

## Tips for Chief Executive/Staff Success

October 10, 2012 Version

### The Difference of Perspective between Electeds and Staff

Elected officials and staff bring important but different perspectives to their respective roles as part of a democratic institution at the local level.

- **Elected officials.** Elected officials focus on what their constituents value and need from the agency; and
- **Staff.** Staff has technical expertise in policy areas and what can work, given their day-to-day experiences with implementing agency policies, practices and service delivery that can help inform the decision-making process.<sup>1</sup>

Both perspectives are important in making decisions in the community's interests. The chief executive plays a key role in helping agency staff understand and respect this difference of perspective.<sup>2</sup> Understanding and embracing these different perspectives can be helpful for all concerned.

#### Resources on Maximizing the Success of Board/Chief Executive Relations

Companion pieces to this tip sheet are available:

- Governing Board Member Strategies
- Board/Executive Staff Communications Strategies
- The Importance of an Annual Evaluation Process

Visit our website at:

<http://www.ca-ilg.org/Board-Chief-Executive-Relations>

#### Acknowledgements

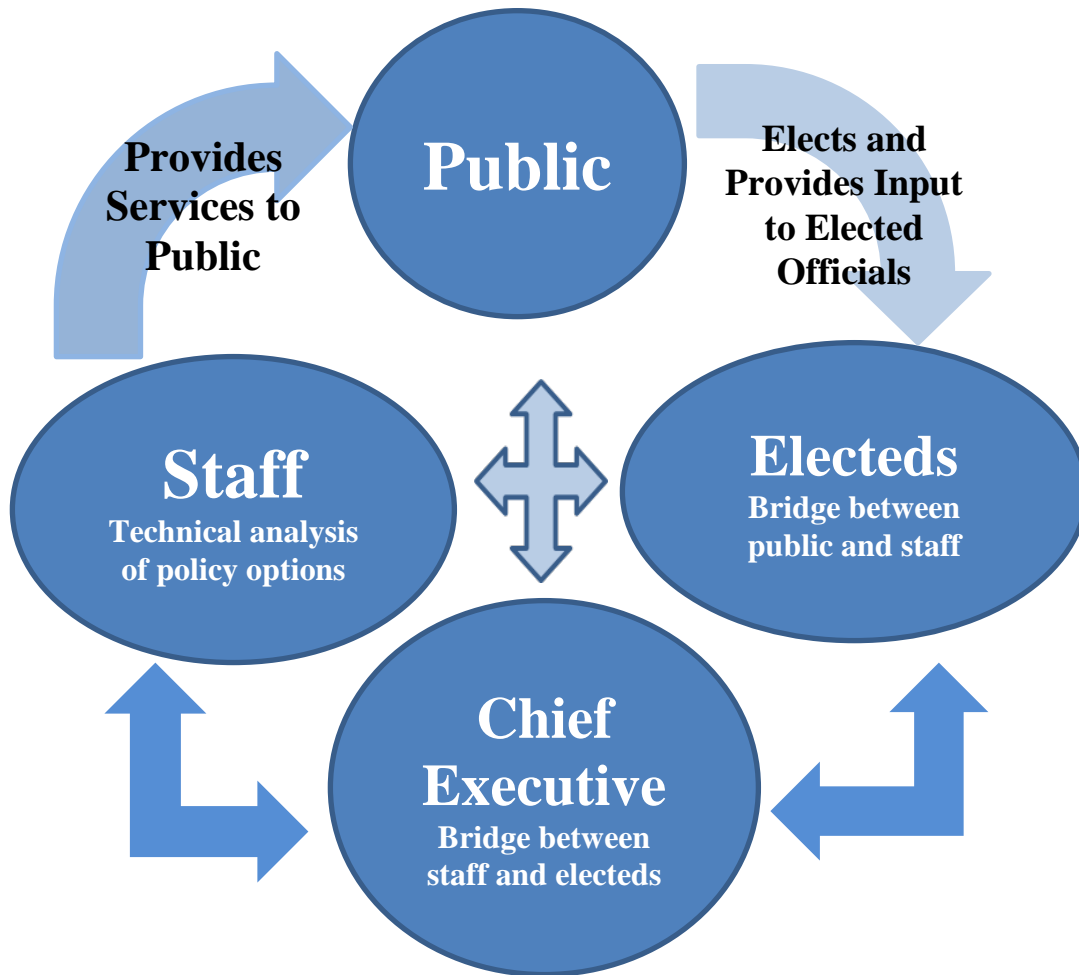
This resource reflects the insights and thoughts of a number of individuals, including Kevin C. Duggan, West Coast Director, International City/County Management Association, Pete Kutras, Retired County Executive, Santa Clara, and Principal Consultant, Municipal Resource Group, LLC, Richard A. Haffey, County Executive Officer, Nevada County, and William Chiat, Director, CSAC Institute for Excellence in County Government.

In addition, the following publications are helpful on this topic:

- International City/County Management Association and National League of Cities, *Working Together: A Guide for Elected and Appointed Officials* (1999); and
- International City/County Management Association and National League of Cities, *Leading Your Community: A Guide for Local Elected Leaders* (2008).

## Bridging Function

Elected officials play an important bridging role between the public and staff; the agency’s chief executive plays an important bridging function between staff and elected officials.



## Clear Goals and Priorities

A key task is for the governing body and chief executive work together to assure staff have clear direction on the agency’s goals and priorities.

Goal setting workshops can be useful forums for establishing governing board and organizational priorities. This includes holding annual workshops in which goals are set, reviewed, updated and/or retained, as well as direction on how the group wants to be kept updated on progress, goals and priorities.<sup>3</sup> Follow up, of course, is critical to maximizing a goal setting session’s value.<sup>4</sup>

Such clarity enables staff to know where to devote scarce/limited resources in proposing budget and work program priorities for the governing board's consideration

Documented goals and priorities serve as a reference point when issues and potentially competing priorities come up throughout the year. Priorities may need to change of course; the key is if a new priority is added, an old one must be subtracted.<sup>5</sup>

Engaging a broad range of the community in the conversation about hard choices can help the governing body in aligning agency goals with community wishes. Such processes offer important opportunities to inform and consult the community on what can be difficult tradeoffs due to scarce resources. Such engagement can also make the resulting decisions more enduring.

### Focus on the Core Functions

For those areas over which the agency has discretion (for example, non-state mandated efforts without maintenance of effort requirements), the conversation can focus on identifying what is most important for the agency to accomplish. This tends to be an intersection of three things:<sup>6</sup>



Identifying this intersection does not necessarily mean that tasks outside the intersecting area will not get accomplished. Some functions may be more effectively accomplished by other agencies, community-based organizations or the private sector.

## Capacity Building

The entire community benefits from well-prepared and knowledgeable local officials. Some tools for assisting with this goal include:<sup>7</sup>

- Leadership academies that help the public, including potential future governing board candidates, understand key elements of the agency's work and processes.
- Candidate orientations that provide information about agency functions, pending policy issues, including budget issues, and any regulations that apply to the campaigning process.
- Newly elected official orientations conducted as soon as possible after election results are certified. Content should include the nuts and bolts of how to accomplish objectives in their new role, as well as briefings on current issues the agency faces, the status of long-range plans and capital projects, and the budget process. Connecting newly elected officials with former electeds who are respected in the community and can offer advice and share experience is also helpful.<sup>8</sup>
- Ongoing education through local workshops, references to helpful information about local governance and policy issues, and conference attendance.

## Credit for Commitment to Elective Office

One dimension of staff's role is to help governing board members receive the recognition they deserve for their actions as public servants.<sup>9</sup> As media opportunities occur, ensure the electeds are aware so they may receive recognition for their service on community issues.

## Role Clarity

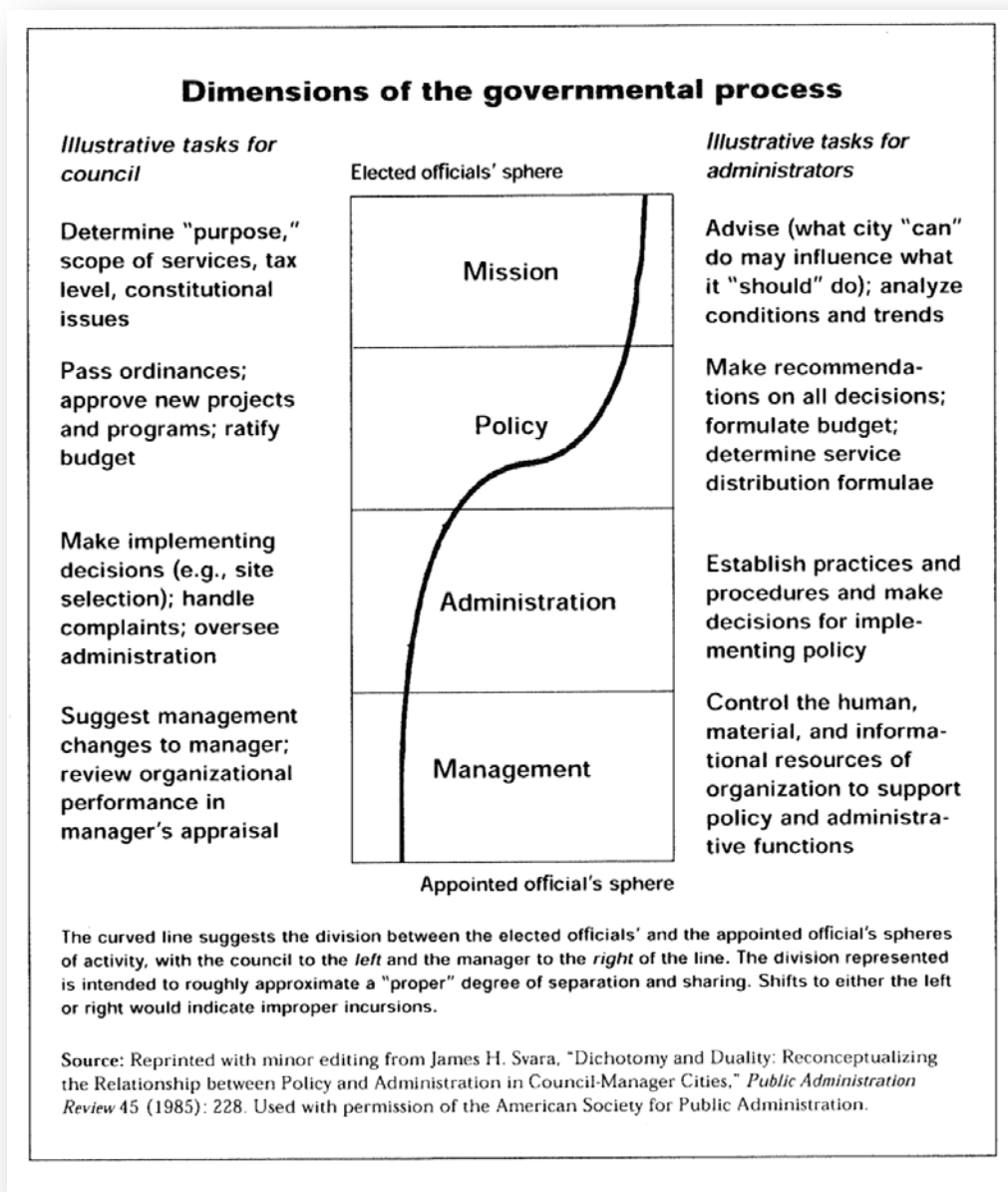
A shared understanding of the chief executive's role and the governing board's expectations optimizes the working relationship. This understanding is informed by local charter and ordinance provisions that provide the overall framework for the relationship.

- Within each agency's legal framework, the hiring process is a good opportunity for each participant in the process to be forthright about their respective expectations.
- An annual evaluation process is an ongoing opportunity for such communication, particularly as governing board members change.

Staff will be most able to perform to expectations if those expectations are clear and mutually acceptable.

## Role Division

Current thinking is that elected and appointed officials operate in all four dimensions of the governance process: mission, policy, administration and management, although to differing degrees.<sup>10</sup> The next graphic<sup>11</sup> illustrates this phenomenon. The curved line illustrates a typical division of roles between governing boards and executive staff.



## **Evenhandedness**

A positive working relationship with all governing body members regardless of personality, philosophy, positions on issues or whether the member is in the majority or minority on the body (remember majorities can change) can be another important success strategy. Communication preference may require that you spend more time with certain members. “Evenhandedness” does not necessarily mean communicating with all decision-makers in the same way.

## **A Sustained Effort**

Successful relationships require ongoing effort and attention. Communication is a central element of this effort.

- Staff’s role is to present information and analysis objectively, fairly and without spin.
- This includes willingness, when necessary, to deliver unwelcome information and minimize surprises for the governing board.

## **When Elected Officials Disagree with Staff Recommendations and Analysis**

Professionals recognize smart, conscientious and reasonable people can disagree on the best course of action (particularly given the differing perspectives that staff and electeds contribute to the analysis of what best serves the community’s interests).

- Such disagreements are not and should not be taken personally.
- All governing board decisions must be faithfully implemented, even those which differed from what staff recommended.
- Staff should never speak ill of elected officials, even to seemingly sympathetic and discreet listeners. Word of what was said inevitably seems to get back.

## **Attention to Detail**

Doing the small things well helps governing board members trust staff on the big items.

## Defining Success

Enjoying good relationships with elected officials is a worthy goal, with a few caveats.

- Be clear on the lines (legal, ethical and professional) over which you are not willing to step, before finding yourself in a difficult situation.
- As difficult as it may be, your professional reputation for competence and integrity in the long term is a more valuable career asset than keeping a particular job.

### Suggestions Welcome

This resource is a service of the Institute for Local Government (ILG) whose mission is to promote good government at the local level with practical, impartial, and easy-to-use resources for California communities. ILG is the nonprofit 501(c)(3) research and education affiliate of the League of California Cities and the California State Association of Counties.

For more information and to access the Institute's resources on Local Government 101 go to <http://www.ca-ilg.org/local-government-101>.

The Institute welcomes feedback on this resource:

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## Resources and References

<sup>1</sup> International City/County Management Association and National League of Cities, *Working Together: A Guide for Elected and Appointed Officials* (1999) at 22.

<sup>2</sup> International City/County Management Association, *Partnerships in Local Governance: Effective Council-Manager Relations* (1989) at 37 (chapter by by Kevin C. Duggan and Terry Ellis “Preparing Staff to Work with the Council”).

<sup>3</sup> Julia Novak and John Nalbandian, Preparing Councils for Their Work, *PM Magazine* (August 2009) available at <http://webapps.icma.org/pm/9107/public/feature3.cfm?author=Julia%20Novak%20and%20John%20Nalbandian&title=Preparing%20Councils%20for%20Their%20Work&subtitle=>

<sup>4</sup> Mike Conduff, ICMA-CM, A Great Retreat!, *PM Magazine* (April 2012) available at <http://webapps.icma.org/pm/9403/public/council.cfm?author=&title=Council%20Relations&subtitle=>

<sup>5</sup> Frank Benest, Ten New Rules for Elected Officials in Times of Economic Meltdown (2011) available at <http://www.ca-ilg.org/post/leadership-strategies-times-economic-meltdown>.

<sup>6</sup> Adapted from Jim Collins, *Good to Great in the Social Sectors*, 2005 at 19 (the “hedgehog concept”). Also recommended by Frank Benest in Ten New Rules for Elected Officials in Times of Economic Meltdown (2011) available at <http://www.ca-ilg.org/post/leadership-strategies-times-economic-meltdown>.”).

<sup>7</sup> From Mike Conduff, Council Relations, *PM Magazine* (June 2012), available at <http://webapps.icma.org/pm/9405/public/council.cfm?author=&title=Council%20Relations&subtitle=>

<sup>8</sup> Preparing Councils for Their Work, *PM Magazine*, available at <http://webapps.icma.org/pm/9107/public/feature3.cfm?author=Julia%20Novak%20and%20John%20Nalbandian&title=Preparing%20Councils%20for%20Their%20Work&subtitle=>

<sup>9</sup> This concept is part of the International City/County Management Association’s Code of Ethics:

Tenet 6. Recognize that elected representatives of the people are entitled to the credit for the establishment of local government policies; responsibility for policy execution rests with the members.

<sup>10</sup> *Working Together: A Guide for Elected and Appointed Officials* at 19-20.

<sup>11</sup> Based on the work of James H. Svara in “Dichotomy and Duality: Reconceptualizing the Relationship between Policy and Administration in Council-Manager Cities,” *Public Administration Review* 45 (1998): 228. This material is reproduced with permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.