

Career Compass No. 9: Bouncing Back From Defeat

In this installment of Career Compass, Dr. Benest offers suggestions for how to "bounce-back" from work-related defeats and maintain your enthusiasm for public service.

- *I was just involved in an effort to get the governing board's approval for a major new land use plan that would promote economic vitality and enliven a part of our community. I was not the official leader of the project team but did much of the staff work and was involved in the presentation to the board. While the project was somewhat controversial, we did good staff work, provided solid analysis and sound recommendations. After some neighborhood and business criticism of the proposal as well as some support, the governing board rejected our recommendations. I feel very disappointed and the experience has sapped my enthusiasm for my local government work. I thought that this was a great career for me. What do I do? Where do I go from here?*



Let me start off by saying that the local government system worked. Staff did its work, hopefully engaging the community and various stakeholders in the process. Given the lack of consensus, the governing body simply did not agree to go forward. The big issues of the day in local government involve differing views and tension between different stakeholders with often conflicting interests. You win some and lose some.

You and your team should be congratulated for taking on a controversial project. There is no progress without some calculated risk-taking by local government and their professional staff. Moreover, just because the board said "no" does not mean that the local government and community cannot address the key issues in another way or even return in the future with a different approach or revised plan.

Finally, failures or defeats are great opportunities to reflect and enhance your practice and skills and grow as a professional. In the aftermath of a major disappointment or "defeat," here are some suggestions on how you can respond in meaningful and tangible ways:

1) Use a colleague or friend or family member to vent a bit

It is okay to vent and express some frustration. After all, you put a lot of good work into the effort and the project was not approved. It is in fact disappointing.

2) Reflect and be self-critical

After you vent a little, you need to turn to constructive reflection. In terms of your individual work and the team's effort, what went well and what did not? Where could you have provided more value or contribution? Were there opportunities to gain more community support that were not fully explored? Did your proposal fail to adequately address some legitimate concerns?

3) Reach out to a senior manager and request feedback

You can show great initiative, self-confidence and a willingness to learn if you informally reach out to the chief executive, department director or other senior manager and request feedback on your performance and the team's effort. Over a cup of coffee, you can gain some valuable insights and also seek advice on how to build on this experience.

4) De-brief with the team and re-engage

After any significant experience, a team should de-brief:

- *What went right?
- *What did not go well?
- *What are some future opportunities to address the key issues or concerns that generated the plan?
- *Where do we go from here?
- *What are some lessons learned for our future practice?

Your team can still exert leadership in addressing the underlying issues and problems, maybe in different ways.

5) Get involved in professional organizations

Professional involvements can help you get some perspective, provide support, and re-energize you. I could not have survived as a local government

manager without the ongoing support and encouragement of my colleagues locally, statewide and nationally.

6) Find a new project to energize you

In the aftermath of this experience, you should look around for a new project. As part of this search, you can talk to colleagues and supervisors about a new assignment that can engage your skills, interests, "gifts," and passions; energize you; and promote new learning. One disappointment should not sour you on a fulfilling career. Get back on the horse.

7) Understand how you can become more resilient over time

Research from the Hardiness Institute has identified three key factors that are exhibited by resilient leaders who tend to successfully bounce back. Resilient people have three key beliefs known as the 3 C's:

- Commitment: Resilient people strive to be involved in events rather than feeling isolated.
- Control: They tend to control or try to shape outcomes, rather than lapse into passivity or powerlessness.
- Challenge: They view stressful changes (whether positive or negative) as opportunities for new learning.

In addition, resilient leaders take comfort (my 4th "C") from others and benefit from social support systems so they can better deal with disappointments. Part of your network of family, friends and colleagues (see Career Compass #8—How to Develop a "Dream Team" of Advisors) should include people who can listen and provide support and encouragement as well as advise, expertise, and contacts.

In summary, local government is a great career, not only because it provides ample opportunities to contribute and serve, but it will stimulate new growth and learning even amidst our "failures."

Career Compass is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's senior advisor 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.

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