



5 Priorities A New Local Government Leader Must Focus On

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Whether you're a brand-new local government leader or an experienced manager taking on a new role, the first weeks on the job are full of opportunities to establish relationships and communicate priorities. A new manager can set the tone of his or her tenure for years to come with early choices, so concentrate on these priorities as you're settling in.

1. BUILD RELATIONSHIPS.

The policy issues and operations are important, but the most important thing is to begin building relationships. They are the key to success, so spend adequate time creating and nurturing them. It's smart for a new city or county manager to walk through the entire administrative building on the first day and show up at police stations, community centers, maintenance facilities and other employment centers—without an entourage—in the first weeks (or months, depending on the size of the government). This communicates to employees that their work is at the heart of the organization.

On the first day meet with department heads and senior staff, establishing the ground rules and answering their questions. Proceed to elected officials and their staffs, other managers, employee representatives, and boards and commissions. As you settle in, meet with as many community organizations and interest groups as your schedule allows. Explain your priorities and stress that your office is open and accessible. This will take a lot of time, but it will be worth it.

2. CHOOSE CHANGE CAREFULLY.

A new manager often wants to put his or her stamp on the organization and fix mistakes of the past. But it's worth it to spend a little time getting to know the government as it exists and reassure employees before introducing too much change. A good leader instinctively knows, when taking the reins, that the starting point has to be respect for the people, the organization and the way work is done, and that every change must be well thought out before being implemented. Changing policies or people just for the sake of change is a bad idea.

3. KNOW AND ARTICULATE A CONSISTENT SET OF VALUES.

Beyond the everyday policies and workloads, every professional manager needs to have central principles that guide the work of the team. Some examples:

- Department heads and senior staff act not as free agents but as the city manager's representative, especially



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when interacting with elected officials and the media.

- Managers are expected to work collaboratively, making important decisions only after consulting with the other managers who work will be affected.
- Continuous improvement is the goal of every manager, which requires a positive tone and a constructive environment.
- Be clear about the core values the first day on the job and reinforce them throughout all the work of the organization during your tenure.

4. SPEND TIME WISELY.

There are three things to spend time on: people, general management and policy issues. While the balance between these elements varies with the scale and complexity of the government, each of these three dimensions of the role are important. To get the right balance requires a first-rate staff that is well-organized and functions like clock-work.

5. BALANCE INTERNAL AND EXTERNALS NEEDS.

The internal world is the operation of the executive branch of government, the administration. The external world is the mayor and council, the press, the community and other entities external to the government. To be effective, you need to organize so you can effectively lead in both worlds. That means you need staff support to get things done that you want to do. The best leaders are constantly delegating work to others, especially staff members whose work they control, do instead of taking on the work themselves. The goal is always to increase the leverage of your time, working through others.

There are other issues that will arise and other priorities that will become prominent as a new leader settles in. An organization review or management system review of the government can equip an incoming manager with a 360-degree look at the organization, and most first-time managers will benefit from executive coaching. But these few principles are important from day one, for rookies and veterans alike, to set the right tone for a successful tenure.



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