

Commentary

The Undiscovered Country: A New PAtH for Local Government Management

Governing boards have been known in one form or another for centuries. Yet, throughout those many years, there has been a baffling failure to develop a coherent or universally applicable understanding of just what a board is for.

—*Carver's Policy Governance Model in Nonprofit Organizations*, by John Carver and Miriam Carver

We have come so far with our technical and operational improvements. While sweeping changes have been made in organizations, our operating relationship with our elected bodies has changed very little. Now on the horizon of the 21st century, is the time for us to consider a paradigm shift in the way appointed officials relate to their elected bodies. The governance relations contract (GRC) may be that mythical shift that we need as a profession. It has not been tested yet. Maybe you will be one of the pioneers to test it in this undiscovered country.

In making a case for the GRC, let's start our journey by looking back. In the shadows of the Blue Ridge Mountains at the turn of the last century, the council-manager form of government was born. The key tenet and foundation of this form, then and now, is that the implementation of policy through an appointed professional manager is more effective and efficient than through an elected mayor.

The 20th century provided fertile ground, in many ways, for validating the worth of the tenet and the form. Professional management working under the direction of elected bodies built the physical organization and technical infrastructure that made the United States. Life was good.

The Winds of Change

The 21st century has brought amazing change. In this undiscovered country, while we are still trying to find our bearings on our compasses, the landscape is being radically altered. Recent governmental events in Dallas, Fort Worth, San Diego, and San Antonio are landmarks of the changes occurring in this new landscape we find ourselves traversing. One thing is certain. Change is not coming; it is here on the doorstep.

In San Diego, it was not just some single-issue interest group but the business community that was pushing for a change in city government. The community

forces that had provided the backbone for the growth of the council- manager form of government are the same ones, in some cases, now lending impetus to the change to a strong mayor form.

What is the problem with the council-manager plan? Is it not the best form of local government in the nation? Hey, just look at the Maxwell School's grading of governments. Didn't Phoenix and Austin end up with an "A" rating? And guess what? They are both council-manager governments.

You are absolutely right. There is little doubt that the plan can prove its worth through an objective, nonpolitical rating system. But does it work in the Monday-night, board-meeting litmus test of working with our elected officials?

A major impediment to managers' building effective relationships with their elected officials is the outdated and draconian concept that councilmembers should not interfere with the executive prerogatives of the manager. Does this mean that the elected body cannot set expectations for how they want employees, customers, and citizens treated or for the performance outputs and outcomes they expect from departments?

The ICMA Charter tells us that the manager is responsible for the day-to-day running of the community. Elected officials are also ultimately responsible to the citizens for running it. They do this through the manager, by setting policy.

Webster's dictionary defines policy as "a definite course or method of action selected from alternatives and in light of a given condition to guide and determine present and future action." What does this mean? It means that elected officials should have a role at the table in determining how the manager is going to run day-to-day operations and to implement the council's policies.

The days of the "black box"-give it to the manager, and let him or her implement the policies-are fast coming to a close in some local governments. There is a growing chorus from some managers that the quality of elected officials has eroded; all they (the mayor and council) want to do is micromanage; they do not look at the big picture or the future implications of their decisions. Have we come this far, to end up as an idea or a noble experiment that has seen its better days?

Like many of you, I have reviewed the annual awards that are given by ICMA. The awards are a great testimony to the dedication and hard work of our colleagues. Unfortunately, I have not seen, nor can I ever recall, an award for establishing effective relationships with the elected body. What does this say about our priorities as a profession? After all, we serve at the pleasure of our elected bodies.

The efforts of our peers to improve relationships with their elected bodies, however, are not recognized as significant enough to merit an award from ICMA. Those of our colleagues who are building innovative relationships with their elected officials should be recognized. These managers represent the

explorers in this undiscovered country. It's time we started recognizing the most fundamental part of our work. Building a partnership with the elected body comes first.

In this moment, we are poised to take steps to reshape the profession and must rely on a new compass to chart our way. One new tool that may help us set a fresh paradigm in promoting improved relationships with our elected officials is the GRC.

The elected body and the manager should develop the GRC jointly. In fact, the best time to do this may be when a new manager is hired. It is a dynamic document, not a static one, and should change with the circumstances and conditions that emerge from time to time. The GRC should be signed by the elected body and the manager.

The same energy that we put into negotiating our initial employment contracts and our annual reviews should also be directed toward developing a GRC, which should focus on these six areas:

1. Expectations of the organization
2. Performance expectations of the manager
3. Expectations of relations with the mayor and council
4. Role of the mayor
5. Operating procedures for meetings with the mayor and council
6. Expectations of civic engagement

The discussion that follows sets out some hypothetical examples of how the GRC could work. Each example could include subsets of 1.1a, 1.1b, and so forth, in the case of more expansive policies.

1. Expectations of the Organization

1.1 The elected body will annually set performance measures for local government departments, in consultation with the manager.

1.2 The code enforcement department will implement online permits by no later than October 2005.

1.3 All departments will submit process improvement plans as part of the fiscal 2006 budget.

1.4 The local government will maintain a strategic planning system for all departments.

"They can't tell us how to do our jobs!" Yes, they can, and they should. We are responsible for day-to-day operations, but this does not mean that elected officials cannot tell us how they want the day-to-day operations changed or run.

2. The Performance Expectations of the Manager

2.1 All critical financial and operational information will be shared with the elected body and employees.

2.2 Employee performance review will be conducted for every employee annually. At least 50 percent of the evaluation will be focused on customer service.

2.3 Employee process-improvement teams will be started in every department and an annual report submitted to the elected body on the teams' accomplishments.

2.4 Budget recommendations submitted to the mayor and council will be developed collaboratively with department heads.

2.5 All employees will get a turkey at Thanksgiving (just kidding).

Get the drift?

3. Expectations of Relations with the Mayor and Council

3.1 Value every member's opinion.

3.2 Take time to be fully informed by staff in order to gain the necessary knowledge for taking action.

3.3 No question is a dumb question.

3.4 Disagree with the vote, but do not undermine the will of the mayor and council.

3.5 Focus on the future, using the local government's comprehensive plan and strategic plans as guides.

3.6 Set no fewer than four retreats a year to discuss the GRC.

3.7 Commit to attending a minimum of 40 hours of training per year on current city and county management issues.

3.8 There will be no public criticism of staff at council meetings.

3.9 There will be no interference with personnel issues in the organization.

3.10 All written communication from a member to the organization will be addressed to the manager and copied to all members.

3.11 No member will direct staff, and all complaints or inquiries will be submitted on the local government's customer response system.

3.12 Members will commit to supporting the strategic planning system.

I especially like the training item. But this list is just a start, to give you an idea of types of issues that can be dealt with under this section.

4. The Role of the Mayor

- 4.1 Set the agenda for the meeting with the manager.
- 4.2 Run the pre-agenda meeting.
- 4.3 Serve as the council's contact in economic development-related issues.
- 4.4 Work with the manager on setting agendas for retreats.

Under the council-manager form, the role of the mayor usually is undefined, except in the charter. Defining the portion of this role not delineated by the charter will assist the mayor, and, more important, the council in avoiding hard feelings. Feelings get hurt and egos sometimes bruised when it is perceived that the mayor is getting "too much of the limelight."

5. Operating Procedures for Meetings with the Mayor and Council

This section does not need to be elaborated on, as such procedures are used in most local governments.

6. Expectations of Civic Engagement

- 6.1 No major capital improvement, whether sidewalk, street, park, or other facility, will be designed without first involving the neighborhood adjacent to the improvement.
- 6.2 Staff will develop a system of citizen tours of major projects.
- 6.3 A citizens' academy will be developed to educate and promote civic involvement.
- 6.4 A staff liaison will be assigned to every neighborhood association.

Civic engagement can assist the elected body in fulfilling its primary role as a bridge between citizens and staff. Working with councilmembers on designing this bridge is much better than simply leaving it to chance or hoping that management will figure it out.

I don't want to put readers to sleep with too many recommended provisions. The ball is now in our court. Will the GRC stop elected bodies from micromanaging, failing to focus on strategic issues, and the like?

The answer to this question can only come from us. Are we willing to let the elected body set some parameters on how we run the organization? There are no safe harbors in the undiscovered country where we find ourselves. We have

to set sail and navigate a course in partnership with our elected officials. The GRC can be one compass that helps us reach our destination together.

—Michael Letcher
Deputy City Manager
Tucson, Arizona

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