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Career Compass No. 52: Recasting My Rep

In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Frank Benest presents a road map for redefining yourself in the minds of others.

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I've been in my current position as a management analyst in the county administrator's office for the past three years. I believe that I'm viewed as someone who reliably completes quality work, such as board of supervisors reports, budget and performance management studies, and other analytic work. I am also perceived as a good and productive team member.



However, while I believe that I have the potential to lead others and manage important projects, I have not been chosen to lead project teams tackling the county's key priorities. Simply put, colleagues, especially senior managers, do not perceive me as a leader. They seem to view me solely as a "numbers person" who does good "staff work."

How do I change people's perceptions of me?

It is difficult to change people's perceptions of who you are and what you have to offer. This was a challenge to me earlier in my local government career. I was a human services director (overseeing the city's social services) and wanted to become a city manager. No one thought I had the capacity to lead an organization as a chief executive. They perceived me as a soft-headed, touchy-feely social worker who knew nothing of finance, land use, or politics.

To make the desired transition, I had to redefine myself in the minds of others.

Ideas to Help Redefine Yourself

As I reflect upon my own past efforts to change perceptions of my capabilities, I have identified some strategies that may be helpful to you.

1. Check perceptions

The first thing you must do is to verify your assumptions. Invite a trusted colleague or coach to coffee, state your assumptions, and ask for forthright feedback. You might want to engage several colleagues in providing feedback to get different perspectives.

In these separate coffee discussions, you can ask several questions:

- To what degree do people fail to perceive my leadership capabilities?
- Am I overreacting to the assumption that people don't see me as a leader?
- How do I go about changing those perceptions that get in the way of my leadership role?
- Can I enlist you in my efforts to identify leadership opportunities? How can you support me? (For example, are you aware of an upcoming project which I can lead or co-lead? Can you suggest to top management my participation as a lead or co-lead?)

2. Take ownership

As suggested by Dorie Clark, author of [Reinventing You](#) and [Stand Out](#), don't get defensive. Resist the urge to tell people they have a misperception of your capabilities. If they perceive that you are not a "leader" (whatever that means to them), then that perception is real for them.

It is up to you to change the dynamic. Acknowledge their view and ask for suggestions on how to change your behavior or take other actions to enhance your reputation.

3. Focus on behaviors

Behavior is ultimately the key to recasting yourself in the minds of others. You should focus on new behaviors, not perceptions. Frequent and consistent behaviors over time will redefine who you are and what you are capable of doing for the organization.

4. Redefine leadership

In seeking leadership opportunities, don't assume that you must serve as the formal team manager. Remember that leadership has nothing to do with formal authority or position. Anyone can lead. Leadership is all about exerting positive influence.

Therefore, even if you are not the formal project manager, you can exhibit certain leadership behaviors:

Ask questions at team meetings, such as

- Why is this project important?
- What is our vision?
- What are our goals?
- To what extent are we meeting our goals?
- To achieve our goals, what else might we do?
- What are the interests and concerns of stakeholder groups and how do we respond?
- What does success look like?

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

Share your opinion, even if it is contrary to the majority view.

Volunteer to take on specific assignments in order to help the team move forward.

Incorporate the ideas and interest of other team members as you help the group develop the work plan. Your ideas will gain support and become more powerful if they are meshed with those of others.

Help the team debrief as it does its work. Ask

- What has gone well?
- What has not gone so well?
- What have we learned as we move forward?

5. Assertively seek new leadership assignments

Don't wait to be selected for new leadership opportunities. Schedule a development conversation with your manager in the county administrator's office and specifically request a "stretching" opportunity to lead a team of significance. Or better yet, suggest a specific role for yourself in terms of a new team project.

Given the "retirement wave" facing most local government agencies, there are now more and more vacancies in our organizations as mid-level managers retire. Consequently, be on the lookout (and ask your coaches and others supporters to be on the lookout) for acting or interim positions in various departments. The best acting positions are those in which you have management authority over a program, budget, and staff. Your performance in an acting position can supercharge your development and change your reputation in the organization.

6. Over-deliver consistently

Since it is difficult to change people's minds, you need to over-compensate. So if your boss thinks you do not speak up in meetings, you must consistently provide in team discussions thoughtful ideas, ask powerful questions, and disagree appropriately. As Dorie Clark suggests ("[You Really Can Change Your Reputation at Work](#)" Harvard Business Review Blog, Sept 11, 2015), if you really want a more positive impression to "stick," you have to act consistently to produce it.

7. Build rapport with others

Colleagues are more likely to view you as a leader if they connect with you. Therefore, identify and share common interests with others. For example, are you and others pet lovers, foodies, football fanatics, hikers, parents, or readers of biographies? Identify a commonality and share experiences. Common interests forge bonds. Assuming you do have some good ideas and are willing to take some calculated risks, others are more likely to follow you, if they connect to you on a personal level.

8. Fill in the gaps

When I was trying to redefine myself, I needed to address some gaps in my experience. I sought out the city's community development director and asked to participate on a land use project team shaping a large development proposed for the community. I also requested of the finance director that I serve on the city's budget team.

What are the gaps in your skills and knowledge? How do you secure the needed experience to develop these skills and knowledge?

9. "Flex" your style

It is a good idea to take a leadership or communication style assessment, get feedback on your scores from someone trained in the assessment tool, and then try out some new behaviors. For instance, if you are task-oriented and don't spend much time relating to teammates, you might try out a little chit-chat, share some of your personal or family life with others, and ask them about their personal lives.

Some people feel it is inauthentic to be someone you aren't. However, don't think of it as being inauthentic. Rather, think of it as experimenting with new behaviors and "flexing" your leadership and communication styles. You are just expanding your portfolio of behaviors. (See Herminia Ibarra, "[The Authenticity Paradox](#)," Harvard Business Review, January-February 2015).

10. Promote the work of your various teams

If you are on the county budget team, take the initiative to write a county newsletter item summarizing the work of the team and the outcomes of budget deliberations. The team gets the visibility and so do you.

11. Seek leadership in professional organizations

Since local government professional organizations are always looking for volunteers to work on committees, it is not difficult to get on a committee and then take an active role. As you get involved, you can proactively suggest that you present the work of the committee at meetings of the professional association and write a summary for the association newsletter.

You can also get visibility by presenting at a seminar or workshop on a topic (for example, performance management) for which you have some knowledge and experience. Start out as a panelist. Your manager, a supportive colleague, or a coach can help you outline the presentation. Once you present, you can easily turn the outline into a professional article.

12. Get feedback on your efforts

As you implement your redefinition game plan, get feedback from a trusted coach. Ask some of the following questions:

- How am I doing?
- What are you hearing from others?
- Am I being sufficiently proactive?
- What else might I do?

Make sure you request forthright feedback, and then let your coach know what further steps or adjustments you plan to make.

Have Patience

Your current reputation was not built in a day. Changing perceptions will take some time. However, you will be successful if you develop a conscious rebranding strategy (see [Career Compass #23 “Building a Personal Brand”](#)) and then build momentum step by step, action by action.

Take Charge

Don't allow other people to define you and your possibilities. Don't wait until someone presents you with an opportunity. Proactively seek and secure the development and learning assignments that will demonstrate your capabilities.

In the process, you can take charge of your own reputation.



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.

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