

MAKE CLEAR YOUR PATH? CREATE A PROFESSIONAL ROAD MAP



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By Patrick Ibarra

Scholars debate the exact meaning Shakespeare had when writing the line, “What’s past is prologue,” in *The Tempest*. Some believe it’s meant to imply that everything that came before doesn’t matter because a new and magnificent future is stretching out before you. Others contend it has the exact opposite meaning. The past is of great importance because it defines the present and therefore sets the stage for the future. Either way, I began thinking about the idea of a person’s professional trajectory and what comprises a successful and fulfilling career. How does a person create a career road map? From those past the mid-point, when looking back, which experiences influenced their growth and development the most?

Charting a Course

I invited three experienced managers to offer advice to their 30-year-old self: Reyna Farrales, deputy county manager, San Mateo County, California; Scott Ochoa, city manager, Glendale, California; and Jeff Weldon, city manager, Brookings, South Dakota. Based on their comments and my own experience (I spent the first 15 years of my career in city management before starting my own business), here is a suggested framework to help you create a CLEAR career path:

C – Community: Where do you want to live and work? Metropolitan or rural area? And in what size organization do you want to work? Large organizations can have more opportunities if you want to climb the ladder faster, but in small-to-midsize organizations, you can often see a direct line between your work and its impact.

L – Leadership: What type of leader do you want to be? Which experiences do you want to help accelerate your skills and capabilities? What challenges do you want to explore? Leadership is about both plumbing (the muck and mud) and poetry (the beauty and brilliance), and it’s all about affecting positive outcomes. Weldon offered this advice to his 30-year-old self, “I would be assertive, but not overly aggressive, in asking my supervisor to identify and provide opportunities to develop leadership skills and potential. “Seek latitude and discretion to make decisions and pursue prudent risk taking because making mistakes helps you learn and improve your judgment. Be sure your manager is your advocate because those mistakes can sting and you need to know there’s a net from which you can bounce back.”

E – Effectiveness: Public service is about making a difference. So, ask yourself, what kind of difference do you want to have on the communities you serve? Ochoa observed: “In a quest to create better cities, better neighborhoods, and better lives, take a little more time to understand why something is working well, not just whether it worked.”

A – Adaptable: You need to be a bit uncomfortable to stay relevant, so be vigilant in using your binoculars to notice what trends will soon impact government and craft an approach for what you need to learn. Read government stuff, network, get a mentor, attend a conference, read nongovernment stuff, attend a webinar, start a book study group, watch a TED talk, ask lots of questions, keep a journal, and take on that assignment no one wants. Ask more questions, read some more, and by all means, continually challenge your assumptions because if you find yourself saying, “we’ve always done it that way,” it’s time to visit your mental gym and get a good workout.

R – Replenish: While public service is a noble profession, living in the public eye can be incredibly exhausting on you and your family. Investing time in you will generate countless dividends, including replenishing your passion. Farrales advised: “Practice art.” I recently read some advice from a letter written by author Kurt Vonnegut to a group of high school English students: “Practice any art—music, singing, dancing, acting, drawing, painting, sculpting, poetry, fiction, essays, reportage—no matter how well or how badly, not to get money and fame, but to experience becoming, to find out what’s inside you, to make your soul grow.”

Do yourself a favor; right after you finishing reading his article, select a time in the future, let's say 15 years from now. Use the CLEAR framework and pen a letter to yourself reflecting on these past 15 years.



Patrick Ibarra is an “entrepreneur of ideas” and architect of innovation who takes the headwinds governments are facing about the current climate of unprecedented changes and translates them into a tailwind with practical, tactical and impactful solutions that can be used immediately. A former city manager, Patrick owns and operates The Mejorando Group consulting practice (www.gettingbetterallthetime.com). Mejorando is Spanish for “getting better all the time” and Patrick’s firm partners with governments helping them increase employee performance and organizational effectiveness by providing consultation, facilitation, and training. Ibarra is an author, speaker, blogger and educator who brings fresh thinking, innovation, and new ideas to help public sector organizations succeed in the 21st century.

For those agencies interested in immediately improving your organization’s performance, Mr. Ibarra can be reached at **925.518.0187** and/or patrick@gettingbetterallthetime.com and follow the Mejorando Group on Facebook and Twitter.