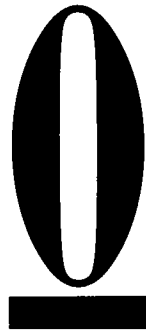


# What Councils Want from Managers ... But Do Not Tell Them



ften before an election, elected officials have formed opinions and beliefs about managers and their staffs. Based on their attitudes about what government ought to do, elected officials may harbor perceptions that make working relationships difficult.

This article, based on personal research and experience, attempts to shed candid light on concerns and beliefs often held by the governing body (referred to as the council here) that interfere with the development of trust and meaningful partnerships in governing.

As in any relationship, trust must be a resource from which cooperation may be derived. The following are seven unspoken assumptions that councils do not tell their managers.

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**Seven**

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**Unspoken**

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**Council**

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**Assumptions**

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**R. William Mathis**

**#1 Managers hide money.**

**Theme.** Councilmembers generally believe that managers stash money away for various reasons. Rationalizations and tolerance for this activity seem to vary with how important the money issue is to that councilmember. Council wants to know how much discretionary money really is available.

**Comments by council.**

- "The finances of our city are so complex [that they are] not easily explainable to a nonfinancial person."
- "It's not really that he hides money; it's just not in plain

sight. He's protecting us."

- "My city manager would not purposely hide money, some is just less visible."
- "The complexity of city budgets requires the various pockets and reserves. Why? So we won't all want our own program and will share more!"
- "My major job is to uncover where staff hides the money. Auditor role, or mole digging around."
- "Managers think they are Robin Hoods who are in a noble cause to rescue the funds from dishonest or bungling elected officials."
- "Every time I want money, I feel I have to go to Mother for permission."
- "What really upsets me is that he squirrels the money away without my agreement, then encourages me to spend what I don't understand."
- "My city manager does not mean to

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be dishonest. He keeps saying it's all in the budget document. Dishonesty of that kind is a public thing, but it's not really lying."

**Discussion.** Managers are not believed about money. It has become commonplace to talk in circular or vernacular terms of which only insiders understand the meaning. This practice may continue because of the belief that councils are nonfinancial or budget-ignorant. Some budgeters feel that public finance is so complex that the average person lacks the background to understand it, so they make it "staff-friendly." Clearly, the pervading feeling is that managers do not want to fund a certain program, so they hide the money.

The perceived practice of hiding money is taken by council crusaders as an excuse to "expose" the practice,

whether it exists or not, simply because councilmembers believe that it does.

**#2 Most managers have their own agendas.**

**Theme.** Most councils assume that their managers have personal agendas that get played out over time. Where a council is divided or highly political, the council perceives the manager as putting forth his or her own agendas, thereby taking unfair advantage of the council's dilemmas.

**Comments by council.**

- "Why is the funding path so much easier when the manager agrees with me? Because it's his agenda."
- "If you watch who on the council a manager likes and socializes with, you can figure out [who has] similar agendas."
- "Our manager can get what she wants; it's just a matter of framing. She has a whole studio of frames."
- "Our manager is so controlling, manipulative."
- "His agenda is to keep everyone employed. Mine is to reduce government! It's why a strong mayor form of government is becoming popular."
- "Managers are preoccupied with staying in charge of us, rather than listening to our ideas."
- "My manager's agenda is zero. He passes everything to us and moves only when directed. His agenda is clear—a nice guy."
- "A manager is employed to carry out my agenda because I had the largest voter count. That vote counts, big-time."
- "Our manager should use his head. The agenda this election will change, so he'd better get on board where we are."
- "The mayor and manager are buddies. Clearly, favoritism is injected

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- into all their proposals."
- "Friendship has no place in politics. It upsets the manager-council agenda, but I can't say it. I'll let him know in other ways."
- "My manager's agenda is control; mine is service to the needy."
- "Our manager is so smart, he can make a recommendation for something he's really against and win."
- "Because of my opposition and outspokenness, I often receive less information as my punishment from the manager. My time will come."

**Discussion.** Many councils believe that managers manipulate agendas and council perceptions—for good purposes and for personal reasons. They fear that managers can redirect or stop major council agendas. Councilmembers claim that managers have unspoken objectives and can lobby without responsibility for clarity and forthrightness.

A manager's becoming friendly or socializing is seen as a mixed problem by councilmembers. They fear that fraternizing with the council changes the balance of the "family." The picture of the manager is that of a control-oriented individual who often expresses equal treatment but does not always live by this philosophy.

**#3 Councils do not acknowledge personality conflicts as issues that affect their work with the manager.**

**Theme.** Councils do not generally acknowledge conflicts, thus causing a dysfunctional relationship with the manager. The conflicts are generally framed as "issues" or "philosophical differences."

**Fact.** A majority of manager firings may result from council-manager personal conflicts involving hurt feelings, grudges, misunderstandings, or semantic differences.

**Comments by council.**

- "If a problem does exist, the manager needs to change. I'm elected for my view and approach!"
- "Personality differences have no place in the public arena. I can work fairly with anyone!"
- "Personality conflicts are about power. I have it; he needs to follow. No conflict here!"
- "I think the ability to handle or resolve personal conflicts shouldn't occupy any space on the taxpayer's agenda. The manager should simply handle it. It's his or her job."
- "We must learn to overlook personal conflicts. This relationship between managers and council is professional, not personal."
- "Personal issues are important to work out, but the public doesn't want or care to see us spend time working them out. The manager should work [them] out behind the scenes with a consultant."
- "If the council and manager have a clear strategic plan, few personal conflicts should arise."
- "Councils and managers ought to meet at least twice yearly for goal and conflict resolution."
- "Denials of conflicts among coun-

councilmembers is our biggest problem. Therefore, the manager is at risk if these conflicts are avoided.”

- “I see interpersonal conflict as helping my agenda since I’m a minority.”
- “If conflicts get uncomfortable between councilmembers or manager and council, the best solution is termination.”
- “I have no obligation to work with anyone I didn’t elect or hire. Common sense should prevail.”

**Discussion.** Denial is a major mechanism at work on many councils. On the one hand, councillors want a professional relationship; on the other hand, they want to be personally comfortable. To some, admitting conflicts appears akin to admitting a weakness or fatal flaw. When denial gets out of control, the result often is unconscious or bizarre actions taken against other councilmembers or the manager.

Assignment of responsibility for council personality conflicts is mostly a doublebind or a lose-lose proposition. Councils express little enthusiasm for dealing with personal conflicts and assign this task to the manager. Resolution of conflicts and prevention should become regular parts of annual retreats and discussions.

## #4 I really want to choose my own manager.

**Theme.** Trust will be more easily given if the council as a whole selects its own manager. Commitment of new members to a current manager can not be expected to be solid unless some buy-in is made by the whole council.

Many election platforms have “Change the manager” or “Change the administration” as focal issues. This unsettled attitude must be closely examined as budgets shrink and administrators come under scrutiny.

## The greatest fear

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manager.

### Comments by council.

- “I was elected to have my approach put into action. The manager must recognize and trust this new direction.”
- “I would definitely need to hire my own manager. As mayor, I deserve that privilege.”
- “Secretly, most councilmembers feel at times [that] they could manage the local government better than the manager. This [seems] particularly true when [they allow] poor performance by certain department heads.”
- “In politics, trust is always changing. I think managers should understand it’s not personal.”
- “The manager I voted to fire was a great manager, but not for this new council. I wanted to get the total commitment of the manager with my new colleagues. That’s all, really.”
- “Managers shouldn’t stay too long because they’ll gain more power and influence than the elected council. Besides, some of our council aren’t too swift.”

- “Managers shouldn’t have any more sense of security in their job than we do as council. It’s a dynamic balance that makes us work.”
- “My programs didn’t get through; I wasn’t able to buck the system. The only power remaining was to facilitate a change in manager.”

**Discussion.** Most councilmembers want to take part in selecting their managers. Some legislators have a strong need to do the managing themselves, and the next best solution is to do the hiring. New members generally want to place their own approval on the manager, and developing that strategy is essential. Trust in the manager generally appears transient in hard economic times. The greatest fear that new councilmembers have is that of manipulation or control by the manager.”

## #5 It is a real pain to evaluate the manager. We often have to look at ourselves.

**Theme.** Councils do not enjoy or often complete thoughtful, clear evaluations of their managers. The best managers require that council conduct a professional and thorough evaluation. Councillors need guidance and standards to take them through the evaluation process.

### Comments by council.

- “Our evaluations are shams. If we [were] honest, retribution would be instantaneous.”
- “Evaluations reveal how much we operate in a vacuum, without a plan, and from crisis to crisis. [Evaluations are] necessary every couple of years.”
- “I’m uncomfortable doing it and often can’t remember what was done during the year or what evaluation was made last year.”

- “Evaluations are best done quickly and after everyone is tired, so that they will tell the truth or keep quiet to get the meeting over.”
- “Evaluations always bring up salary, which is even more uncomfortable than the performance evaluation itself. [Managers should] just take what staff gets.”
- “We all know how he’s doing. If there is a problem, we can talk.”
- “I think our managers should provide us [with] objective options so that the process works comfortably and is a part of our contract with the manager.”
- “There ought to be a city ordinance requiring in-depth evaluations and goals for clerks, managers, and attorneys—in fact, all appointees of council.”
- “I don’t like [evaluations]. My colleagues are too nice [and] don’t

tell it straight.”

- “Evaluation should be the foundation for the manager-council trust relationship. Maybe that explains why we don’t do it.”

**Discussion.** Many manager evaluations are not conducted because of lack of experience in a potentially confrontational and personal process. Sometimes, evaluation is not conducted because the council lacks goals and objectives for themselves or the manager. The evaluation process is seen as difficult, so it is easy to procrastinate or slide by it. But the facilitated evaluation process provides an excellent mechanism for straight talk, a review of goals and assignments, and a chance for personal agendas to surface.

Evaluations should reflect the whole year, not just last month or the

latest issues. A whole range of responsibilities needs evaluation and prioritization for the manager. Honest and candid evaluations create a trust basis, and complete evaluations can assure improved communications of personal agendas, promises, and agreements.

**#6 It is the manager's job to present issues so that I do not lose face.**

**Theme.** Some dynamic issues (raising taxes or cutting services) are seen as lose-lose propositions for councilmembers, with no good options. Councilmembers expect managers to position some of those items as “no-choice decisions.” The basis

for this desire is the need to avoid antagonism or rejection by voter supporters and friends. A councilmember's loss of face will never be forgotten if it is seen as avoidable.

#### Comments by council.

- "My manager is hired to take the heat from the public. It's important that we are left in a good place with citizens."
- "Our job is already impossible. There's a limit to how much blame we can stand from the public."
- "The emotional tone last night was so tense. [The manager] could have positioned our solution so that members weren't fighting the crowd."
- "I never worry about tough decisions or losing face. That's why I ran for council. But that staff better explain it right."
- "That vote makes me look like I hate staff. I feel discredited when I've actually been their supporter."
- "Managers have all day to position issues, work with staff, and prevent confrontations. This is when I start thinking [about] change."
- "If the manager differs in opinion during a meeting, he needs to share his opinions carefully. It's embarrassing enough working with the present cast on the council."

**Discussion.** Many councilmembers are not prepared to be up front on

some issues and are intimidated by the consequences of some votes. Humiliation can be perceived, manufactured, or imagined. In the public fishbowl, the voters have a deadly memory for the manager. While positioning is important, candid discussions in public can easily cause the thin-skinned to feel assaulted.

The expectation of the manager's responsibility to position issues is often realistic, once the discussion or fireworks have begun. Mayors and managers should have their plans for coordination and strategy prepared for this assumption.

## #7 It is the manager's job to handle maverick councilmembers.

**Theme.** Often, controversial or maverick thinkers lead councils into discussions, confrontations, or conflicts that seem unproductive, subverting the team effort and rendering the decision-making process dysfunctional. Many councils wish the manager would take those mavericks out behind the woodshed for a talk.

#### Comments by council.

- "The hypocrisy and dishonesty of our colleague keeps this council in a state of dysfunction and rumors.

It's all to try to control all of us with one vote. We can't do anything. We agree: it's the manager's problem.

- "The manager should keep us informed of the 'the turkey's' plans. We don't like surprises."
- "Our personal differences among councilpersons simply means that the manager has to manage behind the scenes. I expect him to."
- (maverick:) "I see the manager as part of this goofy collection of self-serving politicians. He will not control me the way he does the others."
- (maverick:) "[Because I'm] the only independent thinker and voter on this council, the manager should recognize my unique role."
- "That's why the manager is paid top dollar."

**Discussion.** Conflict-avoiding councils often can be manipulated or intimidated by maverick or outspoken members. The role of disciplinarian or "parent" often is assigned to the manager to ease the atmosphere. Often, however, council dysfunction can not be managed by managers, and the expectation may result in negative, no-win assignments or requests. **DM**

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