
Managers and Convention Facility Directors— The Modus Operandi

J. Rolando Bono and Joe Madison

Any discussion of local government's management of public-assembly facilities forces facility managers to define what they are talking about. Consider the variety of facilities that are involved: convention centers, convention authorities, special events arenas, market places, sports facilities, etc. It is an understatement to say that there is a great variety of public assembly facilities in this country.

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But though there are variations in names, organizational structures, and management reporting relationships, the challenge for managing these numerous facilities is the same. For each individual involved in facility management, the challenge is to manage a cost-effective, functional, and reliable facility or facilities. The working relationship between the local government manager or chief administrative official and the director of the facility determines whether that challenge is met.

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San Antonio's Organizational Structure

In the city of San Antonio, the departments that operate and promote public assembly facilities, including Convention Facilities, Market Square, Parks and Recreation, Arts and Cultural Affairs, Human Resources and Services, and Convention and Visitors' Bureau, are placed under the jurisdiction of the assistant city manager for human and cultural services. Under one assistant manager, communication, cooperation, coordination, and the exchange of information among like organization functions are facilitated. This reporting relationship provides for continuity of effort, good working relationships, and easy resolution of conflicts that might arise. The importance of securing this relationship is evident in the fact that the convention and tourism industry is second only to the military in economic impact, pumping over \$200 million into the city annually.

The Convention and Visitors' Bureau, which operates with bed-tax revenues but is a full fledged city department, is responsible for the promotion of the city as an attractive place for conventions, meetings, and vacations. The Convention Facility Department manages and operates the municipally owned convention center and municipal auditorium. Primary activities held at the facilities include conventions, trade shows, professional basketball, and public-oriented functions such as entertainment, consumer exhibits, and church, civic, and political meetings. The department contracts with groups and individuals wishing to lease the facilities in accor-

dance with regulations established by the city council.

Understandably then, the convention center plays a vital role in the recreational, entertainment, and cultural life of the city. Coordination between the marketing and operating functions is critical. Our primary objective is to maintain and strengthen San Antonio's position as one of the top 10 convention destinations.

With population growth and physical expansion, the city has assumed responsibilities and obligations to provide needed public facilities and services. In 1986, the city completed a \$32 million expansion that added 207,000 square feet to the convention center. Last January, voters approved a five-year, 1/2-cent increase in the sales tax, raising the tax from 7 1/2 percent to 8 percent to pay for the planning and construction of a \$160 million, 65,000 seat multipurpose facility.

A Compatible Relationship

Because many convention facilities compete for business, it is imperative that a good working relationship develop between the manager and department head. From our experiences and observations, a clear understanding of what is expected of the department head and the manager (in the relationship) can make it easier to work together.

What follows is a generalization of some of the important points to remember in establishing, maintaining, and fostering this relationship. This is not an exhaustive list. Likewise, the points made are not necessarily listed in order of importance.

- Acknowledge that the department head runs the department and that the manager oversees its functioning.
- Promote accessibility, availability, and candid discussions.
- Define the mission of the department clearly so that it is understood by all parties.
- Recognize when the department is not organized or equipped to carry out the mission set forth.
- Stress the importance of dealing with realistic, attainable goals and results.
- Define the limits of authority and responsibility clearly as to what, where, when, how, and why each is to perform (overstepping the bounds of authority is a sure route to conflict).
- Avoid misunderstandings and conflicts between departments (particularly between those that market the facilities and those that operate the facilities).

- Keep one another informed of significant developments, opportunities, and problems.
- Show mutual respect for each other's skills and respective roles within the organization.

From the Manager's Perspective

The most that a manager can provide to the department head is diligent support for needed resources. It is not enough to schedule meetings to deal with issues of coordination, to develop a neat organization chart, to establish reporting protocols, or to develop long-range plans. Managers must have a sense of responsibility to the department's mission.

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It is unlikely that resources will be adequate to accomplish all desirable goals. In most instances, department heads are provided with limited resources and are expected to accomplish impossible goals. It is no trick for a department head to do a good job with an abundance of manpower, equipment, and other resources. In practice, the major criteria by which a manager should judge the performance of a department head is how well that individual achieves desired or assigned goals with the resources available.

Consequently, the manager's chief role is to remove the sources of frustration and spell out clearly all personnel and budgetary support available. Critical or unpopular management decisions should be presented along with the rationale that was taken into consideration in the executive decision-making process. When something goes wrong, the attitude that the manager takes toward those setbacks has a great deal to do with how well a department head copes with them and what happens to the working relationship.

From the Department Head's Perspective

If you are going to have a self-initiated program, expect certain requirements and certain prerequisites. By far the most important is the tremendous backing needed from top administrators of the local government. Because so many local governments recognize

the opportunity for economic growth through investment in public facility management, today's facility managers and department heads need to cultivate the market with an entrepreneurial spirit.

In asking the manager to trust and support the director's recommendations and requests—be it the need for increased budgets, additional personnel, facility expansion and improvement, equipment procurement, etc.—the department head must be willing to reciprocate by opening up the department. Simply put, in return for the manager's active support and lobbying (particularly during the annual budget process), the department head is obliged never to permit the manager to be caught unprepared or to be surprised. It is the department head's obligation to anticipate future development and to initiate the necessary planning.

Given the wide variety of responsibilities the manager may have, it is incumbent on the department head to prepare and submit

periodic reports on the activities of the department. These reports keep the manager informed of the status of projects and the opportunities ahead. To remain competitive for convention and trade shows, a local government must remain in constant change through the improvement of its public facilities. This change is facilitated by the manager.

Teamwork Pays

By working as a team, the manager and department head combine their knowledge, abilities, and know-how to meet the challenge of fulfilling the community's needs and the council's expectations. It is the attitude and approach used by the key parties that determine the success of the relationship. Loyalty can be built and maintained only through the investment of one's own time in constant communication. **PM**