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# Career Compass No. 98: Combating Change Exhaustion

Local government staff are overwhelmed and exhausted by change. How can we help employees cope with all this change as well as expand the organization's capacity to adapt?

By Dr. Frank Benest | Nov 15, 2022 | ARTICLE

*I am a human services director in a West Coast urban county. My department staff have had to adapt to a whole array of new change initiatives that we are now struggling to implement:*



- *Telework arrangements.*
- *Hybrid meetings.*
- *Tech initiatives to digitize services.*
- *Partnering with the sheriff's department and city police departments to deal with mental health episodes.*
- *New options to house the homeless.*
- *Diversity, inclusion, and equity issues.*
- *A more robust onboarding process for new staff.*
- *Plus, plus, plus!1*
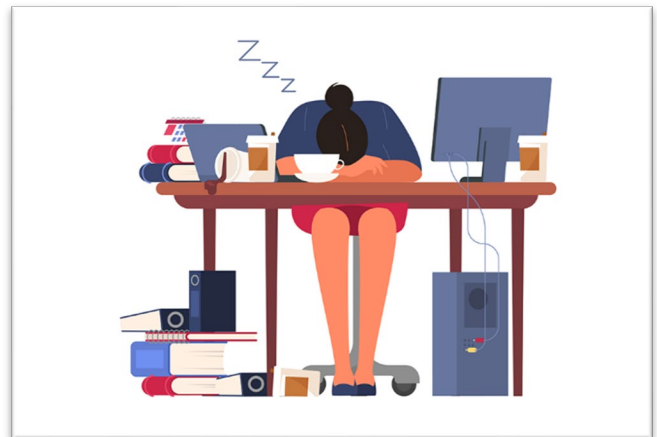
*All these efforts are worthwhile. I support them all. However, my staff is overwhelmed and exhausted (and so am I). I know that we need to adapt to new realities. But all this change (mostly positive change) creates uncertainty, disruption, and distress.*

*Can you suggest what my leadership role should entail to support my people as well as help me deal with the distress?*

Yes, our local government organizations are struggling to adapt as we transition to post-pandemic realities.  The change initiatives you cite are necessary if our organizations are to be relevant, effective, and worthy of public support in this new era.

The adaptive challenge is not just the sheer amount of change.  It is also that change is accelerating and it is nonlinear.  In other words, it is happening faster and faster, and it cannot be anticipated (for instance, the impact of the pandemic or the national movement to defund police).

> *"CHANGE IS ACCELERATING AND NONLINEAR."*

Therefore, from my perspective, the three key questions for leaders are:

1. Which change initiatives must be immediately implemented and which can be introduced more slowly over time?
2. How do I help employees cope with all this change and still embrace the changes?
3. Over time, how do I increase the overall change capacity of the organization?

Below are some ideas on how to explore the fatigue challenge, lessen change exhaustion, and, most importantly, expand the change capacity of the organization.

## Explore the Change Exhaustion Challenge

I would encourage you and your division heads to have a series of conversations with your department staff about the change efforts underway.

You can ask these questions:

- What change initiatives are you most involved in?
- Where are we making progress?
- What is most challenging for you?
- Are you energized by these efforts or are you feeling overwhelmed or exhausted?
- As we adapt to new realities, what suggestions or ideas do you have to deal with the change and any uncertainty that you and others may be feeling?
- What are some non-value-added activities that we can stop doing?
- How can I help? How can others help?

Everyone, not just formal leaders, has responsibility for dealing with the distress that people are feeling.

You can summarize the results of these individual conversations and some steps to counter the situation going forward.

You can then present the change exhaustion challenge to the county executive Team. I am sure that the other department directors are experiencing the same challenges. You can encourage them to have similar conversations with their department employees and identify themes and suggestions and bring the issue back to the executive team for organization-wide action.

Since elected officials and the public are likely to press for speedy change on a number of fronts simultaneously, it is important for department directors to raise the issue of organizational change capacity with the county executive so that she can manage expectations with the governing board and outside stakeholders.

Even if the other department heads don't join you, you can take action to address change exhaustion in your department.

Starting these conversations, feeding back to employees what you hear, and taking some steps in response accomplishes a great deal.  First, you get valuable information. Second, you can take some action to lessen the exhaustion.  Third, you create relationship and connection with employees so they may better follow you in these tough times.  Finally, engaging in these conversations demonstrates that you have empathy and that you care.  Research by The Gallup Organization indicates that the perception that "someone at work cares about me" is a key driver of employee engagement, overall performance, and resilience.  (See Marcus Buckingham, *First Break All the Rules—What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently*, 1999.)

## Lessen the Change Fatigue

To minimize exhaustion from all the change initiatives, consider these suggestions:

1.  **Demonstrate discipline**

If all the change efforts are a priority, none of them are a priority.  With the executive team (or at least with your own department management group), you must identify change initiatives to immediately execute and those to postpone (not abandon) or implement more slowly.  Some efforts can be implemented as a pilot ("think big, start small").

> *"THINK BIG, START SMALL."*

To guide this priority-setting, you can ask team members:

- Which change efforts produce the highest value for our department, or organization, or the communities that we serve?
- Which initiatives are resource (including time) efficient?
- Which generate the most enthusiastic support from staff?
- Which engage some parts of the department or organization and can be implemented there without everyone's involvement and commitment?

- Which can be started as experiments?

I'm a change junkie. I love change initiatives internally and externally. But as a leader, I need followers and therefore I have had to learn more discipline.

2. **Focus on purpose**

As Daniel Pink notes in his book *Drive*, purpose is the great self-motivator. Typically, we rush into a meeting to discuss change and focus on "what" we need to do and "how" we are going to do it. To generate self-motivation, energy, and commitment, you must start with the "why." Employees need to know how the project fits into the bigger picture.

While you as a leader should communicate the meaning of the project with respect to its importance to the department, organization, and/or community, meaning must be tied to the individual. Ask: "Why is this change project important to you?" Or, "Which of these projects are most meaningful for you?" and "Why?" Or, "Which aspects or elements of this initiative is more interesting or meaningful for you?"

3. **Manage the Mood**

Where there is great urgency to move on an issue or get something done, the leader must turn up the temperature and be more demanding. When people are overwhelmed or exhausted, the leader's role is to lower the temperature and be more supportive.

4. **Strive for "roughly right"**

When there is a lot of turbulence and adapting, forget long-range planning. Identify the general direction, take a few steps to start the change journey, pivot as needed, and fix things up as you go along. Strive for getting things "roughly right" and support smart risks that may not work out yet produce learning.

5. **Model the way**

Amid a lot of change, people choose to follow you as a leader or not. Modeling is the most powerful way to lead. Therefore, you must ask yourself:

> *"ASK YOURSELF 'HOW AM I SHOWING UP?'."*

- Have I shared with employees my values and goals and where I am going to focus my energies?
- Have I embraced the proposed change? Is that commitment reflected in how I spend my time?
- Have I demonstrated that I am energized by the change journey? (If not, why would anyone follow me?)
- Have I engaged myself in the new learning required by the change?
- Have I shared my missteps as we proceed?

When people see you in person or virtually, ask yourself "How am I showing up?"  People take their cues from you.  If you show up exhausted or disheartened, it is difficult for them to overcome their distress.

6. **Celebrate progress along the way**

As suggested by Steven Kramer and Teresa Amabile in their book *The Progress Principle*, change initiatives take a long time to achieve success.  Consequently, it is important to help people see progress along the way and celebrate the achievement of key milestones with an ice cream social or a pizza party.

7. **Encourage self-care for all**

As a leader modeling positive attitudes and behaviors, it is critical that you address your own exhaustion and thus take care of your physical and emotional well-being.  Get some exercise, go home on time, spend time with family, eat well, and stay connected with friends.  Encourage your team members to do the same.  Share and support wellness habits and rituals during team meetings.

To promote people's ability to periodically disconnect from work, advocate that staff take long vacations without constantly checking email or otherwise communicating with team members.  In turbulent times, people need to truly unplug and recharge mind, body, and soul. Our European colleagues have institutionalized month-off vacations, and we should follow their example.

> *"PEOPLE NEED TO TRULY UNPLUG AND RECHARGE MIND, BODY AND SOUL."*

To survive as a CAO, I often left the office to get a cup of coffee and do focused work in a café.  At lunch, I took walks or played pick-up basketball.  I took the initiative to schedule friends and colleagues for coffee or drinks.  I also didn't do any work in the evening at home until the kids went to bed.

# Expand Change Capacity

While you definitely want to help lessen change exhaustion, the ultimate goal is increasing the change capacity of the organization.  In the turbulent world of local government, the amount and speed of change will continue, and your county organization must be able to respond and adapt.

Here are a variety of ways to increase the change capacity in your department organization:

1. **Forge connections**

Through your one-to-one check-ins with staff and team meetings, you must aim to foster relationship-building and connections. High-performing teams with a great capacity to promote positive change spend 25% more time bonding over non-work topics, such as family, sports, and leisure interests. Team members joke, tease each other, laugh and celebrate together, and even vent. (See Erika Andersen, "Change is Hard. Here's How to Make It Less Painful," *hbr.org*, April 7, 2022.)

This sense of connection and belonging fosters higher productivity, resilience, and trust. (See *Career Compass No. 79: Leading By Connecting*.)

2. **Make it safe**

A key determinant of team performance is psychological safety. In trying to adapt, team leaders (both formal and informal) ask questions, acknowledge what they hear, model vulnerability, encourage people to express their ideas and different points of view, and validate different perspectives. A sense of safety creates the space and a larger capacity for organizational change. (See *Career Compass No. 69: Psychological Safety—The One Key Determinant of Team Effectiveness*.)

3. **Give control**

To lead change, you must envision the successful outcome. There must be *clarity* of direction but *flexibility* in how the team or organization gets there. As Daniel Pink suggests in *Drive*, autonomy (along with purpose) is a great self-motivator. Within certain guiderails, leaders must give people the opportunity to "figure it out." (See *Career Compass No. 65: FIO—The Key Competency of 21st Century Leaders*.)

 Because there is so much uncertainty, you must encourage people to take a few steps forward, pivot as necessary, and fix things up along the way. By incorporating the ideas of team members and addressing their concerns, you are getting their

> *"TO LEAD CHANGE, THERE MUST BE CLARITY OF DIRECTION BUT FLEXIBILITY OF HOW THE TEAM GETS THERE."*

"fingerprints" on the change initiative and increasing their sense of ownership. They are shaping the change as it occurs.

4. **Learn as you go**

Promoting positive change is a learning journey. If you focus on learning and growing, people will see change as a way to learn new skills, create new experiences and capabilities, and promote their career development. Learning not only creates additional change capacity but it helps retain your talent. Talented professionals will stay with you

if they continue to learn and grow.  They tend to leave when they stop learning and growing.

As you encounter with your team the challenges associated with organizational change, don't ask "Why is this so difficult?"  Rather, ask "What are we learning now that will enhance our future practice?"

Organizations with a learning culture debrief every significant experience not just after they occur but also as they occur.  They ask:

- What is going well?
- What is not going well?
- What are we learning to enhance our future practice?

Another suggestion to make learning a part of daily routines is to incorporate a "learning report" at the start of each staff meeting.

5. **Give support**

Great leaders of change are demanding <u>and</u> supportive.  They show empathy, acknowledge concerns perceived by employees (even though they may not perceive the concerns as big problems).  They provide resources (especially time), training, tools, practice sessions and simulations, mentoring, and/or affinity or peer support groups.

This kind of support builds organizational capacity for change.

6. **Incorporate simple rituals**

A ritual is a practice or activity that happens on a regular or consistent basis.  In a team environment, rituals create positive habits, promote connection, and foster psychological comfort and even a sense of control.  Rituals give people a feeling of stability amid all the change.

> *"RITUALS GIVE PEOPLE A FEELING OF STABILITY AMIDST ALL THE CHANGE."*

A simple team ritual is to incorporate a "team acknowledgement" item at every meeting during which a team member can express appreciation for the support from another staff member.  Another ritual may be a quick "team huddle" on Monday morning at which everybody gets the opportunity to identify priorities in the coming week and any help they might need.  Or schedule a once-a-month walking meeting or a regular potluck meal.

7. **Help people focus on work that they love**

Expanding the change capacity of your department or county organization is all about increasing the energy levels of people.  Even as staff members get shifted to new teams and change projects, help them engage in work they love.

How do you know what energizes them?  ASK THEM!  According to Marcus Buckingham, a good metric is 20% of one's work should engage their passions.  If people are passionate about 20% or more of their work or tasks, they will tend to be more energized, engaged, productive, and resilient.  If less than 20%, they will tend to be disengaged, low energy, and less productive.  (See Marcus Buckingham, "Designing Work That People Love—It's Easier Than You Think," *Harvard Business Review*, May-June 2022.)

To help focus people on the work they love, Buckingham suggests that weekly one-on-one meetings between the manager and his or her direct reports are critical.  Instead of focusing on updates or progress reports or performance feedback, Buckingham recommends that managers ask four simple questions during their weekly check-ins:

- What did you love about last week?
- What did you loathe?
- What are your priorities this coming week?
- How can I best help?

If managers can help employees recraft their daily work to focus on some tasks that they love to do and/or one or several "passion projects," the overall change capacity of the organization increases dramatically.

When I was city manager in my last city, Palo Alto, California, I was feeling de-energized

> *"YOUR FIRST AND FOREMOST JOB AS A LEADER IS TO TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR OWN ENERGY AND THEN HELP TO ORCHESTRATE THE ENERGY OF THOSE AROUND YOU."*

even though the organization needed me to lead and/or support a number of change efforts.  I managed to amplify my energy by engaging in several passion projects, including affordable housing and homeless services.

Peter Drucker, the great management thinker of the 20th century, famously stated: "Your first and foremost job as a leader is to take charge of your own energy and then help to orchestrate the energy of those around you."

# Shape the Change

We in local government are experiencing a tremendous amount of change, most of it positive and necessary.  To complicate matters, change is accelerating and cannot be fully anticipated.  All of which creates uncertainty and unease internally and externally.

Amid all this change, leaders must support their teams by taking steps to relieve change exhaustion.  Yet ultimately the leader's role is to also increase the organizational capacity for change.

To increase the capacity for change over time, leaders must create a culture that promotes learning and adaptation.  Such an organizational culture entails:

- Minimizing change that is imposed from the top
- Trying out pilot projects
- Focusing on learning as you go
- Helping employees get their "fingerprints" on the change so that they can shape the change as it occurs
- Engaging team members in at least some work that they love

Increasing organizational change capacity is all about enhancing your energy and the energy of all those around you.

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Sponsored by the ICMA Coaching Program, *ICMA Career Compass* is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's liaison 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. Read past columns at icma.org/careercompass.

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