

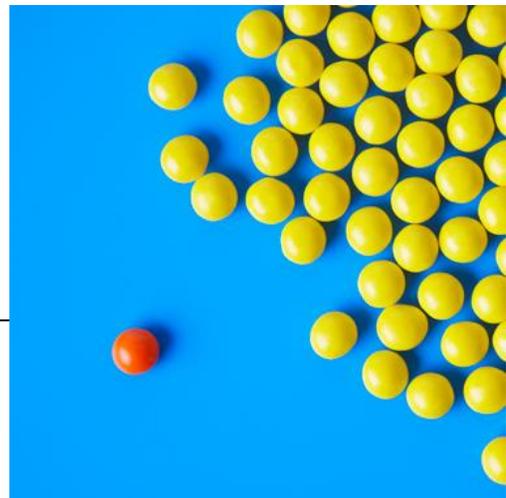
Career Compass No. 36: Creating a Leadership Presence

by Dr. Frank Benest

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In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Benest offers us some tips on standing out.

I am a human resources senior management analyst in a fairly large city government. At one of our HR department management meetings, I made what I thought was a good suggestion about how to proceed on a new HR initiative. However, my idea was not considered. This has happened to me before. I'm now reluctant to speak up. How can I get others to listen to me and take me seriously as a leader?



Your real concern is how to better project “leadership presence” so you and your ideas are taken seriously. Leadership presence is a “skishy” attribute—it’s hard to define. Yet when you have it, people pay attention, listen to your ideas, tend to follow, and want to collaborate.

Leadership presence is something you can learn. There is no one best way to exert positive presence. You want to start small and practice some behaviors so that you can exert confidence and leadership presence in larger settings.

Here are some strategies.

PREPARATION

Before a key meeting at which you want to put forward an idea or proposal or raise an important issue, try out some of these techniques:

- Connect with a few key players, share your idea in an informal conversation, and get feedback.
- Incorporate into your proposal some thoughts from these conversations with colleagues.
- Frame your idea in a way that resonates with the “influentials” with whom you discussed the idea.
- Figure out a compelling “why” for your proposal so that the group might be more open to considering it and taking action.
- Craft your message in terms of organizational values, larger goals, and the need to act now.

If someone supports the idea, and that someone is influential, ask him or her if you can mention the conversation in the staff meeting, noting that you both are enthusiastic about the idea.

You might also “tag-team” the idea. Join with someone with “presence” and influence who shares your idea and would like to co-present the proposal. The proposal will be better perceived at the meeting (and you will be, too, especially if you handle yourself well in co-presenting).

Before the meeting, you can prepare a few points about your proposal. Remember less is more. After talking to a few colleagues, get their feedback on your key points.

In preparing your comments, don’t provide a lot of technical detail. Don’t strive to show people how smart you are.

You can identify a powerful and provocative question to engage others in the issue. For example:

- What do we really know about this challenge?
- Is this the underlying problem or is there something more fundamental challenging us?
- What are some barriers to improving this situation and how can we overcome them?
- Why is it better that we act sooner rather than later?
- Are we passionate enough about this new initiative that other organizational members will follow us?
- What if we take a completely different approach?
- How do we accelerate our learning about this key challenge?

(See [Career Compass No. 24: Asking Powerful Questions](#)).

If appropriate, you can put the item on the management team agenda with you as the designated staff person to introduce the item and frame it for the team.

In preparation, practice your key points by saying them out loud. Don’t write everything out. A few bullet points will help you remember what you want to stress, while allowing you to make eye contact with others at the upcoming meeting. You should also identify a few tough questions and how you would respond. Close your eyes and visualize your participation in the meeting and your responses to questions.

AT THE MEETING

Be present in the moment, listen intently, and be open to how you can connect your idea to other thoughts that are presented. Don’t let your mind wander; don’t become distracted by your smart phone. Be attentive to what people are saying and feeling.

When you present your idea, pay attention to your tone, posture, and eye contact, as well as your message and follow-up commitment.

Posture. If everyone is sitting at a conference table, lean in a bit. If it is appropriate, stand up straight, with good posture, shoulders back and weight distributed on both feet.

Eye Contact. Eye contact helps you connect with people. Make eye contact with a few individuals, especially influentials, around the table. Hold eye contact for 3-6 seconds and then connect with someone else.

Tone. You want to sound knowledgeable and be assertive yet not forceful, vociferous or “pushy.” You want to project your voice yet not be loud. Show enthusiasm for your proposal. If you are not enthusiastic, why should others be enthusiastic?

Your Message. Before speaking, slow down and take a deep breath. Then make a concise statement and perhaps ask a provocative question to engage others. Make reference to what others have said, connecting your ideas to those of others. You are looking for a “yes, and” rather than “yes, but.” Use “we” as appropriate. Acknowledge and be open to any concerns or fears that are raised but focus on the “why” and the upsides.

Visuals. If it adds value, write out a few key words or draw a simple diagram on the white board or a flip chart.

Dealing with Nay-Sayers. If it is an emotional topic or issue and someone attacks your proposal (or you), it is essential to say calm and positive. Again, acknowledge the concern, without judging others, and then concisely reassert the compelling need or “why.”

Follow-Up Action. Let the group know that you commit yourself to taking some action, such as talking to some colleagues in other departments, collecting some more data, or developing an action plan for further discussion. Ask who else would like to join you. Even if no one else joins you, take another step and demonstrate your commitment.

AFTER THE MEETING

As a follow-up to the meeting, debrief with a trusted colleague, your manager, or a coach. Get some feedback to learn how you were received and if you came off in an appropriately authoritative and assertive manner.

GROWING YOUR LEADERSHIP PRESENCE

Once you practice at your HR department management meetings and get more comfortable and confident in that environment, you can try a more challenging setting such as a multidepartment task force or at a council subcommittee meeting or a professional association discussion.

Finally, I suggest that you pay attention to those who seem to exude leadership presence. Critique how they connect with others, what and how they communicate, how they project confidence. Then figure out how you can use some of what you learn from their leadership performances.

Anyone can grow their leadership presence and become more influential. It is just a matter of learning, practicing, and taking a few risks.

ONE FINAL COMMENT

Leadership has many voices. There is no one best way to exert leadership. Over time, you will discover the voice and style that works best for you.



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.