

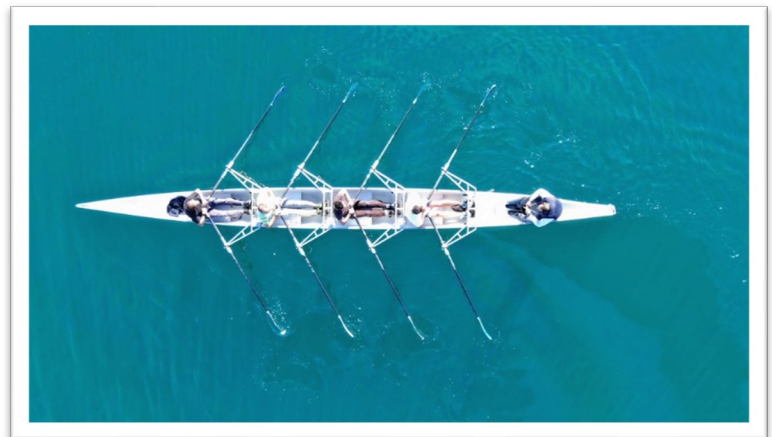
## Career Compass No. 85: To Thrive in Post-Pandemic, Enhance Employee Experience

Cultivating talent in good times and downturns will help stabilize morale, leading to better productivity and organizational health.

By Dr. Frank Benest | Sep 7, 2020 | ARTICLE

Dear Frank –

*I am deputy city manager of a mid-sized urban city government. In response to the COVID-19 crisis, we have made, with great difficulty, significant budgets cuts, including employee layoffs. Our city government has a history of being an effective organization in addressing the many demands from the city council and community. Even with the cuts, we will still be able to deliver in some fashion many of our basic and essential services.*



*My big concern (shared by our department heads) is that our organization will only be able to limp along. Our remaining managers and other employees are overwhelmed, discouraged, and hunkered down.*

*How do we revitalize our organization going forward?*

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Most local governments across the country are suffering through major budget cutbacks but will be able to survive in one form or another. However, given our challenges, we need effective, innovative, and responsive public agencies more than ever.

Here is the key challenge: Recognizing your deep cuts, including layoffs, how do you overcome this organizational damage and thrive in the future? I believe that the answer is enhancing the employee experience in your organization.

## Why Focus on Employee Experience?

Layoffs and other major budget cuts demoralize an organization. The negative consequences are significant:

- Productivity and customer service decline.
- Fear is pervasive, undercutting the kind of creativity needed to overcome the cutbacks.
- Talent flees.
- Costs increase, such as sick leave, other absenteeism, and worker compensation claims.
- Employee engagement plummets.

Just surviving as an organization is insufficient. To *thrive* in the post-pandemic era, local governments must focus on developing and retaining talent and enhancing the **employee experience**.

## Why Does Talent Matter?

Local governments are service- and knowledge-driven. Therefore, they are totally dependent on good talent. All new solutions, even technology-driven solutions, require talent. (See Kip Harkness and Frank Benest, "[Tech Talent—How To Attract and Retain Tech-Savvy Professionals](#)," *Public Management*, June 2018.)

Engaged and committed talent is required if your organization is to

- Maintain productivity and customer service despite the cutbacks.
- Sustain the innovations created during the initial response to the pandemic.
- Re-engineer and streamline existing processes and practices in order to achieve efficiencies.
- Create new services given the needs of your community.
- Partner with other public, nonprofit, and private-sector entities in delivering new solutions.
- Incorporate new technologies.
- Engage the energies of community groups and volunteers.

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The problem is that good talent is mobile.

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The problem is that good talent is mobile. Talented employees can easily leave. In fact, the literature calls these employees "free exiters" (they can freely exit). Therefore, here is the challenge: How do you create the

“social glue” so talented professionals stay with you and help you overcome your difficulties?

## What Is Your Employee Value Proposition?

Your employee value proposition (EVP) is defined as the unique set of

monetary and nonmonetary rewards and benefits that the organization provides to employees in exchange for their skills, capabilities, commitment, and contributions.

Your EVP is a key differentiator as you compete for new talent and retain that talent over time. EVP helps you define who you are as an organization and thus stand out from competitors.

Assuming that your local government pays more or less competitively, how your employees *experience* the organization is the critical factor in attracting, retaining, and energizing employees.

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## How Do You Explore Your EVP?

The best way to explore your EVP is of course to ask employees. In a series of focus groups or small-group discussions with different employee groups and/or through periodic surveys, ask employees three basic questions:

1. Why would a talented professional want to join our organization and stay with us?
2. Why would a talented professional be reluctant to join our organization and stay with us?
3. What tangible steps could we take so it is more likely that employees will want to join us and stay with us?

In one of the agencies where I served as city manager and in many workshops that I have conducted as a trainer, we asked people about their organization’s EVP. Here is a sampling of some of their typical responses:

### Some of the Pluses

- Opportunity to make a difference, build community, save the planet.
- Meaningful work.
- Competitive salary, good benefits.
- Good and dedicated coworkers.
- Effective top management.
- Business-like governing board.

- Colleagues with diverse skills and expertise.
- “Family”-like environment.
- Commitment to public service.
- Good values.
- Strong partnerships with other entities.
- Opportunity to see the impact of my work.
- Opportunities to learn and grow.

### Some of the Minuses

- Too much bureaucracy and red tape; can’t get anything done.
- Silos.
- Rule-bound.
- Risk averse.
- “Political” decision-making by management.
- Constantly changing priorities.
- Little flexibility in scheduling.
- No governing board or community appreciation of local government employees.
- Out-of-date legacy technology.
- Controlling mid-manager.
- Too slow to change.
- Top-down management.
- Little opportunity to advance.
- Governing board is too reactive to pressure from special interests.

I suggest that you ask senior management the three questions above and then do the same with different employee groups and compare their responses. There may be a disconnect that you need to explore.

It is also important to pose the three questions regarding your EVP to your governing board, perhaps at a study session or retreat. Governing board members might be able to identify why employees would want to join and stay with your organization. They typically have some difficulty in identifying why employees would be reluctant to join or stay with your agency. This kind of discussion helps the governing board sense areas of improvement (such as funding for employee development) and support the efforts to enhance your EVP and the overall employee experience. (See Frank Benest, “[Winning the War for Talent: The Elected Official’s Role](#),” *Western City*, Aug 2018.)

## What Are the Five Elements to an Energizing Employee Experience?

It is not about making employees “happy.” Rather, the key is creating the conditions to help employees become engaged, energized, and committed.

Based on my practice as a local government manager and the literature on this topic, I have identified five key elements that lead to a vital and energizing employee experience.

## 1. Purpose

Local government has a competitive advantage because our work is meaningful. Daniel Pink in his book, *Drive* (2009), identified purpose as one of three key self-motivators. (The other two self-motivators are autonomy and mastery. See below for further discussion.)

The problem is that leaders do not often articulate the purpose behind the work or help people explore the meaning behind their efforts. Think of your typical staff meeting. We run into the meeting and immediately start talking about “what” we’re going to do and “how” we’re going to do it. We need to “start with the why.” (See Simon Sinek, TED Talk, “[How Great Leaders Inspire Action.](#)”)

For instance, a meeting with park maintenance workers should start with some discussion of why the maintenance of city parks is important to the

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Purpose energizes our work.

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community. Different workers may have different “why’s.” Some may say that maintaining the parks beautifies the urban environment, or helps people relax and enjoy their leisure, or enhances family and community life. Purpose energizes our work.

Consequently, all our meetings and reports should briefly identify the “why” of our work.

Another way to infuse more meaning into everyone’s work is to “recraft” jobs. In conducting a “stay interview,” identify with the employee what tasks, assignments, relationships, and learning opportunities are meaningful and energize the person. (See [Career Compass No. 80: To Retain Talent, Use ‘Stay Interviews’.](#)) Then work with the employee to tweak their assignments so they get to experience more purpose. (See Jane Dutton, “[What Job Crafting Looks Like,](#)” *hbr.org*, March 12, 2012.)

## 2. Autonomy

No one wants to be told exactly how to do a task or complete a project. People hate controlling micromanagers. Within certain guide rails, people desire autonomy to “figure it out” and find the best way to solve a problem.

As the Gallup research indicates, people join an organization because of the compensation, or the opportunity to do good work or advance. They leave an organization because of a poor relationship with their boss. (See Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman, *First Break All the Rules: What the World’s Great Managers Do Differently*, 1999.)

To help managers move from a top-down directive style to a more coaching style,

organizations must commit to provide leadership development training, especially in the realm of soft skills. As one advances into management, it is the soft skills that produce the hard results (and improves the employee experience).

As one example, [San Mateo County, California](#), provides a trained one-to-one coach to every new manager as well as supervisory and management training.

In the post-pandemic world, employees will desire to maintain greater levels of autonomy that they experienced when they worked remotely. Moreover, local government agencies will also require employees to act with more autonomy. With leaner organizations, local governments need staff people to step up and take on new roles and assignments. To be successful, people must have appropriate autonomy with support and coaching so they can stretch and grow, make missteps, learn from those mistakes, and help our local governments address new challenges.

### 3. Learning and growth

The opportunity to learn and grow is critical to a positive employee experience. There are many ways to promote learning and development:

- Stretch assignments.
- Pilot projects.
- Job rotations.
- Acting or interim assignments.
- Team leadership opportunities.
- Staffing a city commission or neighborhood advisory council.
- Lunch-and-learn sessions.
- Book clubs.
- Formal or informal coaching.
- Leadership or management academies.
- Talent exchanges within the organization or with adjacent local governments.

To promote a learning culture, WD-40 CEO Gary Ridge often challenges his employees with a question: “When was the last time you did something for the first time?” (See Bill Taylor, “[5 Questions To Ask About Corporate Culture To Get Beyond the Usual Blather](#),” *hbr.org*, June 1, 2017.)

One of the best ways to promote learning is to debrief every significant experience with your team: What went well? What did not go so well? What did we learn for future practice?

Learning also promotes “mastery,” one of the three self-motivators posed by Daniel Pink. Nothing is more motivating than making progress and getting better at something that is personally meaningful. (See Monique Valcour, “[You Can’t Be a Great Manager if You’re Not a Good Coach](#),” *hbr.org*, July 17, 2014.) Gallup’s research suggests that learning and growth are big factors driving engagement and commitment. (For list of the

12 drivers of employee engagement, see SHRM *HR News*, "[The Gallup Q12 Employee Engagement Questionnaire](#)," May 1, 2020.)

Most employees are also interested in how they can advance in their careers. Without too much difficulty or cost, HR can offer in-person or online workshops on how employees can take charge of their careers; learn about career ladders and what is required to move up; and develop resume, interview, and networking skills.

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Talent development and learning activities are cheap.

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The good news is that talent development and learning activities are cheap. While budget-cutting may eliminate most travel and outside training, employee development is cheaper than most other investments that we fund, such as capital projects or technology. Moreover, there are inexpensive webinars or free coaching programs. For example, the [ICMA Coaching Program](#) offers to all local government employees no-charge webinars and free one-to-one coaching.

## 4. Belonging

People want to feel a sense of social support. As a result of our sheltering-in-place experience, all of us now more fully appreciate the need for social contact and community. Again, one of Gallup's 12 drivers of employee engagement is "At work, someone cares about me."

We spend most of our waking hours working. Therefore, a sense of community and belonging is critical to creating a positive employee experience.

There are many ways to promote belonging, caring, and connection:

- Build relationships (for instance, conduct a walking meeting or meet at a café; have a conversation about family or non-work activities).
- Tell personal and professional stories at team meetings and encourage others to do the same.
- Share some of your non-work self with others in order that they too share some of their selves.
- Ask questions to start conversations with colleagues and listen.
- Provide scheduling flexibility and telework opportunities so people can have more balanced lives.
- Conduct listening meetings or larger town hall meetings with employees.
- Support people when they are struggling (for example, if someone is caring for a family member, offer some remote work so the employee can attend to their family).
- Develop a wellness program not only to cut costs but to also demonstrate that your organization cares about employees.

- Celebrate everything, work and non-work related.

(See [Career Compass No. 79: Leading By Connecting.](#))

## 5. Culture of Gratitude

Employees want to be recognized for their good work. Gallup identifies recognition as another key driver of employee recognition (“In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work”).

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Everyone is a “hero.”

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As a result of the COVID-19 crisis, all of us have become more aware and appreciative of first responders, health care workers, grocery clerks, child care providers, and sanitation workers. In our local government organizations, how do we sustain this awareness and continue to recognize essential workers of all kinds? Everyone is a “hero.”

While we may have eliminated the annual employee appreciation dinner due to budget cuts, there are simple and inexpensive ways to recognize people. For example, start each staff meeting with a “team accomplishment” segment when anyone can give a shout out, recognizing a team member’s contribution. While attending a city council or commission meeting, write personal thank you notes to the budget or technology or communication team members. (Writing recognition notes during city council meetings was the only way that I kept my sanity over 36 years of council meetings.)

Good managers and team members should not only express appreciation for the *work* being done by one’s colleague, but should also express gratitude for the *person* and what he or she brings to the team and organization. (See Mike Robbins, [“Why Employees Need Both Recognition and Appreciation,”](#) *hbr.org*, Nov 12, 2019.)

## How Do You Proceed?

To develop the process of enhancing the employee experience and bolstering workplace culture, productivity and creative problem-solving, you might want to consider the following steps:

- Prepare senior and mid-management to focus on your EVP. Before working to enhance your employee experience in the post-pandemic world, prepare the executive team and other senior managers and middle-managers. Discussion topics include:
  - After severe budget cuts, what is the state of our organization and our capacity to respond to current and future demands?
  - Why focus on our employee experience and workplace culture?
  - What would be our role in leading such an initiative?
  - How should we get started?



- How should we communicate our intentions to the rest of the organization?
- Form a citywide “culture champions” team to develop a change campaign.
  - Ensure that the culture champs are energized by the prospect of improving the employee experience and workplace culture (you might want to have staff bid on the opportunity to serve on the team).
  - Secure champs from every department.
  - Include a department director on the team to serve as an executive sponsor (the role of executive sponsor is to communicate team efforts with the city manager and other department heads and help the team remove any roadblocks or remove red tape).
  - Provide training and other support for the team.
- Consider separate department culture champ teams, since every department (even every division) is often a culture of its own.
- Conduct focus groups (as well as any surveys) with different employee groups to identify your EVP.
  - Summarize the input from all groups, including themes.
  - Commit to share the “Enhancing Our Employee Experience” plan with all and update the organization as the initiative moves forward.
- Develop and implement a citywide plan to enhance your employee experience, including program elements, timelines, and a few key metrics.
  - Ensure that plan includes soft skills training (including coaching skills) for supervisors and managers, incorporating the five elements promoting a vital employee experience.
- Consider the opportunity for each department team to create its own mini-plan (complementing the citywide plan).
- Implement the plan with active city manager and department head support.
- Demonstrate and celebrate progress along the way.

## What Is the Role of Top Management?

In many cases, the city manager and department directors give passive support to such organizational change initiatives. . . which then die over time. **Active** support requires more than funding (most of the activities to enhance the employee experience require little funding). HR can provide technical expertise, but the culture initiative must be “owned” by top management, not HR. Otherwise, it will fail.

Active support requires the following commitments:

- Understanding and promoting the “why” behind the initiative.
- Engaging middle managers in the discussions and holding them accountable for supporting any efforts (change happens or not in the middle of the organization).
- Marketing program activities at all staff meetings and keeping the issue alive.
- Serving as role models with respect to living the five key elements to a vital employee experience (modeling is the most powerful way to change culture).
- Ensuring that all employees have the opportunity and time to engage in learning and development and other program activities (time is the key resource).
- Monitoring the implementation of the initiative and making adjustments in conjunction with the culture champs team.
- Celebrating progress city wide and in their departments.

## Learn from the California Talent Initiative

The Cal-ICMA Talent Initiative is based on the premise that talent development and workplace culture are no longer nice, discretionary activities. Rather, they are now key business imperatives.

The [Talent Initiative webpage](#) includes the full document and executive summary for the “Talent 2.0” report and many resources. For exemplary programs, click on the “Best Practices Compendium” and then click on the heading of “Workplace Culture.”

## Your “What-If” Agenda

You have a council and community that makes a lot of demands on your organization. Top management must continue to be **demanding** of employees... and **supportive** at the same time.

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Top management must move beyond its “to-do” agenda and spend at least some time and energy on its “what-if” agenda.

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If your organization is demoralized and weakened by severe budget cuts, many senior managers throw up their hands and say “it’s not our fault—we can’t do anything.” Not true. It is in such times that organizations need the best leadership, now more than ever.

To thrive, not just survive, in the post-pandemic era, senior managers must exert organizational leadership, not just financial management. The five elements to an energizing employee experience all require good leadership in the face of much adversity.

To focus on your organization's employee experience, top management must move beyond its "to-do" agenda and spend at least some time and energy on its "what-if" agenda. (See Scott Eblin, "[Leaders, Welcome to the Beginning of Phase 2](#)," *eblingroup.com* blog, May 13, 2020.) For example, What if we had a great employee experience so that our talent would feel energized and excited about the challenges ahead and wouldn't even think of leaving? If that were true, what do we need to do?" This kind of leadership must include exerting a lot of attention and energy, making commitments, taking risks, and exhibiting courage.

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Sponsored by the ICMA Coaching Program, *ICMA 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](mailto:careers@icma.org) or contact Frank directly at [frank@frankbenest.com](mailto:frank@frankbenest.com). [Read past columns](#) at [icma.org/careercompass](http://icma.org/careercompass). Get *ICMA Career Compass* right in your inbox by subscribing. Select any issue, and look for the blue [Feedburner subscription box](#).

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