

Council-Manager Relations At the Crossroads

Victor DeSantis

Local government managers depend upon the strength of many relationships in fulfilling their responsibilities. None is more important, however, than the relationship of a manager and his or her council. Council-manager relationships are crucial in determining not only a manager's effectiveness in carrying out day-to-day duties but also how good a council is at making decisions and guiding the community.

To continue to be effective administrators as we head into the next millennium and approach the second century of professional management, managers are naturally concerned with identifying the patterns of council-manager relations and learning how these relationships can be enhanced. In 1992, ICMA's Council-Manager Plan Task Force was charged with assessing the current status of council-manager government, developing strategies for promoting citizen enthusiasm for council-manager government, and recommending ways in which ICMA and state associations can strengthen the partnership between elected officials and appointed managers.

For more than 80 years now, the council-manager form has successfully adapted to changing societal circumstances. Because these changes are dynamic and involve the core values of the council-manager plan, professional managers and the form of government itself must also keep evolving. In



years past, roles were more sharply defined throughout society, and in local government, the council and the manager “knew their places.” As times have changed, so have the relationships between elected officials and managers. As pointed out by David Mora, chair of the task force and longtime manager, “Managers have come to the realization that relationships are changing and that the original or traditional form may not always be as effective under all community circumstances.”

The individual players in the system also have evolved. Councilmembers are better educated and more diverse, and managers are spending more time cultivating relationships with them. More than ever before, councilmembers are being asked to deal with value-laden issues, and it is left to managers to help frame the issues by distilling complex information and clarifying the various perspectives and options. For managers, this changing environment can mean greater tension in the council-manager relationship.

Fortunately, managers across the United States have generally reported a high level of support from their councils. In a research report from the early 1990s, almost 40 percent of city and county managers responding to an ICMA survey reported that they had highly supportive councils. The fact that fewer than 2 percent of managers reported “no support” from their councils may reflect a generally well-functioning system in which managers and councils that are no longer working well together will, after a period of adjustment, end their relationships. The fact that the annual data on managers reveal few “firings” is a testament to most managers’ ability either to reconnect with their councils or to recognize their situation and seek other employment.

Interaction with the Council

To highlight the current state of the profession, three areas of council-manager

Survey Conducted by the ICMA Council-Manager Plan Task Force

In the spring of 1996, managers in council-manager communities in the United States received a survey developed by the ICMA Council-Manager Plan Task Force to capture information on how council-manager government functions today. The survey, which was mailed to 2,787 jurisdictions, generated 1,301 responses, a 47 percent response rate.

Eleven questions covered the subjects of governing-body relationships, policy implementation, the role of the chief elected official, the manager’s role in policy making, department-head appointment and removal, administrative activities, budget development, and manager evaluation.

relations are examined in this article. The first area of focus is the manager’s interaction with the council, both from the standpoint of actual practice as reported by managers and from the angle of managers’ preferences in structuring their council interaction.

As the data in Figure 1 show, 95 per-

cent of managers report that they interact with their councils on a formal basis, with all members present. This practice is followed closely by that of giving the council periodic, written reports, at 91 percent. Because these two methods of formal interaction also are selected by managers as being the two most desired practices, it seems clear that most managers are comfortable operating in these ways.

A high proportion of managers, however, also report that they maintain some informal relationships with councilmembers, taking into account the individual members’ styles and personalities. As claimed by one manager from a mid-Atlantic state, “Informal relationships are invaluable because some councilmembers have a different style in front of the entire council and the public. They also help to build a greater level of trust and allow the councilmembers to get a better sense of the managers as people, what their values are, and how they operate.”

One of the interesting patterns that can be seen in the responses to the managers’ survey is the regional variation in council-manager interactions. As David Mora explains, “Legal requirements and other constraints in many states, such as differences in sunshine laws and other regulations, may be driving some of the

Figure 1. Managers’ Interactions with Councils

	Actual Practice	Desired Practice
Interact with council on a formal basis, when all members are present	95%	71%
Inform council with periodic, written reports	91	71
Provide written responses to individual councilmember inquiries and send copies to all councilmembers	74	32
Meet with individual members of the council to discuss issues, concerns, and priorities	85	61
Maintain an informal relationship with individual councilmembers, tailored to their styles, preferences, and personalities	85	55

regional differences.” As shown in Figure 2, managers in the West are likelier than their colleagues in other areas to report much reliance on holding meetings with individual councilmembers (47.9 percent) and on maintaining informal relationships with councilmembers (47.3 percent). Regional differences also were noted in the provision of periodic, written reports to the council; the highest percentage is found in the North Central region, at 63.9 percent, while the lowest can be seen among managers in the South, at 51.5 percent.

How a council is elected, whether at large or by district, may be another factor affecting the council-manager relationship. As a result of both legal challenges and societal changes, the council-manager form of government is no longer as strongly tied to election provisions as it once was. District elections and directly elected mayors are common among council-manager governments today.

When the council-manager interac-

It is important to the overall working harmony of the council that individual councilmembers or the manager not be taken by surprise or embarrassed in formal session.

tion data are broken down by the type of council election, the greatest use of informal relationships can be seen among managers whose councils are elected by

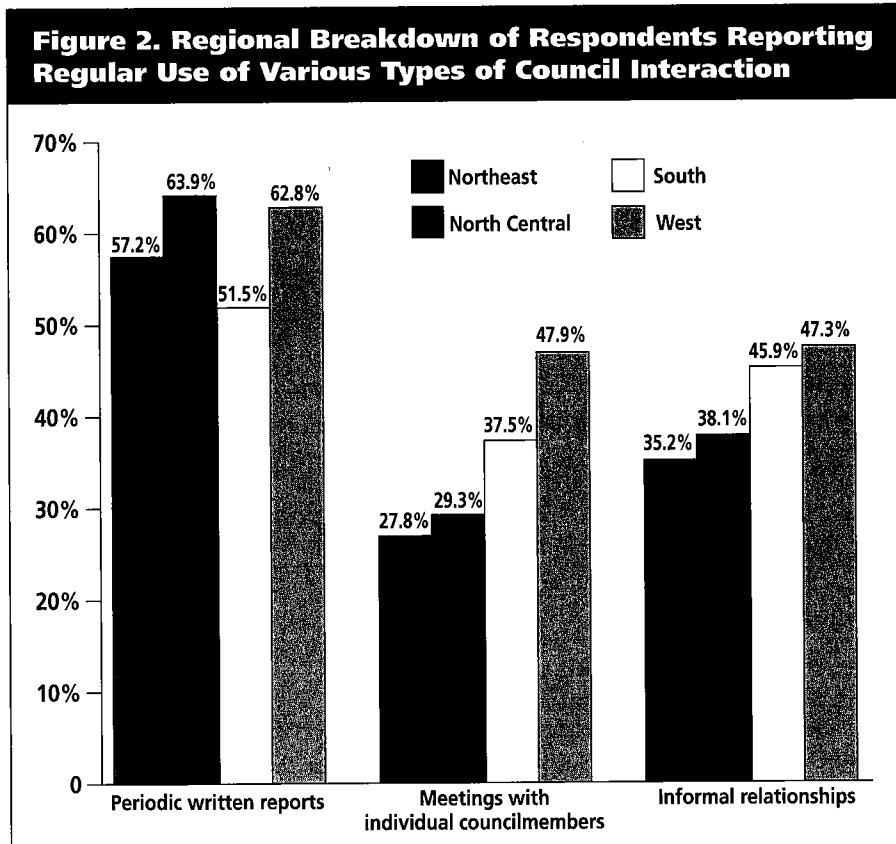
district at 47.9 percent (not shown in a Figure), while the lowest use can be seen in the mixed-systems segment at 32.6 percent. Because these districts may have different needs and issues from other parts of the community, managers are responding in more personalized fashion to the councilmembers who represent these sections.

Communications with Councils

Another important aspect of council-manager relations is how the council and manager communicate on a regular basis and how they plan for the future. How the council conducts its own affairs and how individual members treat each other can be important predictors of council effectiveness. An extremely divisive or noncollegial council can be a constant source of frustration for even the most facilitative manager and can be less effective as a decision-making body.

Apart from the individual personality clashes that occasionally surface on a council, communication and information also can play roles in how effective the council is at keeping things running smoothly in formal sessions. As one manager claims: “Councilmembers don’t necessarily want each item to take too long at the meeting; therefore, some informal communication before the council session can help to identify trouble spots and allow the session to run smoother. It also gives the manager the opportunity to relay more information and to get a sense of what concerns individual councilmembers may have before the open session begins.” It is important to the overall working harmony of the council that individual councilmembers or the manager not be taken by surprise or embarrassed in formal session.

As shown in Figure 3, just under 70 percent of managers report that they are active in helping to maintain good council working relationships when the council or mayor does not take this initiative. For a variety of reasons, however, fewer managers report this as a desired



practice. The data also show that one practice in which many managers would like to engage more is the setting-aside of time to discuss specifically how well the two parties relate to each other (67 percent).

An important aspect of council and manager effectiveness in guiding the community is the development of goals and objectives. Hal Conklin, a councilmember from Santa Barbara, California, writing in the February 1987 issue of *PM*, suggested that the most important ingredient in effective administration is goal setting within the government: first, let the council establish an annual list of goals to which they will ask the citizens to hold them accountable; then, let the department heads develop their own goals to which the manager holds them accountable.

At both of these stages, the shared desire to achieve success in reaching the established goals must involve a team effort. As suggested by one northeastern manager, "Long-term planning retreats are essential because you are generally not spending your time making policy; instead, you are reacting to community needs and demands and getting involved in details."

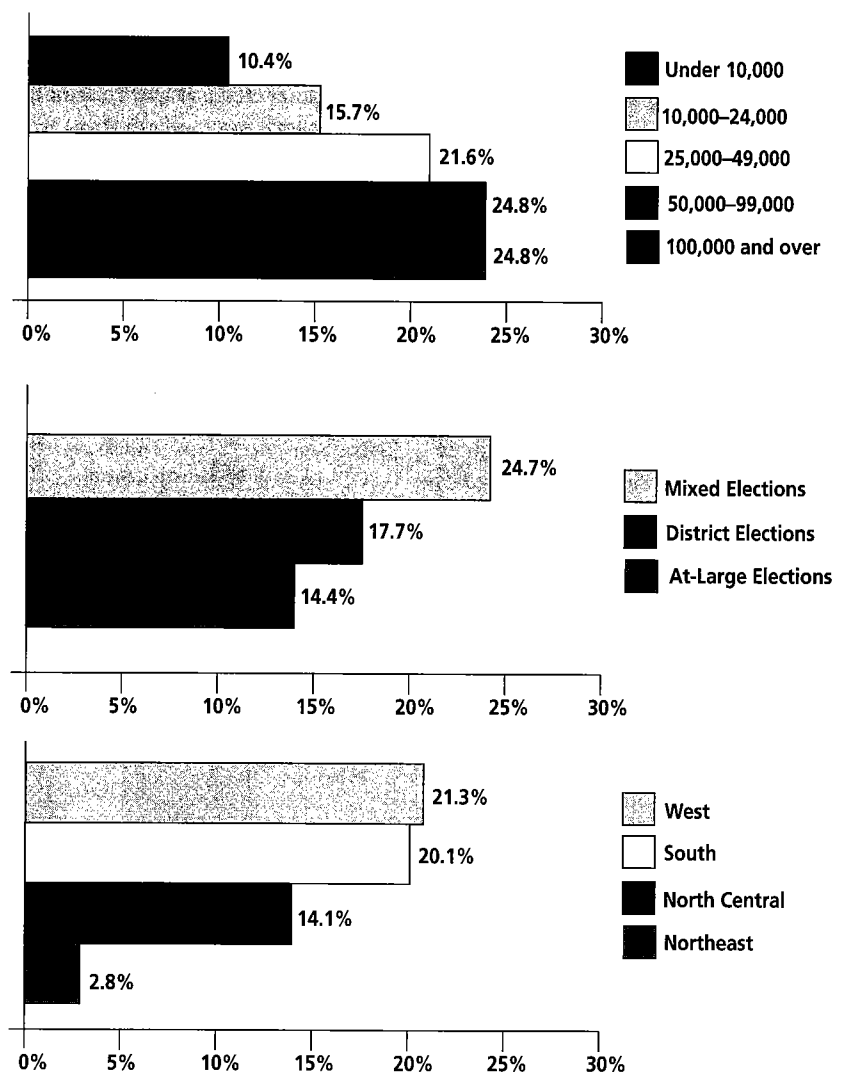
The use of goal-setting retreats to establish annual goals and objectives differs by population, region, and type of council election. The data in Figure 4 show that as the population increases, so does the use of goal-setting retreats. Councils in larger communities are more than twice as likely to use this long-term planning technique regularly. The highest percentage of regular use of retreats is found in the West, at 21.3 percent, while the lowest regular use can be seen in the Northeast, at just 2.8 percent. Finally, the highest percentage of use is among councils using mixed election systems, at 24.7 percent, with the lowest use among at-large councils, at 14.4 percent.

Unfortunately, there is no magic bullet or other device to ensure an effective working relationship between manager and council. Although there are many positive steps that can be taken to make

Figure 3. Managers' Communications with Councils

	Actual Practice	Desired Practice
The governing body discusses rules of conduct with the manager	29%	41%
The governing body holds retreats to set long-term goals and to provide direction for the manager	39	71
The governing body reviews the way it conducts its meetings and how well its members treat each other	19	44
The governing body and manager set aside time to discuss how well they relate to each other	29	67
The manager helps the council maintain good working relationships when the council or mayor does not take the initiative to do so	69	50

Figure 4. Breakdown of Respondents Reporting Regular Use of Council Goal-Setting Retreats



What Is Your Opinion?

In 1994, ICMA's membership approved a resolution from the Council-Manager Plan Task Force that included a commitment to participate actively in continued research on and discussion of council-manager government: how it is evolving to meet changing demands and needs, and how managers are successfully adapting their practices to respond to changes in their communities.

ICMA would like to encourage interested members—from current and former practitioners to academics and elected officials—to provide input on the changing state of council-manager relations and on the issues raised in this article. What do you find interesting? What do you agree or disagree with? What do the results suggest in terms of further research, discussion, and professional development opportunities?

Send your comments to Betsy Sherman, director of member services, ICMA (fax, 202/962-3500; e-mail, bsherman@icma.org), or to Victor DeSantis (fax, 508/279-6167; e-mail, vdesanti@ix.netcom.com). ICMA is planning to publish the responses received and to hold a session at the 1998 annual conference in Orlando at which these issues will be discussed and the dialogue on the profession continued.

and accept the obligation to work fairly and equally with all members of the governing body. However, as policy complexity and the chance of controversy have increased, managers have been called on more often to help promote cohesion within the governing body and to enhance open communication within the local government.

Finally, and perhaps most important, managers are being asked to be visionaries, to scan the environment looking for new opportunities and impending crises, and to implement the delivery of services consistently with community priorities.

Local government managers will respond to these changes in different ways, depending on their particular backgrounds and styles. As David Mora puts it, "Managers who have been in the profession longer may be more comfortable with the traditional aspects of the council-manager form, while some newer managers may be more comfortable with councils that have greater access to department heads and staff, and with community demands for more direct participation in the governmental process." **PM**

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Managers will become increasingly sensitive to political issues. They will continue to foster council effectiveness and to enhance their mayors' abilities to facilitate the work of councils.

A partnership between manager and mayor will be viewed as essential to managing both the political and administrative agendas and to involving citizens in decision making. How managers interact with their councils also will continue to evolve. A core principle of managers always has been to recognize