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## Building Better Board/Manager Relations

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Among the northeastern states, Maine and Pennsylvania are recognized nationally for their strong support of the Council (or selectmen) -Manager form of local government.

According to Maine Municipal Association, of the 492 municipalities in Maine, approximately 290 have a city/town manager, administrator, or administrative assistant to the selectmen. Of that number, 240-250 wear the title "manager" while the others are generally called administrators or administrative assistants. Population is a big factor in whether or not a community has a manager/administrator/AA. All but two communities over 5,000 population – Buxton and Lebanon – have a manager, administrator or administrative assistant. All but a dozen or so of the communities over 2,500 population have managers, administrators or administrative assistants.

According to MMA, to have a city or town manager, a municipality will have either a municipal charter that designates the position or will adopt what is known as the statutory Town Manager Plan. It should be noted that some communities call their chief administrative officer, "administrator". If this position is incorporated into the municipal charter, then for all intents and purposes the administrator is the same as a manager; however, towns that use an ordinance, job description or an article on the town meeting warrant to hire an administrator or administrative assistant without adopting the Town Manager Plan, do not legally have a manager, or chief administrative officer, by another name.

### So much for the technical stuff....

As a 36-year city manager I have always viewed this relationship between the manager and the council or board of selectmen with varying degrees of interest, fascination and occasionally horror when the relationship deteriorates.

Why do some cities and towns chew up and spit out their managers on a regular basis, and others seem to enjoy a mutually productive, rewarding and professional relationship? I don't plan on playing a name game listing those municipalities known as "trouble" within the ranks of Maine managers, but I do want to mention some long serving managers, and the three diverse communities they work for, who won Maine Town & City Management Association (MTCMA) awards in 2007 – Bill Bridgeo (Augusta), Richard Davis (Farmington) and Marjorie Stratton (Vinalhaven). These managers and their council/board are positive examples of how the relationship can result in good things happening.

Success is measured in patterns of good government and not occasional blips on a radar screen when one manager doesn't get along with his or her elected officials. Not all of us get along with all of our relatives or neighbors either. I maintain that those cities and towns with a continuing, positive relationship between the manager and council/board, didn't get there by accident; they've worked hard to make it happen.

A March 2004 *Maine Townsman* article, titled "How Long Do We Last", is helpful in demonstrating that a positive relationship can be mutually beneficial to the manager and the municipality. A sidebar with that article listed 32 managers who had been in the same community for 10 years or longer. While several of those individuals listed have since retired or moved on from their manager jobs in the identified communities, the list is still an important reflection of how positive relationships are good for Maine local government.

There are at least six key elements to such success.

### Proper Hiring Practices, Including Good Employment Agreement

Towns that succeed with their managers usually go through a thorough search and screening process to find the right manager. In the business we call this "chemistry", and this could apply to spouses, sports managers or business leaders where sometimes a bad choice can be made combining dissimilar personalities or goals.

The manager candidate also must do some homework. Is this a stable town with moderate government or a rabid partisan community that expects the new manager to slug it out from day one? There are few secrets in local government, and a chat with area colleagues and a thorough reading of local newspapers will usually indicate the flavor and recent political history of a city or town.

Once a candidate is selected he or she deserves an employment agreement which spells out any potentially explosive issues, such as "when will the new manager be reviewed by the governing body?", or "how much vacation will the person receive the first six months (you didn't expect your new hard charger to go without some time off during the first summer and fall)?", or "how many hours does the council/board expect the new manager to work?" Some departments in town government might have different work time expectations (e.g., town office is open 35 hrs. per week, but public work and public safety buildings are open longer). It's not that the salaried manager shouldn't work more than the standard work week – that's probably expected – but tying up any loose ends makes for better relations. This is in the same category as the old saying "good fences make good neighbors".

Properly negotiated and executed employment contracts between governing body and manager make for smoother sailing as both parties know what is expected. Both state and national manager associations (MTCMA and ICMA) have a wealth of sample contracts to guide any interested town or candidate. Also, consult with the town attorney or MMA legal staff to make sure any contract negotiated doesn't violate state laws, local charter, etc.

### **Foster Frequent and Open Communications**

Elected officials don't like surprises from their managers, and managers shouldn't be the last one in the loop either.

In my first town as the manager, the senior council member wouldn't speak to me after I was sworn in. I asked around and no one on the Council or staff could think of anything I had done to offend this venerable old bull. So, I did the logical thing and called him up. He immediately and angrily said "you sat next to the mayor at your initial dinner, and I hate the mayor". Not knowing the depth of these feelings I simply said that my wife and I were invited to sit next to the mayor and his wife, and what else could I do. There was silence and then he said "OK, I understand your situation. Sorry I took it out on you". We got along the rest of my 7+ years.

When you contact one (councilor) on an important issue contact everyone. Don't play favorites or keep secrets unless it is a confidential conversation. I have found that weekly reports are valuable to keep all up to date. And don't always call with good news. You've got to break the bad news as well. I've had some doozies in my career, including two police officers having a gun fight over a bar waitress and employees having a fist fight behind the town garage, but you still have to relate the news and be prepared to explain what you did in the situation.

### **Respect for Others' Roles**

As a young town manager, I thought I had all the answers, and for a while, thought I could even predict how elected officials might vote. How wrong I was on both counts.

A kindly old mayor once took me aside and explained that he needed answers to tell people in supermarkets, and he would rather be awakened at 2:00 a.m. about a bad fire or personnel issue than be surprised at the coffee shop the next morning.

As a manager or administrator, you are not the elected official and don't have to answer to the electorate in November. Where there is jealousy or in-fighting in the ranks of top elected or

appointed officials, there is almost always turmoil, instability and lots of negative press. How do you find out what your officials want on a policy or procedural matter or hot topic in your town? You ask them. They should respect the job you do as town manager and you should afford them the respect and courtesy of their office.  
**Manager Must Serve in a Professional Manner**

The International City/County Management Association (ICMA) has a tight Code of Ethics for managers, that has also been adopted by the Maine Town & City Management Association. So this applies to all local government professionals who are MTCMA members, regardless of whether they are ICMA members.

A manager should avoid any type of political involvement or endorsement of products, programs or candidates. The manager should be kept informed, trained and networked with colleagues. You should never embarrass an elected official. You can have disputes in public and policy differences should be aired before the entire governing body. Any personal business, especially regarding town expenditures or hours worked, should be meticulously followed, counted and double-checked to make sure you can pass the newspaper test. If it wouldn't make good reading for your town, you probably shouldn't be doing it. All of us have doubts or are asked about new programs, so you check with a senior colleague or go on the internet with ICMA, the MTCMA listserv, or the many resources of MMA.

### **Have A Sense of Humor**

Sometimes the actions of residents, officials, visitors and employees are so zany and off the wall that you have to laugh at what goes on within the walls of the typical municipal building. Humor is a good thing at some otherwise deadly boring meetings. Again, you are not to make fun of anyone or use gallows humor in the wrong situation, but a funny remark at the right moment can bring a few smiles and make the everyday business of local government a bit more tolerable. And if you smile at visitors and staff members, you have a better than average chance that they will smile back.

### **Put Your Town First**

If your town succeeds, your relationship with your elected officials will probably blossom as well. This will increase longevity, salary requests and future job offers in an often stressful position. Make sure you give kudos to officials and employees first. Believe me, people will know who is guiding the ship, and you don't have to be out front with news stories or pictures in the paper. When it is known that you account for every penny, and you expect employees to do likewise, then you will have earned trust and respect. By practicing teamwork, and by being a modest but conscientious professional looking out for both taxpayers and employees, you will be advancing good relations between elected officials and managers.