

Career Compass No. 44: Rookie Mistakes of a First-Time Department Head

In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Benest Helps Us Appreciate the Rookie Mindset

by Dr. Frank Benest

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I have just been appointed the new director of the Public Works Department in an adjacent city. For the past seven years, I have served as a division manager in a very good Public Works Department. This experience got me ready for my new department head position.

I've done some research on the department and the public works-related issues facing my new city. The department seems to be a good group with no glaring big problems.

Since this is my first executive position, how do I get started on the right foot and promote the likelihood of my success?



"If I look serious, they'll take me seriously. Yeah, that's it."

Congratulations. I remember when I got my first department head position. I too was very excited yet anxious about the opportunity and the challenge of proving my worth. Looking back, I made a number of mistakes. So, I'd like to share some of the classic mistakes of first-time or "rookie" department heads.

Nine Rookie Mistakes

MISTAKE NO. 1: HOLDING COURT IN YOUR OFFICE

Typically, new department directors ask for briefings in their office from different division heads and program managers. This is a missed opportunity to schedule briefings and meetings in different offices of public works and in the field, seeing people in their environment, and casually meeting staff. I suggest that you go to tailgate safety meetings, do a little job shadowing of field crews, and let the department employees know that you will be in the cafeteria or lunch room on a certain morning to hang out, have coffee with anyone, answer questions, and meet people.

MISTAKE NO. 2: GETTING UP TO SPEED TOO QUICKLY

New department heads often like to show that they are knowledgeable and have done their homework. Instead

of asking questions, listening and assessing the knowledge and competencies of staff, the department director does too much talking and tries to impress others with his or her knowledge.

MISTAKE NO. 3: COMPARING YOUR NEW ORGANIZATION WITH YOUR PREVIOUS AGENCY

You apparently came from a very good Public Works Department, which provided you with ample experience and even exposure to some best practices. As you see how your new department operates, it is tempting to share how things were done better in your previous organization or department. This is deadly. Your new colleagues don't want to hear your constant references to better practices in your previous agency.

It is important to first get to know the culture of your new department. What worked in your previous organization may not be the best solution for where you are now. Again, you need to listen and learn a lot as well as build relationships as you come onboard.

If you see a dysfunctional or out-of-date practice, you may want to ask a staff person to check with similar departments in nearby cities on their practices or protocols and then have that person share the findings with your department management group.

MISTAKE NO. 4: TAKING CORRECTIVE ACTION TOO QUICKLY OR NOT AT ALL

By conducting various kinds of listening sessions with different public works units, you will certainly discover a few troublesome problems that department management has failed to address (i.e., a personnel issue, a burdensome process or practice, a stalled initiative). On one hand, you don't want to rush to judgment and act hastily. You want to demonstrate that you've listened to and heard employees, assessed the situation, and then took action. On the other hand, once you've evaluated the problematic situation, you need to confront it and act.

Keeping a commitment to address a problematic situation builds trust with staff and increases the likelihood that department employees will share their concerns and issues with you in the future.

As you become aware of problems, think through which ones you want to initially confront and correct. Your first effort to "fix things up" and improve the department and the work place is symbolic to all--so choose wisely.

MISTAKE NO. 5: ACTING LIKE "I KNOW BEST"

If you make most of the decisions as the new boss, your staff will be at your door every hour on the hour; they won't take ownership of the problems or the solutions; and they will become overly-dependent on you. After consulting with management staff and other department employees, you probably do want to make some key or pivotal decisions to demonstrate that you are in charge and aren't afraid to act. But this should not be your general approach to decision-making.

In approaching different kinds of decisions, you do want to declare to your management group how the particular decision will be made. You can declare to the management group:

- "The decision is up to you" (defer/delegate decision to management group).
- "Let's decide together" (seek consensus before deciding as a group).
- "Please provide input and I will decide" (ask for input before you decide).
- "I will or have decided" (announce your decision without any discussion).

Your decision about how to decide an issue will of course be tied to how important or urgent it is to you. If you don't openly declare how the decision will be made, your management staff will be confused if in some situations you leave the decision up to them and in others you make it with little or no input.

In general, engaging employees in decision-making over time will help develop the capacity of your managers and others. As Dan Rockwell states in his blog "[Leadership Freak](#)" ([March 18, 2015](#)), great leaders avoid providing the "right" answer. Instead, they add "s" to words and ask "what options or solutions might we try?"

Remember that the primary role of leaders is to grow more leaders.

MISTAKE NO. 6: EMPHASIZING YOUR VISION

Typically, a new department head goes out to work groups or holds an all-hands meeting and communicates his or her goals for the department, updates everyone on key issues or projects, talks about the budget, and the like.

The problem is that this is one-way monologue even if you ask for questions and respond to them.

What you want to do is engage people in a conversation. As the poet David Whyte has suggested, leadership is the art of conversation. The best way to engage in a conversation is to ask questions. For instance, . . .

- "Given our public works role, how can we make the community an even better place to live and work?"
- "What are the issues or challenges that interest or concern you?"
- "As your director, how can I support you?"
- "Do you have the resources you need to do your best work?"
- "What do you want to learn?"
- "What do you like best about your job or the department?"
- "What don't you like about your job or the department?"
- "If I could make one improvement, what would that be?"

Prematurely proclaiming your vision for the department is a mistake, since you know less about the department than anyone else. Instead of announcing your vision at the beginning, you can certainly talk about your values and overall approach to managing the department, commitment to customer service, and the like.

There is nothing wrong with vision. In fact, developing a vision and identifying goals may be very energizing for everyone, as long as it is a *shared* vision and involves *shared* goals.

MISTAKE NO. 7: ACTING LIKE THE LONE RANGER

A lot of executives or senior managers believe it's lonely at the top. If you get too close to your direct reports or others, it will become too difficult to make tough decisions or impartially evaluate the performance of your staff. I disagree. It's lonely at the top only if you isolate yourself.

You spend most of your working hours at work or thinking about work. While you want to avoid the perception of favoritism, it would be a dreary existence if you didn't have social and friendly ties to co-workers even if you are the boss and occasionally make a tough decision.

In addition to doing your part in creating friendly work relations with others, you as an executive must also actively reach out and form bonds and relationships with those who can provide advice, coaching, and social support. Certain colleagues from inside the department can become an informal "brain trust." Those from other departments or from outside the agency can also serve as trusted advisors or coaches.

As a leader, you need the capacity to bounce back after making a mistake or failing (see [Career Compass No. 9: Bouncing Back From Defeat](#)). Your resiliency as a leader is determined in part by your professional and personal support network.

MISTAKE NO. 8: SPENDING ALL YOUR TIME ON DEPARTMENT OPERATIONS

As a new department director, you do need to learn all you can about department operations. A primary role is, of course, managing your department so the city manager and others don't have to worry about poor service delivery or that the department is not achieving its work plan. However, another primary role for department directors is serving as a "little cm" with the other department heads. The city manager is the "big CM" and serves as the chief executive. However, the city manager needs "little cms" who not just manage their departments but also help the city manager identify city-wide problems, assess challenges, and generate solutions for the big challenges facing the city organization and community.

Therefore, to become a key part of the city's leadership team, you must create positive relationships with the other department directors. Schedule a series of get-to-know-you coffee or lunch meetings with individual department heads. Maintain this effort over time. Relationship-building comes before joint problem-solving. These relationships can also help you build your support network (see Mistake No. 6 above).

MISTAKE NO. 9: BECOMING CONSUMED WITH ALL THE RESPONSIBILITIES

You certainly need to invest a lot of time and energy in getting established in your new position. In doing so, it's easy to become consumed with getting to know all the department employees and the other senior managers, attending city council and community meetings, getting briefed on key capital projects, becoming familiar with the department and city budgets, meeting key stakeholder groups and other agency representatives, and just

trying to stay on top of e-mails and other communications. However, you must guard against getting burned out and consciously seek opportunities to refresh and re-energize yourself.

When I was appointed as a first-time department director in my mid-twenties, I quickly became stressed out with demonstrating that I was competent as the new boss and that I was on top of everything. As I became overwhelmed with all the responsibilities, I tried to "numb" my work emotions. Unfortunately, once you start numbing some emotions, you numb all emotions. I became withdrawn at home and eventually separated from my wife. Over time, I matured and grew from this first major leadership responsibility but it was a distressful time in my life.

To avoid becoming consumed, try to carve out some time, energy and space for your non-work life. Consider:

- Taking a walk at lunch
- Going to the gym on a regular basis
- Maintaining outside (non-work) relationships
- Not checking e-mails when you get home (or waiting until the kids go to bed)
- Designating a tech-free zone in the family room or in your work shop
- Meeting your spouse/partner or friend for lunch
- Maintaining your participation in your soccer or running club
- Going out of town with your family for a long weekend, or better yet, a vacation.

As a department head, remember that you also serve as a role model for other managers in your department and help set the culture. If you don't want work to be all-consuming for you and others, don't e-mail your team after hours or otherwise become over-focused on work all the time.

The Upside to a Rookie Mindset

While you may make a lot of mistakes as a first-time department head, there is an upside to being a rookie.

A lot of department directors get complacent after they have established themselves. A great thing about being a "rookie" is that you are always asking questions and are open to learning, making new relationships, and trying out different approaches. A great department head maintains these efforts over the long term with a focus on renewing and refreshing oneself and adding more value to the department, city organization, and community.

Therefore, I suggest that you do your best to maintain a "rookie mindset." For instance, over time you can. . .

- Get actively involved in the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), not just professional associations related to public works.
- Enroll yourself in the ICMA Credentialing Program or some other credentialing effort that stimulates continuous learning.
- Seek out conferences, workshops, and reading outside the field and share with your team what you learn.
- Find ways to meet new people inside and outside local government.
- Engage a variety of peer coaches or supporters inside and outside your organization.
- Take on with the support of the city manager an acting role as a director of another department while the recruitment is being conducted.
- Reflect on your ever-unfolding leadership journey and share your musings in a department blog or a personal journal.

I wish you well on your new journey of discovery, learning, and contribution.



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.