

BY KATY SIMON HOLLAND, ICMA-CM

HOW WE LEAD MATTERS

10 rules for working constructively with governing bodies

After a 25-year career in public administration, capped off with 15 years as the county manager of Washoe County, Nevada, I ran for and was elected to the county's school board in November 2016.

I ran for this position because I thought I could be of help. The school board had committed three Open Meeting Law violations in 18 months. The 104 school facilities in the county had fallen into disrepair as a result of inadequate capital funding.

Many members of the community were frustrated with the appointment of an in-house superintendent with a compensation package valued at more than \$300,000 and a hiring process that did not include an open competitive process. Plus, our state was ranked 50th in the U.S. in educational achievement.

I believed that my training and management experience could be helpful to students, community members, and state legislators. Having successfully served almost 20 extremely different elected county commissioners in those 15 years, some with challenging agendas, I believed I could help support my fellow school board members, the city-manager-equivalent superintendent, and the staff in a new, positive, shared direction.

Not So Fast

Despite having been a staff member for decades and coming into what I hoped would be an atmosphere of helpful collegiality after I was elected, I was quickly confronted with important opportunities to learn—opportunities that will continue throughout my term.

I have since recognized that my curiosity about how things are done

and why they are done the way they are, came across early on as meddling, questioning, and micromanaging. I came to find that the gaps in shared understanding and shared expectations of what is direction and what is information gathering are at best a drain on productivity and at worst a chasm of frustration.

As a result of what I've learned as a manager and now as a school board member, I want to share what I believe are the top 10 rules for public sector CEOs in helping to constructively support elected governing bodies. Managers are the individuals who own the task of setting the conditions for effective elected official and staff relationships. They also are the ones who succeed or fail largely based on how well those relationships are managed.

Here are my leadership tips:

Separate the past from the present and the future. Elected officials may be brand new, or they may be continuing to serve. Either way, managers owe it to them to start fresh every meeting, every week, every day, and not hold on to what may have happened in the past. Work together to treat each interaction and each decision as a new opportunity for each person to do her or his best.

Clarify purpose before starting to work on clarifying expectations. Invite the dialogue as early as possible in the relationship with each member. Ask them about their vision, their values, their goals, why they ran for an elected position, and what particular talents and experience they hope to be able to contribute. Then share with them your vision, values, and purpose.

Hold off trying to establish expectations with members until you've had the purpose conversation with each one, in case you risk being misunderstood as trying to control the board or council.

Facilitate an early discussion and agreement between the elected governing body and the senior staff on the elected officials' role, which is informed oversight, and the staff's role, which is to manage the day-to-day operations and to support effective decision making by elected officials. Establish a time and an appropriate forum to develop mutual communication protocols.

Ask the elected officials what support they want from the manager and the staff and how best to provide it. How would "informed oversight" look on a day-to-day basis, versus micromanagement? How will we know when we are doing it right?

Model the kind of engagement you want to have. Set the tone of collegiality, mutual respect, collaboration, and integrity. Be the first to reach out, initiate communication, and request to schedule individual time with each member.

Build trust by demonstrating respect to all staff, elected officials, and residents, particularly when they are not present. Everyone watches how you behave, and if you talk poorly about people who are not present, others who are present may suspect that you talk about them when they are absent, too.

Step up to acknowledge and offer to help resolve any conflicts between elected members and staff. The staff reports to you as the manager, and members must respect that. The caveat for that respect is that you own the responsibility to manage conflicts effectively—not the board chair, not the mayor, not the president.

Don't rush to jump in if issues can be resolved, but remember that most of us are not well-skilled at conflict

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resolution, and offering to assist and being accountable for members' problem solving go a long way to constructive interactions.

Resist the temptation to get defensive about the staff's performance. Assert their expertise and professionalism when it is warranted, but listen first to understand complaints and concerns before trying to be heard defending them.

Keep elected members well informed and frequently updated. Provide quick highlights every week of not only your activities and those of staff, but also accomplishments and results toward goals. This can also be shared with candidates and other members of the public to reinforce transparency and accountability and build future relationships.

Make your thinking visible. Ensure that you and staff members "reverse engineer" how you got to the answer you came to, and provide the key points of relevant background for all recommendations and staff reports. Clarify your reasoning in how you got to the conclusion that you are now proposing.

Always push yourself and staff to provide realistic alternatives that offer both pro and con arguments, and clarify why you are recommending one option over all others. If a vendor agreement is proposed for approval, who else submitted a proposal? What were the review criteria? Who participated in the review? Why did you rule out other options?

When a senior staff member and I recently sat down over coffee after several tense exchanges in which he felt I was inappropriately questioning his professional judgment, I shared my perspective with him: "Your job is to make your reasoning visible to me, and my job is to make my reasoning visible to you and to the public."

When I said that, he immediately understood and said that a light bulb truly went on for him in clarifying why I was asking the questions.

Provide formal status reports that are regular, frequent, relevant, concise, and easily understandable. Being an open book of information on progress, obstacles, barriers, and results is the most important way to build trust. Simple one-page matrix status reports on key strategic goals, initiatives, and projects should be provided at least quarterly and should include:

- Issues and challenges.
- Key activities to support the goal during the most recent reporting period.
- Trend of measurable performance compared to goal; ideally in a visual format, perhaps using green/yellow/red to signify on track/at risk/behind schedule.
- Decisions and key tasks planned for the next reporting period to include what you need from the governing body, along with what you are doing to address the projects at risk or behind schedule.

At least annually, ask for the elected governing body members to evaluate how well staff members are providing the support the elected officials need. While it's important for this to be a part of your performance appraisal as a CEO, it's also valuable to make it a separate topic of continuous improvement. This can be done via a simple one-page survey, which addresses the key factors that you and the elected officials have agreed upon as staff's role (see the third tip on page 22).

Work on continuously improving authentic relationships with each individual elected member of the governing body. We all know the importance of providing information to all elected members equally and concurrently. The same goes for positive, constructive, and healthy working relationships. They have to be addressed individually and consistently with each person, with consideration for how the

relationship you have with each elected member appears to all the others.

The End Result

As you make your thinking visible to your elected bosses, you will find that trust and mutual satisfaction will grow. There will be less inclination for elected governing body members to want to second guess staff and less temptation to micromanage, which is not in their or the organization's best interest. **PM**



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You turned on everyone's search engine, and you now have a room full of people seeking ways to *do* the impossible, instead of simply declaring it to be impossible. **PM**



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