

Career Compass No. 45: City Managers Need Coaches Too

In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Benest reminds us that everyone can benefit from a coach.

by Dr. Frank Benest

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I'm a mid-career City Manager for a suburban community who has served in my current position for five years. I am a strong leader who is comfortable dealing with most aspects of my job, such as department oversight, budget, operational management, personnel and service delivery issues. However, I find it is becoming increasingly difficult to effectively respond to political conflict between certain City Council members; a few Council members who don't respect my role or want to micro-manage the organization; and new demands as our community becomes ethnically more diverse.

Over time, the Chief Executive role in local government seems to have become a much more difficult job. I don't just want to survive; I want to feel more effective in these turbulent times.

I still enjoy my job (most days) yet I could probably use some advice and guidance about new challenges. I must admit that I don't feel comfortable sharing some of my dissatisfaction with other senior managers in my organization or asking them for advice.

I know that our State Association has a coaching program for emerging leaders (and some of the up-and-comers in our organization participate). However, I don't know of any City and County Managers in our region who have engaged a coach of any kind.

What do you think? Would a savvy coach help me? If so, how do I get a coach and use one?



"I have a funny relationship with my governing board." "Funny haha, or funny strange? Wait...let me guess. A little bit of both." "It's great to talk about this in confidence with someone who's been there."

(NOTE: While my response below is written for City Managers and other Senior Executives, many of the suggestions are relevant for all local government leaders needing advice, feedback, and support. -FB)

Yes. Serving as a City Manager has become a much more difficult job. In fact, in California, Cal-ICMA recently surveyed City and County Managers and held follow-up focus groups to identify conflicts and stressors. These disconcerting challenges include:

- Governing Board members who don't understand or value the Council-Manager form of government
- Attempts by Governing Board members to interfere into administrative matters or micro-manage
- Political conflicts among Governing Board members or "outlier" members, causing serious negative impacts on the staff and organization

- Lack of Governing Board priorities and overwhelming demands on the organization
- Dramatic loss of revenue, including state actions taking away local government authority and funding
- Growing controversies such as land use or development conflicts
- Changing demographics in the community, leading to a change in values at the political level and new demands on the organization
- Increasing misinformation and inflammatory attacks from social media posts

WHY DON'T CITY MANAGERS SEEK COACHES?

Chief Executives in local government often don't have the necessary support and guidance they need to serve effectively in these turbulent and disruptive times. There are a lot of reasons that City and County Managers do not get coaching:

- Either most State Associations don't have formal coaching programs for members or they are oriented to emerging leaders, not senior executives.
- City and County Managers in their mid and late careers may feel that they have "arrived" at the top of their profession and may be complacent about their continued learning and development.
- Some Chief Executives do not want to acknowledge that they may feel less than adequate given the increasing challenges and thus feel reluctant to seek advice and support.
- The role of the City, County or Special District Manager may be fairly lonely. Inside our organizations, we may feel that others really don't understand the demands or pressures facing the Chief Executive, or it is showing weakness if we ask for help and advice.
- In the local government sector (as opposed to the corporate or non-profit sectors), we don't have a tradition of coaching for Chief Executives.

WHAT IS COACHING?

Assuming that you would benefit from a formal or informal coach, let's first define coaching. In this context, coaching provides feedback or advice or simply a listening ear from a trusted colleague or group of colleagues. Coaches listen, ask questions, provide different perspectives, suggest additional options or choices for action, challenge our thinking or attitudes, and prompt action. They encourage and support us. Effective coaches don't dole out answers. Instead, they help you find the answers that are right for you.

To effectively serve, a coach helps make it "safe" and comfortable to explore dilemmas and maintains confidences. Most importantly, a coach demonstrates that he or she cares about you as a leader and a person.

As a City Manager, How Do I Get Coaching?

City, County and Special District Managers can secure informal or formal coaching in a variety of ways. The following seven suggestions are listed in order of less formal to more formal approaches.

1. DEBRIEF WITH OTHER SENIOR EXECUTIVES INSIDE YOUR ORGANIZATION

After any significant activity or experience, I suggest that you hold an informal debriefing session at your department head meeting. For example, in Palo Alto, California, where I served as City Manager, we debriefed every City Council meeting (we called it the "Good, the Bad and the Ugly") as well as any recent project or organizational or community initiative.

Typically, you would ask the following questions about the Council meeting or a just concluded community workshop conducted by staff:

- What went well?
- What did not go so well?
- What did we learn for future practice or behavior?

Of course, it is critical that you as the leader are not defensive and demonstrate your openness to feedback (even if you don't agree with some of the comments). Otherwise, you won't get forthright feedback and suggestions for future action.

If you don't feel comfortable seeking this kind of peer advice from all the department heads, call together on a

weekly or bi-weekly schedule a few trusted department directors or other senior colleagues in the organization and debrief significant events in a smaller circle.

2. INVITE A CITY/COUNTY MANAGER TO COFFEE OR LUNCH

The easiest approach to get some informal coaching is to invite on a regular basis a trusted City or County Manager to coffee, a drink or lunch. When I served as City Manager, I met informally with other Managers away from the office at least two or three times a month. Not only did I explore challenges and dilemmas in order to get feedback, but I got social support which was essential to my survival as a Chief Executive.

Please note that I didn't ask these colleagues to serve as my coach. I just asked them out for coffee or a drink. These "let's have coffee or a beer" get-togethers easily turned into sounding board sessions for me.

During these sessions, we swapped stories and personal experiences. I often learned more from the stories than any specific advice. (Stories are the most powerful way to teach and learn.) Not only did I get advice but I enjoyed the interaction.

3. GET PEER ADVICE AT YOUR AREA MANAGER GROUP MEETING

Most Managers participate in Area Manager Group meetings. Area Manager Groups tend to be overly social (at one extreme) or very business-item oriented (at the other extreme). In any case, it is fairly easy to incorporate peer advice as a formal part of the monthly program for your Area Manager Group.

In the Bay Area of California, the Santa Clara County City/County Managers Association has incorporated a regular peer coaching element into our meetings. At the beginning of the monthly meeting, we hold a 45-minute "Managers-Only" session called "Joys and Challenges." After we express gratitude and joy for recent organizational or personal successes and experiences, any member of our group can raise a challenge in a safe environment and get feedback and advice from other Managers. After the Managers-Only session, we invite Assistants or presenters to join us for the business meeting of the Association.

Why don't you suggest that this kind of confidential peer advice be included as part of the regular meetings of your Area Manager Group?

4. USE A COACH FROM THE STATE ASSOCIATION COACHING PROGRAM

Currently, there are 15 State Associations that have joined the ICMA Coaching Program. All these State Associations participate in the Coaching Program webinars and distribute these Career Compass advice columns. Some have started (or are about to initiate) a one-to-one coaching service which offers at no-cost a respected senior leader as a coach for any emerging leader in the state. Typically, all the emerging leader has to do is go the State Association website, select a coach, send an email to the coach, and then start the coaching relationship. It can be a one-time or periodic conversation, or an ongoing relationship. Coaching conversations can be face-to-face or over the telephone.

In California, we have 90 plus coaches profiled on the "[Coaches Gallery](#)" on the Cal-ICMA website. Some who reach out to the Cal-ICMA coaches are in fact City Managers who wish feedback and advice.

If your State Association has a one-to-one coaching program, why don't you reach out to one of the coaches? Or contact one of the Cal-ICMA coaches listed on the "[Coaches Gallery](#)" at www.cal-icma.org/coaching.

5. ASK AN ICMA SENIOR ADVISOR OR STATE LIAISON TO SUGGEST A COACH

If you don't feel comfortable asking a City Manager colleague from a neighboring jurisdiction to serve as an informal sounding board, ask an ICMA Senior Advisor or State Liaison to serve as a coach. Or, they can also serve as a "match-maker," recommending a respected City or County Manager (active or retired) whom you can contact in your State. They can even make the introduction for you.

Again, you don't have to ask for "coaching." Just mention that the Manager was recommended as a savvy professional with lots of experience and you'd like to get their feedback on a challenge or two. Then invite the Manager to coffee or schedule a phone call. This "coach" can be an active manager or an encore manager. As an encore manager, I personally do a lot of pro bono coaching for both emerging leaders and Chief Executives.

6. SECURE A FORMAL EXECUTIVE COACH

If you want a more formal arrangement, you should secure an Executive Coach. This can be an encore manager who is recently retired and now consults or is otherwise still engaged in some aspect of local government. For instance, there are several of us encore managers in California who do paid coaching for City Managers or other Senior Executives.

Another option is to seek a former CEO from the corporate world who has training as an Executive Coach. Your organization or you personally would pay an hourly rate or package fee for the formal coaching.

Typically, executive coaching consists of a scheduled series of structured discussions, with specific goals and expectations, with some preparation required of the Manager in advance of the session. The Manager and the coach may often identify specific actions or different behaviors for the Manager to try out or practice before the next coaching session.

The big advantage to using an Executive Coach is that you secure the committed time, attention and counsel of an experienced and often formally trained coach. Formal executive coaching also forces you to take the coaching process seriously, prepare for sessions and take some follow-up action.

The downside is the cost. Hourly rates for formal executive coaching range in the public sector from \$150-\$350 (costs are higher in the corporate sector). A package fee ranges from \$500 to \$2000 per month depending upon the frequency, depth, and extent of support you seek. While cost is a concern, consider the substantial value for the organization and the community as well as the Manager if the Chief Executive receives sage advice and support in his or her role. Also consider the organizational or personal costs if the Manager fails in his or her role.

To secure a formal executive coach, you can ask trusted colleagues or human resource professionals for recommendations or contact an organization like the International Coaching Federation, www.coachfederation.org, where you can make a confidential request for coaching.

7. JOIN A CHIEF EXECUTIVE PEER GROUP

Another formal option is to join a Chief Executive Peer Group. Most common in the corporate and non-profit sectors, these confidential monthly meetings for a selected cohort of chief executives are led by a professional consultant/coach. The consultant facilitates structured learning and discussions, engages participants in leadership style assessments and self-reflection, and promotes peer coaching and mutual support among the participants. Participants may also receive individual coaching. The emphasis is on personal development as well as support to address professional challenges.

The peer group meetings occur over a period of a year or longer with an annual cost in the corporate sector varying from \$10,000 to \$20,000 (the annual fee in the public sector is substantially less). For one example of an organization that conducts Executive Peer Groups in the private and non-profit sectors, go to www.vistage.com.)

For the federal government, the Partnership for Public Service has developed the Strategic Advisors to Government Executives (SAGE) Program. For senior executives in the federal service across a variety of disciplines, SAGE provides one-to-one coaching and periodic peer group meetings during which participants can discuss leadership dilemmas with former government executives who have held similar positions. (For more information please visit the [SAGE Program online](#).)

In local government, I am aware of one example of this kind of formal peer support group for local government executives. Craig Rapp, a former City Manager, and Dr. James Lynn, a psychologist and organizational consultant, conduct "Compass Peer Groups" for City Managers in the Minneapolis and Chicago regions. To check out these Executive Peer Groups, go to www.compasspeergroup.com or www.craigrapp.com.

How Do I Get the Most Out of Coaching?

In order to get maximum value from informal peer advice or more formal executive coaching, we need to shift our mindset.

Focus on a "growth mindset." Instead of looking at our challenges as problems to minimize, we need to have a "growth mindset." Carol Dweck in her book *Mindsets* suggest that those with "fixed mindsets" try to avoid challenges and mistakes. They prefer to do the same kind of work that they have already mastered since it

reinforces their sense of competency. With a "growth mindset," we look at challenges and experimenting and even mistakes as opportunities to learn and grow, and thereby expand our portfolio of behaviors, skills, and relationships and ultimately become more effective in a disruptive environment.

As part of a growth mindset, we want to try out and practice new behaviors to see if they work for us or improve problematic situations. As Herminia Ibarra suggests in the Harvard Business Review article (January-February 2015) entitled "The Paradox of Authenticity," you are not being a fake if you experiment with new behaviors; rather, you are just trying them out to see if they enhance who you are as a leader and thus over time become part of your authentic self.

Ask for help and feedback. As a strong leader, it may be difficult for you to ask for help and feedback. We often perceive asking for help as a sign of vulnerability and weakness (see [Career Compass No. 32 : The Power of Vulnerability](#)). We tend to think of strong leaders as very confident, all-knowing managers who have it all figured it out. The paradox is that it is only strong leaders who can ask for help and advice and coaching.

Be open to the conversation. It is important to not only share your challenges and dilemmas with a coach, but be open to the feedback and any suggestions on how to handle similar problems in the future.

Prepare for the conversation. Even if it's only a cup of coffee with a colleague, prepare for the opportunity. In advance of the get-together, identify the challenge you are facing; what actions you have taken; what have been the results to date; why you are frustrated; and how you'd like things to change.

Use the coach to promote self-reflection. Great leaders are self-reflective. Coaches can ask probing questions which promote reflection and self-critique and opportunities to make adjustments. After an informal or formal coaching conversation, reflect on what has been discussed and the implications for self-correction.

No griping. It is therapeutic to express some frustration but you want to quickly move on to request the coach's perspectives and constructive feedback.

Be forward looking. While you want a coach to assist you in debriefing recent experiences, the point is to explore what you have learned so that you can enhance your future practice and behavior.

Learn from the stories. Chief Executives love to tell war stories. Don't just enjoy the swapping of stories--probe for lessons that may be related to your dilemma or challenge.

Don't feel compelled to follow the advice. While you want a coach to offer different perspectives and additional options and prompt action, you don't have to accept or act on anything. It is your responsibility to weigh the advice and feedback and choose whatever you may do to become a more effective leader.

Enjoy the interaction. While you are certainly looking for feedback and advice, informal or even formal coaching offers an opportunity to form new relationships and get social support. The experience of meeting with colleagues and exchanging experiences and views is stimulating and fun.

Provide informal coaching for other chief executives. Since we all need coaching and support, actively seek opportunities to serve others in the same capacity. In your conversations with other Managers, look to create a safe and comfortable environment to explore the challenges faced by the other Manager, ask questions, suggest other perspectives and options, and offer encouragement.

Providing advice and support for others causes us to become more self-reflective of our own leadership. We also get a lot by giving a lot.

Remember, Coaches Love To Coach

Often we think it is an added burden if we ask another City or County Manager to coach us or act as a sounding board. Not so!

Coaches love to coach. It is satisfying and fulfilling and gets us away from the more mundane aspects of our City Manager jobs.

You are doing a colleague a favor if you ask for advice and coaching.

Thrive, Not Just Survive.

You seem like a seasoned Manager and I congratulate you on your desire to enhance your capacity to lead and become more effective in difficult times.

You are right. It is not enough to survive, you want to thrive. Coaching can help.



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.