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Career Compass No. 75: Patience Is a Leadership Virtue

Patience is the capacity to tolerate delay without getting frustrated or upset.

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I'm the traffic manager in a mid-sized community and am relatively new to the position. Due to many resident complaints, I was assigned by my boss, the community development director, to develop a plan to calm traffic and increase bike and pedestrian safety along a commercial retail street near several schools.



The traffic management staff did not readily jump into drafting the plan, so I prepared the approach. The plan calls for reducing a lane of traffic in each direction, eliminating some street parking, adding a protected bike lane, widening sidewalks, and adding some intersection protections for pedestrians and bicyclists.

I believe the plan is well thought out. I've made a few modifications to the draft plan based on two neighborhood meetings and a session with the Planning and Transportation Commission. It's time to get the plan in front of the council and get it approved so we can do our work.

There is some trepidation about moving forward. The community development director and the city manager think that the plan will be controversial (which is probably true) and want us to have some more meetings. The economic development staff in the Community Development Department are also concerned with pushback from the merchants on the street, employees who commute to town, and shoppers. We've had a few discussions to educate merchants and employers in the area, but they seem opposed. To be honest, more than a few of my traffic management team members also think that the plan may be too radical for our community.

Despite these doubts, the neighborhood residents who live in the area are very supportive and want us to proceed.

I am committed to traffic safety and more walkable and bicycle-friendly environments. I want to make a difference and am pushing to get the approval of the plan. Enough meetings already. I am getting frustrated by all the delay.

Isn't time for leadership?

I understand your impatience and your need for some results. I too have a bias for action. In fact, my motto as a leader has always been “ready, fire, aim.” However, it would be best if you still were ready.

“Ready” requires patience and using your time wisely. As Dan Rockwell warned (“[Impatience Took Him to the Top](#),” Leadership Freak blog, June 13, 2011), quick decisions that are not thoroughly baked or tested in the real world of organizational or community life often need to be reversed or modified.

What is patience?

Patience is the capacity to tolerate delay without getting frustrated or upset. Patience allows you to remain calm, even though it seems that you’ve been waiting forever for something to happen.

Patience enables you to become less reactionary to obstacles posed by groups that might not see the world in the same exact way that you do. Patience allows you to suspend judgment long enough to engage others, learn something new or different, and modify your ideas, so they become more powerful.

Why patience?

Patience is not just waiting. It implies that you use the additional time wisely.

In your situation as the traffic manager, patience is required if you are to:

- Identify the strengths of the team members and get them into the right roles.
- Develop and “stretch” your staff, so they are part of the solution.
- Conduct authentic conversations with employees and external stakeholders, listening and understanding their needs and interests.
- Create relationships and connection with internal and external stakeholder groups.
- Integrate the interests of other groups, address their concerns, and get their “fingerprints” on the plan.
- Learn about different perspectives and needs.
- Promote trust inside and outside your organization.

Positive change is often incremental; progress happens in starts and stops, and change is often misunderstood and/or merely unpopular. It is not uncommon for stakeholders to impugn our motives as leaders and assume evil intent. When people do not immediately embrace the vision of a better organization or community or what it takes to move forward, it is easy for the champion of change to get frustrated, upset, and give up. (See Scott Savage, "[When You Want to Give Up: Responding to Frustrations While Leading Change](#)," March 17, 2017, Thin Difference blog.)

Big ideas (like traffic calming) never unfold as planned. As you advocate your idea or solution, it bounces up against reality (i.e., financial reality, stakeholder opposition, team member resistance). Patience allows you to incorporate the perspectives of others and modify the idea. Consequently, promoting positive change in the uncertain and messy world of local government takes time, patience, and perseverance.

When shouldn't you be patient?

As a leader, you shouldn't be patient when:

- Someone exhibits unethical or immoral behavior.
- People are willing to live with mediocrity.
- Staff or external stakeholders ignore significant problems to the detriment of the organization or the community.
- Team members don't make an effort to contribute, they withdraw, or are not accountable to the team.
- People exhibit destructive behaviors or attitudes that undercut the effort.
- Team members simply don't care.

(See Dan Rockwell, Leadership Freak blog, "[Avoid 4 Dangers of Impatience](#)" Nov. 17, 2014.)

When should you be patient?

Here are situations when you must exert patience:

- You don't have a relationship with internal or external stakeholders.
- Progress is satisfactory and ongoing.
- People are learning along the way.
- People want to improve their organizations and/or the community they serve.
- New responsibilities are assumed or assigned to team members.
- Trying hard falls short.
- You see potential in staff, and they want to stretch and grow.

- Stakeholders may not agree with you and oppose your approach but are willing to struggle with you in finding an acceptable solution.

Patient leaders exhibit trust in others, humility, and ultimate confidence that there is a way forward even when there is uncertainty and lack of support.

(See Dan Rockwell, Leadership Freak blog, “[Avoid 4 Dangers of Impatience](#)” Nov 17, 2014, and “[When Restraint Takes You Further](#),” June 11, 2012.)

Patience for whom?

Since you achieve results (approval and acceptance of the traffic-calming plan and implementation of the plan) by creating relationships, with whom do you need a relationship? Virtually everyone!

Each group inside and outside the organization can potentially block you and veto the plan. Inside the organization, the economic development staff can block your efforts. Likewise, your own team may agree to follow you but in practice not follow you, and thus stymie implementation of the plan.

Outside the organization, the merchants, other employers and their employees, and shoppers can oppose your solutions.

It is not only the neighborhood residents in the surrounding area who count. Every group has a right to be heard, identify their interests and concerns, and offer their ideas to mitigate the traffic safety problems.

How do you build a relationship?

A relationship must precede problem-solving. It is through relationships that we achieve results. Therefore, you start with building relationships, which hopefully leads to some level of trust. (See [Career Compass No. 42 “Trust Me!”](#))

Of course, building relationships take patience and time.

How do you build a relationship with employees and external groups? You engage them in conversations.

To begin the process of engaging others in authentic conversations, you must ask yourself and your team:

- With whom do we need to enter into conversation?

- What will be the content of the conversation?
- Are we truly open to the conversation?
- What may we learn?
- How do we respond to what we hear?

When you have identified the most important conversation partners, you might want to let these eight suggestions guide the conversations:

1. Listen more than you talk (good conversationalists listen twice as much as they talk).
2. Engage others with a curious mind (“tell me more”).
3. Listen deeply; don’t immediately seek to rebut (“yes, but. . .”).
4. Paraphrase, so you acknowledge other ideas or concerns and ensure that you understand (“this is what I hear you saying”).
5. Suggest ideas (“Could we address your concerns by _?” “Have you considered _?”).
6. Use powerful questions (“What would success look like?” “What are your fears?” “What would be another or different approach?”).
7. Understand that conversations are more about learning than educating.
8. Let the other person know how your thinking has been influenced by the conversation.

(See [Career Compass No. 61 “Leadership is the Art of Conversation.”](#))

What are some tips for practicing patience?

Here are some tips for practicing patience.

1. Ask yourself if the situation calls for patience.

Good leaders are self-critical. Given the criteria identified above, does the situation call for patience or not? Take a deep breath and assess.

2. Identify times in the past when patience paid off.

To take a beneficial pause, consider times in your past professional or personal life when you were able to exhibit patience. For instance, it could be a situation in the past when you let a relationship develop

over time or when more time allowed the pieces to fall into place. What was the situation? What did you do during the pause? What did you learn?

3. Practice a few simple acts of patience.

Patience is difficult for action-oriented leaders. One suggestion is to practice a few simple acts of patience.

- Take the long way home and enjoy the different scenery along the way.
- Read an entire magazine from the front to end, all the articles and even the ads.
- Walk around the office when you arrive (even though you have a slew of tasks in front of you); say hello to staff; ask about plans for their upcoming weekend, and share your plans

(See Justin Kanoya, "[When Patience Pays Off](#)," Thin Difference blog, March 14, 2017.)

4. Announce intent to be patient.

At a team meeting, announce your intent to be more patient so you can better engage everyone, integrate their interests, and respond to concerns. Ask for their help and feedback as you proceed.

5. Get an accountability partner.

Ask a trusted colleague with whom you regularly interact to help you monitor your behavior. Schedule a cup of coffee every 2-3 weeks to get feedback as you practice patience. Use your coffee meeting to debrief efforts to slow down and engage.

6. Get coaching.

A coach inside or outside the organization or a trusted colleague can suggest when it's advisable to use patience and pull back (or push forward if the situation warrants action).

What are some suggestions to use your time wisely?

Again, patience is not beneficial unless you use the time wisely. Patience will free up some time and energy to help get ready for action.

Here are some suggestions.

1. Avoid calling an employee or community meeting as a first response to conflict.

If you are working on a contentious issue internally (i.e., significant budget cuts, restructuring departments) or externally (i.e., traffic calming, homelessness), resist calling an employee or community meeting as a first response to conflict (even if your boss strongly suggests such a meeting). A meeting of stakeholders just brings the warring factions together and heightens the conflict.

Instead, conduct a series of one-on-one conversations or small-group discussions. By asking questions and probing for underlying interests, you can identify some themes with respect to different perspectives, fears, concerns, and, most importantly, acceptable possibilities and opportunities to move forward. Once these themes have been identified by engaging representatives of all internal or external stakeholder groups, you can then convene a meeting to show your work. In the meeting, you can demonstrate that you truly listened and heard people from the different groups.

By acknowledging what you heard from each of the groups in the initial conversations, you dampen the contentiousness and create the opportunity for people to hear differing perspectives.

2. Take a risk if the challenge is aligned with your values.

If the traffic safety challenge is aligned with your values, you should take the risk of promoting traffic calming efforts even if it is controversial. Knowing that you are committed to this value allows you to keep yourself energized amid the controversy and messiness of the issue, demonstrate patience, and engage stakeholders to find a path forward.

3. Try a pilot

Try a low-cost, time-limited, reversible pilot, or experiment. In your case, the six-month pilot could include restriping the street, reducing one lane in each direction plus adding a bike lane. You could find some additional parking in the commercial area (perhaps on a city-owned parcel?) to offset the street parking spaces that you remove for the experiment.

During the pilot period, you need to identify some metrics and then ensure that data is generated (average car speeds, accident data). You can then debrief the experience with the staff and outside stakeholder groups during and at the end of the experiment.

It's important that you approach the pilot as an opportunity for you and others to learn from the experiment (not educate others).

4. Show progress

Your patience will pay off, and others will stay engaged in struggling to find solutions if you can demonstrate progress. Traffic improvement projects often take a long-time to pay off; therefore, you

need to demonstrate progress in the planning of the project (including how you will address the concerns and problems raised by stakeholders), and the implementation of the progress (such as the restriping of the street and relocation of the street parking spaces).

As Teresa Amabile and Steve Kramer pointed out in their book [The Progress Principle](#), people inside and outside the organization will stay motivated and engaged if they see progress. It is your task as a leader to help people see forward progress.

5. Go slow to go fast

Sometimes we are so action-oriented, we fail to engage others fully, and our efforts are met with much opposition. We consequently fail.

By conducting authentic conversations with others and finding acceptable ways to address issues, we minimize opposition and can make a difference. Once people see that their ideas have been incorporated into the plan and their concerns addressed (even if not completely solved), you can move fast.

You need to go slow to go fast. (See [Career Compass No. 56 "Paradoxes of Leadership."](#))

Patience and purpose

Our focus as leaders needs to be on purpose and meaning first. Once we are clear about "the big why," we must patiently do the work to achieve our purpose.

As stated by Jon Martz ("[The Role of Patience in Purpose](#)," Thin Difference blog, Jan 14, 2015), "Patience really means taking the time to do the work. Risk is present in patience, yet patience mitigates risk." Patience doesn't mean you avoid the risk. Instead, patience allows you to take purposeful and constructive action to minimize the risk.

Here is another paradox of leadership. Leaders must have a sense of urgency about addressing the challenge, yet be patient at the same time as they engage others in figuring how to respond. The urgency helps keep you energized and committed. However, you must use patience to engage others, collaborate, and move forward.

Frank is patient?!

Since I've always been action-oriented as a leader, my colleagues and friends would laugh that I'm trying to advise others on how to be patient as leaders. However, reflecting on my experience as a long-time local government leader, I understand patience as a leadership virtue.

I guess that I teach best what I most need to learn.

I like to thank Pamela Miller of Miller Consulting Group for suggesting that I address this topic of patience and laughing with others as I struggled to figure it out.



Sponsored by the ICMA Coaching Program, *Career Compass* is a monthly column focused on leadership and career development 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 leadership or career question you would like addressed in a future Career Compass, e-mail careers@icma.org or contact Frank directly at frank@frankbenest.com

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