

FEATURES

Those First Days Can Be (Well, Almost) Indescribable

A Checklist for the First 100 Days

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Starting a new job as a local government manager can be an extremely exciting and invigorating experience. You have spent time researching the community, preparing for the interview, negotiating a contract, and maybe even looking for a home in your new community. Have you given any thought to what you're going to do during those all-important first days on the job?

Just as with the first 100 days of a U.S. president's term, your first 100 days as a manager have great practical and symbolic importance. They offer a unique window of opportunity to establish relationships, set a tone, and identify expectations, both within the organization and in the community. You ought to take advantage of it.

I have been through this experience twice, gaining some valuable insights along the way, and have condensed what I've learned into these suggestions of do's and don'ts for the first 100 days as the new manager.

MEET INDIVIDUALLY WITH EACH COUNCILMEMBER

Even before your first day on the job, set up one-on-one meetings with each elected official. The quality of your interaction with these officials is a critical factor in determining how successful you'll be at your job, so the sooner you begin building these relationships the better.

Start your conversation by asking them about their goals and priorities for both yourself and the community: discuss their expectations as well as your own.

On an even more practical note, agree on the best methods of communication for routine events and emergency situations. Be sure to set regular monthly meetings with each elected official, not only as a means of providing information but, just as important, also to foster these relationships.

MEET WITH ALL EMPLOYEES

I cannot overemphasize how important it is for you to get to know your staff, and for your staff to get to know you. The sooner employees know you, your expectations, and your vision, the more likely you are to gain their trust and support.

Employees may be intimidated by the prospect of meeting "the boss." This is especially true for those who do not have the opportunity to interact with the manager regularly. You may even find, as I did, that some employees in the organization have never had a conversation with the manager.

As the new manager of Yorba Linda, California, I made it a priority from the first day to meet with every full-time and permanent part-time employee—more than 100 people in all—in one-on-one meetings. I started the meetings by asking them about their backgrounds, job responsibilities, and goals. We discussed what they liked about the organization and what was working well.

I concluded each meeting by asking what the employee would like to see changed and then discussing each of the changes they proposed. Some of the recommended changes I knew I could accomplish immediately,

while there were others that might be possible or would take some time. In either case, I told them what I was going to do, and I made sure to follow through.

Of course, some things I knew I could not change. These situations were perhaps the most challenging ones. It would have been easy to say, "Thanks for the suggestion," and leave it at that. I believe, however, that most employees will see this response as dismissive and indifferent. Instead, I simply told them it wasn't possible and honestly explained why.

The one-on-one meetings took more than six months to complete, but they were well worth the time and effort. Talking with the men and women who serve daily on the front line was a tremendous learning experience for me and a great way to assess the organization. Their individual perspectives were invaluable in helping me find out what was working well and what needed my attention, both immediately and over the long term.

More important, it was an important step in building a great team. I can't stress enough the value of gaining the trust of your employees by soliciting their input, fulfilling promises, and being honest about what you can and can't do.

REACH OUT TO COMMISSIONS AND THE COMMUNITY

The first days of a new manager are a time of transition for the entire community. Local groups and organizations will be anxious to know who you are and what to expect from you. Be proactive in reaching out to them. Just as with staff members, community groups can give you valuable information and perceptions about the effectiveness of the local government organization.

If you can, meet them on their own turf, to put them at their ease and to see at first hand what they're all about. This means getting out of your office and visiting service clubs, going to chamber of commerce meetings and events, and attending commission meetings, among other efforts.

MEET WITH MEDIA REPRESENTATIVES

Like it or not, media coverage is a fact of life. I recommend that, instead of viewing this relationship as adversarial, you work with members of the media to take full advantage of the opportunity they offer for delivering your messages to the community.

Establish an open line of communication as soon as possible by meeting with the reporters assigned to your city or county and, if possible, their editors. Be a source of information, not a barrier. Let them know who they can and should contact in your organization to get the information they need. Repeat this process as new reporters take over or as new media outlets start covering your locality.

WORK WITH THE SCHOOL DISTRICT

I believe that a significant component in fostering a great community is having a great school district, and vice versa. One of the keys to ensuring that both entities are the best they can be is for them to work together to identify and address common areas of concern. This requires a level of trust between the administrations and elected bodies of both organizations.

And this trust comes only through regular, face-to-face interaction. Schedule a meeting with the school-district superintendent early on to lay the groundwork. His or her support is critical to the success of this effort.

I have made this point a priority in both cities I have had the pleasure of serving as city manager. The result has been the forging of strong partnerships that have led to good decisions benefiting the entire community.

LISTEN

My husband is fond of saying, "Listening is important. That's why we have two ears and only one mouth." That's especially true for a new manager.

Every community has a history, stories, and values that are important to it. You can gain a great deal of insight into your new community by using your ears more than your mouth during your first 100 days. Listen to the anecdotes and traditions, make note of the important facts for future reference, and learn what you can from the experiences of others, both good and bad.

AVOID THE PHRASE “WHEN I WAS IN [PREVIOUS COMMUNITY], . . .”

It’s human nature to call on past experiences when dealing with similar situations in the present, especially when we start new jobs. Resist the temptation, however, to say, “In [name of community], here’s what we did to address this same issue.”

The reality is that, unless they specifically ask, the people in your new local government probably don’t want to hear how the last place handled an issue. Every community is, or at least considers itself to be, unique and doesn’t necessarily want to be the same as other communities.

By all means, use the experiences and ideas that you think will work in your new environment, but be sensitive to how you present them.

DON’T JUMP TO CONCLUSIONS

There are managers who are able to immediately make an accurate assessment of a community, situation, and/ or organizational issue. But most of us can’t do this. While it’s important to pay attention to your gut instinct, try not to jump to conclusions, especially as the new kid in town. Take a deep breath, do your homework, and then make your assessment.

BE RESPECTFUL OF PREVIOUS MANAGERS

It is not your place to criticize past administrations. What’s done is done, and no amount of finger-pointing, deserved or not, can change that. Your job during these first 100 days is to assess the organization as it exists today and to make changes to the areas you determine need changing.

Keep in mind that some day you, too, will be the “previous manager.” Being mindful and respectful of those who have served the community before you will go a long way toward ensuring this same level of respect for you when your tenure is over.

ENJOY THE JOB!

Your time as the new manager is an exciting one for you and your family. It also requires a significant commitment of time and effort to get up to speed, establish relationships, learn about the community, assess the organization, and accomplish the elected officials’ goals. Don’t forget also to take the time to enjoy the personal and professional rewards that come from your job.

I consider myself fortunate to have had the opportunity to serve as the new manager on two occasions. I learned a great deal each time and hope my advice will be of value to you when you find yourself in a similar situation.

My First Week as a City Manager...or What They Never Taught Me in “Next Generation” School

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Like many first-time local government managers, I dreamed about what my first day and first week at my new town would be like. It would go something like this: I’d meet with the mayor and staff members,

discuss moving forward together on the challenges facing the town, meet with the chamber of commerce, and have time to reflect on how I could best help the town meet its goals.

As it turned out, my new town— Fairfax, California—had one immediate and overriding goal: digging itself out of the mud. Three days before I began my job, on December 31, 2005, Fairfax was hit with a severe, early morning storm that flooded a good part of the town.



Mud from landslides and flooding inundated some roadways and carried vehicles along with the flood waters. The town clerk called me at home on New Year's Eve to tell me what had happened. The emergency operations center was opened after 3 a.m., and the town hall, police station, and fire station were flooded. Several businesses also were flooded, as were a large number of homes. Landslides sent muddy water and debris flowing onto the streets, flood waters lifted cars from their parking spots, and some cars landed on top of other vehicles.

I learned that a major volunteer effort was taking place, with neighbors pitching in to help other neighbors. Everyone was thankful that no one had been killed or injured—a miracle actually.

And, by the way, my new office was under water.

I absorbed this news with some shock but also with a determination that now, in a time of crisis, I wanted to help this town more than ever. I had not yet moved into the town limits, but I contacted the mayor and all council members that day and the next, asking them for an update on the situation and what needed to be done.

The day before I started in Fairfax, I went to a store in my old neighborhood and bought a few pairs of waterproof boots and a decent raincoat. I suspected that the stores in and around Fairfax would be out of rain gear, and it turned out I was right. A former city manager (who used to work in Marin County) told me that he always kept rain gear in the trunk of his car to use at a moment's notice. I used to laugh at this idea, but now I understand!

THE REAL FIRST DAY

So, on my first day with the town, I arrived to a recently flooded office. Files, boxes, and materials had been lifted off of the floor to keep them dry. The carpet was soaked with muddy water, and a very bad smell permeated the whole town hall. The vice mayor gave me a tour of the most hard-hit spots, and we visited three of the major landslides.



Sudden, devastating landslides affected half a dozen homes in Fairfax, California, leaving some residents without a place to live.

I had never seen anything like this before. Portions of houses had been inundated with mud, and some parts of houses had been detached from their main structures. Three residences were red-tagged, and several were damaged but still livable. Major damage occurred to a few bridges; one pedestrian bridge had become completely detached and carried downstream, and it was resting near town hall. Many years ago, town hall had been built over a creek, which probably seemed like a quaint idea at the time.

I chose to live in a home near town hall, and as early as the next morning, I heard contractors with water trucks and street sweepers cleaning the mud from the streets. This was our mini Katrina, and we were recovering as we knew how: working together and helping each other get our lives back together.

After my first day, I taped a Stephen Covey quote to my bathroom mirror, read it each morning, and let its message sink in before I left home to face the day's challenges: "The greatest risk is the risk of riskless living."

During that first week, I had the honor of giving our area's member of Congress a tour of the devastation. I was grateful for help from Fairfax's awesome staff because I was still learning my way around the town. We also gave tours to county supervisors, the county administrator, and representatives from one of California's U.S. senators.

The town's state assembly member also visited and spoke at that week's council meeting. That same week, Governor Schwarzenegger declared a state of emergency for Marin County. On the last day of my first week, I was interviewed by a major network news station for a Friday evening newscast. The segment was a human interest story about a person who walked into an extremely challenging first week on the job.

By the way, most of that week I wore those new boots and a pair of jeans. Working in a wet and muddy town hall did not require me to dress for success in the traditional sense.

The town code says that the town manager shall serve as the director of emergency services. I can honestly say that every day I am learning more and more of what that job entails. With the public works crew, I have been working with contractors to restore public buildings, to make certain that our roads and infrastructure are restored to safe conditions, and also to ensure that the many state and county agencies that we interface with are contacted for disaster assistance.

As I write this, Fairfax still awaits the federal declaration of a state of emergency so that residents and business owners can apply for financial relief and assistance through the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

LESSONS LEARNED?

I would tell any up-and-coming manager to be ready to set aside any preconceived notions of what life is as a manager. The keys to making the most of any new endeavor are keeping an open mind and having the flexibility, adaptability, and willingness to do whatever it takes to get the job done. Another is a readiness to accept a situation for what it is and assert appropriate leadership.

I have received a warm welcome from the town council, residents, and staff in this community, and I look forward to seeing the town through its recovery. I know that we as a community and as a local government organization will emerge stronger, with an even better ability to handle the long-term challenges we face.

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