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# Public Facility Management Under the Civil Service System

Roy G. Saunders

**A**s the senior member of the International Association of Auditorium Managers (IAAM)—a 32-year veteran, and manager of my present auditorium facility for 27 years—I can say confidently that a civil service system offers stability to the workforce of a municipal government.

Thirty years ago, most public assembly facilities were municipally owned and operated, and little regard was given to their professional management. The industry has grown to include auditoriums, coliseums, theatres, performing arts centers, stadiums, and many other public assembly venues. Now, with cities recognizing the economic role of such facilities both in terms of their ability to generate tax revenues and in the role these buildings play as venues for leisure entertainment, there is considerable interest in maintaining citizens' investment in the physical facilities and in marketing these buildings to achieve their full potential. Today, most facilities are still municipally owned and operated, though a far greater number of trained professional facility managers now help set policy and direct the operations and growth of the buildings in their charge.

## Managers Have New Freedom

The obvious benefit of civil service is stability. Although entrenched civil servants whose performance is seen as marginal or poor have long been the bane of municipal managers, recent trends have led to a more goals-oriented environment for managers. In recent years, with the advent of equal employment opportunities, government employee unions, and federal regulations that articulate employee rights, municipal employees have real-

ized new freedoms. This same body of legislation and court decisions has clarified management's role as well and given managers freedom in hiring, evaluating, and firing employees for cause. These issues have challenged managers to keep better employee records, counsel their staff members, and document activities with painstaking accuracy.

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Civil service offers protection from political patronage and, ideally, encourages a level of professionalism not found otherwise. Civil service employees enjoy the opportunity for internal promotion, an incentive for performance in a system where stability could encourage mediocrity. Many systems do not extend civil service to top management. Our system includes management. This has been an advantage for me in recruiting and retaining those whose education and experience are appropriate for them to become professionals in a career field—in this instance, public assembly facility management.

Civil service has allowed me to last through 13 changes of city administration with little or no disruption in the businesslike operation of our department. This was not the case in other communities where I have worked that did not have civil service. Many, if not a majority, of facilities are operated by municipalities with professional managers and staffs who are covered by civil service, completely or in part. In some instances, the management either is not covered or is op-

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erating under a personal-services contract.

I have managed facilities in other communities that did not have civil service, personal-services contracts, or any other protection for employees. This circumstance created an undesirable working atmosphere wherein as much as 85 percent of the total workforce were subject to turnover, with the change of city administration, as a direct result of political patronage.

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Even though individuals appointed through the political patronage procedure may have solid business backgrounds or other outstanding qualifications, frequent changes create an atmosphere of uncertainty not only for the

operating staffs, but also for lessees, user groups, and others having relationships with the facility. Many facilities' schedules are dependent on repeat business or the continuity of operation in dealing with a trained and experienced staff. In my opinion, there is no comparison between a civil service system and a political patronage system, but I would give serious consideration to privatization or other form of professional management.

Civil service affords the professional staff and management reasonable protection from possible political interference so that they can make professional judgments and recommendations. The elected political leaders ultimately establish policy, but the staff manages the facilities. The stability factor offers a freedom to management and staff to be outspoken and objective. This can be especially critical in long-range planning and recommendations for expanded and improved facilities.

Public assembly facilities are often the only divisions within city government that compete for business. As such, they face unique challenges within the government. Most other municipal operations, especially utility services, are monopolies. In the case of public assembly facilities, we sometimes compete at the local level, and usually at the state, regional, and national levels. Most statistical resources project growth in the use of public assembly facilities off the charts up to the end of the century.

Public events are time-sensitive. Often, the clients who book events and the contractors who service events are impeded by time delays in such areas as personnel, purchasing, auditing, and legal. We are always searching for better and faster ways of achieving our needs within the bureaucracy.

Rental rates are established competitively as part of a total package of hotels, attractions, and other considerations that make a city nationally competitive for lucrative convention business. The ability of a convention center to service a convention professionally also helps to mold a competitive edge between cities. The image of a city is greatly enhanced by a professionally staffed, service-oriented convention center. Very often, the convention center is the focal point for out-of-town visitors.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for a facility operated by employees covered by civil service is to provide first-class service. The job stability provided by the system offers little incentive, positive or negative, for employees to perform at the top level of their ability. Yet because the convention industry is so highly competitive, the significant advantage

one building has over another is its level of service. Managers are challenged to achieve these high levels of performance and must be able to do so in order to remain competitive.

### **Motivating Civil Servants**

In government, employees' performance is the true test of the civil service system. There have been numerous studies in recent years to determine what factors motivate government employees. Productivity and performance have been the focused concern of management as shrinking budgets have caused reductions in force throughout all government offices. Such issues as inflation, reduction in federal monies flowing to cities, and labor's increased wage demands have challenged public managers to extract higher levels of performance from the shrinking resources available.

The past decade has seen an increase in public assembly facilities managed by private operators. City officials, faced with operating deficits in their public assembly facilities, have looked to private management as a way to control costs and increase revenues. Private management, however, is ultimately concerned with the bottom line. A public facility constructed with public funding should address the needs of the citizenry. Some types of events and programs do not generate the type of revenue that would be required by private management. Proms, graduations, and dance recitals are not usually moneymakers. A public facility operated for the public good with public financing can address the community's needs without undue emphasis on the bottom line.

The impact of convention centers on the city's economy should not be overlooked. A convention center with even a moderate calendar of activities will earn considerably more than it spends in the indirect revenue returned to the city by the expenditures of visiting convention attendees. Even facilities geared toward the presentation of entertainment and sporting events generate substantially more revenue to the city than the rental income from events. Managers of publicly operated facilities are more cognizant of the indirect revenues to the local government than private concerns, whose concern is that income exceed expenses.

Whether in the private sector or within a civil service system, employees take direction from their supervisors. Perhaps the single most important factor to employee productivity is the quality of supervision. Employees have varying needs. Some are motivated by money, some by social interaction at work,

some by the prestige or recognition the job provides, and so on. The type of supervision required varies from employee to employee accordingly.

In the private sector, when new top management comes in, the subsequent shakeup in personnel is often felt all the way to the mailroom as the new boss strives to put familiar people in middle-management positions. The boss has working relationships with these people and knows that they share a common focus for the company.

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In government, the new boss (mayor, council, or others) may not have experience in the day-to-day operation of city services such as public assembly facilities. The newly elected official or even the new department director will likely be supervising people who have worked in their fields long enough to develop some expertise. These employees may be receptive to new leadership, or (just as likely) they may believe they can teach the new boss a thing or two. Job security can easily be abused.

Public service managers trade the private sector tradition of bringing in their own people for the civil service system, which offers stability and continuity. This is not a bad tradeoff, just a challenging one. Public managers must assess motivational factors and develop teamwork in addition to achieving expected productivity levels and keeping the required records on all employees. Even with the protection of the most stringent civil service system, it is still incumbent upon managers to produce a successful operation and satisfactory net results, or to be accountable for their action or inaction. If successful, managers will have organizations that take pride in their work and achieve national reputations for service. **PM**

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