

Council–Manager Relations: Finding Respectable Ground

by **Gary O’Connell**

During the 2006 ICMA Annual Conference in San Antonio, Texas, I was part of a panel that discussed differing perspectives on council-manager relationships, and what is important for understanding and working in the council-manager environment. From my discussion points for that session, I developed this article to further the debate on which issues are important to local government managers who have the most success in working with locally elected governing bodies.

This advice follows my 32 years in local government management. It is not meant to be the end-all in a discussion within our profession but is meant to share what has worked for me over time. Many of you in the management business probably have your own lists, too. My hope is that this article can directly help managers and also generate a larger debate, maybe another conference session to share more ideas on how to bring success to a sometimes extremely difficult relationship.

For me, trust, personal relationships, strong communications, and a vision for making a positive difference in the community have overall importance. My belief is that if these can be achieved with most, if not all, of your elected officials, then success will follow. I talk constantly with new councilmembers and with my staff about the importance of trust building.

These points of advice have worked for me:

Build relationships. Probably the key lesson learned in my career is that building relationships is the most important thing you can do. If you don't build relationships well, or if you don't at least make a very sincere effort, you will lose as a manager the opportunity to get to the big issues. When the issues get tough, it will be harder going. Build on these relationships early in your tenure or early in the new terms of incoming councilmembers.

Listen intently and intensely. It shows respect for the other person to listen carefully, and this skill will take you a long way. Note and follow up on what you hear, from either the individual councilmember or the council as a whole. Listening can be critical to your success.

Be patient. Timing is critical, and sometimes this the hardest lesson to learn from experience. Understanding when it is the right time to bring an issue or recommendation forward can often determine success. Experience suggests patience if your instincts tell you it's not the right time. I find this one of the hardest lessons for my staff to learn. I usually choose patience if staff members disagree on timing.

Show humility as well as self-confidence. Humility mixed with self-confidence beats out arrogance and ego. These are basic personal styles, but I find that staff and other managers who have not learned this lesson do not fare well. Being out front, arrogant, and a know-it-all manager is a recipe for disaster.

Work behind the scenes. I have found that in the council-manager form of government things work best if the manager stays back. Councils do want positive credit, and a managerial style that lets the council be visibly and publicly successful also means success for the manager. Managers who don't heed this advice, in my experi-

ence, often find themselves "in the frying pan," and they never seem able to get out of trouble.

Always treat council with respect. They are the bosses. Don't ever forget it! Offer the councilmembers policy alternatives that are thoughtful and well researched and doable. Give councilmembers a good strong recommendation they can act upon. Serve the community, but remember that if you don't serve the council well, you won't be around to serve the community.

Ask and understand why a councilmember has chosen to run for office and serve on the council. For most councilmembers, running for office is a conscious decision; because their reasons are important, it is important for you to find out their reasons. I also believe it is critical to understand what they perceive as success. Find out the specific things they wish to accomplish and what they would judge as success. Know the community-related personal interests of each councilmember; talk about their interests directly with them. The better you know them, the better off you will be.

Respect councilmembers' priorities. Part-time councilmembers are your number one relationship, but you are not their number one relationship. This is an axiom I have heard for many years. If you think about this for a minute, it really does emphasize that most councilmembers have many things on their plates, and the elected official's work is only one part of their lives. Learn to respect that, and to respect their valuable time, limited as it may be from your perspective.

Make sure councilmembers aren't surprised. Councilmembers should not be surprised by any local government news they read in the newspaper. I remind my staff of this on many occasions. Surprises usually mean a negative, defense-first reaction; avoid that with good, early communications. Find out what kind of communication

works best for each councilmember, as my experience tells me that one method does not fit all work styles. Some read e-mails, others read faxes, and others want a personal phone call. I encourage you to ask each councilmember what works best, and you should understand and respect that personal work style. The mayor (even if council appointed) plays a special role. If you build on that, it could mean a special and trusting relationship.

Learn how to deal with difficult councilmembers. An encounter with a difficult member of the council can become an energy-draining event. Try to stay focused on the positive, win-win spirit. Don't allow yourself to become a magnet for the naysayers (on the council or in the community). Stay out of individual council disagreements or internal council politics. You will never win by interjecting yourself in the council's internal politics. Stay out of it.

Be disciplined in your follow-up on council issues. Track issues to completion, and set up a system that works to assure closure. It is important to your success to "sweat the small stuff" or to assign a staff member to take charge and do that. The lack of follow-up on council issues, especially constituent ones, can lead to many and bigger problems.

Discover how you and councilmembers can think big picture. Often elected officials can get stuck at pothole levels. I believe that managers are hired to play leadership roles beyond getting the potholes repaired. But to get to the leadership issues that are large and strategic, the small stuff has to be addressed and done well. Good systems and strong staff assure the small stuff gets taken care of well.

Understand that a manager is perceived as successful if councilmembers feel successful individually and as a council group. Never let your ego be bigger than the council's; give council the public credit for the successes and then step back. Councilmembers are

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public people, and they want the credit for success. Let them take it. When they feel successful, you will be successful. During a crisis, however, step up front. When a situation gets negative or if things are not going well, the manager needs to step forward and be very out front. Remember, too, that the council reacts differently as a group in public than they do in private, and you must adapt to this change.

Treat the community with respect.

Use a community process to build consensus on major issues before the issues reach the council agenda. Don't surprise the community, just as you don't surprise the council. When members of the community are surprised, they react negatively, and that negative feedback quickly gets to council. Good councilmembers with community roots will almost always hear things in the community about issues that you don't; be positive (not defensive) about this fact and use it as a kind of local "radar reconnaissance."

Figure out how to balance individual or neighborhood needs versus communitywide interests and council reactions.

Getting the larger community-wide issues addressed by the council in the face of activist individual interests can be difficult at best. This is a growing issue in many communities. A successful manager figures out how to do both. The motivated individual with time (who is usually a naysayer or opposed to something) can always win, especially in this world of electronic communications. The media seem to love this type of individual, and they seem to get the front-page headlines. As the manager, you will have to find ways to get the broader issues in front of the council and the community.

Get buy-in and community ownership on major issues before dropping something on the council dais for action.

Helping to manage the process of decision making is a new style for many managers. The community's desire to be more involved can't be ignored in this day and age, so it is up to managers to find successful and

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Strategies for building and maintaining this important management responsibility include seven ways to help councilmembers be more effective; new roles that elected officials are undertaking and why, and what elected officials can expect from the manager and staff.

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meaningful ways for the public to be involved. For the manager, it means stepping out of the comfortable box inside of city hall or county courthouse. You will have to get out into the community continually—with community meetings, meet and greets, neighborhood walks, living room meetings—but without overshadowing councilmembers. Many in our profession resist this, but I think this is the key to success for the future of our profession.

Be absolutely honest and of the highest integrity.

This advice always works; this is what the ICMA Code of Ethics is all about. Adhere to the code strictly, and it will pay off positively for you. Always take the high road. Be professional. The more public the issue is, the more important it is to be extremely professional. This is easily said but hard to do at times when you get passionate about some issues. Taking the high road gets difficult when you are personally attacked in public, but you will win in the end if you stay the professional course. Don't compromise your values or ethics. Confront issues early on or they will grow out of control. This can be hard to do, but your survival is at risk if you let an issue fester. This is what professional local government management is all about.

Lead. You have an organization full of managers to motivate, but you play the community leadership role in the broadest sense. Councils expect this leadership. Have regular one-on-one

meetings with councilmembers. Set aside as much time as you can. Establish a pattern early on that mutually works for your schedules. Also consider having retreats, work sessions, and issues-building sessions. Often it takes the manager's leadership to encourage these types of activities. This is critical to the trust building that leads to success.

Think greatness; constantly raise the bar.

If you have your own theme to help emphasize excellence and high performance (such as building a world-class community), it goes a long way to help staff and employees understand that goal. This kind of thinking appeals to many councils and helps them think about the larger, difficult, and more strategic issues in the community.

Insist on permission to take risks.

A formal, written employment agreement gives you as a manager permission to take risks and be entrepreneurial, which is the essence of the council-manager form of government. But you cannot risk your personal finances or family to do this. Get an understanding from the council that family special events come first. Being up front about this will avoid personal anger and frustration. Councils are usually very respectful of this if you bring it up early. **PM**

Gary O'Connell, ICMA-CM, is city manager, Charlottesville, Virginia (oconnell@charlottesville.org).