by Roger Morris, Douglas Enevoldsen, Shaunna Johnson, Roger Jordan, Stacy Sigman, and Chris Ward

Living in a Fishbowl

Local government managers know that actually doing their job is different from doing most others. It isn't a unique job; other jobs also carry particularly lonely or obvious responsibilities. But it does have those attributes to an unusual degree. Like parenthood, bereavement, or becoming the champion, the concept seems familiar, and yet parents, the bereaved, and champions will say that if you haven't actually been in that position yourself, you can't know what it's *really* like.

Usually people come into the manager's position after years of preparation. They have worked as city or county government employees for years, they have been assistants or senior managers, and they have been on the inside of events and party to much of the activity surrounding their local elected officials and their own manager at the time.

This is a great help for any thoughtful observer—noting how people react to or deal with given situations or circumstances and thinking about how *they* would behave were they the manager. You can learn a great deal from a good manager, doing what's called in the United Kingdom as "sitting next to Nellie," and particularly from someone prepared to mentor and discuss with you the emotions, tactics, and political realities of a situation. The mistakes of inexperience can thereby be reduced, approaches seen to work can be quietly copied later, and the standards and reputation of an honorable profession can thereby continue to be advanced.

And yet, what works in one place, with one mayor, or with one particular manager, may not work elsewhere. We are not talking about repeatable scientific experiments here; we are talking about diverse and dynamic human emotions. However experienced, clever, tactful, or personable you are, each of us, once appointed as the manager, has to make it anew—this manager, this place, this set of circumstances, now. That can sometimes be a scary thought!

TALKING IT THROUGH

A number of former and current managers came together at ICMA's Pittsburgh conference in October 2007 for a roundtable discussion under the title, "Living in a Fishbowl." This article is the outcome of that session. We realized that there is very little (surprisingly little, when you think about it) published by ICMA or flagged on the ICMA Web site about the inner emotions of actually doing the manager's job. It is our hope that this article in *PM* magazine and on ICMA's Web site at jobs.icma.org on how people handle the sense of public visibility they feel, and the realization that their private lives are no longer entirely their own, might be helpful to others.

The most important message in this topic of discussion is that you are not alone. Whatever you're feeling has almost certainly been felt many, many times before by others. Like you, they couldn't always express those feelings—not publicly, anyway. If they had sympathetic (better, empathetic) fellow managers they felt able to talk to, or family members, or close friends, that would have helped a lot. If they didn't, it would have taken a lot of self-confidence, inner resolve, and a well-adjusted approach to face down the doubts and carry on in an outwardly controlled and purposeful manner.

So what do we mean when we talk of living in a fishbowl and in the public eye? There is an endless variety of concerns, of course, but six kinds of problems, experiences, or situations seem to recur time and again in the examples that people give. What follows are those that were given during the conference session. The anecdotes and descriptions, all true, come from a wide variety of sources.

Press and media publicity are constants. Because your name and photograph appear frequently in local newspapers, in broadcasting, and on Web sites, people recognize you wherever you go around town. The reporting doesn't have to be lurid, critical, or damaging in any way. It may be fair and desirable coverage of local events and policy discussions; it may even be publicity you have sought and encouraged. Regardless of that, the result is that your face will be public property when you'd rather it wasn't—just as much as when you don't mind that it is.

Even if it's not quite fame or celebrity, you cannot turn your local prominence on and off.

TRUE STORY The recently appointed manager initially relished publicity and seeing his name in the paper. Then one day his smiling photograph, receiving some minor award, appeared next to an item about his proposal to triple water costs over the next few years. A couple recognized him in the supermarket and berated him about the publicity, telling him how "dumb" he really appeared to local residents.

TRUE STORY Another manager was legitimately away on city business and spent about $10 on lunch. As a result of some incident, the local newspaper demanded to see all his expense claims, and it published several items. As a result, he was embarrassed by much local discussion over how much it was appropriate for him to be paying to eat.

TRUE STORY A third manager thought he was off the record when he told a reporter that he knew more than he should about a story. The reporter printed the comment, causing both him and the council a lot of difficulties.

A manager is never off duty. Being the manager doesn't stop or go on hold when you leave the office. This isn't just about evening meetings, public events, or civil emergencies; it's 24/7 as the job requires. That means that it can be difficult to find time to think; to switch off at all (especially now with e-mail and electronics like the BlackBerry); to stay fresh and get proper downtime and vacations; to give the attention or priority that other parts of your life need or deserve; to do personal, private, or incidental things, especially if they involve being out in public in your community; and to keep a sense of proportion about your job and the place of your community in the wider world.

TRUE STORY One manager told how he had been deterred from going out with his wife to many places locally because he was so often badgered by residents who expected his attention about everything from local tax levels onwards. Once when he was at the county fair and there was a big problem locally about sewage polluting the river, which was putting a lot of pressure on him, he had thought it prudent to accept a challenge to eat a raw snail as part of some stunt. To refuse would have led to more criticism of him as somehow not willing to go along with public expectations.

TRUE STORY Another manager described how he lived a few hundred yards along the same street as city hall. One Saturday morning he started to clean his car on the front drive, a cleaning that took all day because people knew it was the manager's house and kept coming along and talking to him about city issues.

A manager's job affects the family. Although the impact of your job on your family may be more obvious in smaller communities, it can be a problem anywhere. Your partner may have a personal career or job, and some occupations present immediate problems if there is any potential overlap or conflict of interest. Such areas as real estate and development are well attested and sometimes result in accusations against managers about alleged ethics violations.

There are others: the partner may work for the same city or county in another capacity or for an organization that is grant funded. The relationship and connection are public knowledge, which not only may infringe on the partner's own privacy but may result in their being lobbied to influence things. Legitimate use of contacts can easily overstep into abuse of the access that friends or colleagues have to someone.

For children, unless already grown up, different problems can arise. Being the manager's son or daughter can be a burden that your children's friends don't have to bear. It's less likely to be about private influence than about bullying or pressuring children over something they can't do anything about (making it similar to some other forms of discrimination). Incidents or behaviors that wouldn't be reported about most other people may get them unwanted and deeply embarrassing publicity, and, anyway, most people want to be known for who they are themselves rather than for their relationship to somebody else.

TRUE STORY The city manager's wife was friendly with another woman who, like her, was a volunteer in a local facility that received support from the city. Issues arose for the city about the future of and support for the facility. The friend expected that the manager's wife would publicly take the side of the facility in the discussions that were going on. When the wife declined to do so—recognizing that campaigning by her might be both embarrassing and damaging for her husband, on whose income the family depended—the friend was offended and the friendship quickly cooled.

TRUE STORY Another manager's teenage daughter attended a publicly funded school whose district boundaries included some areas where a number of "problem" families were housed. The daughter suffered at school because she had a distinctive surname, and it was known that her father was ultimately responsible for allocating scarce housing units to people in those areas. The father felt obliged, against his normal principles and the kind of rules his job required him to expect the public to accept, to seek preferential treatment from the school authorities to allow his daughter to move to a different school outside her home district.

It probably isn't a good idea, for example, not to care at all what people think of you, but neither is it healthy to be really stressed by being talked about and publicized.

You have no choice about private time. You cannot be private when you want to be. This is really an extension of the second category, about never being off duty. Like anyone else, you want or need to do everyday things when you are not actually at work. It may be just shopping, keeping a hair appointment, buying a birthday card, or getting new tires for the car. Things that ordinary people do all the time are less likely to be anonymous for you.

Residents may not be rude or complain about the mayor or their neighbors, but they can be intrusive even so. Or you may feel or imagine some intrusion, enough to put you on your guard, put you slightly on edge, or just erode the value of a snatched few minutes of fresh air or relaxation out of the office in the middle of a long and busy day.

Someone may, you think, disapprove of the kind of birthday card you have chosen. Or someone might overhear the salesperson offering you 10 percent off the price of tires when you don't know whether it's either a favor you shouldn't accept or the salesperson doesn't recognize you and everyone's getting 10 percent today. It doesn't matter: being the manager is affecting your private life at that moment, in however small a way.

Often the occasion will be more significant for you. It may be an important day for your children at school, when it's their day more than your day. You might be teaching them to swim somewhere and not welcome the idea of what people might be thinking about seeing you in a swimsuit. You might be taking a wheelchair-bound parent shopping.

In many situations, in fact, you aren't trying to behave or be on parade as the manager. You just want to be you, going about your own private or family life. Most people will see this and respect it. They'll know it's "not a good time." But, unfortunately, some people think nothing of trespassing on your privacy, don't have an inhibiting sense of time and place, and think that because they pay you through their taxes they somehow own you and your time. Unless you're to live like a hermit, you'll need patience, tact, and self-controlled politeness—and a little notepad and pen, so that you can record the names or telephone numbers you've promised to get back to.

TRUE STORY A certain manager enjoyed partying on his own time and sometimes tended to drink too much. One evening he and his pals got well out of order, and he lost his job as a result. He complained that

the others, including two elected officials, hadn't lost their positions similarly, but the city he led held him to a higher standard.

Making new personal relationships can be hard. This again is a particular instance of the previous situation about not being private when you want to be. An unattached single manager wants to be able to meet people, go out, and make friends; "maybe more" as those advertisements say. A good social life and doing what you enjoy is not an unreasonable antidote to the challenges of the job and long hours spent at city hall.

It will probably be easier in a bigger community because there can be more cover. In a smaller community, where "everybody knows everybody else," it will be particularly difficult to avoid the feeling that others can see what you're doing and whom you're doing it with, and that they are gossiping about you and making up things to fill the gaps in their supposed knowledge.

Women speak of this particularly—maybe they feel it more acutely or maybe they are simply more inclined to articulate their feelings about it—but it can be a serious issue for anyone. Like any relationship or contract, it's fine while the sun is out: take away the trust or try to end things, and the scenario and personal pressures quickly change.

TRUE STORY In an admittedly extreme example, a woman who resented the end of her relationship with a certain manager drove a car up the steps and through the glass doors of the municipal office building where he worked, causing him—as she intended—considerable publicity and embarrassment.

You aren't the same sort of citizen as most are. You'll be familiar with the argument lawyers sometimes use: although *X* shouldn't get special privilege because of being a member of Congress, a celebrity, the local mayor, or whatever, then conversely, because *X* is in fact also a citizen like anyone else, *X* shouldn't be subject to any disadvantage from the norm either. It ought to apply for you, too. Except that it doesn't, or at least a lot of the time it doesn't, and you need to work out when the warning lights are on for you and when they aren't.

For a start, partisan politics are out. ICMA members know that any kind of perceived support, let alone open support or campaigning, is definitely prohibited (it would breach Tenet 7 of the Code of Ethics). How this is defined may vary. It may perhaps be acceptable to be thought of as sympathetic to a particular political party in some contexts but not in others. In the U.K., for example, the concept of political restriction extends by law to all senior local government employees.

Things that ordinary people do all the time are less likely to be anonymous for you.

When voting extends at the local level to more than just electing the councilmembers, avoiding partisan activity may be a lot harder because all sorts of people and issues vie for campaign funds, endorsements in media and publicity campaigns, and, of course, the actual votes themselves. Supporting petitions, including online ones, is another expression of your private views that might better be left out of the public domain.

The practical restrictions are much wider, even if few of them are about breaking the law or a professional code. They can summed up in the one word: *judgment*. If you draw needless attention to yourself in the wrong context, if you're perceived to have a high sense of your own importance, if people think you're using some inside track to your private or family benefit, or if you behave in some way that makes reasonable people frown or worse—"our manager should have had more sense than to have done that"—then you may well have lessened your reputation and may pay a penalty across the community for your prominence and what they think of as your lack of judgment.

TRUE STORY Cars and alcohol (particularly together) are potent catalysts of public opinion. At one level, neither has much to do with that downtown regeneration strategy, that need to follow up allegations of improper use of immigrant labor, or the need to sack the police chief for overspending the budget and remodeling the office when street patrols have just been reduced.

But people demanding high standards of anyone else must first themselves demonstrate high standards, or else they lack credibility. What might be minor failings in others will very likely be exploited against you by people opposed to whatever you're trying to achieve. As with any battle, if you've ceded the high ground, you've made it a great deal harder to win.

PUBLIC SCRUTINY IS A GIVEN

As we've observed, the foregoing six groupings often shade into one another. We can sum up most of them by saying that, like any celebrity of any sort, what you do and say is going to get noticed. You have forfeited or at least reduced the cloak of anonymity that normally allows most of us to go about in broad daylight without really being seen. Certain standards will be expected of you, and sometimes the lens of public scrutiny will magnify the issue in question.

There'll probably be some jealousy and some sycophancy around you and your family. The cumulative effect of all these things (as the rich and famous find) is that it becomes hard to know what motivates the emotions you meet, what is genuine, and what is a means to an opportunistic end. Who you are in itself may alter the dynamics around you.

So, what advice can we give and what can we say about this state of affairs, if we can't really change it?

The first thing is to try and keep a sense of proportion. Assess as best you can, certainly, the environment in which you're living and working, but remember that we've expressed most of the problems we've suggested conditionally. There are some decent, take-it-at-face-value people out there, and some you can learn to trust. You can help yourself to take in your stride the downside of being in the local public eye.

A speaker at the annual business meeting at ICMA's Pittsburgh conference spoke out against the frequency he observed of people running down the manager's profession; he noted how damaging it was and also off-putting to potential new recruits to hear people complaining about the difficulties, the hours, the exposure, the elected people, the public, and so forth that were getting them down.

Well, we all need to let off steam now and then, and what better place to do it than with an audience of understanding peers who all agree with you? Putting aside the difficulty of asking us to change the habits of a lifetime though, there is a point here: Being a manager is for many a great job. They recognize the issues we've aired about the fishbowl factor, but even if it does get to them sometimes, they've learned to cope. In fact, they accept the fishbowl as part of an overall good deal in which for a certain degree of inconvenience of various kinds they get to be the manager and take home a lot of satisfaction and good pay.

So how can you be one of those, recognizing the issues set out above in this article but learning to see potential problems coming and minimize them, and to cope sensibly with whatever you can't avoid? We think you can do several things.

Vitally important for understanding the environment in which you'll be living and working is to assess the political realities very deliberately—not only before you take the job but also as soon as you start in it, when the context around you may already have been changed in some way by the fact of your appointment.

Then make some deliberate decisions about the six kinds of issues we've discussed in this article; and, without getting too obsessed about it, always keep them under review somewhere in the back of your mind. You can lessen the number of potential handholds for people who want to climb all over your privacy and individuality. Smooth surfaces are harder to get a grip on!

At the workshop session mentioned, participants received a copy of Figure 1, which accompanies this article. The approaches on either side are opposites, or at least contrasts, in attitudes. All are neither wholly right nor wholly wrong. They are not necessarily extreme behaviors: they are grouped around a middle course somewhere in between what most people will probably adopt most of the time. They are the sorts of things about which you should desirably have given some thought and for which you want to have a reasoned policy, practice, or outlook.

It probably isn't a good idea, for example, not to care at all what people think of you, but neither is it healthy to be really stressed by being talked about and publicized. Whatever line you take on any of the statements, be prepared to explain the reason for it—if only to yourself or your partner—so that you see how it fits how you want to be treated and perceived. Introverts and extroverts are both OK, but both reputations have consequences.

ISSUES GUIDE

Finally, we offer recommendations on how to work through the six kinds of issues that were identified.

The first was about *press and media publicity.* You can't get the last word on this, so don't try. It's a fast-moving media world, and fewer people are probably reading the newspapers than you think. Unwelcome publicity can still be extremely damaging and hurtful, however, so don't give the media types any personal reason to want to get you. Establish a professional relationship with key editors and others if you can; treat them courteously; remember that they have jobs to do too; and, if you promised to call back, *call back*!

Give them the information you can. That way, they'll probably respond by respecting your embargo dates, by giving you a chance to respond before they publish that hot story, and by not giving you gratuitous grief. It's playing the percentages, but so are most of the self-protecting steps we mention here.

Make sure also that you don't upstage your mayor or council. Check who's handling the press, and don't assume you're the spokesperson unless you know it's agreed or accepted. Make yourself notes on any key points you must not miss when you make statements or give interviews.

The second was about *never being off duty.* Here you need to set some ground rules. Take care that what you do at the start of your new contract isn't seen as setting an example you can't keep up. Visiting all the evening community organizations during your first year sounds fine (and is probably easier if your family hasn't moved to the area with you yet), but if people think you can keep that up every year when you can't, you've raised expectations only to let them back down again pretty quickly.

You may also have to consider whether some places and activities you might have chosen in your own personal time are better avoided because you know that people will take advantage too much and not let you enjoy or do what you wanted in the right kind of atmosphere.

You can make sure from the outset that—unless it's a genuine emergency—the elected officials and public understand that you cannot respond to any query at any time. Take a message and say you'll look into it as soon as the office reopens. Tell people you'll call back at a mutually convenient time (and again, *do it*!).

Come in and go home at sensible times, similar to the rest of your staff. You sleep and eat for much the same time as they do, so take a lead from that! Don't be a clock-watcher in the wrong sense, but keep a private note of things like how many hours you do

Figure 1. Living in a Fishbowl

The two columns here show contrasting or opposite attitudes on surviving the demands of a manager's job, such as "I keep myself to myself," which is opposed to the polarity of "I'll tell anyone any time what I really think, and so will my partner." Readers might see themselves as somewhere between the two extremes in these columns and think about the differences and what they mean for coping with and surviving in their jobs. —Roger Morris

From outside, it's hard to tell how big the fish really is!
From inside, you can't see out clearly!

My family and I can't go anywhere locally without being recognized and pestered about city issues.	⟷	Nobody knows me, recognizes my name or seems to have any idea what I do.
I don't pay any attention to the media, I ignore publicity and I live well out of town.	⟷	I don't know what people are saying about current city issues, and I don't have my finger on the city's pulse.
I have as little to do with the elected people as possible.	⟷	I socialize with the elected people whenever I can, and invite them home for drinks and barbecues.
I don't care what people think of me at all.	⟷	The public and media attention really stresses my family and me.
I keep myself to myself.	⟷	I'll tell anyone anytime what I really think, and so will my partner.
I avoid the firestorms.	⟷	I make sure I'm around when something big or politically significant happens.
I don't join professional organizations, or go to any outside meetings I don't have to.	⟷	I speak and write and publicize myself all the time, so that everyone knows where I'm coming from.
I have my council favorites with whom I share information.	⟷	I make sure I share the same information with all Council members.
I never seek or take the credit for anything.	⟷	Mr/Ms Limelight, me! Get it whenever you can, I say!
I don't pay attention to what my staff say. If they want to be the manager they need to get another job someplace else.	⟷	I don't do anything that I'm not sure all my staff agree with.
My predecessor's still around, but I ignore him/her completely.	⟷	I get my predecessor's opinion about every significant city issue.
People say I'm a character.	⟷	People think I'm a caricature.
I just don't get what "living in a fishbowl"means — I've not changed just because I've got this job.	⟷	As a manager my image matters more than anything else.

work, how many units of alcohol you drink per week, how much exercise you take, how much time you spend with your partner and children, how much time you spend on a favorite pastime—whatever matters to your particular quality of life and will help you spot insidious trends as pressures build up and you find yourself doing more and more in the job.

Leave the BlackBerry at home when you go away or, if you must take it, leave it switched off and tell your office to call you only if it is genuinely urgent. And don't answer the cell phone straightaway: listen to the voice mail or read the text so that you can judge when you need to respond in your own time or if at all. People will soon learn when to contact you, when not to bother, and that you'll be there doing the job when you need to be because it's you who is holding the job down and not the other way around.

When you are off duty in the everyday sense that you're not at work or at an extension of it, set an example you and your community can be proud of. Image isn't everything, but it is important; and leading by good example never goes wrong. If you make a headline, try to avoid making one you won't enjoy reading in the newspaper.

The third was about the job *impacting your family.* This is also partly a question of ground rules from the outset. You may decide to live some distance away in a neighboring community, for instance, but if you do, you must make sure that your employer knows that and doesn't object.

Some people and some councils think you should live in the community that pays you and be part of it. Others think a degree of separation is helpful, giving you some objectivity and more protection from the fishbowl phenomenon. These can't be absolute rights and wrongs, but make sure you know what the local expectations are.

In particular, if you plan to leave your family members where they are at the current time and live only Monday through Friday where your new

job is, make sure that's OK. Maybe it shouldn't matter these days, but often it still does, and being thought of as only half-committed, however unfairly, may come to count against you.

Your attendance, and maybe that of your spouse, will be compared against that of others. Councils have a way of finding other means of venting some gripe that they can't make directly. Perhaps it's that small weekend emergency, that special church service, and you weren't there. . . .

Have a discussion with your family about what they can expect, but stand up for them too by setting some limits and making sure that your community knows why you expect some privacy for your partner and children.

ACTIONS SPEAK VOLUMES

Fourth was the point about *not being able to be private when you want to be*. You probably have to accept this most of the time. It's part of the price of what you get paid to be. It's likely to be easier, of course, if you live a long way away from your community or if there is safety in the numbers of a large population. But otherwise, just try to act consistently.

Even if it's not quite fame or celebrity, you cannot turn your local prominence on and off. If you normally actively seek publicity or have an extrovert style 90 percent of the time, you cannot expect people to recognize that you want to be treated differently when you have a family problem to resolve or need to go for health checks.

If you can enjoy yourself away from your own community (but not so much at conferences you might attend!), so much the better. It's fine to work hard and play hard so long as you keep a sense of proportion about both and you recognize that people who work for you have their own work-life balances to keep too.

Think about where and how you shop, for instance. Comment or resentment soon builds if people think, for example, that you always go to store A and never go to store B. It is best to be as even-handed as possible and be seen around wherever you can.

The fifth issue, about it being *hard to make new personal relationships*, will also be helped if you don't live among the small community you work for and don't encourage publicity that others would find intrusive. But it's only natural for people to be interested in you to some extent, particularly if you are single and the personal relationships may be of the romantic kind. You can be discreet; firm about your personal territory; and use common sense about whom you do what with, and where. People expect you be human, so understand their curiosity but don't feed it.

In the workplace, be careful not to be too close to people who may try to take advantage of their supposed proximity to you, or who may compromise some aspect of the space you need to do your job—and particularly the more difficult parts of the job—in a professional manner. Friendliness is one thing, but friendship quite another, and familiarity is something else again. People will see supposed favoritism easily enough without you demonstrating it for them.

Sixth and last was the issue of *not being the same sort of citizen as most others*. As with the preceding five, many years in less senior local government jobs have probably prepared and reconciled you to the realities of this. It is simply much more obvious if you are the manager, and it is dangerous to your job security if you get it wrong.

In many respects the dilemma is similar to that around personal privacy and, indeed, is just another example of it. Just as you cannot easily be at the same time a prominent local figure and an anonymous grocery shopper, so you cannot at the same time easily be the apolitical manager representing the community's views while also advertising your own private opinions on public issues of the day.

Whatever you do, think about it first from others' points of view, and think how it will play in the local paper if it gets picked up. Political awareness in the widest sense won't guarantee that you keep your job, but lack of it will probably eventually guarantee the opposite.

DON'T LET THE FISHBOWL AFFECT YOU

So, there it is. As we began by saying, you aren't alone. If many of the things we've said seem to you like statements of the obvious, that's probably because they are.

Most people experience difficulties from time to time; it's in the nature of the job. Dealing with them involves a mixture of setting out the ground rules from the beginning, seeing things as others (and particularly critical others) will, getting used to your local visibility and prominence, having self-confidence but recognizing your limitations (a little humility in the job never hurt anyone), and applying common sense. Oh, and a little luck too!

Don't let the fishbowl effect put you off. People who attended the conference session agreed that being a community manager is one of the best jobs there is. It can be the best just so long as you're holding the job down, rather than it holding you down. Many people, when the time comes to give it all up, say that they feel like a fish out of water. **PM**

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Online at ICMA.org/pm

Read the April 2008 *PM* article "Life as a Local Government Manager: It's Who We Are" for more insights on how life as a local government manager can be unique.