



Career Compass No. 61:

Leadership Is the Art of Conversation

by Dr. Frank Benest

January 22, 2018

I'm a human resources manager in a large city organization. Since I would like to enhance my leadership capabilities, I asked the HR director if I could lead a redesign of our recruitment process. Given my extensive experience and expertise in recruitment, she agreed. Currently, we have over 72 positions vacant city-wide. It takes approximately five to six months, beginning to end, to fill a vacancy.

In competing for talent, my city government is losing opportunities to other organizations because early and mid-career professionals won't wait around for us to complete our cumbersome process. To make matters worse, our organization struggles to meet the goals set by the city council and city manager with this continuing high level of vacancies.

I've had many discussions with department heads and hiring managers in all the departments but there is no buy-in. Everyone wants to maintain in one way or another what they are used to doing. Even my own HR recruitment staff people do not feel any sense of urgency.

I have drafted a new streamlined recruitment process and have shared my proposal with all the key players but they all seem to have a different concern or problem. They just don't seem to get it.



Everyone wants to hire talent quicker but no one seems motivated to significantly change the process. How do I get buy-in to the streamlined process? Can you suggest how I better approach this challenge?

DR. BENEST: Congratulations on taking on this leadership challenge. I sense that you are committed to making a positive difference for your organization.

The problem is that you seek “buy-in.” You have a plan to change things (in your mind for the better) and you want to sell it to others. Seeking buy-in is fundamentally manipulative, and people can immediately sense it, and, therefore, they resist your efforts.

Instead of trying to persuade people, you need to engage colleagues in HR and in other departments in authentic conversations.

WHAT ARE AUTHENTIC CONVERSATIONS?

Authentic conversations are those conversations in which you are truly open to the conversation and wherever it may lead. In my experience, authentic conversations are not the same as the usual business discussions. Authentic conversations are those in which you are trying to genuinely learn from the other person, not teach or persuade. Here are my suggestions to become more self-fulfilled in your position.

WHY DOES LEADERSHIP REQUIRE AUTHENTIC CONVERSATIONS?

You are facing an adaptive (not a technical) challenge. You may think that you are addressing a technical challenge with an evident technical solution, and people just “don’t get it.” However, in reality, you are facing an adaptive challenge because all the stakeholders have their own preferred solutions and can easily block your technical solution. Your technical expertise and any formal management authority are insufficient to carry the day.

As opposed to technical problems, adaptive challenges are those problems where there are no right or wrong answers. Stakeholder groups all have different interests and concerns and they can each “veto” your plan. Adaptive challenges require leadership, not management.

You lead by starting conversations, convening people, focusing on shared purpose, responding to the concerns and fears, solving problems together, and mobilizing action. Your job as a leader is to get to “yes” when everyone can say “no.”

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF AUTHENTIC CONVERSATIONS?

Authentic conversations have great value. They can help the leader:

- Probe for critical information and identify the critical interests, hopes, fears and concerns of stakeholders.
- Create consensus about the problem.
- Promote empathy on the part of those engaged in conversation.
- Create relationships and connections (people won’t tend to follow you if they do not feel connected to you).
- Generate commitment and action.

- Demonstrate that you care.
- Create the opportunity to build trust.

WHAT ARE THE KEY INGREDIENTS TO AUTHENTIC CONVERSATIONS?

1. Demonstrate curiosity

One must enter the conversation with a curious or inquiring mind. You want to understand the person's situation, his or her interests, and concerns. It is not about selling your solution.

The Buddhists say that one must avoid an "expert's mind." An expert's mind is a "full" and thus a closed mind. There is no room in an expert's mind for new views and approaches. Therefore, the Buddhists suggest that one approaches a difficult challenge with a "beginner's mind." A beginner's mind is an empty mind and thus open to different approaches.

Authentic conversations will help the leader become a "learn-it-all" (as opposed to a "know-it-all").

2. Seek different kinds of data

Instead of seeking only technical information, you must probe for other kinds of data, including hopes, fears, concerns and problems, values, and perspectives.

3. Ask powerful questions

To inquire and get the right kind of data, the leader must come prepared to ask powerful, open-ended questions, such as:

- What are your current frustrations with the city's recruitment and hiring processes?
- Can you share with me some specific examples or experiences about recruiting and hiring that frustrated you or your department staff?
- If we could hire talented employees in a quicker fashion, how would that support your department efforts?
- Given your needs, what would an effective recruitment process look like?
- As the city revises its recruitment process, what are your fears or concerns? What is behind your fear or concern? (Listen for things they may be protecting, which are important to them.)
- What happens if we do nothing?
- How might we transform the process to meet your needs?
- Who might know more about this challenge in your department?

4. Actively listen

Active listening requires that you ask open-ended questions, listen intently, avoid distractions (including conversations going on in your head), ask probing follow-up questions, and then summarize and paraphrase what you heard. By acknowledging the other person's interests, hopes, values, and concerns, you demonstrate that you truly "heard" the person.

Listen more than you talk. Typically, a good conversationalist listens twice as much as he or she talks.

Furthermore, listen deeply. Don't immediately seek to rebut ("yes, but"). Instead, say "tell me more."

5. Demonstrate empathy

By acknowledging the experiences of others and their hopes and fears going forward, you demonstrate empathy. Empathy is the ability to understand and share the experiences and feelings of others from their perspective, not your own.

By putting yourself in the place of others, you create empathy, which in turn promotes relationship and connection.

6. Reflect on what you heard

All leadership requires reflection. You need to spend some time reflecting and considering the information that your conversations have generated. Specifically, you must struggle to understand the source of any resistance. Is it about certain technical aspects of the redesign? Is it about autonomy or authority? Do people need more time to digest any possible changes? Are there perhaps other ideas or suggestions that you should consider?

You can reflect by reviewing your notes from the conversations or by keeping a log or journal. Some people like to reflect alone at a café or during walks. I like to reflect and condense information by talking to others (perhaps a trusted colleague, a spouse or partner, or coach).

7. Be willing to change your perspective

Demonstrate that the conversation mattered. As a leader, you must show in tangible ways that the conversation influenced your thinking and the proposal. Otherwise, the conversation is not "authentic;" it is merely talk. To influence others, you must let them influence you. And you must provide feedback to the person about how the conversation changed your perspective or idea.

HOW DOES ONE RESPOND TO RELUCTANCE OR RESISTANCE?

Even if you do not agree, you never want to minimize concerns or problems identified by HR staff or department managers. As Dan Rockwell points out in his [Leadership Freak blog "How To Cuddle Up with 'No' and Win with Doom and Gloomers"](#) (Oct 17, 2017), when you trivialize the concerns of others, you are seen as closed and stubborn.

So, how does a leader legitimately deal with the problems and concerns generated in conversation with others? First, as suggested above, you need to acknowledge the problems expressed during the initial conversation.

Second, don't try to immediately respond in the first conversation to all the fears, problems, and/or concerns identified by the other person. As suggested by Sally Blount and Shana Carroll in an *hbr.org* blog piece (May 16, 2017), "[Overcome Resistance to Change with Two Conversations](#)," the leader needs to engage an important stakeholder in at least two conversations, if not more. In the second conversation, you aim to demonstrate that you heard the concerns of the person. Based on the first conversation, you outline in the second conversation what will be different, or not, in your

approach and explain why. You want the other person to feel that their issues have genuinely shaped your thinking about the redesign.

According to Blount and Carroll, the time between the two conversations is important. They recommend that you get back together for a second or subsequent conversation in two to seven days. If you respond too quickly, either in the initial conversation or a day later, the stakeholder may not feel that you have fully considered their concerns or suggestions. If you wait longer than seven days, they may feel forgotten and dismissed.

During the subsequent conversations, you can ask some additional questions. For example, how might we test out our ideas? What might a pilot program or beta-test look like? Who needs to be involved? What would success look like? What's the next step that doesn't require much commitment? (See Dan Rockwell, [Leadership Freak blog, Oct 17, 2017.](#))

If you don't **integrate** the interests of others and legitimately respond to their concerns, they will block you. While you cannot solve every problem, or make every concern go away, you do need to get their "fingerprints" on the solution so it becomes their solution. As you incorporate the ideas of others and minimize their problems, the solution tends to become more robust and elegant.

As American military strategy suggests, be clear about purpose and direction, yet flexible about how to achieve it.

WHAT ARE OTHER TIPS TO PROMOTE AUTHENTIC CONVERSATIONS?

Here are some other ideas on how to promote authenticity in your crucial conversations.

1. Start with the "why"

We often jump into discussions by focusing on the "what" (streamline the recruitment process) and the "how" (cut out steps, change who does what). Instead we must first focus on the "why" for redesigning the recruitment process, such as:

- Finding the best talent for the organization.
- Filling vacancies quicker so the organization can meet its goals.
- Being more competitive for talent vis-a-vis other public, private, and nonprofit organizations.

People will be more open to the "what" and "how" if they are aligned with the "why." (See [Simon Sinek's TED Talk, "How Great Leaders Inspire Action."](#))

2. Frame the issue differently for different stakeholders

So that different stakeholders are open to considering potential solutions, you need to frame the issue given their interests. Just as a blue frame brings out the blue in a painting, the correct frame helps someone consider an idea or viable solutions based on their values or interests.

Therefore, if we want a department director to consider different approaches for redesigning the recruitment and hiring process, you may ask "How does a new process help you keep your authority to hire the best talent in the quickest fashion?" For HR staff, you might ask, "How do we in HR ensure that the city selects talent based on merit in an impartial yet quicker fashion?"

By framing the issue differently for different groups, you are not attempting to manipulate people. You are merely trying to get them to consider an opportunity.

3. Minimize distractions

If you are going to have a meaningful and constructive conversation with someone, you need to be prepared, be present in the moment, make eye contact, and minimize any distractions. In addition to scheduling ample time to ask questions and explore issues, you might want to talk sitting next to each other without a desk or table separating you, put your smart phone away, or better yet, meet at a café or take a walk together.

4. Show patience

Engaging others in multiple conversations takes time. You must show some patience if you are getting people aligned on purpose and intent, identifying themes from all your conversations, and then modifying your proposal to incorporate the interests and concerns of others. At that point, you can pick up speed because you have addressed the significant issues that people have.

Patience and urgency can co-exist. Go slow to go fast. (See [Career Compass No. 56: “The Paradoxes of Leadership”](#).)

5. Ask people to share experiences and stories

As you engage others in conversation, ask them to share personal experiences with respect to the recruitment and hiring process. These vignettes or stories are powerful ways to illuminate issues and discern themes. Plus, people typically love to talk about their own experiences and tell stories.

Later in the process, you can share these stories with decision-makers and other stakeholders. You certainly need technical data and facts (for instance, the average number of vacancies at any given time city-wide, the time a typical recruitment takes from beginning to end, the percent of applicants who are no longer available by the time interviews are conducted). However, data is necessary but completely insufficient. Stories make the data come alive and often compel people to act. (See [Career Compass No. 50: “Story-Telling—A Powerful Way to Lead and Communicate”](#).)

WHY SHOULD LEADERS RESIST THE URGE TO FIRST CALL A MEETING?

When facing an adaptive challenge in local government, oftentimes our first inclination as leaders is to call a meeting of internal or external stakeholders. Why should we resist this urge?

When addressing an adaptive challenge, each stakeholder group has its own preferred solution or approach. Therefore, if you begin the process by organizing a meeting of stakeholders, you might be just exacerbating conflict. A meeting might harden the differences in values and approaches, and everyone then takes a position for or against the approach.

Consequently, you must start with one-one-conversations during which you probe for values, interest, hopes, fears, and concerns. Once you respond in tangible ways to the issues and themes that emerge from your initial conversations, you can call a meeting and identify the purpose and “why” that you all share. You can then explore where there is alignment on key elements of the redesign and what problems remain to be addressed by the group.

HOW DOES CONVERSATION CONTRIBUTE TO LEADERSHIP?

If you listen intently, ask questions, consider other viewpoints, and modify your solution or approach based on the conversation, you are showing respect for the other person and the reality that he or she experiences. You are also creating trust, which is the critical currency for any leader. People tend to follow leaders who build relationship and connection. It is through relationships that leaders produce results.

CREATING A CULTURE OF CONVERSATION

The poet David Whyte defines leadership as the art of conversation. Leaders ask themselves:

- With whom do I need to have a conversation?
- What do I want the content of the conversation to be?
- What do I need to learn?
- Am I willing to revise my perspectives based on the conversation?

In authentic conversation, you don't have to be right. Remember, adaptive challenges have no right or wrong answers.

As the actor Alan Alda suggests, listening and engaging in authentic conversations involves the "willingness to let the other person change you."

If you lead by engaging others in conversation, you are modeling behavior and encouraging others to listen, consider other perspectives, and change the world together for the common good. Over time, you are helping your organization create a culture of conversation and positive change.

Sponsored by the ICMA Coaching Program, 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.