Your First Year On the Job: Conceptualizing New Directions

George Caravalho

What do I do now? Where do I start? How do I get things done? These are some of the questions I asked myself when I was appointed to my first job in 1980, as city manager of San Clemente, California. Standing at the cusp of my new adventure, I felt a great sense of achievement and excitement, but I was also anxious about being in a foreign place with so many unknowns.

While a new manager is expected to be an instrument of change, change also may be wreaking havoc on the new manager's life, and he or she may not even be aware of it.

But now, as I am acclimatizing to my fourth city as a manager, I am able to look at the opportunity of beginning work at a new local government, not with apprehension but rather with the certainty of its being a promising new venture, a blank slate, a tabula rasa that can be used to be creative and develop a fresh strategy for successful management.

This is not to say that the transition will be easy, even for a seasoned executive like myself. Too often overlooked is the personal side of a manager's move to a new community. While undertaking the move, a new manager will face challenges in meeting new people, encountering a new organization, merging into new cultures and styles, as well as learning different issues, structures, dynamics, neighborhoods, and too many other people and activities to list here.

There are the family considerations, like schooling for the children, temporary housing, buying and selling a home, and the spouse or partner's career. All these important considerations, while still struggling through the sometimes treacherous and tumultuous first few months on the new job.

Conventional wisdom says that a new manager will be an agent of change, a person coming into the management position with the will and means to steer the locality in a new direction, like the sturdy captain at the helm of a ship, looking singularly forward and in total control.

And while this may very well be true, what must be recognized is the fact that a new manager is also an object of change. The high levels of stress, the demand for the manager's time from all sides, and unfamiliar social relationships all have a pronounced impact on a new manager. Thus, while a new manager is expected to be an instrument of change, change also may be wreaking havoc on the manager's life, and he or she may not even be aware of it.

This is not a prophecy of doom; it is only a statement of reality. This reality can be dealt with effectively if the proper steps are taken. A well-considered plan for the future—a personal and family "vision"—can aid in reducing personal stress and tension because, with the support of people around the manager, at home or in the workplace, great things can be accomplished. So long as the manager keeps his or her head high and focused, the ship will stay on course, even if it has sprung leaks and is taking on water.

The Driving Forces

But how can this be accomplished in a brand-new place? How can the support of others, whom a new manager barely knows, be garnered to bring about the changes the manager was installed to make? This is after all the challenge of the job: to foster communication and understanding and mutual support among various groups. To achieve this goal, a process must be undertaken that is both inclusive and broad-based. The process requires a style of reaching out and listening and taking in the character, aspirations, and values of the organization, the community, and its people, then using this information to devise initiatives that will be supported.

A manager is in search of a "syzygy." This an astronomic term that means an alignment of three celestial bodies. In local government, these three bodies are the community (voters), the political body (council), and the city or county organization (employees). The goal of a manager is to orchestrate these three entities so they are all moving in the same direction.

To obtain a syzygy in my own communities, I implement these 10 points:

1. The change "process." Successful leadership requires the awareness and understanding that change itself is a paradox within human nature. [1] Humans are constantly trying to further changes that they feel are important while resisting the changes that others are trying to implement. Thus, to have the greatest success in bringing about change, you must have others buy into it. They must take ownership of your changes.

Timing is a factor in bringing elected officials a plan and strategy that is supported by the majority both of management and of the community. But this result comes with scar tissue and experience. Sorry.

To achieve this, you must involve others in the creation of the changes and make them feel as though they are a part of the driving force behind them. Accepting change becomes easier when a person is included in the process of making suggestions or modifying initiatives. In this way, everyone feels as though they have had a hand in making the future.

Change is also an evolutionary process.[2] When new groups, boards, or associations initially gather, they go through a developmental process. At each stage of the process, certain characteristics become more pronounced within the dynamic of the group.

First is the "cheery bliss" stage, an introductory period wherein individuals are introduced and welcomed and no controversial issues are brought forth. Everyone is trying to see where their new place will be in the changing organization.

Second is the "insecure vulnerability" stage, at which, following the initial congeniality, individuals begin jockeying for position and struggling for power. This activity can be volatile and unstable, and it is difficult to navigate through, as the viability of the group may be threatened.

Third is the "level-headed settlement" stage, at which, after all the new niches have been found and the organization has begun to function as a team again, significant progress can be made toward implementing the changes that the group has, ideally, won support for.

Understanding the dynamics of change will greatly enhance your ability to bring about constructive improvements.

2. Bringing others along with you. The progression for undertaking a new strategic direction begins, for a new manager, during the interview process, with the mayor and council, for example. The interview process is an opportunity to explore the receptivity of the legislative body to new initiatives by outlining the concepts and steps that would be taken and by gaining a commitment for their support and involvement.

It is important for both the policy-making board and the executive to understand and appreciate that they both have a great deal of control over their joint destiny and that both have the ability to severely impede

the progress of the local government, if their efforts are not effectively communicated and coordinated. To make this delicate situation viable, both the executive and the policy board must develop leaders who will make use of and optimize their constituents' ideas, talents, and creativity.

Leadership is the process of bringing along others who are unwilling or who lack the motivation, understanding, or confidence to achieve great things for the community. Through working together, building on strengths, and establishing a strategic direction, many successes are possible in a relatively short time.

3. Conceptual understanding. A vision for the future is originally generated in the community. This vision is then implemented through policy leadership. Through consulting with the community, both on an individual and on a collective basis, an image of the aspirations and priorities of the people the manager will serve will begin to come into focus.

Attendance at community, service club, and various business meetings will enhance a manager's understanding of the community's vision for the future. An excellent first step for a new manager is simply to orient himself or herself with the community by driving and walking around the neighborhoods, business complexes, and parks.

Also, recognize that the elected officials and management staff are knowledgeable sources of information about the community. Their input needs to be included in the process of conceptual understanding in order to further develop a new direction.

4. Citizen involvement. Local government structure has become a far more participatory process than it used to be. There are more external forces and interest groups that feel they must be heard and consulted on various issues. Thus, it is essential that the process include opportunities for suggestions to be made and feedback to be collected from the public.

This vital process may be more important than the actual issues because the buy-in and support of others is what will see policy implementation through. Surveys, focus groups, and strategic planning sessions can all be helpful in soliciting feedback and support from the public. A solid working relationship with these external forces is critical to the success of a new manager's assimilation into a new community and to the credibility of its initiatives.

5. Intrajurisdictional collaborations. Mobilizing a community to accomplish ambitious programs calls for a collaborative approach. No one department, entity, or unit will be able to solve the complex issues that a city or county faces daily. Community-based organizations (CBOs), schools, business associations, and other government organizations need to work together to develop plans and strategies to accomplish their common goals.

The problem of youth violence, for example, should be tackled by a coalition of groups—schools, police, county social services, parks and recreation, the district attorney, and parents—to have the best impact. The efforts of any one of these organizations and individuals, no matter how good the intentions, will fail unless all work together.

Success in transforming the culture of an organization, while simultaneously meeting the expectations of the governing body, community, and one's own family, can be a daunting undertaking. Stress, which will probably become most acute during the "insecure vulnerability" stage, can make a new manager question his or her chosen station in life.

6. Visioning. The route to developing a new direction is a collective progression. A vision in the mind of one executive is not enough to carry the day. The vision must be a collective image in the minds of all those involved as to where they are headed and what their mission is all about.

A new vision requires the commitment and acceptance of many groups: nonprofits, neighborhood groups, unions, elected officials, mid-management staff, and others. Their involvement will energize and mobilize people in all areas and at all levels to take ownership of the new direction.

Vision is powerful because it acts as a tractor beam, pulling everyone in the same direction, and channels all of theior combined will, talent, and creativity toward accomplishing their goals. It also provides something to point to and hang onto when turbulence is encountered and the goals are challenged.

7. Economic considerations. Often, the implementation of a new vision will require new programs, equipment, and personnel, so it is important to be realistic as to the feasibility of new initiatives. Attention must be paid to external trend data that will affect a manager's choices, and internal financial information must be closely examined to gain an overall perspective of the economic strength of the community.

This information should be used to prepare and support budget instructions to department heads for the coming year. In many instances, the budget will have a significant influence on the implementation and success of a newly adopted vision.

8. Multiple municipal "businesses." Local governments operate under fund accounting systems whereby funds are all specifically designed for a certain purpose. This means, in short, that a manager runs multiple businesses! So if someone were to ask, "How is the city doing financially?" the answer would be, "It depends on which business you're talking about." Water? Redevelopment? Streets? The refuse fund?

Or what about the general fund? There may be 15 or 20 or even more "businesses" that, for the most part, are financially independent of one another. If one of the underachieving businesses is the general fund, however, this could be an especially serious problem because much of the money for personnel and services comes from this fund.

The conceptualizing process needs to be an educational process both for the new executive and for the citizens to learn the workings of the government, so they can best effect their desired results.

9. Strategic thinking. Hockey player Wayne Gretzky, when asked to describe his style of play, said, "I skate where I think the puck is going to be."

What does this statement mean? What perspective and talent does it take to make a statement like this? Most obviously, it requires the ability to anticipate, to position oneself in the future, to think strategically. To do this successfully, a player (or a manager) must know many things: his team, his opponent, the rules for the environment in which he is operating. And, all the while, he must maintain momentum and constantly adjust to new obstacles and opportunities.

Taking advantage of all this knowledge and maintaining this momentum is the essence of gaining a strategic advantage. All of these points can be applied to management, as it is the leader who can successfully visualize and anticipate the future who is most successful.

10. Bringing it together. Now, if everything has gone incredibly well and the "celestial bodies" in the community's universe are all moving into place, how does a manager seal the deal? By going through the process, a manager may see a plan that was once abstract and amorphous begin to take shape and gain clarity.

Timing is a factor in bringing elected officials a plan and strategy that is supported by the majority both of management and of the community. But this result comes with scar tissue and experience. Sorry.

Success in transforming the culture of an organization, while simultaneously meeting the expectations of the governing body, community, and one's own family, can be a daunting undertaking. Stress, which will probably become most acute during the "insecure vulnerability" stage, can make a new manager question his or her chosen station in life.

By noting these 10 points and developing a sense of the big picture, a new manager will be able to understand the wants and needs of a community and be able to present a coherent plan and strategy to

achieve a desirable future. Through the alignment of the community, political body, and local organization, the elusive syzygy can be established, unleashing the full potential of a local government.

[1] "This Thing Called Change," a nine-minute video by Cally Curtis Co.; 1-800/344-6088.

[2] The discussion of stages is based on *Stages of Group Development* by Bruce W. Tuckman, Ohio State University; Web site, http://web.mit.edu/hr/oed/learn/teams/art_stages.html.

George Caravalho is city manager, Riverside, California. This article was written with the assistance of Joseph "Gus" Caravalho, a political science and English major at the University of California at Davis.