

# Why Small Towns Do Not Need Managers

**I** am writing this from a personal perspective, having been a city manager in two small communities, one in Michigan and one in Tennessee. There will not be a large bibliography or many references, only some opinions, thoughts, observations, suggestions, and solutions.

When talking with other people in the local government management profession (whether they are from a city, county, town, village, or borough), then looking at their problems with elected officials, one realizes that many larger communities do not have a professional manager and desperately need one, while conversely, many smaller communities do have a professional manager and do not need one. I know this thinking will not go over big with ICMA, nor will it be read by the elected officials of communities that need to read it the most. Elected officials will not believe what will be said herein, due to the fact they will not see themselves as being that "kind of community."

I have not determined where to draw the line between what is a small community and what is a large one. People have different opinions as to whether their community is big or small. Since more than 80 percent of all governing units in the United States have less than 5,000 residents and 90 percent have less than 10,000 residents (Schenker 1986), it is difficult to distinguish big from small. Instead of using population as my criterion, I will use "small thinking." I am going to say small thinking communities do not need professional managers.

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**Anthony Scally**

## The Definition

What makes a community a small thinking community? The first, and maybe most important, criterion is the refusal of the elected officials to acknowledge their community has any problems. They feel theirs is the greatest community in the world in which to live. A second problem elected officials have is the reluctance to give up any power they perceive they have received by being elected to the council or board. They believe they have inherited this power just by being elected. A transformation from being an average citizen to someone special occurs after they have won an election. This power becomes difficult to give up when they hire a manager or administrator.

In some communities, relinquishing this power never occurs and the manager/administrator becomes a go-fer instead of a manager. Elected officials must delegate the authority necessary to allow the manager to manage. This means giving up the perceived power they have as an elected official, allowing the manager the flexibility to hire and fire employees, deciding what work will be done, and choosing the company from which the community will buy its paper clips.

## The Manager

Professional managers are generally hired from outside the community. You will be looked upon as an intruder. People will question your ability to know their local government's needs and wants. The culture of a community might not allow an outsider to run the city's or town's daily business. Citizens feel that the elected official, who has lived there all their life, knows more than the manager. The problem with this thinking is that lifelong residents who think they know everything about the community really know very little about it, and nobody can

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tell them differently.

It does not matter that a person moving into a community can see things that need correcting quicker and easier than people who have lived there all their lives. Elected officials are so close to the problem that either they do not see it, or worse, ignore it, hoping it will go away. The problem can also involve a friend or influential member of the community who supports an elected official. Trying to find the real power base of the community is the toughest part of a new manager's job. The power is usually not the elected official, but a silent base that has been present for years. This silent power can be as hard to motivate as the elected official.

## Age

Problem solving in a small thinking community has a correlation between the age of the elected body, the length of time these officials have been in their elected positions, and how long these officials have lived in the community. The longer for each criterion, the more retrograde the governing body, and the less that will be changed. This is a point you can

observe yourself if you doubt its validity. Check the age and longevity factors and see how much has really been accomplished in any community by looking back in the minutes of elected officials meetings.

Usually, you will find a pattern of putting off fixing community problems. The problem will not be voted on to be solved and eventually disappears from the minutes. Smaller thinking governing boards also will have a pattern of the occupation and/or affiliation elected bodies represented. The board will have one person who is retired and has absolutely nothing to do but hang around city hall. This might not be totally true, but each and every elected small thinking body seems to have one such person. They are usually the ones that know everything about the community, even though they have had no formal education in management, budgeting, personnel, or purchasing. They come from the school of hard knocks and can be more of a hindrance than a help.

The board will have a prominent businessman of the community or the community's largest employer. In the northern United States, the board usually has a woman, and in the south, a good old boy and no women. Once in a while, you will encounter a young person who does have a good educational background. If the town has a bank, the board will have a person who works for the bank; and if the community has a ward system you will find a blue collar representative. If you do not believe this scenario, check it out yourself and see how close my descriptions come.

## Why Problems Exist

This will give you a thumbnail sketch of why these small thinking communities have not been able to meet the demands of the 1990s. With the severe budget crises confronting all levels of government in 1990-91 and fu-

ture budget years, these small communities are faced with smaller budgets and larger expenditures. For years now, there has been an exodus of businesses from small cities and towns all across America, causing a loss of tax base and tax revenue. With the prospect of revenue being curtailed even further, these elected officials have entered into a crisis stage of governing. Thus begins the search for an "instant fix" to all of the problems that have built over the years. Failure to face these problems has not changed over the years; which causes the communities to become rigid and unable to adapt (Glueck 1971).

These problems have been compounded by the precipitous drop of citizen participation within the community. People no longer run for elected offices, donate their time to volunteer programs, or volunteer for fire and police work. Some have dropped out of the political process completely. This dropping out promotes the return of incumbent elected officials, which perpetuates bad governing and stymies new ideas.

The citizens also demand the public official provide new, and sometimes expensive, programs for the community without raising taxes. The elected official must then take drastic measures to please the voters. One alternative is to hire a manager/administrator. Some communities might have already adopted the manager/administrator form of government into their charter, while others must present this to the public for adoption. Since the elected official really does not want to go in this direction and is doing so only out of desperation, it makes a new manager's or administrator's job impossible.

### **What Do They Want?**

In reading the advertisements in the *ICMA Newsletter* over a year's time, (ICMA 1989), a pattern emerges of

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the requirements communities are seeking in a manager or administrator. Minimum requirements include a bachelor's degree in public administration and preferably a master's degree, experience in budgeting, personnel, planning, economic development, industrial park development, downtown revitalization (or the revitalizing of an older neighborhood, which relates to the "quick fix" syndrome), and a professional with proven leadership.

This is really an oxymoron in smaller communities. Professional managers must learn that they will be working with elected officials that are less educated, less trained in public administration, and will not under-

stand modern managing techniques. How will elected officials recognize professionally proven leadership if they themselves do not have any professionalism or proven managerial leadership? I have sent resumes to many smaller communities and never received an acknowledgment of having received my resume or, in some cases, no letter at all concerning the position. How can you advertise for professional managers when you treat them in an unprofessional manner?

A person looking at these ads should note some "red flags" that pop up, warning you a rough time can be had by all if you accept these positions. Watch for ads that say "must like small town" or "new position" or "previous manager retiring after 30 years." These communities would be better off hiring a local person who will be there in title only.

This local person will try to keep everybody happy, especially the people working for the manager. One example is the community I worked for in Michigan. Before I was hired as city manager, the city had hired a local woman as city manager. She was born and raised in the community, was a very close friend of the mayor, had no formal education past high school, and had never been a city manager. She was friends with everybody, as you would expect in a small community. What happened was basically nothing—no problem was solved and the employees ran the community, including getting seven weeks' vacation after 10 years' service, 14 paid holidays, and 2 sick days a month with no cap on accumulation. Get the picture?

### **Look About You**

As we drive through small communities in America, one observation becomes obvious. These communities have a lot of empty buildings, little industry, and a large stock of older housing. Rural communities have

been hit harder by the exodus of business and population than urban communities. The smaller community has become stagnant or lost population, its population base is aging and local business has moved to a nearby population center—usually the county seat. This move has been precipitated by the ability to travel by automobile to the larger city more quickly and efficiently. Traveling 30 to 40 miles to go shopping today is common.

With the community population aging and older people not wanting to leave their homes, the younger people of the community have very few housing choices, which forces them to move where housing is available. One of those housing choices is the mobile home. How does the local elected official react to this type of housing? "We do not want that kind of housing in our community." In reality, it is exactly what the community needs.

An even greater struggle occurs over revitalizing the downtown of the smaller community. The town might have a local gas station/convenience store, a couple of bars and restaurants, a funeral home, maybe a drug store, and a lot of empty buildings. Some buildings might have been empty 10 to 15 years and are beyond repair and redemption. The best thing the council could do would be to tear these buildings down. But does it? Not if the owner is a long-time resident and friend of the mayor or the council.

Smaller cities will not have a master plan and, in most instances, will not have plans for the future. They rarely look into the next week or month, much less the next year or 10 years. They are very happy with the past. They visualize today as the past and are happy that all is well. This also holds true for the daily operation of the community. Do not plan on periodic equipment replacement. Their motto is "if it ain't broke, don't replace it." Even though the police car

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has more than a hundred thousand miles no it, keep it until it falls apart. If you have a computer system (that new-fangled gizmo) that is obsolete, never buy a new one so that employee productivity can be improved. (Yes, you can measure employee productivity in the public sector.)

**Personnel**

Which brings us to personnel matters. The area of public administration where you need the best program possible is in the area of hiring employees. Poor employees cause you more grief than any other area

of management. The smaller community has a larger percentage of poor employees than any other form of government. The spoils system is not dead in the smaller community, nepotism is rampant, and good personnel practices are non-existent.

Both communities I worked in followed a pattern of hiring. New employees were either friends and/or relatives of present employees or friends and/or relatives of the elected officials. This caused very sloppy personnel practices. In one position, no background checks were done on newly hired employees, including checking to see if the employees had a valid driver's licenses. When I had the employees checked who were driving city vehicles, I found two did not have a valid driver's license. I also discovered two police officers did not have high school diplomas, nor had they gone through the police academy to be certified, both state law requirements for police officers.

In another position, six of the eleven employees were close relatives of each other (brother, uncle, son, and sister). In one place, of the five employees working in town hall, two were sisters, one was a sister-in-law. Three brothers were in the Public Works Department, of which one was a department head supervising the other two, which was against adopted town regulations.

Job descriptions or pay classifications did not exist, which led to the favorite employees of the elected officials getting the largest pay raises, causing a high employee turnover. Within one year, a supervisory change occurred in five of the eight departments. Eight of the nine employees hired while I was there quit within six months to take better jobs after they had acquired the work experience. The elected officials had very little knowledge of state or federal laws concerning employee rights. According to them, the employee had no rights.

## Status Quo

Small communities can become closed systems that shut out any new ideas and, even worse, do not recognize old problems that need correction. Small local governments might be the ultimate bureaucracy, tending to use their power to maintain the status quo, rather than promote change or innovation (Blau 1987). This inertia and self-preservation has rendered existing elected bodies incapable of change. They become reactive instead of proactive. They will refuse to acknowledge their economic decline until it is too late. Anything new will have to be accommodated to much that is old (Gorman 1976), which, in many cases, means nothing new will be proposed. They believe in an old myth that to never raise taxes is a great accomplishment for an elected official. If you do not raise taxes, businesses will beat a path to your door and, more importantly, the voters will love you and reelect you over and over again.

Their obedience is to traditional authority wed to the past. What rules exist are those that have operated in the past (Blau 1987). You will hear them say, "We have always done it like this." It is the most frequent response from a closed town to a new idea. When hiring a professional manager, the elected official will not listen to the manager, but instead listen to the employees who are neighbors, friends, and, more importantly, a local person. This inbreeding inhibits any new ideas. If adopted by the elected officials, these ideas could improve productivity, which means it is a bad idea for the employee who also has always done it one way.

## Progressive Communities

I must pause here and switch from the negative to the positive. There are progressive, modern, innovative, smaller communities that do not fol-

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low the above-mentioned parameters. These communities allow the manager to manage, they listen to new ideas, they have good hiring practices with job descriptions and pay classifications. They have recognized the problems of their community and are doing something to correct these problems. They are actively recruiting new business, not expecting the business just to come to their front door. They do raise taxes in a slow, manageable way with a master plan to let the citizens know where their tax dollars are being spent.

They have recognized you cannot have a cozy, friendly relationship with every person in town and have

economic growth, new housing, or the revitalization of an older neighborhood. They are willing to surrender that perceived power elected officials think they have, and give the authority to the manager to manage. They have a master plan or a list of goals and objectives with priority items that will be implemented and followed through to completion.

These communities have not listened to the nay-sayers and can't doers. They have tried to mobilize the business community, tried not to make decisions strictly on a political basis and, most importantly, stood behind the manager they have hired.

## Suggestion

The elected officials of a small community should not hire a manager or administrator if they are not willing to let go of the authority necessary to improve community operations. They should not look upon the manager as the new kid on the block who is an outsider and intruder. The new manager is now a part of the community, and should be treated as such. If officials are not going to accept them into their family, they should not hire them. **PM**

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