

# **We're in This Together:**

## Managers and Assistants in Powerful Partnerships

**Audrey Seymour**

**P**articularly tricky times face the local government manager. Demands for service seem to be ever-expanding, while revenues are flat or declining. Changing workforce demographics and economic uncertainty have made it even more critical to retain employee talent and enhance organizational performance. Increasingly complex regional issues require creative, collaborative, and time-consuming solutions. And the need to build constructive relationships with governing officials is a constant priority.

How can local government managers juggle these many demands when their primary currency—their time and energy—is in finite supply? Feelings of stress and isolation are not uncommon as managers must make tough choices about where to direct their attention and how to use most productively the resources at their disposal.

In this context, the assistant manager is an important and often underused resource. Powerful partnerships between the chief executive and the second-in-command provide real benefits to the executive, improving the manager's effectiveness and helping preserve his or her sanity. What's more, such partnerships help prepare and even encourage those assistants who aspire to become chief executives.

To gain a better understanding of the current status of the manager/assistant partnership, the author interviewed 30 city managers and assistant city managers in California, not

necessarily matched by city. These local government officials shared examples of partnerships that had provided a meaningful level of support to chief executives by offering a trusted sounding board, distributing the workload, and enabling guilt-free (or at least, reduced-guilt) time off.

Yet, while almost all of the managers interviewed reported that they valued their assistants and were delegating the appropriate quantity and level of work to them, 40 percent of the assistants surveyed said they did not feel that their positions were fully made use of. This did not mean that they were sitting around with nothing to do but rather that they believed their skills and talents were not being put to the best use. Simply stated, assistants want more opportunities to contribute at a higher level.

In particular, assistants seek: a seat at the table in policy meetings with elected officials; line supervision so their organizational authority matches their de facto roles; leadership in key initiatives, deals, and projects; the freedom to do things their own way; and the manager's support for their decisions.

All of this raises an interesting question. If the local government chief executive's time and energy are limited, and if assistants are eager to take on additional responsibilities, why do some managers seem to be reluctant to delegate more and to develop stronger partnerships with their assistants? While many factors come into play, the heart of the answer lies in the manager's philosophy about the chief executive role and the quality of the manager/assistant relationship.

In other words, what a manager gives to and gets out of an assistant position depends on how the manager sees his or her role and on how the two individuals get along as people. And because the manager and assistant are in fact human beings working in a complex organizational setting, some other issues will likely affect the strength of the partnership.

Based on analysis of the interview data, the sections below outline (1) di-

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verse chief executive personas and their implications for assistants; (2) the characteristics of effective manager/assistant relationships; (3) the tensions that managers and assistants face in working together; and (4) eight strategies that managers and assistants can use to build more powerful and effective partnerships.

### Local Government Manager Personas

As the interviewed managers talked about what they would and wouldn't delegate to their assistants and why, it became clear that they were driven by the roles they chose for themselves. Sometimes, these choices were implicit rather than clearly articulated. To help label and explain the different roles expressed, the author suggests the following successful public personas. These roles are not necessarily mutually exclusive; managers could certainly exhibit traits from more than one of the models below.

#### The Vidal Sassoon Model

The motto of the manager in this model could be a takeoff on the tagline used by hair-care empire founder Vidal Sassoon: "If you don't look good, I don't look good." These managers feel it is their job to make the organization run seamlessly so that it provides superior service to the community and the governing body. It

doesn't really matter whether the manager, the assistant, or a department head takes the lead, just as long as that person delivers.

The manager involves the assistant in substantive ways in everything, including policy discussions with the governing body, development negotiations, department supervision, and key organizational initiatives, so that the assistant knows the context well enough to step up and make good decisions. In the Vidal Sassoon model, the manager and assistant are virtually interchangeable, with the assistant considered the "co-manager."

#### The Dave Thomas Model

As with the founder of the Wendy's restaurant chain, the manager in this model is easily recognizable as the organization's spokesperson. Such managers place a high value on, and are personally involved in, public outreach and marketing. They believe it is their role to take the visible lead on matters of critical importance to the community and the organization. This sends the reassuring message that the manager is on top of things and that high-priority issues are getting the attention they deserve.

According to managers in this model, the chief executive's involvement in internal communications is particularly important, as they believe that a core function of the chief executive is to demonstrate caring for employees and to set the tone for the organization. Consequently, internal and external projects that are highly visible are not delegated to the assistant. This is not to say that the assistant doesn't lead on other issues—just not on those in the areas the chief executive carves out for him- or herself. The role of the assistant under the Dave Thomas model could be described as that of the "traditional assistant."

#### The Bill Walsh Model

Like the successful former coach and general manager of the San Francisco '49ers, the chief executive in this model assumes the role of lead strategist. This

kind of manager is intent not just on winning this game or this season but also on building the team for the future. The manager in this model works hard to develop good relationships with the governing body (the team owners), so that the organization has what one interviewed local government manager referred to as the "calm and resources so that people can do their jobs."

The role of the assistant in the Bill Walsh model is to take care of the day-to-day operations of the organization, freeing up the chief executive to focus on broader community issues and governing-body relations. Thus, the assistant could be referred to as the "chief operating officer" or the "internal manager," in contrast to the chief executive's role as the "external manager."

### **The Martha Stewart Model**

In accordance at least with the public perception of this maven of domestic affairs, the chief executive in the Martha Stewart model is involved in all aspects of the organization: internal and external, strategic and tactical. This manager is hands-on and feels that it is the role of the chief executive to set priorities and to chart the sometimes detailed paths toward accomplishing these priorities.

The assistant is called upon to play a key support role and will take on projects as assigned but won't likely be self-directed or have a significant level of involvement with the governing body or with high-profile projects. The role of the assistant in the Martha Stewart model is sometimes referred to as that of a "glorified analyst."

### **Characteristics of Powerful Partnerships**

As suggested, the approach to partnering depends in part on the chief executive's philosophy about his or her own role. It also depends on the personal and professional relationship between the manager and assistant. Stronger partnerships that entail higher levels of delegation to the assistant are more likely if

the following characteristics are present in the relationship:

**Trust and loyalty.** The chief executive needs to trust in the assistant's discretion, support, and ability to deliver. It also helps if the manager can feel secure in the belief that the assistant is not after his or her job.

**Shared values.** The relationship will be strongest if both parties are passionate about public service and have similar basic policy perspectives.

**Complementary skills.** The partnership will benefit if the assistant brings a different set of strengths, interests, and approaches to balance out the manager's weaknesses and minimize the conflict that might result from both parties' wanting to do the same things.

**Open communication.** Managers and assistants must be able to communicate openly and honestly, even when this means delivering hard messages to one another.

**General comfort level.** It makes a big difference if the manager and assistant understand and genuinely like each other.

### **Tensions Inherent in the Partnership**

The characteristics of effective relationships that the author has listed might seem basic, but this does not mean that they are easy to develop and sustain. Managers face tensions in building powerful partnerships with their assistants, including:

- This effort takes self-knowledge, time, energy, and a willingness to see things from the other person's perspective—as in any relationship between two people.
- Even with hard work, an administrator can't necessarily generate rapport if the chemistry just isn't right. How-

ever, managers should be careful not to take age, gender, race, sexual identity, or other personal characteristics as key determinants of compatibility.

- Successful efforts to build trust and rapport can result in friendships that extend beyond the workplace. While this is comfortable for some managers, others fear the possibility or perception of favoritism when tough decisions must be made. In addition, the manager may worry that a strong manager/assistant partnership will lessen the perceived status and therefore the commitment of department heads.
- There may be reluctance to let the assistant shine if the manager feels this could threaten his or her job.
- Some administrators find it hard to stay out of the details and don't know how to let go of their favorite tasks, thus limiting their assistants' opportunities to contribute and build credibility.
- Pressures placed on local government managers are unique and very real. In an effort to protect organizational morale and project a professional image, some managers may buy too heavily into the "lonely at the top" mentality and, in the process, close themselves off from the kind of support that a competent assistant could offer.

In addition to the barriers faced by managers, assistants must walk some fine lines and cope with certain contradictions because of the inherent tensions in the manager/assistant relationship. Assistants may feel that their managers are telling them:

- Be loyal and supportive but brutally honest, even if this means telling me I'm being a jerk or making a big mistake.
- Be different from me to balance my skills, but not so different that our styles and values are incompatible.
- Handle it, and keep me out of the details. But never let me be surprised or embarrassed.

- Make the decision, but if you mess up, I'm accountable and am not going to be happy.
- Have the skills and credibility to handle big assignments, even though you can't develop skills and credibility until I give you some big assignments.

### Eight Strategies to Use

Given these real tensions faced both by managers and by assistants, is it even possible to build a strong and effective partnership? The answer is yes. Here are eight strategies that managers and assistants can use to increase the odds of forging a partnership that works for both parties:

1. **As manager, pick the right person for the job.** In fact, managers and assistants should really interview *each other* and check each other's references, to make sure that there are similar values, complementary skills, and compatible personalities.
2. **Hold explicit conversations.** Talk about your roles and interests at the outset and throughout your working relationship. Make sure you are both clear about who is doing what. If something is not working, fix it.
3. **As manager, clearly communicate the role of the assistant to the governing body and the organization.** Managers can send this message through both words and actions. For some administrators, this means letting everyone know that the assistant is the number-two person in the organization and setting his or her salary accordingly.
4. **Articulate, as the manager, your underlying goals, perspectives, and "givens."** Make sure it's clear what really matters to you, what you are hoping to accomplish, and what your absolute do's and don'ts are.
5. **Demonstrate, as the assistant, that you understand and support the manager's goals.** To build loyalty, show that you have the manager's best interests at heart. Help the manager delegate without concern

- by illustrating that you know what he or she would do or say in given situations.
6. **Give frequent, honest feedback.** Make an explicit agreement that you will seek and accept total honesty from each other, without consequence.
  7. **Support each other publicly and one-on-one.** In public, praise each other's accomplishments, and promote each other's agendas. In private, give as much emotional support as is appropriate to the relationship. Listen and commiserate, as everyone in the field needs this from time to time.
  8. **Get to know each other as people.** Building a relationship takes a commitment not just to reach out but also to let yourself be known. Share your fears and mistakes as well as your successes. Spend unstructured,

informal time together: go for a walk, have no-agenda meetings, talk about life outside of work, and don't forget to have fun.

### Valuable Support

Local government is a challenging and rewarding field. If both manager and assistant succeed in forging a powerful partnership, then both the burdens and the benefits can be shared. While such partnerships take work, they are worth it in the long term because they can provide a valuable support system to the executive, build the organization's capacity, and lay the groundwork for the next generation of managers. **DMJ**

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The image is a logo for CALEA (California Law Enforcement Accreditation). It features the word "CALEA" in large, bold, white capital letters at the top. Below it, the text "Law Enforcement Accreditation" is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. The word "Standards" is written in a large, bold, white, serif font, and "build trust" is written in a large, bold, white, sans-serif font below it. The logo is set against a dark background with a white, curved shape behind the text. There are several circular emblems or seals around the logo, including one at the top left and three at the bottom.