

Career Compass No. 43: My Team Is Overwhelmed (and so Am I)!

In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Benest reminds us we can't all have a Time-Turner.

by Dr. Frank Benest

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As a manager in a city Community Services Department, I lead a youth services team. The team addresses serious matters such as youth violence, substance abuse, and family dysfunction. There is much to do and it is obviously important work.

During the Great Recession, my team lost several positions but the work just kept on coming. With a small rebound in the economy, we have hired one replacement person. Yet with so much work, everyone on the team feels stressed out and distracted. Productivity has plummeted. People in the unit complain that nothing ever comes off our team's plate. Plus, every day there seems to be some new demand from senior management. When we are thrown a new challenge, I notice that the group seems to shut down. It has gotten to such a point that if I suggest a new idea or a new way of doing things, people scream.

Not only is my team overwhelmed, I feel overwhelmed as well. I don't know how to help my team in these continuing hard times. Can you offer some advice?



"But...I wasn't approved for one of these. The last time, I ran into myself at the coffee shop. That was...awkward."

It's true. Local government employees feel overwhelmed and put upon. Resources, especially staffing, are down, yet demands from the governing board, stakeholder groups, and senior management keep on escalating. . .with no end in sight. In some cases, the attitude of senior management seems to be "just suck it up."

Supporting an overwhelmed team is one of the most difficult jobs for a leader. The emotional experience of feeling overwhelmed often incapacitates everyone. Even though you too feel overwhelmed and distressed, your job as the team leader is to get your team focused amid all the demands and "noise."

Given the complexity of the challenge, no one strategy or approach will suffice. It will take a number of efforts to focus and reenergize the team.

Team Leadership Strategies

Here are a number of ideas to consider.

SHOW SOME EMPATHY

First and foremost, show that you understand how team members are feeling. Encourage some constructive venting. Acknowledge that you too feel overwhelmed.

HEAL THYSELF

Before leading the team to find ways of getting more focused and energized, begin to take action so you become less distressed and distracted. The same approaches listed below can help you first heal yourself. (Also see [Career Compass No. 29: Forget Work-Life Balance...Re-Energize at Work and at Home!](#))

IDENTIFY THE STRESSORS

Once you demonstrate that you understand the team's distress, begin to identify with the team the forces that are resulting in the team's feeling overwhelmed. Ask some questions:

- Is it the sheer amount of work?
- It is difficult to get any priority work done given all the distractions?
- Do the projects feel "too big"?
- Are there too many new demands coming from on-high?
- Is there a feeling that nothing ever gets done or decided?

FOCUS ON WHAT MATTERS

This is difficult since a lot of programs and project "priorities" and demands are thrown at your team. Therefore, as suggested by Liane Davey (see the hbr.org blog piece [Help Your Overwhelmed Team](#)), you need to gather your group and ask the team members to respond to this fundamental question: "What does the organization or community need from our team that no other group can accomplish?"

Once the team agrees on a specific purpose, it becomes a guiding principle on how group members should spend their time and energy. It becomes the litmus test to decide what work to take on and what work to shed.

Deciding on a few priority projects might take a number of conversations, but don't give up. You need to tenaciously force the group to decide on its purpose and therefore identify what really matters.

HELP IDENTIFY THE TEAM'S "SWEET SPOT"

Davey suggests that the team edits (with your help) its workload by identifying its "sweet spot." Does a current or new project fit with your team's unique purpose, what the team's good at, or what's really important to the community, governing board, or senior management? If a project is not aligned with the strategic agenda of the governing board or senior management, you need to get rid of it.

INSULATE THE TEAM FROM LOW-PRIORITY WORK

To protect the group's time and energy from being dissipated, you need to articulate the team's purpose and "sweet spot" to the department director and to the executive team of the city. In so doing, you provide a rationale for not accepting new, nonpriority assignments.

This is an extremely challenging leadership task that requires access to higher levels, relationships built over time, and courage. While you participate in the department's management group, you do not participate on an ongoing basis with the department head group of the city. Consequently, you need the community services director to share your priorities with the executive group. You can perhaps find ways to sandwich in your team's priorities when you update the city manager and department heads on a particular project. Or, find ways to interact with the directors of other departments as you participate on cross-cutting, interdepartmental teams, and, in the process, build relationships and communicate your priorities.

SHED NON-VALUE ADDED ACTIVITIES

Many activities (monthly activity reports, redundant written approvals from managers at several levels, laborious purchasing or contracting processes, or overly long staff reports to the city council) are non-value added, ritualistic practices that distract people from important work.

How does a leader reduce such bureaucratic, time- and energy-sapping activities? Here are several suggestions. Once a year, ask staff in a two- or three-week period to identify forms, reports, and practices that get in the way

of priority work. Evaluate "bureaucracy-busting" proposals from staff and eliminate some of non-value-added procedures or activity. Another idea is to encourage staff members to complete a form entitled "This Seems Stupid To Me. . .!" Of course, a manager often needs to sell this idea to higher-ups, which requires framing it in the interests of senior management. (See [Career Compass No. 14: Selling Your Ideas.](#))

Let me give one concrete example from my experience. In one city where I worked, the Police Department had traditionally required officers to complete a log documenting each and every transaction or encounter in the field. These field logs were then reviewed by the field sergeant. Everyone agreed that completing the logs added no value to public safety. By eliminating the logs, we freed up thousands of hours of police time and energy to focus on practices that did make a real difference in enhancing community safety.

FIX UP YOUR MEETINGS

A lot of time and energy is sucked up by unproductive even unneeded meetings. Cut the number of meetings and make those that remain more focused and productive. Don't use meetings to communicate information that can be shared by e-mail or in other ways.

To focus the meeting on a meaningful topic, frame the key issue for the meeting as a question. For instance, you can challenge the group with the question: "Given what we've heard from youth and their parents, what is one key intervention or program investment that will keep young teens safe after they get out of school?"

Forty-five (not 60 or 90) minutes is sufficient if a meeting is focused on an important question. See [Career Compass No. 38: Your Staff Meetings Don't Have To Be Dreary.](#)

BUILD IN "QUIET TIME"

No one has time for "deep thinking" (thinking or reflection that results in true understanding, insight or learning or helps develop effective solutions for a challenge). We are so distracted with e-mails and "busy-ness" that we cannot reflect and strategize. Therefore, create one hour a day (I prefer first thing in the morning, when people are fresh) when no meetings are allowed and no one is permitted to take telephone calls or respond to e-mails. Quiet time is for thoughtful proactive work on priority projects.

In other ways, you can help people carve out uninterrupted time. I used to schedule every Friday morning at a cafe. I'd get a cup of coffee, put my phone away, and focus on an important project requiring focused thinking. You can also find ways for you and staff members to telecommute once or twice a week, as long as they use part of the day for strategic work.

SET LIMITS ON E-MAIL

It is bad enough that we are overwhelmed at work with constant communication, especially e-mails. Set some limits for yourself and your team regarding e-mails and phone calls after work. For instance, unless it is a true emergency, don't send e-mails or respond to e-mails or make phone calls after 6 pm. People need to decompress, refresh, and reenergize after work hours and they cannot do that if they are bombarded with communication 24/7/365.

BREAK UP THE BIG PRIORITIES

In one-to-one meetings or in team sessions, help your team members break the big priorities into do-able "chunks" that once completed can move the project forward. Assist the team in focusing on these smaller tasks during quiet time or other uninterrupted time.

HELP YOUR TEAM SEE PROGRESS AND THEN CELEBRATE

With a lot of demands and distractions, people have difficulty in discerning any progress in achieving their team agenda. During one-on-one meetings and especially in team sessions, ask group members to talk about the project chunks they are addressing and the milestones achieved. As Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer state in [The Progress Principle](#), people can maintain their engagement and energy if they perceive progress. Small wins help create momentum.

In our hectic and disruptive worlds, we in local government rarely take a time out and celebrate our successes. Thus, once a project milestone is met, take a time-out, bring in ice cream, savor the achievement, and express

gratitude for those involved.

FOCUS ON "ROUGHLY RIGHT"

In the risk-averse environment of local government, people tend not to submit reports or proposals or finish up projects until everything is perfect. Otherwise, somebody (a stakeholder group, governing board member, top management) will criticize the work and the staff person. This "no-mistakes" ethos bogs down progress and projects pile up, adding to our experience of feeling overwhelmed. Moreover, no one learns from making missteps because we avoid them at all costs.

The best way to learn, grow, and adapt is to try to get things "roughly right." In other words, do some research, come up with a proposal that you think may work, try it out as an experiment, and fix it up as you go along. The best approach in this disruptive world is "ready, fire, aim."

As the team leader, you can help the team develop a "growth mindset" (see *Mindset* by Carol Dweck). People with a growth mindset enjoy new challenges and see mistakes as a part of learning and growth. Those with "fixed mindsets" avoid new challenges and want to do repeat work that they already know how to do so their sense of competency is reinforced.

Of course, in a risk-averse environment, the leader needs to protect the team from attack. Therefore, call any new effort a "pilot" or "experiment" from which to learn. Also, tie the project to the larger agendas of the city council or the city manager or school board; engage other groups or players as partners, and thus acquire allies and political supporters for any project.

EMPHASIZE SOCIAL SUPPORT

To the extent that people feel interpersonal support in their team, they can better deal with adversity, challenge, and frustration and can generally become more resilient. To promote positive relations, consider:

- "Taking 5" at the beginning of group meetings when people can share what is happening in their personal and professional lives.
- Asking group members on a rotational basis to bring coffee and bagels for the team meetings.
- Acknowledging people's work anniversaries and thanking them for their service.
- Organizing a picnic meeting outdoors.

PROMOTE WELLNESS

To help staff members stay energized and focused, promote wellness activities. When you meet with a direct report or gather the team, take a walk and address the agenda. Help provide a city- or YMCA-sponsored yoga class on site or near work. Make available a meditation or nap room. Provide healthy foods at team meetings or workshops.

MODEL THE WAY

Modeling is the most powerful way that people learn and change attitudes and behaviors. As team leader, you must model the attitudes and behaviors that you wish to see. So, do you as the leader. . .

- Focus on strategic activities during quiet time?
- Say "no" to new demands that don't fit in the "sweet spot"?
- Take walks to clear your head or eat healthy foods?
- Shed non-value-added activities and let people know why these activities will no longer be undertaken?
- Try to get things "roughly right"?
- Show gratitude for the opportunity to make a positive difference?

Have the Courage to Say No

Your job is to help the team stay focused on what really matters and produce important results for the organization and the community. You can only do that if you insulate the team from all kinds of new demands. If you stand up for your team and if you are perceived as a leader that "has the team's back," team members will follow you.

As a team leader, you serve as a key communication link. You help your team know what is happening at the city council level or with other departments or other community services divisions. In this communication role, you must also articulate and advocate the needs of the team to other groups with whom you interact. You must have the courage to say "no" to new demands, or at least negotiate new resources or eliminate some other team priority. It is not easy. It takes courage.

For instance, you may fear that "top management will see me as an obstacle" or "I won't be viewed as a team player." Courage is the ability to face your fears and then act anyway on the legitimate interests of your team.



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.