



Career Compass No. 63:

Legacy: Don't Leave It – Live It!

by Dr. Frank Benest

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Dear Frank,

I am a mid-career fire division head in a county in the Southeast. I've had a successful career. I started my career as a firefighter and have now worked my way up to the division head in charge of operations. I report to the fire chief and in turn I supervise a number of direct reports. I am very busy with my job; I feel good about my work I do; and I am respected by others. In 7-10 years I will retire with a good pension.



So, all is good. Yet, I sense that something is lacking. Maybe I should be making a bigger contribution. I don't know.

Can you help me figure out what to do with this sense of unease?

DR. BENEST: Congratulations on building a good career in the fire service. The work that you and your colleagues do is important to our communities.

I believe that what you feel lacking is a strong sense of legacy. Legacy is the imprint that one makes in the world. Everyone leaves some kind of legacy.

If you are self-reflective, a well-defined notion of legacy can help you make sense of your world and shape your career and life for the better amidst all the activity and noise.

Since I have arrived at mid-life (I tell myself that I'm not old; I am just at mid-life), I've been doing a lot of thinking about legacy.

While legacy certainly becomes a great motivator at mid-life, it's important at all stages of life for everyone. We all leave a wake, each and every day.

Let me share three personal experiences that helped me figure out this notion of legacy.

STORY #1

The first experience was when I first started as city manager of Brea, CA. Brea is a moderately conservative community in Southern California. Brea had a growing problem of day-workers congregating on street corners and in front of downtown stores. The mayor and several council members as well as the downtown merchants wanted me to direct the police department to move the day-workers out of the downtown area.

I felt in my gut that it just wasn't right. Day-workers were obviously hard-working and just trying to support themselves and their families. And we discovered many of the day-workers lived in Brea. So I bought some time and organized a team of city staff, including the police, clergy people, merchants and day-workers. Amidst much political opposition, we proposed a job center for day-workers in a donated trailer on vacant city property away from the major downtown commercial street.

Even though there was much consternation and conflict about the proposed job center, it was approved by the city council and became a great success in addressing the day-worker challenge over time.

Upon reflection, I realized that the job center was a community asset that lived beyond my tenure as City Manager in Brea. This difficult challenge gave me an opportunity to put my value of social justice into action. It contributed to a community ethos that we in Brea could solve difficult problems together. In other words, it was legacy.

So, by mid-career, I began to think of my legacy as the projects that I worked on: the job center for day-workers, a multi-service center for the homeless, parks, libraries, community centers, open space preserves, and affordable housing projects. As stated by the famous architect Julia Morgan: "My buildings will be my legacy—they speak for me long after I'm gone."

STORY #2

My second story is about a conversation that changed my view of legacy. As a young city manager in Brea, I called Gaylord Knapp, the seasoned and well-respected city manager of Cerritos. I wanted to schedule a cup of coffee with Gaylord and pick his brain on how I too could become a successful city manager. Gaylord was the first city manager of Cerritos when it incorporated. Back then Cerritos was mostly dairy land. Through Gaylord's leadership and hard work, he had help turn Cerritos into a thriving suburb.

When I sat down with Gaylord, I asked him what he was most proud of. I thought Gaylord would tell me that he was most proud of the beautiful Performing Arts Center, or the state-of-the-art Library, or the new City Hall. Without a moment's hesitation, Gaylord said: "My great legacy is that over my career fifteen of my assistants have become city managers who are now leading communities."

Wow. I had never considered that legacy is all about growing and developing the people around you. That conversation over coffee changed my whole mindset about legacy. Yes, legacy is about improving the community in tangible ways. But legacy is also about serving and supporting the people around you so they can do good—even great—work together. It is about stretching and challenging them. It is about modeling good values and behaviors, teaching and coaching.

I now believe that the primary role of leaders (regardless of position) is to grow more leaders. That's legacy.

STORY #3

Legacy is not just about the world of work. In 2004, my world was turned upside down. My wife Pam died, and I was left to care for two small kids, Noah and Leila. Pam was a great mom. I had a busy career so I was the secondary parent.

Not only did Pam die, but shortly thereafter I was diagnosed with a life-threatening cancer. With radiation and chemotherapy, I survived but did not really know how I was to succeed as a city manager and more importantly as a single dad. I knew how to manage a city, but not care for my kids.

Over time, I learned with a lot of missteps how to become a better father. Noah and Leila are now 24 and 19 years old. . .and they too are part of my legacy.

CRUCIBLE EXPERIENCES OFTEN SHAPE LEGACY

A "crucible" experience (a death, disease, or other great loss or adversity) shakes up your world and clarifies your values and priorities. A crucible experience often transforms you as a leader and as a person. The death of my wife and the need to step up to my responsibilities as a single dad forced me to re-focus on my values and priorities. Real priorities demand our time, energy, and focus now—not someday in the future. (See Ray Edwards, "[Five Tragic Losses Caused by Someday Syndrome](#)".)

My advice is don't wait for a crisis or tragedy or some other loss to shake your world. Focus on your values and priorities now.

THREE PROMPTS

Great leaders are self-reflective. To help you reflect on your imprint and long-term legacy, let me suggest three prompts. (See Dan Rockwell, "[Would You Hire You?](#)" *Leadership Freak* blog, Oct. 13, 2017.)

Imagine yourself 10 years from now:

1. What have you accomplished that makes you most proud in your personal or professional life?
2. What have you done to enrich the lives of others?
3. If you haven't achieved all your dreams, what have you left undone?

Respond to one or several of these prompts and then share your responses with your spouse or partner, a coach or trusted friend. What do you want to do now to further create legacy? What is one step towards creating a wider and more positive wake?

ONE SENTENCE

To help you consider legacy, you can develop a one sentence legacy. In his book *Drive*, Dan Pink reported on a conversation between President John F. Kennedy and Congresswoman Clare Booth Luce. As the new president, JFK had all these different ideas and potential initiatives. To get JFK focused, Clare Booth Luce told Kennedy that a great man with a great legacy is one sentence.

Abraham Lincoln's one sentence was "He preserved the union and freed the slaves." Franklin D. Roosevelt's one sentence was "He lifted us out the Great Depression and helped us win a World War."

You don't have to be a great historical figure to have legacy. Pink in his book suggested a few sentences for ordinary people. For instance, "He raised four kids who become happy and productive adults." "She cared for every person who walked into her office." (See Naphtali Hoff, "[What's Your One Sentence?](#)" *SmartBrief* blog, Jan. 10, 2018.)

Upon reflection, my one sentence legacy statement is "I cared for my kids and helped grow local government leaders who improved organizations and communities." My legacy sentence helps shapes my work and my life now and in the future.

What is your one sentence?

THREE FINAL THOUGHTS

Here are three final thoughts about creating a powerful and worthy legacy.

First, **reflect upon how previous generations supported you.** I could never have had a great life, including a great career, without the support of my mom Rosy, a large extended family, teachers, coaches, scholarships, a great education and plenty of opportunities to learn and grow, wonderful colleagues, a loving wife, and many friends. Because of this support throughout my life, I too am compelled to support others. (See Kimberly Wade-Benzoni, "[How to Think About Building Your Legacy](#)", *hbr.org* blog, Dec. 15, 2016.)

Second, **model the way.** Modeling is the most powerful way to lead and teach. What are the values and behaviors that you model for others? As Mahatma Gandhi famously stated: "Be the change you want to see in the world."

Third, **give a lot, get a lot**. My mom Rosy told me early in my career that I shouldn't worry about getting a lot of reward from my hard work. Rosy said, "give a lot, . . .and you will get a lot.

LIVE YOUR LEGACY NOW

Everyone—even all of us ordinary people--leaves a wake. What kind of wake do you want to create each and every day?

You have had a good career; you do good work; and you are well-respected. You have a successful career that is still unfolding. To paraphrase Peter Drucker, how do you move from success to significance?

To go beyond your uneasy feeling that something is missing, I invite you to draft your one sentence legacy sentence. Then share it with someone you trust and explore how it can shape who you are and what you do going forward.

Most importantly, don't wait to focus on your values and priorities. Don't leave a legacy someday—live it now!

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.