



WELDON COOPER
CENTER FOR PUBLIC SERVICE
University of Virginia

**“Navigating Effective Relationships with Your Elected Officials:
Peer Advice on Successful Council-Manager Partnerships**

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The founder of the University of Virginia, Thomas Jefferson, charged us to be devoted to “the practical affairs of public life.” This is still our mission today at the University’s Senior Executive Institute (SEI) for local government managers. We strive to make a difference in good government by supporting public executives working in communities with the council-manager form of government. The Senior Executive Institute is a unique learning community where city managers, county administrators and town managers share experiences, learn, and reach new levels in their personal development and professional skills. They join the nationwide SEI peer network.

One relationship skill that we focus on is “**How Local Government Managers Can Improve Their Relationships with Their Elected Officials.**” Our intent is twofold.

- ◆ Discover and share best practices as to what will make *you be more effective* as a local government manager.
- ◆ For you to effectively use your stewardship role *to help your elected officials be more effective* as policymakers for your community.



Essential Skills for The Local Government Manager Profession: You need to know your stuff technically. You need to be that ‘Jack of all trades.’ But you are far more than a technical expert. Technical know how and experience just gets you in the door. ***If you want to thrive and be the best in this profession, you need to excel in the art and craft of dealing with people.***

We are using the umbrella of “Emotional Intelligence Skills” to organize these insights. We focus on four skill domains: Self Awareness, Self Management, Social Awareness, and Relationship Skills. Performance research shows that Emotional Intelligence (or ‘EQ’ for short) explains 67% of star performers’ success across professions, for both business and government. The bottom-line business research shows that EQ skills account for as much as

80% to 90% of effectiveness in leadership positions (Daniel Goleman, *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, Bantam Books, 1998). The good news is that EQ skills can be developed across time, with enough insight, grit, commitment, support, and the patience to engage in personal growth and renewal. EQ skills are as old as civilization and mankind. Old-fashioned words for these EQ skills would cover character, wisdom, leadership, and judgment.

First, we begin with practitioners' comments about the very nature of the manager's role within the council-manager form of government. Second, we will cover practitioner comments using the following four EQ Domains (divided into 20 skills) as categories for everyone's comments. While many observations addressed several skills at once, similar comments have been divided and assigned to several skill categories. The participants' original words were kept with as little editing as possible.

ADVICE FROM YOUR PEERS - KNOW YOUR ROLE VIS A VIS YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS

- You “serve” the community, but never lose sight that if you don't serve your elected body well, you won't be around to serve the community.
- Don't ever forget who hired you and brought you to the dance. These people are collectively your boss. It is easy to get distracted by other people, new projects, aggravated citizens and single-issue lobbyists. Your most important relationship is with the council or board. Also, don't ever forget that you work for the council or board as a group and not for individual council or board members, regardless of how much you may enjoy working with an individual member or feel like you must please an aggressive individual on the council or board.
- Always remember that you work for the elected officials – not the opposite. And they, like the citizens, pay your salary.
- Your job is how you can help the elected officials make the best policies for your community.
- Respect Democracy – you were not elected.
- Remind yourself every day that no one elected you.
- Remember that “the people” sent the elected officials and the elected officials picked you to help. Help them connect to elements of the community that are not in their power base.
- Help them to think about the whole community, not just “my” district. Help them to understand that they are agents of democracy.
- Your job is to make five people (or how many members on your governing body) look good and accomplish good things. There is no limit to what can be accomplished if you don't care who gets credit.
- Give Council the public credit for the successes – step back, but you need to step up front in a crisis or disaster.
- Let the council and board take the credit for good outcomes and popular projects or programs, even if you feel you, or the staff, are primarily responsible. They are the ones who must get re-elected.

- The elected officials have goals and objectives that may or may not be in accordance with your own goals.
- Remember it is their city, and we, as city managers, are not always right. The elected officials have the right to be wrong.
- Be optimistic about the council-manager plan and your role in it.
- You are hired for what you know, but you may be asked to leave for who you are. Never take anything personally until you are told to take it personally.

Emotional Intelligence (EQ) Skills

<p>Self Awareness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional Self-Awareness • Accurate Self-Assessment • Self-Confidence 	<p>Social Awareness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy • Leveraging Diversity • Organizational and Social Awareness • Stewardship
<p>Self-Management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self Control • Trustworthiness • Conscientiousness • Adaptability • Achievement Drive • Initiative & optimism 	<p>Relationship Skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing Others • Leadership • Influence • Communication • Change Agent • Conflict Management • Networking, Building Bonds • Teamwork & Collaboration

SELF-AWARENESS SKILLS

EMOTIONAL SELF-AWARENESS

- Understanding and knowing yourself is extremely important. Know your natural tendencies and learn skills to handle those tendencies. Gain the knowledge that allows you to see yourself as others see you, and once you learn that, how do you like it? What will you do about it?
- Building effective elected relationships is an art that comes from painful, experiential learning. All of us see and live our lives through filters, and one filter is our experience.
- Never let your ego be bigger than theirs.
- Know your non-negotiables (before a ‘crisis’ occurs), take time for yourself regularly (‘sharpen the saw’), have realistic expectations, and realize that you are not in control, but you can be prepared.
- Listen to your inner voice and conscience – if you’re not confident about a particular subject, area, or person – explore why. When you identify why – act to strengthen and improve your position.
- You can do this job only if you take care of yourself, re-energize and let go.

- Have a spiritual side – Life is fascinating. Be in awe of its mystery. Revere all that you see that seems to be miraculous in life and nature and find ways to pause for reflection or worship. Your daily troubles will seem less significant.
- Be faithful to your values and to what others believe is valuable.
- We all are human and prone to imperfection – don't hold it against them if you don't want them to hold it against you.
- Remember that before you think they are a problem or have a problem, you are also part of why you think they have/are a problem.
- Always say to yourself, "What do 'They' see when they see me coming?"
- Remember how our minds work - that our memories and the emotions that go with them always guide our decisions. Know your inner nemesis.
- As neuroscience shows, "We are not "thinking machines" – we are "feeling machines that think."
- Have a healthy ego yourself, have empathy and understanding, and see that some elected officials, because they are a combination of good and bad qualities, may remind you of your own inner 'nemesis' from your past life experience.
- Be aware when you are holding on to feelings that you can let go of to be more conscious of your emotions.
- Be aware of how your personal life impacts your role as manager – focus on having a stable and supportive personal life.
- My family thinks I am important. Elected officials don't have to.
- Be aware your service is only for a moment in time.
- Have competent ignorance (seek to "know what I don't know"). Share the load. Be consistent with staff and Trustees. Keep options open and stay open minded to new options and methods. Look beyond the emotion.
- Passion gets things done – even misdirected passion is better than no passion at all.
- Read books written by good authors. Good authors write books with characters that are constantly exposing their emotional intelligence, both good and bad. Learn from these examples.

ACCURATE SELF-ASSESSMENT

- Manage the voice in your head telling you – "I know what's best" – trust that the community heart is in the right place and they will make the right decisions.
- This too shall pass! Ask yourself, "Is this issue as large as I am making it?"
- Remember you are not always right.
- You need to know and acknowledge to yourself what your views and perceptions are, then set them aside and listen to your board. Work with your board to align your goals.
- Know what motivates and energizes you, and concentrate your efforts in those areas. Delegate as much of the rest as possible.
- Know your blind spots.
- Know your strengths – and share them. Know your weaknesses and listen to the people that can support you in overcoming these weaknesses.
- Develop your strengths and don't let your negatives carry over.
- Spend a specific amount of time each day debriefing yourself on how the day went.

SELF CONFIDENCE

- Approach your job with a positive attitude. Elected officials are like the rest of us – they respond well (usually) when approached positively.
- Never let your ego be bigger than your elected officials' egos.
- Have humility yet be self confident, versus being arrogant and egotistical.
- Infuse humor and humility in your presentations as often as possible; never embarrass your elected officials.
- Have a high self esteem so you are not so bothered when you lose on issues.
- Exude confidence.
- Don't let them bring you down, and don't go negative yourself.
- Don't read newspaper articles and evaluations like love letters. Know yourself and what you are about.
- Don't think too much about what people think about you – most people may not think about you at all.
- Use humor as an effective tool to demonstrate brevity.
- Don't take things too seriously.
- Maintain a clear perspective and a sense of humor.

SELF-MANAGEMENT SKILLS

SELF CONTROL

- Strangle yourself before they do.
- Your 'microphone' is always on! Be aware of what you say and how you say it.
- Breathe in before you speak out. Be the same person to everyone. Don't start tough tasks at low energy periods.
- There is no substitute for knowing ahead your triggers or blind spots – this awareness will greatly help in managing yourself.
- Understand your trigger points. Take time to reflect, and be aware of and work on your weaknesses – constantly check on yourself through constant monitoring.
- With incivility, try to be patient and even tempered, because at the bottom of the nastiness is some legitimate issue. Realize that those folks aren't speaking for everyone, and don't take it personally.
- Choose your reaction carefully – remembering that you always have a choice in how you respond to external stimuli.
- When in opposition, don't say the first thing that comes rising up from your gut.
- Know your emotional limits and triggers. Pause and think before speaking or acting.
- Allow difficult comments and criticism to roll off your back.
- Don't over react when you are spoken to in a rude manner.
- Maintain your calm and keep focused on what will be the long-term impact of short-term decisions.
- It doesn't make sense to get emotional over issues that are out of your control. How you handle and respond to issues and statements is up to you. No one can make you feel a certain way.
- Make sure you stay healthy and as stress-free as possible so you can be a clean slate. Control your own emotions, but use them to help inform you and shape strategies.

- Don't react too quickly to adversity; avoid the first, natural inclination to be defensive. Take pause, reflect, and let your inner calm prevail over kneejerk reactions.
- Recognize that sometimes council and board statements are for public consumption. Do not be offended if such statements don't put the staff in the best light. It is probably not personal. However, continuing such statements is a sign that there is a problem that you need to address.
- Self control, self control, self control – the City is not your possession.
- Sail above it – it's not about me. Have a poker face at times.
- Keep it professional and don't relax too much.
- "This too shall pass" ...Keep your cool.
- Be slow to anger.
- Never let them see you sweat. Always prepare for meetings - then you won't sweat. Don't rely on your memory on important issues and take the time to write down important points.
- When your back is to the wall, be aware of all your surroundings and subject matter. Dot your "i's" and cross your "t's."
- Be a confidante to Council but not a buddy, often just listen and don't express your own views. Stay out, have no comment if they complain about each other.
- Be patient for achievement – as we say in Japan, "Sitting on a stone for three years."
- In dealing with work issues my life long approach has been to build a reputation of calm reliability as a manager. For example, I speak of Commission meetings as being "on stage." This reminds me, as well as our staff, to see the "theater" in the event and in the moment, and not take the strife and emotional conflict too seriously.
- Control your feelings, be thoughtful, and measure your actions and response carefully.
- Act on emotions – there is usually a legitimate reason for that emotion. However, in instances where the emotion is abnormally high, wait for some period of time before acting.

TRUSTWORTHINESS

- Stand up on principle -- Sit down on ego.
- Be absolutely honest and of the highest integrity.
- Be honest and never give away your integrity.
- Your WORD is the only thing we all can give regardless of our social or economic life status. Walk with Kings and Queens, but never lose your common touch or your sense of purpose. Say what you mean and live by what you say.
- Maintain your personal integrity and ethics. Do not be drawn into their battles between each other.
- Your work is your currency – don't go broke!
- Stay out of trouble. Live your personal life such that your actions never compromise your good standing with the governing body and community.
- Build trust with your governing body. While this is a two-way street, uphold your end even if the governing body does not. Trust is built by the following:
 - 1) Being honest and forthright
 - 2) Being correct with your facts and figures

3) Communicate with members as a group and at the same time. Do not curry favor with individuals on the governing body by giving them advance information.

4) Keep the governing body fully informed on local issues and don't let the governing body "hear it on the street" first.

- Don't break the trust that any elected official confides in you.
- Work on bringing the trust factor to the highest achievable level.
- Elected officials deserve the utmost respect from us.
- You need credibility with your community and staff before you have the trust of your elected officials.
- Take the "high road" – be professional – the more public the issue is, the more important to be extremely professional.
- Be guided by your integrity (ICMA ethics) and believe in the Council-Manager plan and the process.
- We should hold ourselves to a higher standard, be open and transparent, practice the Golden Rule of treating others the way you would want to be treated, provide honest answers and explain the 'whys' behind issues.
- Lead by example, have integrity, show emotions as a person, but connect without being too personal.
- Demonstrate trust and forthrightness yourself.
- You need to be able to look in the mirror and not be bothered by your actions.
- Do things for the right reasons to attain the proper results.
- "Do what you said you would or will do."
- Follow up promptly on the little things to build trust for the bigger issues.
- Portray professionalism without a personal agenda to gain trust.
- Don't believe that you or the elected officials are invincible.
- Never tell embarrassing stories about elected officials.

ACHIEVEMENT DRIVE

- Never sacrifice family, loved ones, or your basic values and principles for gain at the workplace.
- Success individually, success as Council group (at least the majority) leads to the success of the City Manager.
- Focus on helping them accomplish their goals, and help them be more effective; don't try to be their friend.
- If the council or board does not offer to perform an annual evaluation of your performance, ask them to do so, preferably using some type of written instrument. It is preferable to do so semi-annually. You need to know how your bosses collectively view your work performance, pointing out your strong and weak points. This procedure may save your job someday.
- Build and support a quality staff and organize for results. Celebrate and promote organizational achievements and special recognitions. Make the governing body proud of the staff and the accomplishments of their government. Encourage members to get to know and interact with staff but insist they operate in the "ask but don't task" mode when it comes to their interactions with staff.

- Provide workable alternatives to the elected body and make sure all options put forward by staff are good options. Continually monitor the organization's level of enthusiasm versus the public's tolerance level.

ADAPTABILITY

- Take risks, adapt, innovate and improvise, but never get out in front of them unless planned.
- Anticipate (lead) – you are in trouble if you're merely reacting.
- Are you comfortable with risk? If you have a proven track record for success, that gives you capital, if your bosses feel you have a good track record.
- Are you pioneering a new approach or advocating a proven approach? Elected officials will be asking - "Has anyone else done that?"
- The value of a formal, written agreement – severance – to give you as a City Manager permission to take risks (but not risk your personal finances or family) and to be entrepreneurial.
- Be open to alternatives and new ideas. Remember that you are not always right. Take a step, no take two steps back and observe.
- You will not always have the right answers and sometime you will fail, but if you have a good relationship with your governing body, they will probably forgive you. Pick yourself up and continue looking for the right answers.
- Be sensitive to the political environment. Sometimes your good ideas and initiatives need to wait. Timing is everything.
- 'Leave your baggage at the door' – over the years some issues have circled before the council three times, and you should view each issue with a fresh eye when it comes up again.
- Practice letting go of everything. Take the other person's viewpoint to better understand it.
- It is not good enough anymore to assume that not knowing is okay – you need to be proactive.
- Time management – make decisions and be prepared to change directions when necessary.
- Be honest and accessible, feel the pain of elected officials, and never let them be surprised by you. Be flexible and adaptive to overcome obstacles.
- Be flexible and be empathetic.

OPTIMISM AND INITIATIVE

- Explore and learn all you can. Show enthusiasm – It's very contagious. Be positive – everything has some good in it and when bad things happen, something always comes along that replaces the bad.
- I am too serious, many of you are too – we need to learn how to lighten up.
- Choose to be happy!
- In public, be positive and optimistic and happy. In private, be absolutely honest.
- Enjoy the moment in the context of the long term (you're paid to lead).

- Strive for a higher focus on core values, be optimistic, and be able to adapt to broad changes.
- Live your life with passion, but don't hurt others while being too passionate!
- Dealing with difficult elected officials can become an energy-draining event, and even one negative voice on your Council can impact the whole group, so one strategy is to focus on the positives.
- Try to remain positive, even in the face of crisis. See that the credit for good things goes to your elected officials.
- Smile – it helps most any situation to get better.
- Be positive in your private and public conversations regarding the council or board, or don't say anything. If you can't do this, it is time to move on.
- Your happiness is just as important as theirs.
- Be honest at all times. Have fun at all times.
- You must have a sense of humor. Don't be too serious about yourself.
- Be kind to yourself and non-judgmental and you are more likely to be kind and non-judgmental with others.

SOCIAL AWARENESS SKILLS

STEWARDSHIP

- Courage is the first great quality that guarantees others. Choose service over self-interest – great leaders are servants first. Let people see you being yourself. Don't pretend to be somebody else. You won't be good at it.
- Let them know that they are “the Boss.” Let the public know that the elected officials are “the Boss.”
- Respect the fact that they cared enough to run for elected office. Serving in local elected office is a great sacrifice, regardless of whether you agree with their politics or not.
- They have earned their position – treat them with respect!
- Treat them with respect at all times.
- Treat them with the highest level of respect in spite of when you feel they are not respectful to you or your staff.
- Be respectful of all members regardless of educational background; speak to inform, not to impress.
- Never, ever bad-mouth an elected official to another one or anyone else – even if the person you are talking to is taking the lead. Treat every citizen as if they could be your next elected officials.
- Always give your elected officials the credit.
- Be open, have values at your core that are inviolable. Give time – as much as it takes, and genuinely care about positions.
- Be sensitive to elected officials that they not feel that they are merely relegated to accepting staff work.
- Connect the dots between all stakeholders in the organization/community to build a culture of mutual respect and cooperation.

EMPATHY

- Council people are complex people with complex lives and stressors. Get to know about both and show you care.
- Council members are under enormous pressures from their constituents, even if it is only “perceived” on their part.
- Know the “personal interests” (city related) of each elected official – talk about it, talk directly about it.
- Get to know who the elected officials are – I mean really know them – what motivates them and why. Get to know them as people, not just as elected officials.
- You need to let them see you as a real person that is “for them.”
- Let them know that you too are vulnerable.
- Get agreement from Council that family special events come first
- You need to demonstrate acceptance and empathy.
- Use empathy and don’t presume that you know their motive.
- Empathize more often when questioning someone’s motive.
- Read your audience.
- Don’t be upset if Council members don’t immediately gravitate to logical conclusions. Council members may be coming from a more emotional perspective.
- If a member feels awkward about voicing a real concern, you can bring up the issue before Council instead, so that person does not feel embarrassed.
- Engage in debriefing – ‘group therapy’ of what happened after sessions.
- Accept and understand their need as elected officials to look good and to be liked.
- Make them look good, and give them all the credit. Flatter them and spoil them when you can.
- You need to care...but not that much that it consumes you!
- Each member is entitled to his/her opinion, use empathy and listening skills.
- Each individual elected official has different views. Think about the other’s position first.
- Be aware of similarities and dissimilarities among them.
- Listen carefully to what elected officials say, sometimes the way they really feel about an issue is “between the lines.”
- During one-on-one conversations, listen for the deeper meaning of “what makes the person tick.”
- Listen...In every office to the threads of love and joy and fear...and somehow you know that connecting those threads is what you are supposed to do.
- Listen! If the message is unclear, seek clarity. Differentiate between “static” and real messages.
- Be a good listener. Respond to requests and questions honestly. No favorites – all treated the same.
- Never, never, never take it personally -- until you are told that it is persona
- It is not personal! (Usually)
- Identify shared or mutual experiences which establish credibility and respect.
- Always take the opportunities to compliment elected officials when at social occasions, not only to them, but also to others that will eventually get back to them.
- Try never to let them be surprised – about anything.
- Never let them read it first in the newspapers.

- Get agreement from your Council that family special events come first.
- Build them into a team where the individuals respect but not necessarily agree with each other. Involve elected officials and management in community issues.

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SAVVY

- Helping your elected officials as a governing body to develop meaningful and positive relationships with their constituents will lead toward high performance by building relationships between the democratic process, the political process, and the organization.
- Good elected officials (at least those with community roots) will almost always hear things in the community about issues (or even city hall people issues) that you don't – be positive with what they pick up and use it as “radar reconnaissance,” rather than being defensive about how they heard it.
- Define expectations, become aware of their individual priorities, update frequently. Spend your political capital wisely.
- “Counting to Four” (Out of Seven) – on any day a majority have to want you to stay.
- Model citizenship with your own actions.
- Never get out ahead of your governing body generating support with the public for new initiatives. Don't press them in a corner. Find ways to make it their idea. Remember you are their chief advisor.
- Remember you are not the elected chief executive officer. You are the chief advisor and administrative agent of the governing body.
- Use your technical skills and expertise to assist in moving forward the underlying principles which motivate the decision makers.
- Manage expectations, do not put them in a position where they have to retreat. Deliver on your word. Avoid placing them in situations where they feel they need to blame.
- Agree in public, discuss in private. Know when to listen, and listen first. Don't blind side elected officials. Ask if you can discuss the topic privately.
- Expect that your elected body reacts differently as a group in public than what you see and hear in private.
- I consider my Number One Job is to make the elected officials look good. Every elected official runs for a reason. I try to get every elected official's goals met within the government structure. Trust does not come with the manager's job – it must be earned.
- Read the situation. Read the other person's emotions, and adjust your style to get the best results.
- Be a palm reader. Are your policymakers united or split on an issue, especially if there is a history of media characterization of dysfunction among elected officials. Hostile or civil climate? Is there infighting between the members? If so, if you spend more time with some, you will be seen by the others as plotting against them.
- Power shifts can happen quickly. So maintain positive relationships with all members of the Board. Reach out to members that operate outside conventions. Build strong relationships with the agencies you work with so that you can provide opportunities for your board.
- Remember that council and board members have to get elected. Learn to trust their instincts, even if you don't agree with them.

- Even the least talented elected officials may have better social skills than you have. Often they are experts in reading people and telling you what you want to hear – don't let them read you too easily, and do not be fooled.
- Think like a politician, but act like a manager.
- Look out for the politics, yet live with the politics.
- Don't politic with Council. If you inform one, you must inform all. No favorites. No socializing – it can be misunderstood by Council and others.
- Don't just assume elected officials are being sincere. Find the purpose behind their public actions and statements.
- The irate citizen on the phone can be your boss in the next election. Don't become their inspiration to run for office.
- Information is power – always pursue educational opportunities.

RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

DEVELOPING AND MENTORING

- Relationship building is the most important issue – if you don't do it well or at least make a very sincere effort, you will lose as city manager the opportunity to get to the big issues, or when the issues get tough, it will be harder going. So build relationships with them early on.
- Have a passion for building these Number One relationships. Elected officials are often better at relationships and connections than we are - they win and govern by personal connections.
- One on one meetings with elected officials are a must to build trust and to let them know you know a great deal about what you are talking about. These provide a great opportunity to educate elected officials.
- Constantly trying to improve the quality of life is hard, so help make it easier for your elected officials.
- You don't have to care about everything they care about, but care that they care.
- Never stop coaching them – it's your job! Help them to do their job.
- Council "building" is your job, whether they let you do it or not – recognize the value of good retreats, work sessions, issues building, etc.
- Get Council to agree ahead to what their operating roles will be for "how we will do things" – for example, interactions with developers.
- Invest time in them (away from the meetings). Stay flexible and open to changes in direction. Take note of and remember each one's "hot buttons." Process can be just as important as outcomes.
- Point out better ways for them to act in private, not in public.
- Coach them tactfully. Shame them to do the right thing privately.
- Always encourage them to "Do the right thing."
- Exercise patience when dealing with less experienced staff subordinates.
- Empower people you want to grow. Empower through listening to ideas, considering them, acting upon good ideas.
- Realize that education and training is important to "part time" folks in elected positions. Communicate regularly, have teamwork exercises and keep the focus on the big picture.

LEADERSHIP AND SHARED VISION

- We need to be helping councils find their meaningful leadership work.
- Get your elected officials to focus on out (outside the organization) and up (on goals and vision).
- Strive for the higher purpose (focus on the community). Focus on community goals (ideas that will build community).
- Ensure that your elected council or board has a particular area or sense of ownership.
- Have a clear vision and collaborative decision-making. Be a persuasive catalyst for change, developing a culture of leadership.
- I spend the better half of my day helping elected officials be successful in moving their community forward, and that is time well spent. We are the vehicles for making them succeed. Elected officials have a much different attitude now – that they are ‘experts’ on election night versus in the past where newly elected members would see themselves as the rookies on the back bench, watching and learning from the more experienced members.
- Provide professional advice that is relevant, timely, reliable and dependable. Keep them informed and help them become successful as a group. They get the credit and make sure they get first dibs to speak to the press.
- Honor the direction of the corporate body. Your actions should demonstrate that you are carrying out the work of the corporate body and not any one of its members.
- Listen to what is important to individual Council members and focus your attention on them. Learn how to weave their desires into the organization’s goals and priorities.
- Lead – you have an organization full of managers to motivate – but you play the community leadership role in the broadest sense.
- Exercise flexibility in which leadership style you use at any particular time (visionary, democratic, affiliative, coaching).
- Be disciplined in your follow up on Council issues, track them to completion; have a system that works to assure closure.
- Pay attention to Council details – this can build trust that leads to bigger, more strategic issues.
- Ask yourself – is my proposal in the best interest of the City/County?
- Be willing to accept other people’s positive agendas and not just push one’s own agenda.
- Never lose sight of the bigger goal.
- Plan each meeting with elected officials.
- Especially in a diverse community – understand social equity.

INFLUENCE - PERSUASION

- With part time elected officials and full time staff, your elected officials are your Number One relationship, but you are not their Number One relationship.
- Don’t assume that everyone you meet wants a relationship with you. You have to make buildings relationships with them a Number One priority.

- Realize that elected officials have more important relationships in public life than with you. And having an elected official whose Number One relationship in public life is you would be far worse.
- Do your homework. Know whom you are dealing with and where they have come from.
- Educating new councilors or board members:
 - this is a critically important program
 - chance to answer negative comments heard during the election
 - help new members to get started
 - once a week for 4 to 5 weeks
 - this gives managers a chance to privately find out what is important to new member
- Work at getting them to like you personally. All life is about relationships.
- It's a big surprise to me when someone I don't value highly makes an insightful observation about me. This makes me re-evaluate a lot of other relationships and helps me be less judgmental.
- Use your best manners as Mom taught you – with every official and citizen.
- No surprises, especially in public meetings. For example, your elected officials should never hear about cost overruns for the first time in public session. Never embarrass your elected officials.
- Be more than just business minded - focus on relationships.
- Behind the scenes works better than being very out front.
- Every relationship involves more than one influence and can be good or bad based on your response. Providing positive influence in your relationships is more likely to result in positive outcomes.

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

- Communication is key to keeping Council informed and involved. Communicate until it hurts!
- Communicate regularly, frequently, just-in-time for their needs, with no surprises. For example brief them every Friday.
- It is better to communicate too much than not enough. Good communication is the lifeblood of the council/board-manager relationship.
- Meet with members individually before each formal council or board meeting. At that time, discuss the agenda for the meeting and your views or concerns about items on the agenda. This is a good time to do some lobbying and to determine how the member feels about individual issues or needs more information. Keep all members informed about any new information you give to any individual member. Be sure you tell each member the same thing with the same emphasis, be it enthusiasm or concern.
- Make sure the staff work for the council or board is well done, accurate and current. Make it as concise and simple as possible. Always review in advance any staff work performed by others. Do it well in advance of the meeting.
- In a council or board meeting, if you don't know the answer to a question, say so. Don't make up an answer or give a partially true answer in order to look good. Tell them you will get the correct answer the next day and let everyone know.
- First float concepts without details to see if there is interest among members and who supports the issue.
- Manage the data flow, especially the tone that is conveyed.

- Help Council to understand without preaching.
- Tell them you will try to make it work, or get more data, don't say it's a lousy idea (even if you may think so).
- Build a credibility connection by regularly using many communication sources and adopt a team standard of 'sweating the details.'
- Have clarity - you must make very clear what is at stake. Find a common passion and hook to it. Use "I feel" values language versus technical "I think" language when it is called for.
- When values are at stake and emotions are appropriate, use "feel" words versus "I think" language.
- When communicating about an issue or problem, articulate clearly but with respect.
- Staff fire managers, councils don't. Don't fake it until you make it. Don't take it personally until you are told it's personal.
- Communication is a two-way street - you have to listen before you talk.
- Listen first, be patient. Consider looking at the long-term business, not an incident at a time.
- Listen, listen, listen to all parts of the community to where the fire will come from.
- Exercise good listening and non-verbal skills.
- Pay attention to your body language. Be careful about what you are saying non-verbally.
- When a citizen speaks whom you do not like, don't turn your back on that person – this conveys disrespect.
- Don't tell stories or relate personal information unless you get permission. No gossip about them or about staff.
- Remember that words can be weapons, once they are said, you can't get them back.
- What you say – good or bad – will come back to you and reflect on you.
- Use direct, specific, non-threatening communication. Respond - don't react.
- Listen well. Respond quickly. Ask if you can help further. Be last in line, first in the theater.
- Tell them the same thing and don't play one against the other.
- Communicate as much as each elected official needs to be successful.
- When you receive a request for information, unless it is inconsequential, share it with the rest of the commission, but without attribution. No one wants to be identified as asking a stupid question (I learned this the hard way 20 years ago).
- Always be prepared to answer "not so bright" questions at public meetings from elected officials, so that you don't look stupid and the elected official looks "great."
- Keep your cool when elected officials imply that you don't know what you are talking about. Be prepared and anticipate "goofy" questions and issues before meetings with public officials.
- Observe the elected officials' packet of material when they enter the public meeting room. If the packets are still unopened, be prepared to answer a lot of questions.
- For years I went home from Commission meetings focused on something that went wrong until I learned to spend a few minutes after each meeting reviewing the things that could have gone wrong and didn't. A key role of a city manager is to be an editor or even a censor of the information flowing to the council. A manager will have the more focused attention from elected officials during the window between an election day and swearing in than in any time during their service together.

- Decline of traditional media and trend for people making just flat-out false statements without any fact checking such as newspaper blogs.
- With emails, be careful to not falsely interpret or misconstrue the tone and intent in the email.

CHANGE AGENT

- The ART of our profession is knowing when to get in front of your governing board, when to get behind them, when to step out front and when to disappear – kind of like Kenney Rogers –“ the Gambler knows when to hold them, when to fold them.”
- Give your elected body policy alternatives that are thoughtful, well researched, and doable, yet give a good strong recommendation that they can act upon.
- Distinguish between “idea-birthers’ with a change platform and ‘newbies’ with their own varying agendas, and realize that everyone wants to leave their mark.
- Long term, substantive change is that which is embraced rather than forced - it manifests progress that is woven into the community’s fabric.
- Never “fall in love” with any initiative or project or goal so much that you will do anything to achieve it. Build relationships throughout your organization and throughout the community so you can keep a finger on the pulse.
- Use community process to build consensus on major issues, prior to getting issues on the Council agenda – don’t surprise the community, much less the Council.
- Have a strong vetting capacity within your administration, when advocating a major change, a game changer, be sure that you are able to fully vet it first.
- Timing is everything, don’t focus on controversial issues three months before or after elections.
- One must balance a respect for local tradition with the need for thoughtful change, pursuing low hanging fruit changes.
- Often Council can get ‘stuck’ at the pothole levels – so use techniques to think big picture or at least do both at once.
- The value of a formal, written agreement – severance – to give you as the city manager permission to take risks (but not risk your personal finances or family) and to be entrepreneurial.
- As nonprofessionals, elected officials are unlikely to give us strict priorities and it is likely that they will change as they go along.
- Take their position all the way, so both you and they can see what the outcome will be, don’t resist their position. They may change their mind about the path they are on.
- Don’t keep reminding them of past positions on which they have changed their minds.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

- Never compete with your elected officials, you are not running for office. Avoid public challenges and do not box them or you into a corner. Never make them feel “staff” is the competition.
- Never challenge your elected officials publicly.
- Lose graciously, win graciously, and try not to always make it about winning or losing.
- It is okay to lose on an issue or program, it is not we versus them, it is us.

- Don't keep score - leave it in the chambers.
- Understand elected officials' bias and direction, but don't take sides. Listen as a confidante, but don't become buddies. Try to give knowledge when appropriate and try to be aware of the bigger picture.
- Stay out of individual Council disagreements or "politics," you will lose at that game!
- Stay out of the middle of Council personality conflicts by staying positive.
- Many Council conflicts are about one person in the relationship not feeling valued.
- Give your staff face time with council and the public in a positive and supportive way. Don't "throw them to the wolves."
- Don't make excuses for poor behavior, tardiness, inadequate or incorrect information, or poor staff work. Face the issue and say you will correct it.
- Keep your cool in a public meeting when council or board members heatedly argue about an issue or situation. Do not get drawn into the argument itself or try to play sides.
- Do not try to outguess your governing body; they will likely win in the end. And that will make you the loser.
- When there are ideological splits on the governing body, stay out of the fray and play it down the middle.
- Boards and councils will, from time to time, make mistakes. Be careful about pointing this out to them for they will eventually probably see it for themselves. We all make mistakes.
- Individually and sometimes collectively your governing body may not see the world as you do, but that is okay. If this gets to be a big and ongoing issue and you have trouble dealing with it, it may be time to resign and find another job.
- Don't avoid conflict, don't beat around the bush, be direct and clear.
- Don't burn bridges – watch the words you say.
- With incivility, recognize that it is easier to be ugly when not communicating face to face or back and forth.

NETWORKING AND BUILDING BONDS

- Have regular one-on-one meetings with your elected officials – as much time as you can get.
- The mayor plays a special role (even if council appointed), recognize that and build on it – it can mean a special, very trusting relationship for the city manager.
- Inquire about their family situation in a polite, non-nosy way to see what they tell you. It can tell you a lot about what else will be important in their life.
- Commissioners seldom get praise at Commission meetings, so after the meeting, try to find some word of praise or congratulations to say to each elected official.
- When the Board socializes together, you should be there. Once in a while, take a commissioner to lunch.
- Create "quiet time" with yourself (daily) and elected officials whenever possible.
- Help them with their personal problems if you can without "crossing the line."
- Know elected officials historical connections to the community and past issues of importance. Know who is related to each other.
- Know the elected officials' background and their burning issues.

- Get personally out in the community every day – be highly visible (but don't overshadow the Council doing, e.g. at community meetings, meet and greets, neighborhood walks, living room meetings).
- You will always be viewed as an outsider, no matter how long you have been manager.

TEAMWORK AND COLLABORATION

- Be a facilitator to getting things done. When tasks are accomplished, it is done in such a way that the Council says - “look what we have done ourselves.”
- Develop a working team with a common mission understood by all. Help them feel accomplished.
- Explain the importance of working together with your elected officials. To accept another person's idea - even when we might not agree – shows respect.
- Treat them all equally and fairly.
- Define “roles” as soon as you can.
- Don't play games with them. Encourage them to talk with staff and expect feedback from staff.
- You need to break down elected leadership/staff barriers and criticism.
- Reinforce them when they are right. Help staff to understand issues from the point of the elected officials.
- Your relationship with elected officials, as a group and individually, is so critical to your effectiveness and their effectiveness. Practice democratic values and principles, and be accountable.
- Build trust so that both you, as the manager, and your elected officials together can be “Delivering on Democracy” for your community.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: A REAL PARTNERSHIP FOR A COMMON CAUSE

My personal life motto is “Delivering on Democracy.” This is a motto that may fit you as well. Delivering on Democracy means a ‘voluntary spirit’ and a devotion to public service. It means appreciating both representative government and professional public administration. I believe wholeheartedly in the Council-Manager form of government. The promise of democracy can be realized every day by local government actions. I salute and appreciate the noble work done by local elected officials - citizens who step up to the plate and generously give their time and talents to their beloved communities. And I admire the hundreds of local government managers I have been privileged to know – true professionals with an abiding fire in the belly to make a difference in the communities that call them to be stewards.

In my view, our common mission is about transforming ourselves and our relationships to better serve our communities. This change happens through effective shared leadership and by practicing Democracy's values and principles every day. I hope these “EQ Skills and best practices” from your peers have sparked your learning and resolve.

Thank you for sharing your thoughts,
Deborah Roberts



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