

Career Compass No. 113: Promote Stability Amid All the Change

A lot of change creates uncertainty and distress. Learn how leaders can create a sense of stability so the organization and employees can adapt.

By Dr. Frank Benest | Dec 01, 2024 | Article - Article



I'm an administrative services director in a midsize city in the southeast. My staff are experiencing a lot of change:

- *Recently our finance, HR, and IT staff were merged into a new Administrative Services Department.*
- *We are leading the implementation of a new enterprise software program for the entire organization.*
- *A number of staff people are now hybrid or even remote employees and we are struggling with how to stay on track, aligned, and connected.*
- *In response to numerous city-wide change initiatives and new priorities, our teams are constantly changing.*

The environment seems a bit chaotic. Many people are unsettled, overly stressed, and in some cases under-performing.

How do I help our department members deal with these changes and better perform?

As local governments respond to new realities and ever-changing circumstances, most of our organizations are experiencing a lot of uncertainty, employee anxiety, and productivity issues.

There is in fact a lot of change. However, it is not just the amount of change. The big problem is that change is accelerating and it is non-linear. We cannot anticipate the change. The classic example has been the pandemic that upended our world and the way we work. Another not-fully-anticipated problem is how extreme heat is impacting some of our communities.

Amid all of this change, I believe that leaders must help create a sense of stability for employees. Stability is foundational if organizations are to effectively adapt to new realities.

A lot of distress

Gallup has documented a lot of distress across all sectors: 76% of all employees experience burnout at least “sometimes” and 28% feel burnout “very often” or “always.” Burnout is especially a problem in the public sector because the demands from the public and elected officials keep coming regardless of the organizational capacity to respond.

In short, “burnout is the silent destroyer of both employee well-being and organizational success.” (See [Scott Newman, “This Is How Companies Should be Rethinking the Employee Burnout Crisis,” Fast Company, Aug 28, 2024.](#))

What is the nature of organizational stability?

Organizational stability is created by an enduring mission; core values which go unchanged; clear direction and goals; leadership that is predictable, steady, and calm; consistent priorities from the governing board and top management; and stable work relationships.

Why is organizational stability important?

Stability provides a safe and secure environment that allows organizational members to adapt to new demands and opportunities. It minimizes a sense of uncertainty and disruption and provides some measure of predictability and optimism as change occurs.

As Ashley Goodall concludes: “People do their best when their environment is predictable, when they have some sense of control, when they are part of a stable set of relationships, when they feel connected to place and ritual, and the point of their efforts is readily

apparent to them." (See [Ashley Goodall, "Creating Stability Is Just as Important as Managing Change," hbr.org, July 9, 2024.](https://hbr.org/2024/07/creating-stability-is-just-as-important-as-managing-change/))

In other words, stability provides the opportunity for employees to do their best.

What can leaders do to promote stability?

Leaders must consider the conditions people need at work to be productive and adapt to changes. The primary condition is a sense of stability. Leaders can take a number of steps to create a sense of stability amid the change.

Here are 10 ideas:

1. Focus on the enduring mission and core values of the organization

While there may be internal improvement initiatives (i.e., reorganizations, new technology) and new external change efforts (i.e., climate, homelessness initiatives), leaders need to reiterate to employees and put front and center the organizational mission, such as protecting community health and safety or promoting a satisfying quality of life for all residents.

To provide a sense of continuity, leaders can also emphasize ongoing core values (i.e., treating employees and community members with dignity, equitably providing services to all, learning to continuously improve).

In addition to over-communicating the organizational mission and stressing core values, it is important for leaders at all levels to tie an employee's work contributions to the larger mission. For example, as the administrative services director, you might help the payroll accountant or the IT specialist perceive how their support of front-line service workers helps the organization fulfill its service mission.

2. Insist on a few priorities and demonstrate discipline

It is important that city-wide priorities do not constantly change willy nilly. This is difficult in local government, especially with new demands from the community or newly elected officials.

Many local government executives are now implementing two-year work plans and budgets, multi-year capital improvement programs, and strategic plans of all kinds.

Most organizations cannot handle more than three to five organization-wide priorities. Effective executives guide governing boards as well executive teams in staying the course with just a few priorities.

3. Beta test new initiatives

You may or may not be successful in limiting constantly changing new priorities. If stakeholder groups or elected officials insist on new change efforts, resist the temptation to fully implement new organization- or city-wide initiatives.

The Affordable Care Act initiative initially faced obstacles because of efforts to implement the initiative all at once on a national basis with a new website available to millions of Americans needing affordable health care. The website encountered challenges. In hindsight, it would have been prudent to launch the website as a pilot project in several different kinds of counties or in a large state and a small state.

Therefore, with any new change effort, beta test the new program in order to see what works and what does not. As a result of the beta test, you will learn some lessons and you will less likely to overwhelm staff.

4. Create clarity of direction but provide flexibility on how to achieve goals

Your role as an executive leader is to be clear about direction and goals but also to encourage flexibility and autonomy on how to get there. With so much uncertainty and disruption, it is difficult to exert control.

If it is an adaptive (not a technical) challenge, there is no agreement on the best approach to achieve success (for instance, minimizing traffic congestion) and stakeholder groups have different values and their own preferred solutions. All you can do is set direction, help the team take a few steps forward, see what works and what doesn't, pivot, and learn as you go.

5. Be present

In a turbulent environment, leaders can provide a sense of stability by being fully present and avoiding distractions when interacting with individuals and teams.

Ask yourself if you are showing up as a leader who is

- Committed to connect?
- Calm and focused?
- Curious (“tell me more”)?
- Enthusiastic about the other person’s project?
- Forward looking?
- Encouraging?
- Enabling of others?

- Eager to support (without taking over)?
- Thankful?

With respect to these behaviors, “being present is bringing your best self to what you are doing now.” (See [Dan Rockwell, Leadership Freak blog, “7 Simple Practices That Enable Being Present,” Feb 7, 2023](#)) and (See [Career Compass #105 “How Do You Show Up as a Leader?”](#))

6. Ask questions, listen, and respond

When you interact with staff, ask open-ended questions, listen intently, and respond as appropriate. To demonstrate empathy to those employees dealing with a lot of change, ask a few questions:

- What is your priority this week?
- Why is it important to you?
- What is challenging for you?
- What are some obstacles?
- What does success look like?
- How can I help?

By listening and responding as you can (i.e., providing more autonomy or removing some barrier), you show empathy and thus create connection between you (and hopefully the organization) and the employee. (See [Career Compass #86 “Empathy is a Superpower.”](#))

7. Promote safety and belonging

Employees spend most of their waking hours working. Therefore, employees more than ever want to feel a sense of belonging and connection. This is especially the case for those with new hybrid and remote work arrangements. (See [Career Compass #107 “The Business Case for Promoting Workplace Belonging.”](#))

“Belonging” is when you feel that

- You work for an organization with a purpose.
- You matter to others.
- People care about you (not just what you produce).
- You are supported.

- You have a “seat at the table” and your opinion counts.

Leaders account for about 70% of an employee’s sense of safety and belonging. (See [Wei Zheng et al., “What Makes an Inclusive Leader?” hbr.org, Sept 27, 2023.](#))

Some simple ways to promote workplace belonging include:

- Get personal. Spend time in one-to-one and team meetings talking about non-work items (family, hobbies, vacations). Talking about non-work topics not only promotes connection but also performance. High-performing teams spend 25% more time talking about non-work topics than lesser-performing teams. (See [Erika Andersen, “Change Is Hard. Here’s How to Make It Less Painful,” hbr.org, April 7, 2022.](#))
- Talking about the personal lives of employees demonstrates that you care about them.
- Express gratitude. Belonging is enhanced when leaders and colleagues express appreciation for the efforts of team members. Gallup research indicates that actively engaged employees have received appreciation in the past seven days.
- Make it safe. Psychological safety is a key determinant of team effectiveness. When people feel safe, they believe that they can express their feelings and divergent opinions without fear of reprisal. Safety is critical when people feel anxious about change and their continuing roles.
- Conduct stay interviews. A stay interview is a one-on-one interview between a manager and a valued employee. The purpose of the interview is to learn what will keep the employee working with you and the organization and elicit what would entice the employee to leave you. By conducting stay interviews, you indicate that you want the employee to stay with the organization (and you care about them).

A few typical stay interview questions that elicit key information from the employee include:

- What do you like most about your work?
- In your work here, where do you find meaning and purpose?
- What keeps you here?
- What would entice you away?
- What do you want to learn this year?

- Is there anything you'd like to change about your job to make it more meaningful or rewarding?
- What strengths or talents do you have that aren't being used?
- How can I or the organization help you reach your career goals?
- What support do you need to be more effective?
- What threatens your peace of mind, your health, or personal fulfillment?
- What can we do to ensure we keep you with us? (See [Career Compass #80 "To Retain Your Talent, Use Stay Interviews."](#))
- Harness the power of rituals. Rituals help us feel a bit of control when a lot of things feel out of control. Rituals are defined as a prescribed set of actions regularly repeated in a precise manner by an individual or members of a group.

Leaders can institute some rituals that help create stability. These rituals may include a “take 5” ritual at the beginning of staff meetings when team members can share what is happening in their personal lives. Another team ritual at the beginning of meetings could be a “team acknowledgement” agenda item when colleagues could thank team members for any assistance or contributions. Every meeting could also include a “learning report” or a “team debrief” that supports the organizational goal of “learning to improve.” Leaders can also encourage individuals to develop and maintain their own rituals, such as taking a walk in the afternoon, or inviting a colleague for lunch every Tuesday.

Again, these habits create stability amid the change.

8. Keep teams intact

Teams create a sense of belonging and allow for individuals to see how collective action can make a difference in addressing a big problem. They also mediate between the individual and the organization and help connect one to the larger organizational purpose.

Unfortunately, we keep changing teams and reconstituting them with each new change initiative. This constant changing of team membership disrupts social networks and one’s sense of stability.

To the extent possible, leaders should try to keep teams intact even as we may adjust their goals and program efforts.

9. Model the way

Leaders must model positive behaviors that promote stability. These behaviors include calmness, steadiness, optimism, hope, and caring.

Effective leaders share the brutal facts and the difficulties that lie ahead, AND they communicate confidence that the organization will prevail in overcoming adversity. (See [Jim Collins, Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and And Others Don't, 2001.](#))

10. Celebrate those who embody core values

You certainly want to celebrate smart risk-takers and innovators who help the organization adapt. However, you also want to celebrate those who embody and promote enduring organizational values. To recognize organizational “stabilizers,” you can celebrate their contributions in simple ways with coffee and bagels at a staff meeting or an ice cream social.

By acknowledging and rewarding these cultural heroes, leaders promote core values and behaviors and thus stability.

Stability is not stagnation

To promote adaptation, effective leaders need to differentiate between stagnation and stability. Organizational stagnation results when there are no adjustments or adaptation to new changes in the internal or external environment (i.e., new technology opportunities or climate changes or demands for police reform).

In contrast, organizational stability is when the mission, values, and direction of the enterprise are clear; priorities are consistent; leadership is steady and predictable; and relationships are stable.

Organizations, especially local government agencies, need both change agents and stabilizers. Tension between change and stability is beneficial. As Dan Rockwell has suggested: “You need a stable present to change the future.”



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