



Career Compass No. 60:

I Don't Like My Mid-Manager Job!

by Dr. Frank Benest

December 11, 2017

I'm a mid-manager supervising an engineering/capital projects group. I was promoted into this role two years ago. While I am good at overseeing the work plan, pushing out the work, and holding people accountable, I am not enjoying the position.

Our capital projects take a long time to complete. When we are amid one effort or another, my group gets called upon to take on another "priority" project or respond to some demand or challenge from a higher-up. For my team and me, it's endless and, therefore, difficult to stay motivated.

In addition, there's a lot of change happening in our organization with respect to new priorities, systems, and ways of doing things. Top management is always leaning on mid-managers to communicate the change and make it happen.

I always seem to be in the middle, with my public works director making constant demands and our group members demanding support and resources. It's difficult to be caught in the middle. Moreover, I don't feel that the role of mid-manager gets much respect from top management. And I don't sense that those below me fully appreciate the role.

To make matters worse, I feel lonely at work. I have a family that I cherish but I spend most of my waking hours on the job. I used to be one of the team members but now that I'm a manager I have no close social relationships with those in my group. I try to provide support but I don't get any.



Can you help me figure this out?

DR. BENEST: You feel caught in what has been called the “middle-manager vise.” Top management is making demands on you, and your direct reports are making demands on you. Even though you ensure that your group gets the work done, it doesn’t seem fulfilling and you don’t feel much support.

In some ways, the role of mid-manager has changed. It is true that the IT revolution now allows employees to communicate with anyone throughout the organization or outside the organization. Mid-managers are no longer gate-keepers of critical data or financials or general “intelligence,” all of which are now available to all.

However, in my view, mid-managers are more important than ever. With more and more uncertainty and disruption, good mid-managers play a critical role in engaging employees and making positive change happen. More on this role below.

Here are my suggestions to become more self-fulfilled in your position.

1. Embrace the role

Each of us must determine what kind of work provides meaning and satisfaction. You might decide that management is not for you since the work may not feel sufficiently engaging or joyful.

I personally find the role of manager and leader to be energizing and full of purpose. Why? Because, amidst all the resource constraints and competing demands, a manager serves the team and helps the team make a difference in organizational or community life. Service to others has enriched my life. (See [Career Compass No. 41: The Post-Heroic Leader](#).)

Certainly, serving as mid-manager is one of the toughest roles in local government and is much more complicated than pushing out the work and responding to all the demands from the top and the bottom. In uncertain and volatile times, the governing board, chief executive, and key stakeholders in the community are all making demands. Successful change occurs (or does not occur) in the middle of the organization.

The governing board and top management might make pronouncements about new internal or external initiatives, but that doesn’t make them happen. Real change for the better requires that active and effective mid-managers

- Understand the change.
- Communicate the compelling rationale (the “why”) for the change.
- Engage employees in shaping the change and making adjustments.
- Ensure that progress is made.

Yes, top management needs to envision a better future. However, it’s all about the effectiveness of mid-managers to rally people around the positive change and make it happen in the trenches. Mid-managers are the key levers of change.

You must also understand your role as a boundary-crosser. Any initiative of significance involving your group requires that you exit your silo and cross boundaries. For instance, a community center

improvement project requires that you engage the Parks and Recreation Department personnel, budget, and utility staff, along with key user groups to successfully complete the project. When you cross a boundary, you must start conversations, convene internal and external stakeholders, facilitate problem-solving, and mobilize action—all in an environment where anyone might be able to block or veto your efforts forward.

Leading by crossing boundaries is a difficult yet stimulating role for mid-managers. Therefore, I urge you to understand that your role as a mid-manager is critical and embrace it.

2. Explore the meaning of work

Yes, it often feels to you and your group that the work never ends. There is always more work.

I suggest that you and your team take the time and discuss the meaning behind the work. What is the meaning behind an upgrade to the corporate maintenance yard? What will a new library mean to the community? What will the replacement of sewer lines mean for public safety and health?

Are you sharing stories from those benefitting from your capital projects? Are you occasionally inviting internal or external users or customers to your group meetings to discuss the difference that your team is making? Stories are the most powerful way to communicate meaning (see [Career Compass No. 50: Storytelling—A Powerful Way to Lead and Communicate](#)).

Meaning is the great motivator and makes the work worthwhile.

3. Focus on progress

It is easy for you and your group to get overwhelmed with a large project or effort that continues over several years. Consequently, you must help yourself and your team members focus on progress. In their book *The Progress Principle*, Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer suggest that people stay motivated if they see distinct progress along the way.

4. Celebrate

As you and your group successfully meet milestones or complete projects, you must help the team celebrate. We in local government are terrible at celebrating success. Upon completing one project, we immediately move to the next effort. Take a time-out, bring some coffee and bagels to a staff meeting, congratulate everyone, help everyone savor success, and celebrate the team. I call this “purposeful partying”—party with a purpose.

5. Advocate up

While top management makes demands on you and your group, it is important and appropriate for you to represent the needs of your team and “advocate up.” Just as you make demands of direct reports to be responsive to top management, you must also make demands of senior managers (for example, requesting that top management provide more resources or prioritize issues).

Your role is to respectfully ask of department heads and other top management

- What is the vision or direction?
- Where does this issue fall in terms of our other organizational priorities?

- Given the “messiness” that is inherent in this new initiative, how realistic is the timeline?
- This is what I’m willing to do. What are you willing to do?
- This is what I think. What do you think?

It might be difficult at first to “talk truth to power,” however, assuming you are respectful yet forthright, you will gain respect in turn. Moreover, it is self-fulfilling knowing that you support your group and represent their valid needs and interests. Finally, it is imperative that you provide strategic input to any new initiative since you operate in the real-world trenches.

As levers of change, effective mid-managers influence those above as well as those below in the organizational hierarchy (see Behnan Tabrizi, “[New Research—What Sets Effective Middle Managers Apart](#)”, *hbr.org*, May 8, 2013).

6. Reconceptualize your role

Mid-managers must ask themselves if they are doing the right work. Like you, many mid-managers see their primary responsibility as “pushing out the work” and “overseeing staff” (a nice way of saying “making sure there are no screw-ups”). Certainly, mid-managers do need to ensure that work gets done and people are accountable for their assignments. However, let me suggest that mid-managers have an equally important role as teachers, coaches, and talent developers (see [Career Compass No. 46: Leading by Letting Go](#)).

As you engage your direct reports in new projects, are you providing them with opportunities to stretch and grow? Within certain guiderails, are you providing autonomy in how the work is done? As a manager, are you a “multiplier” or “diminisher”? (see Liz Wiseman, *Multipliers—How the Best Leaders Make Everyone Smarter*). Good leaders ask how every problem can be solved in a way that develops other people’s capacity to handle the problem.

The roles of coach, talent developer, and cheerleader are energizing. You create legacy through new community improvement projects. However, you create a different kind of legacy by developing talent. I believe that the primary role of leaders is to grow more leaders.

7. Get coaching

Serving as an effective mid-manager is difficult but it can be a very fulfilling job, or better yet, a calling.

To get better in your role, get some formal or informal coaching. If your organization or ICMA state association has a formal 1-to-1 coaching program, secure a coach. Or simply go to icma.org/coachconnect and identify a coach. Or, just ask a respected manager (inside or outside your organization) to go for coffee or lunch and informally pick their brain.

Coaches can help us

- Better engage staff.
- Influence others.
- Advocate up.
- Cross boundaries and collaborate without any authority.
- Coach and guide others.

8. Address your loneliness

Sometimes our management jobs are fairly lonely. As Vivek Murthy states in *Harvard Business Review* paper “[Work and the Loneliness Epidemic](#)” ([hbr.org](#), September 2017), we face an epidemic of loneliness in our jobs. Experiencing loneliness not only makes us less productive, it has negative emotional and physical health consequences (for example, greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, depression, and anxiety, and a reduction in life expectancy).

As the Gallup research suggests, those who feel isolated and do not experience social support are less engaged and energized and do not perform well. (See [Career Compass No. 37: Engaging Employees for Success](#).) To overcome loneliness, I encourage you to seek out other mid-managers in your department or other departments or in other agencies. Over coffee, share your joys and challenges, as well as some of your personal lives, such as family and leisure pursuits. We don’t often share the joys of our management and leadership roles. It also helps to know that you face similar challenges. It’s important to get peer support and advice.

To connect on a personal as well as professional level with your staff, share some vulnerability. Talk about a difficult project or situation and admit that you do not know how to proceed and that you need their assistance. Only strong leaders can share their vulnerability. Staff will become more engaged if they connect with you and vice versa. While some seasoned managers recommend that it is not a good idea to have friends whom you supervise, I don’t agree. This notion that “it is lonely at the top” is true only if you isolate yourself. When I was a department head and then city manager, I went to coffee, shared meals, and went out for drinks after work with colleagues whom I supervised. Some continue to be lifelong friends. I believe that you can have direct reports who are friends and still make the occasional tough decision that affects them. Why be lonely?

To enhance social relationships, you might want to try out a few techniques or activities, such as

- “Take five”—Start each staff meeting with team members sharing something that happened in their non-work lives.
- “The inside scoop”—At the beginning of a monthly staff meeting, ask team members to share something about themselves with photos.
- Identify people’s personal or leisure pursuits and inquire about them; share with others who might be interested in your personal hobbies or pursuits.
- Make a point of walking around and asking people about their day or the past weekend, or how their children are doing; share your day.
- Demonstrate some small acts of kindness (for example, writing a note or hugging someone when your colleague had to put his dog down).

If you feel uncomfortable sharing yourself with others at work, seek friendships with colleagues in other agencies and/or outside of your professional life. The key is to consciously and proactively reach out and make connections. There is no reason to be lonely.

THE JOYS OF MID-MANAGEMENT

So, envision yourself in the Division Manager position and start acting in ways to better serve others and to exert influence for the larger group and the larger good. That’s what leaders do.

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.