



## GFOA GROUPS

# Emerging Leaders

## Meet GFOA's Young Professionals Network

BY ALISON WUENSCH AND ADAM POWELL

Leadership drives innovation and collaboration in government finance. At GFOA's June 2025 annual conference in Washington, DC, speakers at a Young Professionals Network (YPN) session shared their leadership development experiences, lessons learned, career advice, and key qualities for success in public finance. In this article, we share their diverse perspectives, with varied backgrounds, regions, and stages in their careers. All have stepped up to lead their peers through their work on the YPN Leadership Committee, and all have valuable insights to offer based on their experiences and lessons learned.

Meet the four emerging leaders participating in this discussion:



**Abbey Chapman**, senior financial analyst, City of Rock Hill, South Carolina

Abbey Chapman started at the City of Rock Hill as an intern in the Finance Department and, upon graduation from college, was hired as an accountant; she then moved to a financial analyst position. Abbey is currently working toward obtaining her designation as a Certified Government Finance Officer (CGFO) from the Government Finance Officers Association of South Carolina, as well as her CPA license.



**Kaitlin LeVasseur**, senior budget analyst, City of Wichita Falls, Texas

Kaitlin LeVasseur is currently part of GFOA's Certified Public Finance Officer (CPFO) program to deepen her expertise in governmental finance. Although she's still in the early stages of her public-sector career, she's committed to continuous learning and growth.



**Cecilia Simchak**, assistant director of finance, Town of Needham, Massachusetts

Cecilia Simchak started with the town in 2015 as an administrative analyst in the Public Works Department while finishing her master's degree. She is passionate about leadership in local government and recruiting more young people to the profession.



**Evan Zacharia**, investment finance coordinator, Broward County, Florida

Evan Zacharia has worked in public finance since August 2022. After graduating with his Master of Accounting degree, Evan accepted a full-time position as an assurance associate with RSM US. He later earned his CPA license.

### Essential qualities of public finance leaders

Our panelists reflected on leadership, discussing which traits are most critical to success in today's environment. Evan emphasized communication, considering it the most important of many essential leadership traits. Young professionals may think supervisors have all the answers, but of course, no one does—and the secret to working things out is communication. Cecilia and Kaitlin had a similar take, prioritizing transparency. Cecilia encouraged owning

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**-KAITLIN LEVASSEUR**

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your mistakes, which makes them easier to correct. She also emphasized being open and transparent with both leadership and the community served. Kaitlin emphasized the importance of trust and urged public finance leaders to be transparent, honest, and accountable.

The committee also discussed something small that they all try to do consistently, which makes a big difference. Cecilia and Evan check in with their teams frequently. Abbey asks questions to show others that it's okay not to know everything, and that asking questions allows you to learn as much as possible and to find solutions. Kaitlin prioritizes recognizing her team, a practice she learned from her own supervisor. She thanks those who have helped her team, who work behind the scenes, and who go above and beyond their job description. She writes a note, thanks them publicly, or gives them some form of recognition. "I like when people recognize the hard work I'm putting in, and I assume others feel the same way," she explained. Asking questions, checking in, and recognizing effort aid in creating a sense of psychological safety for everyone.

### **Career growth through leadership**

These emerging leaders shared what allowed them to step into leadership roles early in their careers, accelerating their professional growth. Abbey stepped up to opportunities when they were presented and asked for more responsibility. Cecilia tried to find projects that interested her outside her direct job description. "There's always more work than people in government, so throwing your hat in the ring for something that might be a little bit outside of your position allowed me to take on more of a leadership role

and show not only what I'm capable of, but that I'm willing to do it. I like doing it; I'm interested in it," she said. Evan recognized the level of responsibility already inherent in his role, adding that "it allowed me to hold myself to a certain standard of understanding the responsibilities of the position, and it allowed me to grow into the role itself." Kaitlin contended that taking ownership of mistakes "gives the people you're leading the incentive to follow you. It's a quiet way to prove yourself; you gain respect."

Self-doubt and imposter syndrome are common, and Cecilia noted that she experienced self-doubt as she moved into her current role. "I came in with people who had decades of experience in the field. They've been in their roles longer than I've been in any career, so that took some adjusting, but my approach was to be very open about what I didn't know, saying, 'Hey, I don't have all the answers. You're the subject matter expert.'" Evan emphasized the importance of absorbing as much knowledge as possible and asking questions frequently.

The YPN Leadership Committee also discussed GFOA's role in their professional growth. Abbey and Cecilia said they've both benefited from having someone to bounce ideas off of—someone who is on a similar career path but not directly related to their day-to-day work. This opens them up to new ideas and helps them see familiar problems in a new light. Kaitlin, who'd been an accountant in the private sector, was new to local government and landed in a budget role instead of an accounting role. She was enthusiastic about the change, though, and said that GFOA provided the resources for her growth. Kaitlin is now working to broaden her knowledge of

government finance as a CPFO candidate. The committee agreed that GFOA provides valuable connections and education opportunities to support their professional growth.

### **Leading organizational change**

YPN Leadership Committee members are also driving change in their organizations. Abbey, for example, changed the way she communicated with different stakeholders, revamping the presentation of her city's monthly health insurance income statement and transforming the income statement spreadsheet into a concise and easy-to-understand presentation. "That was a minor thing, but I think it made a big difference in people being able to understand it," she said.

Kaitlin noticed that her organization had strong external transparency but limited communication with internal departments. To improve the situation, she sat down with every department head to discuss the issue and asked them what they wanted to see. She spent a day with the Central Services Department and made sure that other departments understood their role. "I think that was the biggest thing that helped was I took the time to listen to everybody, and then I was constantly communicating," she explained. "I think a lot of cities can improve their communication, and so I made it an effort. It helps citywide when everybody's on the same page; they're more open to change. You increase your productivity tenfold just by listening to people."

Evan realized the vital role that communication played in his organization. "One change touches several different departments; it's important just to understand the whole flow one small change can make on an entire organization."

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—EVAN ZACHARIA

Cecilia focused on changing the environment of your organization through small efforts. She created an easily accessible merit program to equitably recognize staff contributions. The key to this was hearing what department heads were seeking for their staff. “You can’t always give everyone exactly what they want, but if you can meet them halfway, that makes a big difference.”

### Addressing challenges that are unique to public finance

The YPN Leadership Committee reflected on the key challenges of working in public finance, like the laws and regulations that guide how to do things in the public sector. “A lot of the laws that guide certain things that we do just don’t exist in the private sector or are much more flexible in the private sector,” Cecilia said. Evan echoed that sentiment, highlighting the amount of documentation. “I didn’t realize that once you make an investment, it’s not just cut and dry, done. There are layers of documentation for every specific trade to touch 10 different points, and it could take a good amount of time to just document everything, per the policy. It could take me 30-plus minutes to just make sure that one trade is out the door and completed.”

Kaitlin highlighted the pushback that often comes with public-sector roles, noting that while the public and council

can speak freely, public finance professionals must remain accountable in their responses. She also mentioned the lack of privacy and confidentiality, noting that there’s no such thing in government, like when the newspaper publishes people’s names and salaries.

The committee also highlighted the challenges posed by limited resources and staffing. They noted, for instance, that you must communicate clearly about what has to get done and make sure everyone is on the same page, especially since things can easily change between morning and afternoon. Managers must be able to prioritize tasks.

Cecilia discussed how the need to expand existing capacity has led her to think more creatively. “You have things you might need help with, and you should look to the people who are interested in potentially advancing in their careers and are looking to take on an extra project here. You’ll find people who’ll help in the day-to-day at that time, but also in the future. And if a position comes up, you know what that person’s skill sets are. You might want to look outside of the finance department for people who have the skills and interests you’re looking for.”

She has also investigated forming partnerships with the high school or local colleges for internships, and she’s found it to be mutually beneficial. “We know that we need people, young people,

getting into municipal finance because there’s not a lot of us out there. And these people are looking to work, whether it’s for school credit or for a summer job.”

### Advice for current and future public finance leaders

The committee shared the best career advice they have received. Abbey learned to own mistakes, move forward, and have a solution ready. Cecilia and Evan emphasized balance. “Whatever career path you’re taking, don’t pigeonhole yourself into one specific area,” Evan said. “Always be learning, always have an open mind, and be honest and adaptable.” Cecilia advises young finance professionals to beware of burnout. “Take some time for yourself because otherwise, you won’t be able to give your best at your job.”

Also important is remembering why you’re doing this job. “The work I do is so rewarding. I always say that I can drive down the street and see what I was working on that day. That really helps you stay grounded and focused. You realize that your job is helping serve your community and make it a better place to live.” Cecilia concurred. “You can walk outside and see the work that you’re doing, see the results. You can talk to a resident and hear how excited they are about something.”

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## Conclusion

Leadership in public finance is not about having all the answers but about embracing growth. The GFOA Young Professionals Network Leadership Committee's insights show that leadership is defined by resilience, reflection, and ongoing improvement. These emerging leaders remind us that leadership is built through communication, trust, transparency, and a willingness to own mistakes while uplifting others.

Public finance professionals carry a shared responsibility to lead with integrity and impact. Whether it's mentoring a colleague, advocating for clarity in conveying data, or building trust through vulnerability, each of us has the power to influence our teams and communities. This influence does not require a title—only intention, consistency, and a dedication to service. ■



The Young Professionals Network (YPN) is one of nine GFOA Affinity Groups. Group membership is a free member benefit—no additional fees or volunteer requirements. As a member, you gain access to exclusive networking events, webinars, and an online community forum to connect, exchange ideas, and build relationships with your peers. You can join multiple affinity groups.

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**Alison Wuensch** is a consultant with GFOA's Research and Consulting Center (RCC).



**Adam Powell** is also a consultant with RCC.