

Career Compass No. 116: Are You Coachable?

To accelerate your career development and advancement, you need a coach. But are you coachable?

By Dr. Frank Benest | Aug 07, 2025 | Article - Article



I am a mid-career senior management analyst in a county public works department, and I supervise a couple of other analysts in my office. Whenever I go to a professional training workshop or conference, I am always encouraged to get mentoring or coaching if I want to advance in my local government career.

The problem is that I don't know how to get a coach or mentor, what kind of coach or mentor I need, or how I would even benefit from coaching or mentoring.

I like my local government work and would like to move up and advance in my career. How do I secure a coach or mentor and benefit from the experience?

Yes! A coach would be quite helpful as you build your local government career. To get a coach and benefit from coaching, let's clarify a number of issues, including the issue of "are you coachable?"

What Is the Difference Between a Mentor and a Coach?

While the terms “mentoring” and “coaching” are often used interchangeably, there is a difference. The notion of mentoring started in the Middle Ages when artisans took on apprentices. For example, a silversmith would teach or mentor an apprentice on how to do silversmithing correctly. In contemporary local government organizations, we still rely on mentoring to properly train utility workers, paramedics or police officers on the correct way to do their jobs. If done incorrectly, someone gets hurt.

Coaching is different than mentoring. A coach is not transferring knowledge and teaching or training someone on how to do their job. Rather, a coach helps their coachee identify their aspirations, explore their true potential, and strive to become the best version of themselves. Adam Grant defines coaching as “helping people reveal their potential and overcome challenges.” (See Kiara Glassman, “[How Adopting a Coaching Mindset Can Benefit Leaders](#)”)

What Kinds of Coaching Does One Need?

A local government professional should seek different kinds of coaches for different needs. One formal or informal coach can provide you with career advice and how to position yourself for advancement. A second kind of coach may help you deal with a problematic work situation or conflict. A third kind of coach may provide political guidance as you interact with higher levels of management, elected officials, or influential stakeholder groups.

What Is the Minimum Number of Coaches One Should Have?

Given these different kinds of coaching, the minimum number of coaches is “2 + 1.” You need a formal or informal coach inside the department who knows how the department works. You need a second coach inside the organization but not from your department who knows how the agency works and how to navigate the organization and overcome barriers. That is the “2.”

Then you need a coach from outside the agency who knows the local government profession and has a big picture view of management and leadership and career development issues. That’s the “1.”

Where Does One Find a Formal Coach?

There are many ways to find formal coaches. Some larger organizations have internal coaching programs. You can check with the HR department. A lot of professional organizations offer coaching. For instance, here in California, the Municipal Management Associations of both Northern California and Southern California both offer coaching for their members. State and national professional groups in public works or finance or

planning may provide coaching services for members. Check the websites for these professional groups and/or reach out to the board members of these organizations.

The easiest way to get a coach is through the coaching program offered by ICMA. [CoachConnect](#) is a free service offered to any local government employee. (You do not have to be an ICMA member.) CoachConnect is an online registry of 300 senior leaders in local government from around the country who are available to serve as your one-to-one coach. Each coach has a profile, and through the online platform, you can contact a coach and schedule an in-person or virtual meeting.

You can reach out to one or several coaches. You can receive one-time or periodic coaching or develop an ongoing coaching relationship. To register as a “learner” and begin your coaching journey, [start here](#).

How Does One Approach an Informal Coach?

Oftentimes, you may want an informal coaching relationship with someone inside the organization or outside the agency. This colleague could be a peer or a senior leader in the organization or profession. You need not directly ask for coaching. Rather, you can simply invite the potential coach to coffee and say that you’d like to pick their brain about your career development or a problem at work.

Why Would a Coach Want to Coach You?

Early and mid-career professionals are often reluctant to approach a potential coach because they feel that asking for coaching and guidance would be an added burden for the coach. What most younger professionals don’t understand is that coaches love to coach.

Senior leaders love to give advice. It’s fun. We coaches especially enjoy seeing our coachees grow, develop, and advance. Most importantly, coaching allows senior leaders to prepare the next generation of leaders and thus create legacy. As a senior leader gets older and more accomplished, the opportunity to build legacy becomes a big self-motivator.

Are You Coachable?

The big question: how coachable are you? If you are not sufficiently coachable, a coach won’t do you much good. You’d be wasting your time and the coach’s time. Here are some questions for you to assess your coachability:

Are You Self-Aware?

Nobody is completely self-aware. We all have blind spots. However, to benefit from coaching, you must seek to ask yourself

- Who am I in the world?
- What are my strengths?
- How do I actually behave in different situations?
- How do I react to feedback?
- Am I truly open to becoming a better version of myself as a professional and a person?

Growth starts with self-awareness. (See Career Compass No. 108 “[Leadership Starts with Self-Awareness.](#)”)

Are You Open to Learning?

To be coachable, it is essential that you try out new assignments, make some missteps, and learn along the way. To be open to learning, you must be willing to reflect on your actions and behaviors and assess (by yourself and with a coach) what went well, what didn’t go so well, and what you learned for your future practice.

To learn, you must be willing to get somewhat uncomfortable. There is no learning without some discomfort.

Are You Action-Oriented?

Learning requires that you take some action, such as engaging in a “stretch” assignment or new team leadership responsibility. There is no growth until you try something out and then reflect on the experience.

Do You Have a Growth Mindset?

Some professionals have a fixed mindset. They believe their intelligence, talents, and personalities are fixed traits that cannot grow. They believe they are born with a certain level of ability (or special skills) and are unable to improve their abilities over time. Those with a fixed mindset typically avoid challenges, shy away from unfamiliar things or experiences, ignore feedback or criticism, give up easily, can’t accept mistakes or failures, and focus on proving themselves.

To be coachable, you must exhibit a growth mindset. Those with a growth mindset believe that talent is ever-improving, view challenges and new experiences as opportunities to grow and develop, embrace constructive feedback, strive to overcome setbacks, and learn and grow from failures. (See Carol Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, 2007.)

Are You Willing to Think Like a Beginner?

Buddhists suggest that we avoid an “expert mind.” An expert mind is full. There is little room for divergent perspectives or contrary views. Buddhists suggest that we embrace a “beginner mind.” A beginner mind is an empty or open mind and is thus open to considering feedback from different viewpoints. A beginner also may stumble around in trying out new behaviors until some skill or success is achieved.

What Are Some Tips for Coachees?

If you want to get the most out of the coaching experience and you desire to maintain the coaching relationship, I suggest the following:

- 1. Take the initiative.** Coaches are busy so take the initiative in approaching the potential coach and scheduling any meetings.
- 2. Prepare for the conversation.** Before meeting with the formal or informal coach, identify the purpose of the upcoming conversation and draft some pertinent questions that you want to ask the coach.
- 3. Connect with the coach.** Coaching is a relationship so try to establish rapport over time. Ask the coach about his/her career journey as well as personal life. Share your career and personal journeys. Being forthright about any problems or challenges and showing some vulnerability creates trust. Vulnerability promotes relationship and connection.
- 4. Let the coach know what you specifically want out of the coaching conversation.** The coach cannot read your mind. For each coaching session, let the coach know what you want as the outcome of the conversation, such as advice on how to get a promotion or a new title, how to effectively deal with a team conflict, or how to frame an issue for the governing board or stakeholder group.
- 5. Be truly present.** To get the most benefit from the coaching session, eliminate any distractions. Turn off your devices, get away from the office (go to a café or take a walk with the coach), and clear your mind a bit before rushing into the conversation.
- 6. Ask open-ended questions.** You need to probe to truly get the essence of any advice from the coach. For example, you can ask: “Why do you think that is a problem?” “What other obstacles may hinder me?” “What other options may be available to me?”
- 7. Debrief each coaching conversation.** Immediately after each coaching conversation, reflect on the exchange. Ask yourself:

- What went well in the conversation?
- What did not go so well?
- What insights did I garner?
- Which suggestions from the coach make sense for me?
- What am I willing to do?

8. Consider the advice and do something. You don't have to take any of the actions suggested by the coach. It is your career and your life. You are the decision-maker. However, it is important to consider the coach's suggestions and do at least one thing that makes sense to you based on your needs and your personal and professional responsibilities.

9. Provide the coach with feedback. Maintain the interest of the coach by letting the coach know what you have decided to do and what has occurred as a result of the coach's guidance. Have you requested a stretch assignment or team leadership position? Approached someone for an informational interview? Volunteered for a professional committee? It is also important to share any additional obstacles you have encountered, how you have dealt with them, and what you are learning.

10. Say "thank you." Show your appreciation for any advice or assistance provided by the coach. Better yet, demonstrate your gratitude with a hand-written note to the coach.

11. Explore how you can support the coach. Coaching is a mutually beneficial relationship. Ask the coach how you might assist or support the coach. For instance, can you share some of your expertise, do some research for the coach, or volunteer for a team or committee led by the coach?

12. Keep in touch. Even if you are no longer being coached by a senior leader or other colleague, it is wise and kind to periodically let your coach know how you are progressing in your career. This is motivating for the coach and encourages the coach to provide coaching to others.

13. Jettison your coach when the relationship isn't working for you. Find another coach if the coach is not consistently available to you, not providing the time required for meaningful conversations, or is not offering the kind of feedback that you want. Plenty of senior leaders or colleagues want to help you. Again, coaches love to coach.

Bonus Tip: To become coachable, become a coach. Look for opportunities to serve as an informal coach or advisor for colleagues. When having a cup of coffee or drink with a colleague, you can ask questions and make suggestions about career advancement options. This experience of serving as an informal peer coach will sharpen your ability to become more coachable yourself.

Becoming Coachable

Coaching is a critical opportunity to accelerate one's development, allowing coachees to unlock their potential, achieve their aspirations, and become the best versions of themselves. However, to leverage the coaching experience, one must be coachable.



Sponsored by the ICMA Coaching Program, Career Compass is a monthly column focused on leadership and career development issues for local government professional staff. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's Liaison for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. [Read past columns of Career Compass in the archive.](#) If you have a leadership or career question you would like addressed in a future Career Compass, e-mail careers@icma.org or contact Frank directly at frank@frankbenest.com

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