

## **A Key Ingredient for Success: An Effective City Council/City Manager Relationship**

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### **Introduction**

Mayors and councilmembers need to have effective working relationships with a number of key audiences in order to successfully undertake their responsibilities. These audiences include citizens/voters, community groups, the press, other governmental agencies, other elected officials, nonprofit organizations and many more. However, critical to a successful and satisfying career on the city council in a city council/city manager form of government is a successful and effective working relationship with the city manager. This article suggests the necessary ingredients for a mutually successful council/manager working relationship.

### **The City Council/City Manager Form of Local Government:**

The "Council/Manager Form of Government" is designed for the elected city council to set policy direction as the direct representatives of the community with the city manager providing the professional expertise to manage the organization and carry out the council's direction. Policy direction is provided in a variety of ways, including through local laws/ordinances, planning policies (general plan and zoning), financial policies, the annual budget and capital improvement plan, the adoption of city council policies and through numerous other program directives.

The city manager is responsible for carrying out the council's policy direction through the day-to-day management of city functions, including the oversight of city operating departments. Key tasks associated with this role include the hiring and supervision of department heads, the recommendation and implementation of the annual budget and the assurance of quality service delivery. This form of government is predicated on the philosophy that elected representatives are better able to make community value judgments on behalf of residents and translate these values into policy direction—the "what" in city government. It is also based on the belief that professional staff are best able to determine the "how" of implementing policies and delivering day-to-day services due to their experience and training. Since both roles are closely related, it is the city manager's responsibility to coordinate between both realms to assure the effective delivery of services consistent with city council direction.

This is often referred to as the policy/administration dichotomy (the separation of these responsibilities)—which, oftentimes, has a good deal of "gray" on the boundaries. When it works most effectively, the elected officials focus on big picture of policy

development and minimize their role relating to administrative implementation while the staff works to avoid an undue influence on policy development while focusing on policy implementation and service delivery. While the line between the two can become blurred, the city council/city manager system is subject to failure if the line is disregarded.

If the city council and the city manager have an effective and mutually supportive working relationship, the likelihood of the policy and administrative roles being effectively coordinated increases significantly, resulting in a more successful city governance and management.

Among the issues to consider in trying to establish the best possible city council/city manager working relationship are the following:

- The relationship cannot be taken for granted and requires attention and work to establish and maintain. If not diligently pursued, it will not be accomplished.
- The work of city councils is not easy! Not only do you confront the typical challenges of group decision-making, but the "group" in this case may not have a great deal in common. Also, the issues can be weighty and controversial. The decision-making is also done in public, often on TV or the Web, scrutinized by the public and press, and anyone can join in on the deliberations.
- Among the factors that can get in the way of an effective relationship include:
  - Not understanding/appreciating/respecting each other's roles.
  - Differing philosophies.
  - Differing personalities.
  - Challenging issues.
  - External pressures from the media, community groups, employee organizations, etc.
- Fully appreciate that you need to establish a good working relationship with your fellow councilmembers and the city manager in order to maximize:
  - Organizational performance.
  - Organizational reputation.
  - Value to the community.

- Personal reputation.
- Community pride and confidence.
- Don't underestimate how important it is to a city manager to have a good working relationship with the city council. It has been reported that the relationship with the city council is the primary factor impacting a city manager's job satisfaction. Among the reasons for this are the following:
  - City councils are the source of formal performance feedback. Like almost everyone, positive feedback from supervisor(s) is very important.
  - City councils control the city manager's job security.
  - City councils determine the city manager's compensation.
  - City councils establish the city manager's "parameters of success."
  - City council support for the city manager, particularly during tough times, is of tremendous value.

**Recommended Practices:**

So while the stakes are high and the challenges significant, there are a variety of "best practices" and techniques that can improve the odds of your individual success as a mayor or councilmember, as well as the success of the city council and city as a whole.

The following are offered as ideas to consider in your efforts to establish and maintain a strong and effective working relationship with your city manager:

- **Recognize that you are now "different" than before you were elected (and more than you may realize):**

You are now viewed as a community/city leader and what you do and say can have a much greater impact. Your comments will now be viewed as representing "the city." What you do and say will also be more closely scrutinized. You should be aware that the city staff will view you much differently now that you are one of the organization's leaders. Even an offhand comment can be viewed as a directive for action. So even though you may not view yourself any differently than before you were elected, don't underestimate to what degree others are viewing you differently.

- **Understand and respect the city council/city manager plan of governance:**

It is critical for you to understand why your city is organized under this plan of governance and how it should operate. It is important to understand and appreciate- ate the distinction between policymaking and implementation and the different roles played by individual councilmembers, the city council as a whole, the city manager and the city staff.

- **Allow time for you and the city manager to get to know each other and develop a working relationship:**

Try not to overly rely on what you have heard from others regarding what it will be like to work with the manager—others' views may or may not be accurate. Most city managers understand the need to work very hard to adjust to the issues, concerns and priorities of the new city council. Try to be open-minded to your ability to establish a productive and effective working relationship with the manager.

- **City managers will do their best to carry out the policy direction of the city council (even when there is a major change in policy direction):**

Professional city managers are committed to carry out the policy direction of the city council regardless if they personally agree or disagree with the policy as long as what they are asked to implement is:

- Legal.
- Ethical.
- Within their/the city's authority.

It is often misunderstood that when a city manager effectively implements a city council's policy, the manager personally agrees with the policy or can only implement city services consistent with that policy. City managers can change the organization's approach to an issue as may be directed by a new city council. Avoid overly associating the city manager with the policies that the city has previously implemented at the direction of the previous council.

- **Take your role seriously, but not yourself:**

This common advice is particularly important for mayors and councilmembers. While you are doing important and serious work on behalf of the community, you will do it better and more effectively if you keep the normal "ups and downs" and "wins and losses" in perspective. You were elected to make tough decisions on

oftentimes controversial issues. It's a given that you will be criticized and there will be those who vehemently disagree with your decisions. That is unavoidable. Develop a thick skin and do your best to not take personally the conflicts and disagreements that are a normal part of your new role. If you don't develop a thick skin, you will overreact to criticism.

Additionally, you are now part of an organization and will be blamed/criticized for the actions of the organization that you had nothing to do with. That is the reality of your new role and you should keep that in mind.

And remember, the city manager is not always to blame when things go wrong, though he/she should take appropriate responsibility for the organization's actions. It can be easy to focus your frustration on the city manager. You will be happier and more effective if you can experience the normal "ups and downs" of city life without needing to always find someone at fault.

Whatever the issue or encounter, try not to take it personally. Try to keep personal likes and dislikes out of the equation. Your fellow councilmembers and the city manager are not your family or personal friends; they are your "professional colleagues," and you need to work effectively with them even if you would not select them as friends.

Lastly, always "live to fight another day." There are always future issues to decide; focus on those versus the votes already taken. And always remember not to burn bridges due to a difficult defeat; you will need those "bridges" for future votes!

- **Appreciate the legitimate difference between the "community perspective" and the "professional/technical" perspective:**

While you will primarily view issues from your perspective as a resident/citizen in a manner similar to the other residents of the community, the city staff will often have a more "technical/professional" perspective. What might make a great deal of sense to the staff looking at an issue from a purely "business" point of view may not be the right answer based on community perspectives and values. While the city manager will do his or her best to bridge the gap between the two points of view, it is very helpful for councilmembers to understand that while the staff should be sensitive to community values, they will often raise issues based on their professional training that can differ from a purely community values point of view. An appreciation for these varied perspectives is critical to the council-staff relationship. That does not mean the one perspective is "right" while the other is "wrong"; but both parties should try to understand and appreciate the views of the other.

- **Don't fall into the trap of feeling you are VERY special:**

While being elected to a city council is an honor bestowed upon you by the voters, keep that "honor" in perspective. Citizens view electing you as showing trust in your judgment in representing their interests in community decision-making. They did not elect you because they felt you were personally deserving of special rights and privileges. Don't expect the city manager or staff to be able to assist you in ways outside your formal role on the city council. By and large, they will be required to treat you just the same as any other citizen on matters outside the realm of your official duties. Any compensation and "perks" of office should be visible and public.

- **Professional city managers will not "play favorites":**

Professional city managers will strive to have a positive working relationship with all the members of the city council regardless of personality, philosophy or positions on specific issues. They will also not let personal likes or dislikes affect how he or she interacts with councilmembers, and you should not expect the manager to act otherwise.

- **It is critical to city managers to have clear policy direction:**

The city manager and the city organization cannot carry out the policy direction of the city council if that direction is not clearly established. The clearer the direction, the more effectively the manager and staff can implement. Even when the council is split on an issue, the majority's will needs to be clearly stated. The manager should seek clarification from the city council when necessary.

- **Be sensitive to the need for city managers to sometimes tell you "what you don't want to hear":**

One of the least favorite tasks for a city manager is to tell an individual councilmember or the council as a whole something they don't want to hear. This could range from a mistake the organization has made to informing a councilmember that something they want done (or want to do) cannot be done or is not appropriate. While city managers try to be as flexible as possible in meeting the needs of the city council, you will not be well served by a manager who will not tell you when something is not appropriate or cannot be achieved simply to avoid appearing uncooperative. While the manager needs to be clear why the request cannot be fulfilled, it is very helpful for you to understand that the manager has a professional obligation to give you advice contrary to what you would like to hear when he/she is so required.

- **Why managers can't always do what you want them to do:**

The manager can often be confronted with a situation of an individual council-member wanting something done that is not consistent with the wishes of the city council. The manager needs to respond to the direction of the city council as a whole. While managers try to be as responsive as possible to the needs/desires of individual members, on matters of any consequence, the direction of the city council will often be required.

- **Take your role to evaluate your city manager's performance seriously:**

Like any other employee, the city manager benefits from regular and thoughtful performance evaluations. Performance evaluations are an important communication tool between the manager and council. Working for multiple individuals is challenging enough without clear and consistent feedback on performance. At least annual evaluations should be conducted. This provides the opportunity to communicate how the council views the manager's performance, including areas of strength and areas for potential additional emphasis. This is also the only opportunity for the council as a whole to provide this input in private. Also, due to the inherent challenge of multiple individuals attempting to evaluate an individual who works for them as a group, the use of a consultant to facilitate the evaluation can be very helpful. If done right, evaluations can be a very valuable communication mechanism for the council and manager.

- **Tolerance for organizational imperfection (mistakes!):**

While no one likes mistakes, they are unavoidable in the context of organizational life. Cities are complex organizations dealing with a wide variety of services with unique and sometimes challenging clientele. It is not a matter of whether mistakes will be made, but when. It is critical as a leader of your city that you react to mistakes appropriately. While mistakes should be avoided to the greatest extent possible, overreacting can cause further damage. You should expect that mistakes will be addressed promptly, fully disclosed and that steps will be taken to avoid repeating the same mistakes again. You will need to trust the manager to follow up and effectively address the situation when organizational miscues occur. Have high expectations but recognize that mistakes will occur, even in the best organizations, and try not to overreact when they do.

- **Support of reasonable risk-taking:**

High-performing organizations will occasionally need to take "reasonable risks" in order to achieve community objectives. Sometimes these endeavors will not be successful. However, organizations that avoid ANY unnecessary risk are not likely to accomplish a great deal. While city councils need to be informed and concur that the risk being taken is reasonable for the potential benefit being

gained, councils should also be understanding that projects and initiatives that have inherent unknowns may not always turn out as hoped. Intolerance for any



mistakes/risk will breed an overly conservative organization and will stifle creativity and flexibility and the benefits these values can bring.

- **Try to focus feedback on service quality, not individuals:**

An ongoing challenge is the difficulty of reconciling the ultimate responsibility of the city council for city service quality versus the need to avoid interfering in the daily management of the organization. It is much better for the city council to communicate service level or quality concerns to the city manager versus performance judgments regarding individual staff members. It is particularly inappropriate for individual members or the council as a whole to try to direct the manager to hire, fire, or promote members of the city staff.

- **Don't expect managers to take sides in councilmember disputes:**

Regardless of how they may personally feel, most city managers will avoid, at all costs, "taking sides" in disputes between councilmembers. While on occasion the manager might try to help reconcile councilmembers, don't expect the manager to take your side in a dispute with a fellow member. Even if they may agree with you, most managers will avoid taking part in public or private criticism of councilmembers unless professionally required to do so in extreme cases.

- **Don't jump to conclusions regarding citizen/customer feedback:**

While it is your responsibility to be available to listen to citizen and customer feedback regarding the city organization, be careful not to jump to conclusions based on what you are told. Oftentimes an individual may sound completely sincere and credible while providing you an inaccurate account of their experience with the city organization. It is best to not jump to conclusions, one way or the other, until the manager is able to provide you a response to the concern. It is embarrassing to criticize staff for poor performance only to find out that the information you relied on was not accurate. At the same time, the manager needs to not be overly defensive regarding staff performance until he or she also has heard "both sides of the story."

- **Don't expect the manager to exercise "political leadership":**

While managers are inherently leaders of their organizations and, to varying degrees, in their communities, their role is not to be political leaders. That is, it is not intended for the manager to be "out front" on community policy issues. Sometimes city councils want managers to take leadership (advocate publicly) on controversial issues to avoid potential political consequences to themselves. While tempting, this is contrary to the intent of the council/manager form of government under which the elected officials are to take the lead on purely policy matters.

- **Disagree with the recommendation/don't attack the "messenger":**

When dealing with a difficult issue at a council meeting, it can be tempting to not only disagree with the recommendation being presented, but also to challenge/discredit the manager or staff member presenting the recommendation. The best practice is to focus your comments on the recommendation, not the individual. Having a policy discussion devolve into a personal attack is uncomfortable and embarrassing to everyone involved. Even if you are frustrated by the recommendation, it is poor form to attack the presenter. If you do have concerns regarding how a recommendation was developed or presented, that should be provided privately to the manager.

P.S.: Don't play "stump the staff" by trying to ask questions at the meeting that you think staff will have difficulty answering on the spot. It doesn't really make you look smarter, nor is it helpful to the deliberations to ask a question that cannot be answered. While staff members should work diligently to anticipate questions, it is not possible to anticipate all possible questions. If you really want the answer, get the question answered before the meeting or provide a heads up regarding what you will be asking.

- **Conduct yourself at council meetings in a professional/businesslike manner:**

Even on very controversial topics with greatly varying opinions, the council deliberation can be and should be "businesslike" and professional. While it may be more entertaining (possibly from a reality TV perspective) to see councilmembers and citizens yelling and having temper tantrums, it gets in the way of thoughtful deliberations and only tends to lower the respect for the council and city in the eyes of your constituents.

- **Consider the use of council team-building and goal-setting workshops:**

Recognizing the importance of both effective councilmember/councilmember and council/city manager working relationships, often an investment of time in team-building workshops is very worthwhile. These workshops allow for a thoughtful conversation of working relationships outside the context of discussing specific issues. These discussions can help create a better understanding of work styles and perspectives.

Additionally, recognizing that clear direction and priorities are critical for effective council/manager relations, goal-setting workshops can be very effective forums for establishing city council and organizational priorities.

- **Have a clear understanding with the manager of the type and frequency of communication you prefer:**

While a fundamental value of city managers is to provide regular and complete information equally to each councilmember, councilmembers can vary significantly regarding the type and frequency of contact with the manager they desire. While the manager will use written reports in one form or another as a base line of information to all the members, it is important for the manager to understand your preference for how information should be communicated, including the frequency of personal contact. While some members prefer regular "face-to-face" contact with the city manager, others prefer less time-intensive information-sharing methods. While sharing the same information among all councilmembers, it is helpful for you and the manager to understand how much and what type of contact you prefer.

- **Do your homework:**

It takes time and effort to be a successful councilmember. It makes the manager's and staff's job a lot easier if you have reviewed the reports and related materials provided to you prior to the city council meeting. This facilitates efficient meetings, accelerates decision-making and gives the impression that staff and council are working well as a team. Additionally, it will avoid you appearing unprepared to your fellow councilmembers, the staff and your constituents.

- **Trust above all:**

As in all relationships, an effective city council/manager relationship must be based on trust. Other potential obstacles such as differing personalities, styles, philosophies, etc., can be overcome if there is mutual trust. Without trust, little else will be successful. Both parties need to treat each other with respect and be truthful and forthcoming in their dealings.

- **No Surprises:**

Both the manager and council should do their best to make sure that important information is not first learned from others. While in this age of instant communication this is more difficult, and in some cases impossible, the parties should do their best to make sure that noteworthy information to which they are privy is not communicated to other organizational leaders by third parties (particularly the media). The manager needs to work hard to make sure that the council is not taken off guard while councilmembers should keep the city manager in the loop as well. "Surprises" can have a very negative impact on the working relationship in that it speaks directly to the trust issue.

- **Work through the city manager to get things done:**

While practice and philosophy can vary to some degree between cities, councilmembers should generally work through the city manager to obtain action by staff. Individual councilmembers are not authorized to direct staff, though routine referral of citizen requests (or to simply request information) is sometimes appropriate depending on local practice. Coordinating through the manager will make sure the issue is sent to the right staff person for action and will allow the manager to confirm timely follow-up. This also helps the manager stay informed regarding issues of community concern.

- **Council/Mayor Role:**

It is also important to make sure there is clarity between the council, the manager and the mayor on respective roles. At times there can be a conflict between the role the mayor views themselves as playing and the expectations of the remainder of the council. It is difficult if the manager gets caught in a dispute over these respective roles. In particular, how the city manager relates to the mayor versus the other councilmembers needs to be clear.

- **Don't blame the manager or staff for carrying out the direction of the city council:**

The city manager and staff are required to faithfully carry out the direction of the city council, regardless if they did or did not recommend it and regardless if some councilmembers oppose it. Respect the staff for faithfully carrying out the will of the council, whether or not you share the view of the council majority.

- **If the council/manager relationship is not going well:**

If you or the council are having difficulty with the city manager, try your best to resolve the issue. First of all, find an appropriate way to communicate the concerns. The manager can't respond if he/she is not aware of the concern. As noted earlier, try to obtain clear council consensus for the expectations for the manager and communicate those expectations clearly. Try to be optimistic regarding the possibility of the manager making adjustments to satisfy the concerns of the council and give sufficient time to do so. Additionally, provide the manager opportunities to respond to the feedback and communicate how he/she will address the concerns.

- **If all else fails and there needs to be a "parting of the ways":**

A forced separation of the manager is not a good experience for the council, the manager or the city. It can be costly, controversial and can cast everyone in a negative light. It can also erode citizen confidence in the city. Assuming all

reasonable steps have been taken to avoid a forced transition and recognizing a parting based on "irreconcilable differences" is always better than an "ugly, contested divorce" (in an "ugly divorce," both parties end up looking bad), keep the following in mind:

- Keep it professional.
- Don't unnecessarily damage the manager's reputation—it is not needed to make a change.
- Provide a reasonable period of time for the manager to find another position or provide reasonable severance—it takes time to find a manager's job.
- Remember, how you handle the transition of the current manager will have an impact on the quality of the candidate pool for the next manager.

### **Summary/Concluding Thoughts:**

An unstable council/manager relationship has negative consequences for the city council, the manager, the organization and the community. A positive and mutually supportive relationship will increase the odds of having a high-performing and successful city. Councilmembers and the manager need to make creating, supporting and sustaining the relationship a high priority. If made a high priority, the odds of success are great.

Remember that your service on the city council is a unique honor that has been bestowed on you by your fellow citizens. While it is often a challenge, with inherent difficulties, someone needs to do it and your community has selected you for that responsibility. You have been selected to serve in a professional and honorable manner, during good times and bad. Your service on the city council will be over soon enough. Conduct yourself in a manner that will allow you to look back with pride—not only for what you accomplished, but also the way in which you conducted yourself (which will likely be remembered the longest).

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