based on our code, may I put another perspective on the table?”

Contingency Plan

If all efforts fail and the Finance Director insists on using the dubious projections, you should at the very least write a memo to file identifying your misgivings and the steps that you’ve taken to question the projections.

In addition, you should find a way to informally let the City Manager know of the concerns raised by you and others. The City Manger represents the organization and the staff and has an ethical obligation to present a reliable budget to the Council. While loyalty is important, I believe that your code of professional ethics should trump loyalty and the chain of command.

Whether you decide to reach out to the City Manager may depend on any number of factors:

- In your judgment, how critical are the budget projections to the organization and the community?
- Does the culture of the organization encourage the consideration of different perspectives and opinions?
- Do organizational members talk about ethics and how they affect decisions and actions?
- Is the organization small enough that you know the City Manager and you can find the opportunity to “run into” him or her?
- Is the City Manager open to contact from those lower in the organization?
- How vindictive is the Finance Director?
- If you do contact the City Manager and the Finance Director is vindictive, are you willing to look for a new job?

Courage Is A Skill

Courage is like any skill. You develop it over time by doing something and then improving what and how you do it. By practicing small acts of courage, you will learn what works and what does not. Over time, you will become more courageous.

Support Courage In Others

If you act courageously, others will tend to gradually take smart risks and act with more courage. As a formal or informal leader, you can model the way.

To encourage a more courageous and risk-taking culture, you must support others who commit small acts of courage. You can:

- Talk about the implications of ethics in work group meetings
- Act as a sounding board for others who may fear taking courageous action
- Provide social support
- Join colleagues seeking allies in doing the right thing
- Recognize co-workers in public when they have acted courageously

To create great organizations, we need a lot of small heroes, not a few big ones.

A Fuller Life

As [Rosabeth Moss Kanter](#) says in an [hbr.org](#) blog piece “[Courage in the C-Suite](#),” passion, commitment to shared goals, collegueship and practice all support courage. “When others are counting on you and backing you, and when you’re acting in the service of others rather than for personal glory, courageous acts become easier.”

It’s a terrible thing to live our lives in fear. Therefore, I’ll conclude with a quote from the poet Anais Nin: “Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one’s courage.”



Career Compass is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff. 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.