

The following articles, geared toward new city councilors, are reprinted from the July 1992 issue of Virginia Town & City, a publication of the Virginia Municipal League.

Understanding Council, Manager Roles Will Aid Your Locality

by Joseph A. Leafe

The first thing that must be said in exploring the subject of council-manager relations is that there is no specific formula to define the relationship. All communities, all councils and all managers have their own personality, and their differences make each relationship somewhat unique.

Even with this caveat, exploring this unique relationship in the following three areas still can be useful. First, examine the role of each; second, examine the relationship of the council as a body to the manager; and third, examine the relationship between the manager and individual council members.

Rather than a detailed analysis of the job description of the typical local government manager or a detailed examination of the powers and responsibilities of a council, I prefer to apply a more narrow approach. Simply put, if it involves the establishment or modification of policy, it is the responsibility of the council. On the other hand, if it involves the implementation of policy (i.e., the operation of a government in accordance with the council's policy), it is the responsibility of the manager.

In most instances the issue of responsibility is clear-cut and automatic, but in others the answer is not so clear. In those fuzzy situations, I believe the question of policy or implementation is the right question and the answer, whichever way it is decided, will generally avoid any controversy. This is, of course, assuming that both the council and the manager are participants in the process.

The second element involves the relationship between the council and the manager as distinct from the role of each. The council has the ultimate responsibility to hire and fire the manager and thus becomes the final authority. The key to a successful relationship is not built on this ultimate

power of council but rather on a relationship of mutual respect that recognizes the distinct role each plays.

The council has the right to expect that its policies will be carried out by the manager, and the manager should be accountable for implementation. By the same token, if the manager is to be held accountable, he or she needs to have sufficient latitude to do the job. Council has to resist the temptation to micro-manage and dictate to the manager how the job should be done. This is not always easy, as all of us have our own ideas that we tend to think are a little better than the other person's.

The council also needs to be sure that its policy is being clearly articulated. Whether the policy is derived from a majority vote or the building of a consensus position, the manager is entitled to know the council's policy. The

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manager should not be left to interpret policy from the separate views expressed by the individual council members; this leads to more misunderstandings than anything else I know.

Most elected officials are good advocates for their particular position and certainly need not give up their position because it does not represent the majority view. On the other hand, in the council-manager relationship, it is necessary to recognize the differences between council policy, which the manager needs to follow, and positions held by individual council members. By the same token, council members do have the right to expect that managers

will faithfully implement the policies of council and not their own or that of any individual council member.

Another issue is the need for periodic evaluation of the manager's performance. If the manager is to perform at the level expected by the council, he or she not only needs to know what is expected but also whether the council believes its expectations are being met.

Most of us have a tendency to want to avoid unpleasantness, and thus a natural reluctance to discuss deficiencies and unmet expectations. Good communication will solve many problems as often things are not as they appear, and a discussion of the issues will preclude the build-up of unnecessary tension. Mutual respect also is enhanced when the council takes time to give credit for a job well done if that is the case.

The third area of council-manager relations is, I expect, the areas where most problems originate. That is the relationship between individual council members and the manager. Again, this is an area that depends so much on individual personalities and attitudes that no formula is available.

I do, however, have several observations that might provide some guidance. From the very beginning, again the real need for open communication exists. This is easy to say but not always easy to do for a variety of reasons. New council members when first elected have the euphoria of approval from the voters and a feeling that they can now make things happen. Deep inside most realize they don't really know much about council operations. They think they are supposed to, however, so they are hesitant to ask questions because it may indicate how much they don't know.

On the other side, the manager has a new player on the team of bosses, possibly has watched this new member

wage a campaign against current policy and maybe even has some concern for the continued viability of his or her job. None of these factors lead to open communication.

I expect in most cases the relationship between a new council member and the manager is determined in the first 60 days after the council member takes office. Both parties need to be willing participants in the process and at the same time sensitive to the special concerns of the other.

Beyond the issues of communication and mutual respect are a variety of do's and don'ts that will avoid undue heartburn. Number one is for council members to read materials provided by the manager. You have the right to expect timely and accurate information, but nothing is more frustrating to a manager than to have provided information and then have a member of council begin asking questions that demonstrate clearly it hasn't been read. This makes the manager think why bother and demonstrates to all in attendance that the council member hasn't prepared.

On the other side, the one thing council members don't like are surprises. No council member likes to hear something from the media or be confronted with a sensitive issue in a council meeting based on information the

manager has and could have communicated but didn't. No one likes to be blindsided.

Another underminer of council-manager relations is the secret source of information that is used by a council member to challenge or undermine the manager's stated position in public sessions. Akin to this is securing information from the manager or administration and using it as the basis for a preemptive strike against the manager or another member of council.

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Both tend to inhibit greatly the free flow of information and develop unnecessary attention. While council members don't want surprises from their manager, the manager is human, too, and doesn't want a surprise from you.

Another area of caution relates to personnel. This particular caution may apply more to council members who have served for some time rather than new members. While we all recognize

in theory that control of personnel belongs to the manager, continuous effort is needed to resist the temptation either to tell an employee what to do or to reprimand someone for not doing the job the way you think it should be done. This is another one of those human tendencies that comes from holding a position of authority, but one that must be resisted for all the obvious reasons.

Finally, maintain your sense of humor. It is amazing how an occasional moment of laughter can relieve tension and keep us from taking ourselves too seriously.

If both the council and manager understand their roles, if there is open communication with mutual respect on both sides, your local government will have in place the relationship that can provide maximum benefit to your citizens.

About the Author

Joseph A. Leafe has a long history of elected service. He served in the Virginia House of Delegates from 1972 to 1980 and then went on to serve as a member of Norfolk's city council. He was elected mayor of Norfolk in 1984 and served in that capacity until this year. He has served on the Virginia Municipal League's executive committee since 1988, rising to the rank of third vice president.

Effective Councils Require Teamwork

by Linda C. Winner

Most council members, as well as county board members, are elected to office because they have mastered the skills necessary to be effective leaders. These skills include building relationships, making decisions effectively, defining and explaining a vision and goals and working with others as a team member.

Once elected, every council member must test these skills with the other members of his or her own council. Interactions will vary from year to year depending on the individual personalities, the skills and needs of the council members, the council's relationship with the manager, pressure from special

interest groups, the issues facing the council and many other factors as well.

Working Together

When asked what factors make a difference between council members who work well together and those who do not, members from large, small, urban and rural communities identified these following basics:

- Take a good look at your self. Your assumptions about yourself and your situation affect your ability to communicate with others – how you see, hear, evaluate and understand people and issues.
- Be willing to listen to others.

- Take care to express yourself clearly, checking to be sure others understand your statements and stands on issues.
- Adhere to the established code of ethics and conduct.
- Subject your conduct to self-scrutiny and periodic evaluation.
- Respect others' skills and attitudes.
- Keep an open mind.
- Disclose yourself to others openly and freely. Some say we understand only as much of ourselves as we are willing to communicate to others. The more you know about one another, the more efficient and effective your communications will be.

The Team Approach

An underlying premise is that members of council want to work together in a team effort. Most council members agree that the team approach depends on an attitude of "We're all in this together." Being a part of the team does not mean losing one's individuality or refraining from expressing individual concerns. It does mean recognizing the value of the other "selves" who make up the whole.

Legally the council is the authority and members have no individual authority. Thus, only by reaching decisions together can individual council members exercise their authority.

Team Development Stages

Effective councils do not spring full-grown from a collection of individualistic and competitive persons. Like all groups, councils go through fairly predictable phases to reach fully shared responsibility. These phases, if not understood, can be so nerve-racking that all real hope of working together effectively is abandoned too early. An appreciation of each phase and the group issues that will be paramount can help council members to be more effective.

Inclusion is the focus in the early stage of a group. Members spend a great deal of energy on issues such as expectations, roles and responsibilities, boundaries, rules and operating procedures. These concerns must be answered before the group can move on to deal effectively with its work.

Control is the focus of the next stage. Members move from overly cautious, polite inclusion to focus on issues of influence, control of information and autonomy. Subgroup alliances are formed, and confrontation occurs as individual members deal with whether they will have sufficient influence on the issues. This stage is energetic and vital, and some fighting is necessary to heighten investment in the group.

Shared responsibility is the hallmark of the third stage. In this phase both individual uniqueness and collective effort

are valued. Trust is high, and the group is truly dedicated to its overarching goals, willing to both confront and support one another. This is the stage to which councils should aspire.

Moving through these stages does not occur overnight. Too often councils become "stuck" in an early stage, and events like new members on council mean stages will be re-visited.

Teamwork . . .

- ⊙ requires an understanding and commitment to the group's goals
- ⊙ requires the maximum use of the different resources of individuals in the group
- ⊙ is achieved when flexibility, sensitivity to the needs of others and creativity are encouraged
- ⊙ is most effective where shared leadership is practiced
- ⊙ requires a group to develop procedures to deal with a particular problem or situation
- ⊙ is characterized by the group's ability to examine its processes so as to constantly improve itself as a team
- ⊙ requires trust and openness in communication and relationships
- ⊙ is achieved when group members have a strong sense of belonging to the group

From Bordon Lipitt, *Organization Renewal*, 2nd ed. (New York: Prentice Hall, 1982).

Team Building

Building a mature council – one that can discuss and alter its process and discuss strengths, weaknesses, learning needs and accomplishments – takes time. It is important early in a new council's life to make it legitimate to talk about how the council is doing. Such discussions need not be frequent or overly personal and self-revelatory, but whenever a council experiences unusual difficulties, it must be able to stop and examine its processes.

The simple questions "What's going on in our meetings?" or "What could we do to improve our meetings?" can be helpful. Also, simple observations of processes can be helpful. For example, "We seem to be having trouble discussing this fully; what's holding us back?"

Team building refers to either informal or formal sessions in which council members examine how they work together and how to do so more effectively. Team-building sessions can assist council members with the following:

- better understanding of roles and responsibilities;
- establishing goals, objectives and priorities;
- assessing how the council is functioning in areas like communication and decision-making;
- assessing working relationships among members;
- enhancing collaboration and decreasing unproductive competition; and
- understanding how differences of opinion and conflict can be used creatively.

Inevitably there will be times when even the best working councils lose effectiveness. No council can "get it together" permanently; it takes work to keep a complex set of interrelationships healthy and productive. Nevertheless, to solve the enormous problems facing our local governments, individual agendas need to be set aside so that a common understanding of problems and possible solutions can develop. A council member's commitment to practice the skills required to be effective, including team building and goal setting, will go hand-in-hand with the information needed to achieve goals.

About the Author

Linda C. Winner is senior professor at the Federal Executive Institute in Charlottesville where she teaches leadership and organizational behavior.