

Keeping the Passion Alive: Some Lessons from My Personal Journey

by Frank Benest

This is a different kind of *PM* article. It is about my personal journey to regain passion in my life's work. I now want to share with you what I have been learning.

As I approach the latter part of my local government management career, I—like some of you—often find myself fighting the been-there-done-that blues. I know that I am in a good career, but in my honest moments I have worried that I have lost the passion for my work that once fueled me.

Consequently, I was ready for a call last year from Felicia Logan, director of the ICMA University, who told me with great certainty, "Frank, do I have a session for you!" When I quickly responded that I didn't want to lead another session at the ICMA conference, she insisted that I hold my objections until I heard the topic. "OK," I said, "What is it?" Stupid mistake. "Keeping the Passion Alive," she replied. Of course, I was hooked. Knowing that I teach best what I most need to learn, I agreed to lead the session at the conference in Minneapolis.

In thinking about how to rekindle the joy of my work, I concluded that there is no one right approach or set of strategies. So I am going to share some personal views with the goal of provoking you to reflect on how you feel about your work and how you too can act to keep or regenerate passion.

FRANK'S STORY

Because personal stories are often the most powerful way to share personal truths and learn from each other, I'd like to briefly share my story.

I just received my ICMA Service Award for 35 years in the profession. Throughout my career, I have always taken great pride in my life's work, my profession, and my passion for local government.

Almost six years ago, I was appointed city manager of Palo Alto, California. After several years on the job in Palo Alto, I felt somewhat stymied in my quest to make a difference, which I defined as external improvements in the community (new community centers, redevelopment projects, parks, and affordable housing). Palo Altans love their community and oftentimes want to keep it just the way it is. I also became increasingly distressed with the media abuse of local government, citizen distrust of public officials, and the process orientation of a university town.

Then, all of a sudden, I was overwhelmed with two personal crises. First, my two children (Noah, 10, and Leila, 6) and I lost their mom and my wife, Pam, who died of complications of pneumonia. Several months later, I began treatment for a life-threatening cancer.

I beat the cancer. But in the process of undergoing debilitating treatment just after losing my life partner, I lost much of my joy and became disengaged at work. I have very much needed to figure out how to rekindle my passion at work and in life.

The reason I jumped at the opportunity to conduct the conference workshop is that I knew that I would be forced to reflect on my life situation, organize my thinking, and ultimately learn along with all my colleagues.

TWO PREMISES

My thinking about keeping the passion alive is based on two premises:

1. It is quite common for senior managers in local government to

experience the been-there–done-that blues, become overly focused on the negative aspects of our jobs, and feel the need to rekindle the passion that first attracted us to local government management.

2. We can learn from each other about effective strategies to keep our passion alive.

PASSIONATE PEOPLE

Before trying to develop some personal approaches to maintain or rekindle passion, I asked myself and participants at the ICMA conference session the question: "What are the traits of passionate people?" Participants put forward that passionate people are:

"Boldness has genius, power, and magic to it."

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

- Engaged (Thank God it's Monday!).
- Energized (and they energize others).
- Enthusiastic.
- Ardent (fire in the belly).
- Committed, dedicated, and unrelenting.
- Learners.
- Motivated.
- Positive (even in the face of adversity).
- Caring.
- Focused.
- Highly productive.
- Inspiring (and they share their passion).

Session participants were also asked two other questions:

- After a number of years in the local government profession, what has caused you to lose some passion in the job?
- How do you keep some measure of passion in your work life? (See the boxed copy on this page for some of their responses.)

FIVE STRATEGIES TO PRESERVE WORK VITALITY

In the aftermath of my personal crises, I spent many lonely times trying to figure out my future. With the encouragement, advice, and moral support of my family, friends, and colleagues, I struggled to find a path and began to take some steps.

Looking back, I can now discern several approaches that helped me on my journey that is still, in fact, unfolding. Here are five strategies that have helped me (and others) maintain work vitality or recapture it.

I. Have the courage to reflect.

Reflection is a courageous act. We often do not take the time to reflect because we fear what we may discover. Reflection entails asking some hard questions:

- What are the values that attracted me to the profession? Am I fulfilling those values?
- What gives me meaning externally in the community and internally in the organization? Meaning is the most powerful generator of passion.
- In what ruts do I find myself? What is lacking?
- Where do I truly add value?

Reflection can be difficult or distressing, or maybe it is not in our nature, or we want to avoid the conclusions. Therefore, we must help ourselves reflect or even force ourselves to reflect. Here are some ways:

- Talk to your partner about your early dreams.
- Write a short column for your employee newsletter (or just for yourself) on "why I became a city or county manager." I wrote such an article for the newsletter of the Municipal Management Association of Northern California. It became a first in a series of such articles by managers. (The articles are posted on the Cal-ICMA Web site at www.cal-icma.org, under Coaching Corner.)

- Engage in other kinds of reflective writing (a personal journal or an article like this) or a legacy statement for those who come after.
- Invite a dear friend for a coffee or a beer and share what you find lacking in your current job situation.
- Read a book about the “spirit of work” or about “searching for your identity,” and discuss it with a friend.
- Talk to a therapist (as I have) or a spiritual adviser about your hopes, fears, and dreams.
- Take a break or go on a trip or a retreat, but do it with the conscious aim of reflecting.
- Attend or teach a class that is likely to force some reflection about your practice.

Reflection may lead us to focus on where we truly add value (and where we don't!). We need to ask ourselves honestly what our unique gifts really are. We all have limited time and energy, and we must focus on where we can make a unique contribution. For me, my gift is not financial management or budget oversight. It is organizational development. I am good at working with employees in creating a dream and helping us move toward it. And that brings me joy.

2. TAKE SOME RISKS WHEN MAKING CHANGES.

Asking and answering the hard questions will suggest some changes. You may decide that you desire to develop with others a dream for your community or organization, or get out of the operational details and focus on coaching, or initiate a bold project. Courageous leaders often select bold projects because, as the German philosopher and poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe knew, “Boldness has genius, power, and magic to it.”

How can we feel more comfortable taking calculated risks?

First, we need to recognize that at this stage in our careers we have great freedom to take professional risks because we, as seasoned managers, usually enjoy large “bank accounts”

of trust and credibility with our organization, the council, and the community.

Second, we need to confront whether the worst-case scenario—being fired—could happen. The looming talent shortage of executive leaders in local government indicates that even this worst fear, along with having trouble getting another manager job, is not likely to occur. My mother, Rosy, used to ask, “What is really the worst that could happen?” and “Can you live with it?” If I could live with the worst, Rosy always told me to go for it.

“The ultimate freedom is the ability to choose our attitude regardless of the circumstances.”

—Viktor Frankl

I think that some of us need to acknowledge that we may have become less adventuresome in our thinking and doing than we were earlier in our careers. We must continue to put ourselves in new learning situations.

3. REIGNITE YOUR LUST FOR LIFE-LONG LEARNING.

Learning can often regenerate interest and passion in what we do. Taking on new roles is one way to foment new ways of experiencing work and life. In certain situations, for instance, I try to take on the role of follower (extremely difficult for me!) rather than leader. Following the lead of others, stepping aside, and supporting the initiatives of others all create new perceptions, new experiences, and new ways of experiencing the work group.

Of course, reading nongovernmental literature and making connections with your work is another way to gain new insights and excite yourself about new possibilities. Scheduling work meetings at locations outside the local government (at the materials

recovery center, the biological nature preserve, the assisted living facility, for example) and getting a tour and a presentation of the work done there is a wonderful way to generate different thinking and make new connections. Many learn from traveling to different cultures or doing international work through ICMA or other organizations.

Such learning can help you integrate new disciplines and world views into your thinking and practice. I have a colleague who has studied Buddhism and has applied it to his leadership task. Buddhist thought, for example, suggests that to truly learn and lead, we professionals must forgo our “expert mind” (which is closed) and adopt a “beginner's mind” (which is open to new data and approaches).

To stimulate creative thinking, we in Palo Alto start each executive team or department staff meeting with a “learning report” from a team member. The learning report is an article, a workshop, or an experience that will help keep our learning edge.

4. SHAKE THINGS UP!

Sometimes we must move beyond our tired mind-sets that can inhibit new action; we need to force new thinking about the possibilities of work and life.

Here are some ways of shaking things up:

- Set up a satellite office in another facility and work from there once a week.
- Visit street crews and surprise them with a tailgate pizza party once a month.
- Take vacation leave and build homes for Habitat for Humanity.
- Go on a week-long spiritual retreat.
- Do a management exchange through ICMA with a colleague working in Ireland, India, or Turkey.
- Go on an international study trip through ICMA or another agency.
- Participate on a peer assistance project organized by ICMA or another organization (for example, helping a Gulf Coast community

severely damaged by Hurricane Katrina).

- Take a dance, art, or photography class or join a hiking group.
- Volunteer in a person-to-person capacity with a nonprofit organization.

Recently, I have been coaching young professionals and reaching out to cancer victims in the midst of treatment for my kind of cancer. These person-to-person experiences have been rewarding and also have shaken up my perspectives. I am able to feel good about my blessings and the gifts I have to offer others.

5. CREATE A “PASSION PROJECT.”

Given your values, interests, and gifts, what would be a passion project for you? In Palo Alto, I have selected an affordable housing initiative as my passion project. Professionally, I have developed a statewide coaching program as my passionate endeavor.

What are some ways to make a passion project happen?

- Select a shorter-term passion project, to produce some results sooner rather than later and thus maintain your self-motivation, as well as a longer-term project.
- Develop and write down several goals, timelines, and milestones for your project, just like any other important work project.
- Protect time for your passion project by delegating some of the non-passion stuff. I no longer review staff reports for the city council agenda, or sit in on the first round of department budget hearings, or attend council committee meetings unless I lead a particular project. Of course, when you delegate non-passion work, you must become more tolerant of learning mistakes as others take on new responsibilities.
- Share your passion project with others so it becomes real. Talking to colleagues creates personal accountability and generates useful feedback to sharpen your focus and approach.

Losing and Keeping the Passion

At the 2005 ICMA Annual Conference session, participants were asked to respond to this question:

After a number of years in the local government management profession, what has caused you to lose some passion in the job? Session participants identified these factors:

- Indifferent people
- No appreciation
- Poor councilmembers
- Frivolous, high-profile litigation
- Petty personal problems
- Long hours
- Attorneys and unions
- Micromanagement
- Failed initiatives
- Providing same information over and over
- Politics of one (The power of one councilmember)
- CAVE People (Citizens Against Virtually Everything)
- Absolute need to be perfect
- Repetition.

Participants also recounted some personal strategies when they finished the following sentence:

I keep some measure of passion in my work life by...

- Building a team
- Recognizing others
- Mentoring and coaching
- Connecting with younger managers
- Helping people
- Getting out of the office and talking to residents
- Networking
- Taking advantage of professional development
- Having a sense of humor
- Keeping work at work
- Finding personal time away from work
- Finding something outside of work to love
- Having a supportive family.

- Celebrate your passion! Host a pizza party or ice cream social once you complete your passion project.

SOME PARTING ADVICE

Recognizing that every journey is distinct, I'd like to share some parting advice for those of us who struggle with the issue of maintaining a sense of vitality as senior members of our profession.

First, not only might we become

less adventuresome, but we might also tend to isolate ourselves from others. Therefore, a good way of exploring different paths is to reconnect with people. I have begun to schedule coffees or drinks with colleagues in my area to explore some of my doubts, concerns, and hopes for the future.

I have also scheduled informal coffees with each member of our executive team to discuss what is going on with me, what is going on with them,

how I am going to re-engage, and where I can leverage my talents, given their needs. To reconnect with our 1,100 employees, I have conducted a series of “conversations with Frank.” Opening ourselves up to others whom we respect or love and reconnecting on a personal level are critical first steps in our journey of renewal.

Second, as we have become embroiled in various local government issues, we may have lost some measure of our service ethic. When we give a lot, we eventually get a lot. **Giving and getting** is a great approach to our work and professional lives. For example, along with many of my colleagues in the profession, I give a lot to ICMA, and in the end, the service enriches me.

Third, as we approach the last part of our careers in local government management, we may wish to think of **legacy**. When we retire and walk away from local government, for what do we want to be remembered? In my organization, I want my legacy to be that our employees will take risks and

not be afraid of advocating their professional judgment in a demanding environment.

In the greater profession, I would like my legacy to be “preparing the next generation of local government managers.” A sense of legacy helps fuel passion.

Finally, it is all about **choosing our attitude**. It is our decision whether we want to remain in local government and how committed and engaged we want to be. As Viktor Frankl declared in his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*, “The ultimate freedom is the ability to choose our attitude regardless of the circumstances.”

We all face different circumstances in our work and our personal lives. I wish you well as you too strive to find joy in what you do and who you are. **PM**

Frank Benest, Ph.D., ICMA-CM, is the city manager of Palo Alto, California. He dedicates this article to all his friends—old and new—who have helped him regain joy in work and life.