



Career Compass No. 47:

Leadership Myths Debunked

In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Benest highlights seven leadership myths that should be left behind.

by Dr. Frank Benest

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I'm a fairly new program manager for a key Family Services Program in the county's Human Services Agency. I'm trying to get employees to buy into a new approach for serving disadvantaged households and to better adapt to the demands on our agency. I have completed some of the initial research. With this new approach, I know that we can achieve better outcomes for children and their families.

Even though the team members have given lip-service to the innovations that I've proposed, I'm getting subtle and not-so-subtle resistance to the agenda and metrics that I've proposed.

If we don't meet the metrics assigned to our program unit, we face serious funding cutbacks from the state. Because of these consequences, I've been trying to drive results with a sense of urgency but team members are not responding to my leadership. To make matters worse, there are no monetary incentives that I can offer my team members if we achieve the program goals and measures.

I'm committed to this new approach so I've decided to do some of the more detailed planning myself so we can get started. However, I'm quite frustrated. How do I better motivate my team?



Set aside these Mighty Myths!

DR. BENEST: Let me see if I can help. The biggest obstacle for you is that you may be operating according to several well-accepted leadership myths. These myths are inhibiting you from moving forward.

Debilitating Myths

Here are seven myths that impede effective leadership:

MYTH 1: I NEED TO MOTIVATE OTHERS

Leaders cannot motivate anyone except themselves. The role of leaders is to support the self-motivation of others. As a leader, you must explore how to tap into the individual and collective interests and

motivations of your group. The best way to explore and identify the hopes and dreams of others is to ask questions (See [Career Compass No. 24: Asking Powerful Questions](#)). Therefore, you may wish to begin by asking questions about how the unit can better meet the needs of children and families.

MYTH 2: MONEY OR FEAR CAN EFFECTIVELY MOTIVATE PEOPLE

Given the knowledge work of most local government workers, money limits performance, innovation, and adaptability. As Daniel Pink points out in his book *Drive*, people are driven by purpose (the urge to do something in service to a purpose bigger than ourselves). In fact, once you provide competitive pay and benefits, Pink states that "meaning is the new money." The other two great motivators of knowledge workers, according to Pink, are autonomy (the urge to direct our own lives) and mastery (learning to become better and better at what we do).

Fear is also a de-motivator. Fear overwhelms people and thus limits creativity and adaptability. An atmosphere of fear kills creative ideas and approaches. In contrast, a focus on hopes and dreams engages people, engenders commitment, and inspires people to action.

MYTH 3: I NEED BUY-IN

Never, ever seek "buy-in" from employees or external stakeholders. A mindset of buy-in suggests manipulation; you have an idea and you want others to accept it. Buy-in suggests a used-car salesman trying to get an unsuspecting customer to buy a clunker. If you seek buy-in, people sense manipulation as soon as you start "selling."

Rather than buy-in, formal or informal leaders can convene team members; start conversations; identify the hopes, dreams, and interests of people; integrate those interests into the plan; ensure that everyone's fingerprints are on the proposal; and then the execute the plan together. The poet David Whyte has reframed the leadership proposition: "Leadership is the art of conversation."

Yes, these leadership conversations take a lot of time and effort. But it is the only path to long-term success. One of the paradoxes of leadership is that leaders must "go slow to go fast."

MYTH 4: LEADERS "DRIVE" RESULTS

You may be getting resistance because you are using your positional authority to drive results. Management can try to use formal or positional authority as a lever, but management authority can only ensure a minimal level of performance or compliance. You can tell people to follow you, but then you look back and no one is there.

Authentic leadership is based not on your formal authority but rather your interpersonal (even your moral or spiritual) attributes. People choose to follow (or not to follow). As author [Charles Lauer](#) suggests, "Leaders do not force people to follow. They invite them on a journey."

The "journey" is a wonderful metaphor for leaders. With a journey, you know the general direction but not the precise destination. Is it, therefore, an exciting and fulfilling journey? Is the journey aligned with people's hopes and dreams? Are you passionate enough about the journey? If not, why would anyone follow you?

MYTH 5: THERE ARE LEADERS AND THERE ARE FOLLOWERS

Leadership is not about asserting your position. It is not about telling and explaining. Rather, it is about listening, learning, and then exerting positive influence. Anyone, at any time, can step up and lead.

In my career as a local government manager, I have often started a team project as the leader. And then along the journey, someone else (or usually several people) became the leader who pointed the way and energized the effort. Then I changed roles and became the follower and often the cheerleader.

One of the paradoxes of leadership is that great leaders are great followers. And, of course, the best leadership is shared leadership with everyone accepting responsibility, making contributions, and exerting positive influence.

As [Margaret Wheatley](#) says, great organizations and teams are "leader-ful."

Whether a team member accepts the leadership opportunity depends on how the project is aligned with his or her hopes and interests, supported by top management and others, imbued with opportunities to learn and grow, and provides a measure of autonomy.

MYTH 6: I'M THE ONLY PERSON WHO CAN DO THIS RIGHT

Oftentimes, we leaders insist on our way of doing things and, therefore, we often end up doing it ourselves. We simply believe that we are the only ones who can ensure the job gets done the right way. We assume that there is only one way. In fact, there are often many ways to achieve the desired end.

For shared leadership to evolve, people need autonomy to find their right path within certain boundaries (See [Career Compass No. 46: Leading By Letting Go](#)). While you may think that you are the only one who can do it right, that's not your role as a leader. In addition, in a disruptive world, you want to promote a "ready, fire, aim" approach to problem-solving and innovation. Given escalating demands for which there are no perfect answers, our teams need to get it "roughly right" and fix it up as we go along.

MYTH 7: I LEAD A TEAM

Just because you call your work unit a "team," doesn't mean it is a team. A true team is built over time. It struggles to develop and achieve common vision, goals, work plans, and results. Team members must choose to play as a team. Each member has his or her say, but not necessarily his or her way. Everyone helps and supports each other. Each one contributes in his or her own way. People connect with each other and hold each other accountable.

An authentic team is built by all team members. There may be a manager who is the formal leader but ultimately a true team has shared leadership.

To succeed as a team, team leaders must build the team issue by issue, step by step (See [Career Compass No. 37: Engaging Employees Successfully](#)).

A team is only a team if it acts like a team.

Changing Your Leadership Mindset

By becoming aware of these myths, you can enhance your leadership mindset. With a different mindset (see [Career Compass No. 41: The Post-Heroic Leader](#)), you can then take action to become more of a humble servant leader who serves your team, your clients, and the larger organization and community.

To change how you lead, you can start any place. Where do you want to begin?

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.