YOUR ROLE AS A CITY LEADER

Newly Elected Officials:
2018 Leadership Conference
Jan. 26-27, 2018
Brooklyn Park
Your Role as a City Leader

As we begin the session:
- What questions do you have about your job?
- What are your biggest concerns?

Action Plan:
- What actions will you take going forward?
Getting Oriented

What have you done – what would you like to do still?

- Conversations with Administrator/Manager, Clerk, Key Department Heads
- Status of current issues
- Status of long-range plans and capital projects
- Explanation of the budget process
- Tour of Municipal Facilities (parks, utilities, etc.)
- Important documents:
  - Current operating budget and capital budget
  - Information on key programs and services
  - Comprehensive annual financial report
  - Organizational chart, staff roster and phone list
  - The organization’s primary planning documents
  - Map showing city boundaries, buildings and facilities
  - Mission statement and goals (if they exist)
  - Council rules/meeting procedures
  - Meeting minutes for last twelve months
  - Work program and significant staff reports from last twelve months
  - Personnel policies and other administrative policies
  - Facts about your city: population, form of government, incorporation date, number of employees, total budget, total debt, etc.
  - List of governmental agencies providing services or impacting your organization
  - Calendar of important events

- Other:
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Effective Boards

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<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Obstacle</th>
<th>Steps to Take</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Willingness to deal with difficult problems</td>
<td>Value Conflicts</td>
<td>• Identify values and understand council’s role as community building</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Identify community dreams/fears</td>
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<td>• Build council’s capacity to deal effectively with big issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Ability or capacity to deal with difficult problems</td>
<td>Unproductive working conditions</td>
<td>• Depersonalize issues</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Establish vision and set goals</td>
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<td>• Build team expectations and teamwork</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Schedule regular retreats to assess effectiveness</td>
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<td>• Develop effective relationship with staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Effective relationship with staff</td>
<td>• Council that does not work as a team&lt;br&gt;• Unprofessional staff&lt;br&gt;• Diverse perspectives of council and staff</td>
<td>• Team building&lt;br&gt;• Invest in professionalism&lt;br&gt;• Become aware of differences between council and staff perspectives&lt;br&gt;• Develop and encourage translator role.</td>
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*John Nalbandian – for more information, see the article in this packet*
## We Speak Different Languages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Politics Elected officials</th>
<th>Administration</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Game/Problem Solving</td>
<td>Problem Solving</td>
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<td>Players</td>
<td>Representatives</td>
<td>Experts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td>“What do you hear?”</td>
<td>“What do you know?”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Passion</td>
<td>• Data</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Dreams</td>
<td>• Plans</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Stories</td>
<td>• Reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pieces</td>
<td>Intangible: Interests and symbols</td>
<td>Tangible Information; money; people; equipment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currency</td>
<td>Power (stories)</td>
<td>Knowledge (deeds)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynamics</td>
<td>Conflict, Compromise, Change</td>
<td>Predictability, cooperation, continuity</td>
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John Nalbandian

[www.goodlocalgovernment.org](http://www.goodlocalgovernment.org)
What does it mean to “govern” at the local level?

Definition: *Exercising leadership and applying democratic values within local government on the community to represent citizens’ interests, set the course for public issues, oversee how public issues are addressed, and make sure that local government’s actions positively contribute to the community’s current and future quality of life.*

-Vaughn Upshaw

Where to Draw the “Line”

**Board’s Sphere**

Determine “purpose,” scope of services, tax level, constitution issues

Pass ordinances; approve new projects an programs; ratify budget

Make implementing decisions (e.g., site selection); handle complaints; oversee administration

Suggest management changes to manager; review organization’s performance in manager’s appraisal

**Manager’s Sphere**

Advise (what city “can” do may influence what it “should” do); analyze conditions and trends

Make recommendations on all decisions; formulate budget; determine service distribution formula

Establish practices and procedures and make decisions for implementing policy

Control the human, material & informational resources of organization to support policy and administrative functions

Source: Jim Svara, Dichotomy and Duality: Reconceptualizing the Relationship between Policy and Administration in Board-Manager Cities, Public Administration Review, Vol. 45, No. 4, pp 211 – 232
Local Government Governing Model*

Local Government Governing Model*

1. Understand Your Legal Authority

Legal Responsibilities refers to:
• Statutory mandates, laws, and administrative rules
• Procedural requirements
• Law making authority
• Avoidance of conflict of interest
• Open meeting laws
• Authority to delegate to professional managers, staff, appointed boards, nongovernmental organizations

To govern effectively, you need to know:
• What you are statutorily responsible for
• What options are available to you in fulfilling these responsibilities
• What laws, rules, and procedures you are required to follow

Don’t just rely on your attorney. You should have a general understanding of your own and local government’s legal responsibilities.
Local Government Governing Model*

2. Working With Others

No one person or council governs alone!

Councils exercise their responsibilities to work with others to understand issues that the board, local government, and the community want to address.

Once elected, you become a member of the council, and MUST work with others to identify issues and decide what priorities to address.

To be effective:
✓ Know how to listen (to understand)
✓ Know how to interact with
✓ Know how to work with

To be better able to:
✓ Learn about local values, interests and priorities
✓ Expand your options for responding to and solving problems

Requires that you:
✓ Understand politics
✓ Understand people
✓ Understand turf issues
✓ Use effective interpersonal communication skills
✓ Use effective conflict resolution skills
Local Government Governing Model*

2. Working With Others

Special Relationships:
1. Your Fellow Council Members
   ✓ Act as a Body
   ✓ Understand yourself as a member of the body
   ✓ Understand the strengths and preferences of your fellow members
     • Personality
     • Conflict
     • Values
     • Communication
     • Problem Solving

Look to satisfy interests than to bridge conflicting positions.
A conversation about values or interests can often reduce or clarify differences.

• Separate the people from the problem.
• Focus on interests, not positions.
• Invent options for mutual gain.
  o Make opportunities to jointly think about and creatively invent new ideas that may be in the interests of both (or all).
  o Requires a time and a place to happen
• Insist on using objective criteria-agree on some sort of common standard or a result that everyone thinks makes sense.
Local Government Governing Model*

2. Working With Others

Special Relationships:
1. Your Fellow Council Members
2. The Administrator/Manager
3. The Clerk
4. The Attorney

Research indicates that the primary cause of dysfunction in boards is a lack of clarity in roles, goals and expectations.

Roles:

The major areas of council authority and responsibility are:
• Setting and interpreting rules governing its own proceedings
• Exercising all the powers of cities that the law does not delegate to others
• Legislating for the city
• Directing the enforcement of city ordinances
• Appointing administrative personnel
• Transacting city business
• Managing the city’s financial operations
• Appointing members of the boards
• Conducting the city’s intergovernmental affairs
• Protecting the welfare of the city and its inhabitants
• Providing community leadership
• Other specific powers
When goals are clearly defined and assigned (goals/organization), you can determine effectiveness. When resources are clearly set and staff/contract/volunteers properly assigned (fiscal/personnel), you can measure efficiency. When rules and processes are developed and feedback and report systems (procedures/information), you can establish control without “over controlling”, “meddling” or “micromanaging”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Fiscal</th>
<th>Personnel</th>
<th>Procedures</th>
<th>Information</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vision and Values</td>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Bonds and tax levels</td>
<td>Service levels</td>
<td>Elections and initiatives</td>
<td>Newsletters, television and press</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies and goals</td>
<td>Board</td>
<td>Budgets and debt management</td>
<td>Salary and benefits</td>
<td>Ordinances and resolutions</td>
<td>“State of the city”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master work plan</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>Budget and finance plan</td>
<td>Hire and fire</td>
<td>Policies and procedures</td>
<td>Annual report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department work plan</td>
<td>Department heads</td>
<td>Budget control</td>
<td>Training and development</td>
<td>Standards and benchmarks</td>
<td>Monthly, quarterly reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team work plan</td>
<td>Operation managers</td>
<td>Service delivery</td>
<td>Supervision and discipline</td>
<td>Operating procedures</td>
<td>Progress reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual work plan</td>
<td>Service employees</td>
<td>Individual services</td>
<td>Personal responsibility</td>
<td>Job checklist</td>
<td>Status report</td>
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**Local Governance System**

2. Working With Others

Special Relationships:
1. Your Fellow Council Members
2. The Administrator/Manager
3. The Clerk
4. The Attorney

Expectations

Questions for the Board:
• What do we expect of EACH OTHER?
• What do we expect of the MAYOR?
• What do WE expect of the Staff?
• What should the Board/Mayor/Staff expect of Us?

Questions for the Staff:
• What do WE expect of the Board?
• What should the Board expect of Us?

What do you expect of:
➢ Your fellow Council Members?
➢ The Mayor?
➢ Your Staff?

What should they expect of you?
2. Working With Others

Special Relationships:
1. Your Fellow Council Members
2. The Administrator/Manager
3. The Clerk
4. The Attorney

Trust

Establish it, Maintain it.

1. Tell the truth, even when it does not serve you well.
2. Never make promises you cannot reasonably expect to keep.
3. Commit firmly to values that respect the interests and rights of others.
4. Be known for having high standards of integrity, for doing the right thing because it is right, even if others are willing to accept a lower standard.
5. Don’t let personal ambition interfere with being honest and fair.
6. Consistently remind yourself that it is not in your own self-interest to be selfish.
Local Government Governing Model*

2. Working With Others

Civility.

Ten Commandments of Public Civility
Adapted From
John C. Gillespie, Esquire, Parker Mccay P.A.

1. Thou shalt not rudely interrupt a colleague midsentence; nor "speak over" a colleague while she/he is speaking.

2. Thou shalt not assume that shrillness of tone is a substitute for substantive dialogue.

3. Thou shalt treat the members of the public with the same courtesy as you would if they were members of your body--and perhaps more importantly, require that they treat you and your colleagues the same way.

4. Thou shalt not resort to "zingers" designed solely to embarrass your target.

5. Thou shalt, where possible, explore areas of common ground where legitimate disagreements exist, in an effort to move forward on matters of public importance.

6. Thou shalt not allow legitimate critique of policy and practice to become a personal attack aimed at the person who devised the policy or implements the practice.

7. Thou shalt always recognize that your colleagues were also elected, just as you were, and deserve the same level of respect for having run and won.

8. Thou shalt not ridicule or belittle a colleague, or a member of the public, simply because he or she disagrees with you on an issue.

9. Thou shalt not pretend something is much more important than it really is, simply to score points with an audience.

10. Thou shalt always remember that it is okay to agree to disagree, and that reasonable people can indeed disagree reasonably.
3. Setting Policy

Focuses on defining:
- Mission
- Vision
- Values
- Setting priorities
- Deciding what services to offer to whom
- How to pay for them

To be effective:
✓ Know how to engage productively in discussions about mission and goals
✓ Analyze short- and long-term issues strategically
✓ Decide what your responsibility for these issues is (if any)
✓ Be able to frame the policy that guides how the government responds, deliberates, and decides to move forward
✓ Need access to appropriate and necessary information
4. Provide Resources

Refers to the Council’s responsibility to create *capacity* for local government to act.

- Decisions about WHAT resources it needs
  - Finances
  - Personnel
  - In-kind contributions
  - Equipment
  - Capital
- HOW it will generate them
- WITHIN what parameters it will use them
- HOW the use of resources will be monitored (but monitoring falls under Accountability (5))

Although the BUDGET is the most important POLICY document you have, allocating resources is distinct from developing policy.

Advising on, Reviewing, and Adopting the Budget are separate from decision making about what is to be done with those resources.

Closely Related!

Essential responsibility for deciding how resources are generated, used, and monitored to support major policy initiatives and benefit the community.
Local Government Governing Model*

5. Be Accountable

Your responsibility to document the Effectiveness and Efficiency of programs.

Effective Councils:
- Understand and monitor its success at fulfilling its own responsibilities
- Delineates expectations for the manager and key programs
- Establishes annual goals
- Conducts annual self-assessments to evaluate how well it used its legal authority, how well it worked with others to establish policy. Allocate resources and provides oversight and leadership to ensure that they accomplished their goals

HOW?
- Annual performance evaluations of the Manager/Administrator
- Financial Audits
- Program Reviews
- Board self-assessments

“What gets measured, gets done!”
Fiscal Health and Wellness*

*Center for Priority Based Budgeting, Denver, Colorado
www.pbbcenter.org    https://www.resourcex.net/

1. Understand the organization’s overall financial situation.
   • Revenues
   • One-time and ongoing
   • Reserves
2. Understand the plan and what could cause it to change.
3. Understand what exactly you do and how much it costs.
   • Program and services inventory and true costs
4. Identify your “Results” (Setting Policy)
   • What are we in “business” to do?
   • What do these Results mean to us?
5. Align your budget with the Results
6. Identify Performance Measures
Using the Local Government Governing Model:
A Checklist for Local Governing Boards

1. Understand Its Legal Authority
   ___ Do we know what we are legally required to do or restricted from doing on this issue?
   ___ Are there constitutional issues?
   ___ Statutory issues?
   ___ Local policies that we must follow?
   ___ Do we know what we are obligated to do by state or federal law?
   ___ Do we know what we are prevented from doing by state or federal law?
   ___ Do we know what we are given the option to do by state or federal law?
   ___ Do we know if there are other laws or standards that need to be considered?

2. Work with Others
   ___ Have we identified individuals and groups that need to be consulted or buy in before we can act?
   ___ Are all members of the board informed and prepared to act on this issue?
   ___ Have we engaged the manager and the organization on this issue?
   ___ Have we consulted relevant external individuals and groups?
   ___ Have we identified who will be helped and who will be harmed if we pursue this issue?
   ___ Are the media informed on the issue and the board's proposed action?
   ___ Are there other units of government that need to be involved (e.g., state, municipalities, neighboring counties)?
   ___ What agreements need to be negotiated internally or externally with key stakeholders to move the issue forward?

3. Set Policy
   ___ What result do we hope to achieve?
   ___ What policy do we want to enact?
   ___ How is this issue tied to our strategic plan?
   ___ Can we address this matter in our regular meetings, or do we need to hold a special meeting?
   ___ What information do we need to make a good decision?
   ___ What information will we need to monitor this issue over time?
   ___ Do we need to hold a public hearing?
   ___ Does the issue require a public referendum?

4. Allocate Resources
   ___ What resources will be required, and how will we know how well they were used?
   ___ Do we have the resources to pursue action on our own?
   ___ What other groups are contributing or might contribute resources to this issue?
   ___ Have we allocated resources to support our priorities?
   ___ Do we have a process for monitoring resource use?

5. Be Accountable
   ___ What will success look like, and how will we know if we achieve it?
   ___ What will we hold ourselves (as a board), our manager, and our organization accountable for?
   ___ How will we assess our own (board) work?
   ___ How will we assess the manager's and the organization's performance?
   ___ How will we address performance problems for the board, the manager, and the organization?
   ___ How will we recognize performance achievements by the board, the manager, and the organization?
➢ Minnesota Mayors Handbook - Chapter 3: Meeting Management

➢ Minnesota Mayors Association Sample City Council Bylaws - Appendix A

➢ Minnesota Mayors Association Sample Rules of Order - Appendix B


➢ League Workshops

➢ Community Engagement: http://www.lmc.org/page/1/civic-engagement.jsp

➢ Civility Library http://www.lmc.org/page/1/civility.jsp

➢ Managing Disruptive Citizens at Council Meetings: http://www.lmc.org/page/1/disruptive-citizens.jsp
Additional Readings

1. Practical Advice from Others

2. Elected to office? Your life will never be the same - Jacquelyne Gist

3. Levels of Decision Making in Public Organizations - Vaughn Mamlin Upshaw, EdD, DrPH

4. The Council-Staff Partnership: A Team in Service to the Community – John Nalbandian, Ph.D.
Practical Advice from Others

- Lead by example. Be honest, consistent, and flexible. Don’t play games.
- Use common sense. If your heart, mind and gut are in agreement, then go for it.
- Don’t be stampeded into action by the strong demands of special interest groups. Your job is to find the long-term public interest of the entire community, and you may be hearing from a vocal minority.
- Be clear on what you stand for – list ten things you believe in.
- Most of the easy decisions got made a long time ago. Many decisions that need to be made can be very painful – but you can’t solve those big problems without pain.
- Listen. Listen to everyone. Listen until your ears fall off. Soak it up. After six months in office, you will round out the picture of the complexities of city government and your role. Listen fairly... listen thoughtfully... and then do what’s right.
- Don’t be afraid to say, “I don’t know.”
- Don’t make promises you can’t deliver! Most major decisions and actions require approval of the council.
- Gear your mind to process a tremendous amount of seemingly conflicting information.
- Don’t enter office with an unmoving set agenda. Learn as much as you can before taking on a major program or effort. Don’t be strangled by campaign promises that were made without sufficient information.
- If you come on board as a big critic of the “way things have been done,” you may be surprised to find how hard the job really is. You’ll soon gain a better appreciation for those who came before you.
- The job can be very complex – try to stay focused on the big issues. Ask for help when you need it. Don’t be afraid to use outside resources (your attorney, LMC. NLC, a neighboring city or county).
- Don’t be intimidated by larger cities – they have many of the same problems and may be willing to lend expertise or staff resources.
- Network with others in the same boat. Have monthly lunches with mayors from neighboring communities, for example. They can provide support, new ideas, and give you an opportunity to vent.
- Find an experienced mentor from another city. Ask for advice when you need help. You’ll get empathy and a clearer vision from someone who has been there.
- Ask opinions, and listen. Spend time with those individuals who have different opinions than yours (maybe even your opponent in the election). Listen, don’t argue the points, then rethink your positions.
- Don’t reinvent the wheel – someone has probably done it elsewhere. Use information available from LMC. Attend workshops and conferences.
- Pace yourself. Recognize that life – and the city – is dependent on a lot of things over which we have little control. Set some priorities, recognize the need to spend time with your family, and don’t burn yourself out.
- Develop a thick skin. Remember that they don’t hate you personally, they just don’t like your ideas.
- Don’t seek change simply to do things differently! Give yourself at least six months to learn the fundamentals of the task you have undertaken. Even if you come to the mayor’s job with many years of service on the council, or the council with many years of experience on a board or commission, you will find there is still a lot to learn.
Elected to office? Your life will never be the same

by Jacquelyne Gist

Three hours into a town board meeting — covered as always by cable TV — I ran my fingers through my hair and a pink foam rubber curler fell out. I grabbed it and shoved it in my purse. When I got home, my machine was full of messages. People reported that they had watched to see how long it was going to take me to realize that I had a curler hanging from my hair. No one mentioned the awe-inspiring decisions I made that night.

A few months ago, I ran into a local musician who told me that he and his roommates always watched our “show.” They had really loved the “episode” where we talked about requiring people to put their cats on leashes. (That motion failed, by the way.) An elected official in a small town is a public person. People watch you more closely than you would ever expect — both politically and personally. And the people who let you know today that there is a curler hanging from your hair are the same people who will come to the town hall tomorrow with recycling concerns. The musician who loved the cats-on-leashes “episode” also wanted action on the late night noise from the car wash across the street. The owner of my favorite restaurant, where I have eaten weekly for 12 years, talks to me about property he has just bought that is in the watershed protection district. The woman who has cut my hair for 10 years finds out that her new house is next to one of the sites being considered for a new landfill. One of my close friends applies to the town for a small business loan. The list goes on.

I have lived in Carrboro for almost 18 years and I know a lot of people. The people I hang out with and do business with, the people I spend my life with on a daily basis, are the same people for whom I am sworn to provide sound governmental decisions.

Sometimes I feel like the sibling who is left in charge while the parents are out for the evening. If I let everybody do whatever they please, mom and dad will ground me. If I enforce the rules, my siblings will hate me. What if I really believe, based on sound judgment and good information, that the best place for the new landfill is next to my hairdresser’s house? What if it is in the best fiscal interest of the town not to grant my friend a small business loan?

Newly elected local government officials typically enjoy a wonderful honeymoon period with constituents, staff and the press. To those of you still on your honeymoon — to others who would join you — I say, “Savor it.” Pretty soon, something magical will happen. You will undergo a metamorphosis and become a “them.” No longer will you be the person who would be able to solve your community’s problems if only you were on the board. Instead, you will become the one whom people tell how they would solve the problems if they were on the board. This metamorphosis typically takes place around budget time. Life will never be the same.

Facing public prejudice

Being on the Carrboro Board of Aldermen has changed my life in ways I never expected. Most perplexing is the new way people react to me publicly. To people who are not close to me, I am one of “them,” a politician. During my first four years in office, I was accused of being everything from a socialist to a conservative. It seems that lots of people have fixed ideas of who and what elected officials are, how we
make decisions, and what motivates us. Suddenly, I find myself being prejudged based on the fact that I am an elected official in ways that are often funny, usually wrong, and sometimes downright insulting.

Last year at a diversity sensitivity workshop, my fellow participants and I were asked to tell about times when we felt we had been prejudged and how that had affected our lives. Without giving it any thought, I found myself talking about problems I have had that have stemmed from people’s biases against politicians — problems that had crowded out for that moment my serious concerns about problems I have faced as a woman. Even my family distrusts politicians! It is part of the job, and I guess I deal with it by working hard to serve in a way that allows me to look into the mirror without feeling ashamed. I still get mad if people accuse me of “acting like a politician,” but at least I know they are wrong.

**Facing the demands on your time**

When I was first sworn in a little over four years ago, I got something I hadn’t counted on as I campaigned. After the high of the campaign and of being elected, the excitement of seeing my name and picture in the paper every week, after the congratulatory letters and phone calls, after the intense sense of teary eyed joy I felt the night my mother held my family Bible for me during my swearing in — after all of these intense emotional experiences had passed — I found that I had a second full-time job. It required hours of reading, long meetings, and attention to hundreds of details. It was a job that required me to be an expert on areas that I knew next to nothing about. It was a full-time job that I was supposed to do after I finished the full-time day job that paid my bills. All of a sudden, instead of working eight hours a day, I was working 10, even 18, hours a day. And by nature I am a lazy sort. The life of a local elected official? “What life? I don’t have a life; I have meetings!”

That was kind of hard to get used to — all the hours of work and the never-ending meetings. When I was first running for a seat on the Carrboro board, I believed that the job entailed one meeting a week on Tuesday nights. Wrong! Instead, I find my typical week involves two to three lunch meetings squeezed into my job schedule, one or two 5:30 meetings, and two or three 7:30 meetings, in addition to that regular board meeting.

**Facing the demands on your professional life**

So, being an elected official has changed the rhythm of my waking hours and my perceptions of what is important in governance. It has also changed other areas of my life.

When I was first elected, I was working as a social worker in a small nonprofit advocacy organization. The agency’s work required frequent communication with human service, education, government and media organizations. After being in office a few months, I discovered that the people in these organizations would return my phone calls faster than they had before. Because of my public position, I suddenly had access to people that the agency had been trying to build relationships with. I was in a position to get public attention for the agency’s agenda, but I wasn’t even the agency’s director, although some people thought I was. And I felt uncomfortable, knowing that people were responding to my role as an alderman, not my role as a social worker, even if it was for a good cause. My newfound access to the community’s leaders strained my relationship with my boss, whose phone calls were not returned as fast as mine. I ended up changing jobs.

In my new job, I bend over backward to keep my political life and my professional life separate — and not just because I believe that I should do the job I am paid to do by my employer. It also helps to keep
me sane and provides a justifiable escape from political life. It is nice to be able to tell people who call me about town business while I am at work that I am really sorry, but I will have to ask them to call me at home after work. I have found particular satisfaction in telling people who call to yell at me about things like wasting tax dollars on overpaid employees that I am sorry, but I will have to call them after I get off work because my employer doesn’t pay me to spend time dealing with town business. They have a hard time arguing with that!

I am pretty certain that I now have the ability to block out the personal and political implications of decision making. It is one of life’s harder things to do, but I try hard. I believe that my job as an elected official is to serve the best interest of my whole town, not just of those who voted for me or, even harder, not just of those who are my friends. There have been several meetings where I was shaking as I voted my conscience and then went home and cried. I remember reading a tall tale years ago about a couple who moved to a small New England town where every year a harvest king is chosen from among the men of the town. For a year, the harvest king reigns supreme. Everyone fawns on him and all his needs are satisfied to excess. The husband decides that this looks like a pretty good deal and begins a ruthless campaign to be crowned harvest king. He is successful and very excited. On the night of the coronation, when he is to take his place as king, he shows up at the ceremony, is crowned, and then learns that his first duty is to watch the execution of his predecessor. All that work, all the honor and attention, and then they kill you! In my darker political moments, I think of that story.

But sometimes I am able to do something that has a tangible positive effect on the town that I love so much. And it is a wonderful feeling to drive through a neighborhood that is a little safer because of an action I was part of, or to see people using bike lanes and sidewalks I helped to get. It is really satisfying to know that every now and then it matters to somebody that the board took a positive action. When I was working the polls on the day I was up for re-election, people would come up to me and say things like, “I am voting for you. I don’t always agree with you, but I trust you.” An old-time conservative told me that in front of my mother. I felt like I was in a Norman Rockwell painting!

Being an elected official has affected me publicly, professionally, and socially, but it has also changed me privately. It has changed who I am and how I define myself as a person. My best friend — a calm, rational attorney — says that I am much tougher than I was four years ago and, in her words, much less gullible. She tells a story about something that happened when I first ran for the board. I had not been endorsed by the Home Builders Association, but I did receive a $50 campaign donation from two builders and a lovely note saying that they had supported me and were sorry that I had not gotten the group’s endorsement. I thought that this was really sweet and told my friend about it. “Sweet?” she said. “Don’t you know that they are planning to build the new subdivision behind your house?”

Then there was the time that a developer looked me straight in the eye and told me that our development ordinance would not allow him to save trees or open space, even though he wanted to. I apologized for the inadequacy of our ordinance and ran off to talk to the town staff about ways to fix a horrible problem that was keeping these good people from doing the right thing. The staff informed me that they had offered the developer numerous options to preserve the woods and open space, all of them allowed in our ordinance, but that he had rejected every one. A few weeks later, when I voted against the guy’s proposal, he turned to a mutual friend and asked, “Why did Jacqui vote against me?” Our friend said, “Well, you lied to her.” “But I had to!” the developer replied.
After several incidents like this, I began to be less willing to just believe anything someone told me. I don’t think that people lie a lot in the political arena; it’s just that they only tell that part of the story that makes them look best or promotes their interest. So I have had to work toward developing a way of reserving judgment.

This runs counter to my personality, and I now find that in all areas of my life, I am not as trusting as I once was or as I would like to be. I feel that I have lost a part of me that I liked.

I am also not always very nice anymore. I used to work very hard at being nice, because it seemed like the right thing to do. After a year or so on the board, I began to get the feeling that I was sometimes being taken for a chump. Staff members, neighbors, and business people would come to me with issues or problems — they would come and tell me horrible stories and I would rush right out and try to fix them. Often I would learn later that they purposefully had been playing to my social work side and had misled me. After a few particularly blatant incidents, I stopped trying to be everybody’s friend all the time and realized that providing sound, well-reasoned leadership meant that there would be many times when not everyone would like me. So, I am not so nice anymore, but I am a better alderman.

The effect has spilled over into my private life. In matters having nothing to do with town business, I am also not so concerned anymore with trying to make everyone happy all the time. I figure I work hard, try to be fair, and use my best judgment. That is what people have a right to expect. If they don’t like it, it’s not my problem. Four years in public office is more productive than 10 in therapy. Finally, I am no longer afraid to be wrong or to admit that I made a mistake. I have found that being willing to change your mind or reverse your stand on something doesn’t really bother or offend anybody except the press, and who cares what they think? (Well, I do, but I try not to let it affect me.) The longer I am in this job, the more I learn that what is really important is getting the best possible decisions made in a manner that allows the community to have faith in the integrity of those decisions. My personal reactions or political needs are secondary. When I was first elected, I was always worrying about how I did in meetings. Now I worry about what I did — Did the meeting have the outcome I wanted it to? Sometimes getting to that point means not pleasing everybody, disagreeing with my friends, saying “no” to allies, publicly changing my mind, and admitting that I was wrong.

Recently all of this happened in the same meeting! For three years I had been going to meetings of the leadership committee of an intergovernmental task force on crime. At one particular meeting, I along with a fellow member of the board of aldermen, was to present the recommendations of a subcommittee on youth. We had worked on the recommendations for months, and my friend and I had spent weeks working out how we would present the recommendations and exactly what we wanted from the leadership committee. We needed money, legislation, and political support. This was serious stuff. Well, to start with, the meeting had been moved from its regularly scheduled 5:30 start to 5 p.m. I was so used to going at 5:30 that I hadn’t bothered to check the meeting time on the agenda and I cruised in at 5:30. Our presentation had been first on the agenda, so they had moved it back because I was late. After that embarrassment, my colleague finally made our presentation and the group began discussing it. Overall, they were supportive. Then the committee chair said, “Let’s refer this to the three managers for a recommendation.” The week before, after much argument, our group had decided that this was what we wanted and were hoping for just such an action by the committee. But based on my original reservation, which I had finally overcome, I automatically started arguing against it. “No,” I said, “if we refer it to staff, it’ll get watered down and lost.” My fellow alderman stared at me, wishing, I am
sure, that he were close enough to kick me. I suddenly realized what I had done, took a deep breath, and said, “I take that back. I do want it to go to staff. Sorry.” People looked at me like I was crazy. But the motion carried. Later in the meeting, I also managed to inadvertently insult Chapel Hill’s mayor, and then I left before the meeting was over to go teach a workshop. I felt stupid and embarrassed, but the meeting had the outcome I had hoped for. Daddy always said that life ain’t easy.

The day after that weird experience, I had lunch with my mentor and friend, Sue, who is on the school board, and I said, “How on earth did this happen? How did we get to be in charge? If we mess up, there is nobody higher up to fix it. We can really do damage!” Sue replied, “Well, it took you four years, but you finally figured it out.”

I ran for town council on issues of social change, but then I found out I was supposed to make decisions on sewer pipes, acres of impervious surface, transition zones, and intergovernmental fund transfers — stuff we hadn’t really covered in my days at the School of Social Work. So I now find that maybe a few times a year I deal directly with the issues I first ran on. I had thought that I could march into office and say this, this, and that need to change and this is how we are going to change them — ta-da! It’s all fixed! It took me about two years to learn that even my brilliant ideas weren’t new and that if there were simple overnight answers to my community’s problems, they would have happened long ago. This has been hard to convey to the small group of social change and environmental activists who first encouraged me to run for the board. They now accuse me of being, horror of horrors, a “moderate.”

But I have learned that it is not big flashy headline-grabbing political actions that determine the quality of government in a town. It is the small details, the product of long meetings and hard work, that determine the quality of town policy. In the long run, the boring meetings on zoning, sewer, budget, and personnel have a more profound effect on social justice or environmental integrity than do a bundle of flashy resolutions.

The bulk of board work that truly affect the day-to-day lives of people goes by without much notice. I have learned that responsible stewardship of a community is the real job of an elected official.

I love Carrboro (some would say to the point of obsession) and I worry a lot about doing something that would harm it. I also love being an elected official (some would say to the point of obsession). It is the place where those two obsessions clash that I find most personally terrifying. The point where what is best for Carrboro may not be what is best for me politically. I had to face that monster in the 1993 election. There was a hotly controversial issue that came up in the late summer and early fall just as I was gearing up for my re-election campaign. I wished that it would wait until December, but it didn’t. I drove my friends crazy worrying about it, but decided that my political life was less important than the welfare of the town, and I stuck by my position. October was hell, Election Day was tough, but I won by a large margin. At the time, I swore I would never go through that again. But I know I will.

So, to newly elected officials, I say, “Welcome to the strangest club in town.” It may be hard, it may be wonderful. You may have moments when you want to just throw in the towel. But when all is said and done, it is easier to be on the council than to sit by and watch some other group of idiots mess things up. Good luck, and have fun!

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Levels of Decision Making in Public Organizations

Vaughn Mamlin Upshaw, EdD, DrPH

There is a long-standing dichotomy in public administration between “policy” and “administration.” Beginning with Woodrow Wilson’s assertion that “Politics is thus the special province of the statesman, administration of the technical official” (Wilson, 1887), the field has repeatedly attempted to distinguish between the two roles and responsibilities.

With over 25 years of field experience as a non-profit executive director and board member on both public and non-profit governing boards, I find this distinction difficult for people to understand and even more challenging to implement. Research on manager/board roles and responsibilities further clouds the issue, showing that in practice elected and appointed officials shift between policy and administration (Svara, 1995). This happens for a variety of reasons. Sometimes, public administrators ask elected officials to weigh in on “how” something should be done and this leads local elected leaders into administrative details. Other times, elected officials bring their personal experiences as administrators, executives, or business owners to the conversation and seek to guide public decisions so that they better reflects what was done in the private sector.

In practice, whether it is a policy or administrative issue, the organization needs to have the appropriate people involved and focused on making decisions where they can be most effective. To this end, I propose we reframe the conversation away from policy versus administration, and concern ourselves with what type of decision is needed and what group/body is best equipped to make the decision.

Table 1 shows six types of decisions commonly made in organizations—these are decisions about what services will be offered, what level of quality is expected, what resources are needed, how the services will be carried out, what are the service delivery standards, and what rules staff will follow in providing the service. In effect, the levels of decision-making are connected and can be thought of as a set of nesting bowls where the largest bowl contains all of the smaller ones.

The largest “bowl” for decision-making is the strategic one. Strategic decisions attend to the reason the organization exists and where it is going—its mission, values and vision. Strategic decisions also inform people about whom the organization exists to serve. In a public organization, generally the entire community is served by the organization and occasionally a subset is identified as the target for a particular program or service.

Members of the organization’s governing board are usually well equipped to address strategic questions. Board members (appointed or elected) frequently come from the communities
being served by the organization, understand the challenges people in the community face, and are involved with the organization because they have an interest in making a better future for their families, friends, and future generations. Being able to talk about what is important for an organization to do, how the organization adds value to the community, and what role the organization will have in creating a more successful future is something in which a thoughtful community leader can engage. Strategic decisions do not require special training or technical skills. Instead, strategic decisions are based on knowledge of the community and are important for board members to make as trustees or stewards of the organization and community’s future and common good.

Relevant questions at the strategic level include:

- Why does this organization exist?
- What values guide our work?
- Who do we serve?

Quality, the second level of decision-making, flows from the first. Once an organization knows why it exists, quality decisions focus on what it is there to do and how well it is going to do it. Like strategic decisions, governing board members are asked to weigh in on what the quality of an organization’s service should be and for whom. Members of a board are generally aware of what the residents of a community expect, what is seen as sufficient and what is viewed as over-the-top.

If, for example, an organization exists to provide a secure and safe community, then it needs to know what services it can provide to make a secure and safe community. Will it be focusing on prevention of crime or increasing its enforcement activities? Who needs to be protected and who needs to be prevented from committing acts that endanger themselves or others? Quality decisions are about what groups of people will be served and what level of service the organization will provide to them. A question I frequently pose to board members is “Do you want your organization to be seen as the Ritz, the Marriot, or the Red Roof Inn?” These are all hotels, but they differ in whom they want as their customers and the quality of service they provide.

When a board needs to make quality level decisions, ask:

- What does success look like if we do “X”?
- What level of service should the organization provide?
- To whom should these services be provided at this level? (Is this a service for everyone or for a subset of our community? If it is a subset, what are the quality requirements?)
- What outcome or conditions do we want to avoid?
The third decision-making level is about resources. If an organization knows why it exists and what services we will provided to whom, the next question is “What will it cost to do this?” Virtually every public governing board is responsible for approving budgets and overseeing resources for the organization it serves. Dealing with the details of an organization’s finances, such as debating line items in the budget document, leads the governing board into micromanaging the organization. Rather than having governing board members questioning the choice of office furniture, they should be asking if the schedule and budget for replacing and upgrading equipment is appropriate. Budgets are complicated and governing boards need to work with senior managers to set boundaries on what resources (financial, personnel, equipment) will be allocated to a given activity. Rather than debating the cost of office chairs, for instance, the governing board and senior managers should agree on a schedule for replacing office equipment and what a percentage of the budget will be allocated to maintenance. As such, the governing board and the senior managers share responsibility for deciding what proportion of the organization’s resources will be used for what purposes. By law in NC, public managers are required to submit a balanced budget to the local governing board and the local governing board is required to adopt a balanced budget. The board may change the budget proposed by the manager, but the budget adopted by the board must be balanced.

To help governing board members provide guidance around resources, ask:

- What are the organization’s funding priorities?
- What percentage of the organization’s budget will be used for priority purposes?
- What percentage of the organization’s budget will be used to support long-term capital projects?
- What percentage of the organization’s budget will be set aside for reserves?
- What criteria will the organization use to make adjustments in the budget?

Administrative decisions follow next. Administrative decisions are ones that say how the organization will carry out the mission by providing selected services to a designated group at a particular cost. Again, governing boards have a stake in how the organization will administer its programs but rarely do the members of the governing board have direct knowledge or experience in delivering the organization’s services. Administrative decisions often address issues like whether or not the services will be contracted out, whether new administrative units need to be created or existing divisions consolidated. In NC, the General Statutes give local government boards authority organize local government as long as the organizational structure (a) complies with sate laws, (b) does not combine duties that are separated by law, (c) transfer authority granted by statute from one office to another, and (d) change the composition of a statutory board. As such, the governing board needs to work closely with senior managers to
assure that administrative structures are designed to accomplish the local government’s statutory priorities at an acceptable quality using available resources.

The questions a governing board needs to ask in making administrative decisions include:

- What structure best allows us to accomplish our goals?
- What roles do government and/or the private sector have in accomplishing this goal?
- What statutory constraints or options affect our proposed organizational structure?

Governing boards are critical participants in the top four levels of decision-making. The board’s attention should be constantly focused on answering this question:

“What services do we provide to which people at what quality and what cost?”

Using this question as a litmus test of board decisions allows governing board members to participate in meaningful ways. Board members operating at the top four levels of decision making are best equipped to apply their community knowledge, while assuring that they fulfill their responsibilities as trustees of our local governments and communities (Carver, 1990; Chait, Holland and Taylor, 1991).

If the governing board makes good strategic, quality, administrative and resource decisions, then it easily turns over the last two levels of decision-making to the managers and employees. Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) are detailed protocols used by professionals to assure work is carried out lawfully, according to best practices, and results in desired outcomes. If senior managers and organizational employees know what services they are providing to whom and understand what quality is expected and what resources are available, they are in a good position to set forth a set of standard procedures that will be used to deliver the program or service.

For example, let’s say the governing board’s mission includes having a safe and secure community (strategic decision). The board then decides the organization will accomplish this by making sure the city’s neighborhoods have access to streetlights and sidewalks (quality decision). The governing board and senior managers agree to use private contractors to build the sidewalks (administrative decision) and add two community patrol officer positions to the public safety department’s budget (resources).

Once the governing board has made the top-level decisions, the director of public safety and other administrators are able to craft SOPs to meet the board’s goals. Areas that might be addressed in a SOP might include legal requirements for contractor licensing, technical standards for street lighting, hours for nighttime neighborhood street patrols, and types of data
to be gathered for routine monitoring. Generally, SOPs address “how” the governing board’s priorities will be administered and implemented.

When members of a governing board ask questions about how contractors are licensed, how bids will be submitted or what the technical requirements are for street lights, it signals they are concerned about whether the way the SOPs are written will accomplish the goals the governing board set. One way to help the governing board refrain from trying to fix the SOPs is to ask them directly “What are you worried might happen?” or “What concerns do you have about this SOP?” When a board member expresses their concern or worry, it is easier to go back up the decision-making ladder to address the concern at the right level. For example, here is how a manager might respond to a board member’s question about how bids will be submitted.

Board member: “How will contractors know when they can submit bids for the sidewalk construction?”

Manager: “We have a standard operating procedure that requires us to post projects on the local government’s website 60 days prior to the deadline for any construction project. Are you aware of any concerns about this process?”

Board member: “I am not sure all contractors know where we post bids. How does a contractor know that the projects are posted?”

Manager: “Any contractor who wants to work with our local government must be pre-approved so we know that they have the correct insurance, licenses and standards in place. Once any project is approved, we email all of the contractors on the approved list letting them know that a new project has been posted on the website. Does this help address your concern?”

Board member: “Yes. Based on what you’re telling me, I need to let anyone who asks about how to get a contract with the local government know that they need to be pre-approved before they can submit a bid. Is this correct?”

Manager: “Yes. If you know a contractor who needs assistance completing our local government’s approval process, please have them contact Ms. Jones, our purchasing and contracting manager.”

Notice that the manager responded directly to the board member’s concern by clearly stating how the procedure fulfilled the governing board’s quality requirements (i.e. license, insurance, standards) without asking the board member to review the process for selecting and approving
contractors (an SOP). If the governing board was concerned that inferior contracts were being approved, the manager might ask what concerns the board has about the quality of contracts and use these concerns to revisit and strengthen the SOPs as necessary to avoid the problems identified by the governing board.

Rules are the lowest level of decision-making. Rules can be used to assure both employees and the public understands how the organization will operate in delivering the service. If the SOP has standards for lighting, for instance, rules provide guidance on how or where lighting can be purchased and by whom. Can any public works employee purchase lighting or is this something taken care of through a central purchasing department? Another rule might address the amount of time a patrol officer spends driving through neighborhoods versus walking down the streets.

Dress codes, designating smoking areas, and when people can take a break during the workday are all examples of rules. When a governing board member offers suggestions about rules—for instance, what kinds of signs should be posted, what items can be on an person’s office walls or desk, what clothing is or isn’t allowed, or where people can park—they are usually letting the manager know they have concerns around the level of quality. In response to rule-level decisions, the manager might ask:

- What tone do we want to set with signage?
- What messages do we want to send people who come into our offices?
- What image do we want our employees to have in the community?
- What level of convenience do we want to provide to our visitors/customers?

This framework for decision-making can be applied in a number of ways in public organizations. Using the litmus test question for board decisions is a good place to start when developing an agenda for board meetings. Before putting an item on the governing board’s agenda, managers can ask themselves, how does this item fit within the board’s decision-making responsibilities? If the item does not address “what services will be offered to which people at what quality or cost,” the item probably does not belong on the board’s agenda.

For example, the director of public safety may want to know how much time officers should be spending doing neighborhood patrols. This is a reasonable question, but it is not a question most board members can answer. If an employee wants to ask the board to weigh in on this issue or, if a board member starts suggesting a particular number of hours for patrols, the better option is to go back up the levels of decision-making and the board to clarify what a quality outcome looks like.
When board members start telling managers “how” something should be done, they are usually concerned about who is being served, what services are being provided and what the quality and cost of the services are. “How many times will a patrol car come through the neighborhood each night?” is a question that speaks to an underlying concern about quality. Rather than getting into a debate about whether or not three or four drive-through patrols per neighborhood is sufficient it is more productive to reframe the question and ask the board “What do people in neighborhoods need to feel safe at night?” If the response is hourly patrols, then the question leads to a question about resources. “What is the board (or organization) prepared to do (or sacrifice) to achieve this level of service?”

By reframing questions so that they reflect higher decision-making levels board members are able to see how their specific request leads to changes in budgets and/or administrative structures as well as SOPs and sometimes rules. In this example, the department head might say, “We can increase patrolling at night, but with our current staffing levels this means we will have fewer people on duty during the day. What is the board’s goal in having a safe and secure community?” At this point, the governing board will have to review its decisions from the top level work its way down again, asking:

a) What constitutes safety in neighborhoods (quality decision) and;

b) What will it cost to provide this level or service (resource decision); and

c) What structure is needed to achieve the goal (administrative decision)?

In sum, governing boards and professional staff all make decisions on a daily basis. Whenever an organizational decision applies to a number of people is, by default, a policy. Rather than concern ourselves with who makes policy and who administers, we can more effectively work to achieve organizational aims if we recognize that everyone in the organization has a role in making decisions and that the critical need is to assure that people across the organization are making the decisions they are best able to make. Just as it is upside down for a governing board to be deciding what the dress code should be on Friday, it is equally inappropriate to expect employees to make long-term decisions about what an organization’s vision without involving board members who are ultimately accountable to the public.

Using a decision-making framework enables everyone, including governing board members and front-line employees, to participate in making decisions at the level where they have the greatest knowledge and responsibility. Such a framework also helps governing board members and professional managers operate more effectively as a governing team, whereby the governing board sets the overall direction and employees are responsible for figuring out the most effective and efficient way to reach the goals. When both the governing board and professional staff contribute to decisions using their unique knowledge and skills, organizations and communities benefit.
References:


**Table 1. Levels of Decision Making Framework**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Decision</th>
<th>Description/Example of Decision</th>
<th>Authority for Decision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategic</strong></td>
<td>Decisions affecting long-term priorities such as mission, institutional direction, values, priorities and principles.</td>
<td>Governing Board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quality</strong></td>
<td>Decisions affecting who are the organization’s primary clientele, types of services, delivery systems that focus on the relationship of programs and departments to overall mission</td>
<td>Governing Board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resource</strong></td>
<td>Decisions affecting planning, budgeting, financing, marketing, and personnel. Budget approval process, setting rates and fees</td>
<td>Governing Board/Senior Managers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Administrative</strong></td>
<td>Decisions about day to day practices, participation in community activities, selection of contractors, inter-local agreements</td>
<td>Governing Board/Senior Managers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Standard Operating Procedure (SOP)</strong></td>
<td>Decisions affecting procedures used to handle routine transactions and normal form, process, method and application of policies</td>
<td>Managers/Staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rule</strong></td>
<td>Decisions and regulations that guide or prescribe everyday conduct (parking, smoking areas, dress, etc.)</td>
<td>Managers/Staff</td>
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The Council-Staff Partnership: A Team in Service to The Community

by John Nalbandian, Ph.D.

John Nalbandian, Ph.D., is a professor of government at the University of Kansas and served for eight years on the city council in Lawrence, Kansas. Nalbandian has published numerous articles and has made presentations at League conferences and workshops, most recently at the League’s Mayors and Council Members Executive Forum in July.

After eight years on the city council in Lawrence, Kansas, and 20 years teaching government at the University of Kansas, I have found three characteristics common to the highly effective city council: 1) The willingness to address difficult issues - often those that deal with the "big-picture" problems in a city; 2) The ability or capacity of the council as a team to deal with these issues; and 3) An effective relationship with professional staff.

Failure to develop these characteristics results in councils who are inclined to micromanage and deal with smaller, more manageable issues such as constituent problems. I often ask council members, "If you see yourselves primarily as customer service representatives, who is identifying issues and setting goals and objectives that will result in planning for the public investments in your city's future?"

Council failures are often due to obstacles that, even when acknowledged, are underestimated. It takes planning and cooperation by the governing body and staff to overcome them. The obstacles are:

- Difficult, big-picture issues that raise questions of competing values, which many people are inclined to avoid because of the potential conflict involved;
- Governing bodies operate under a set of conditions that impede the hard work it takes to focus on the big picture; and
- Elected officials and professional staff bring fundamentally different perspectives to their work. If not understood, these perspectives can foster distrust.

Value Conflicts

Most council members have had the experience of dealing with a neighborhood group that is passionate in its
A plea for a stop sign that traffic engineers say doesn't meet professional standards. To the staff member, this is a problem requiring a technical analysis of the facts leading to an objective conclusion; what I call a "2+2 problem." However, the neighbors have different values that aren't represented in the traffic manual. Politics involves the art of recognizing and balancing legitimate, conflicting values. Questions of values really are "no right answer problems," and they almost always involve difficult choices, which lead to conflict.

All big-picture problems in cities and regions are questions of competing values: representation, efficiency, individual rights and social equity. These are four fundamental political values and, no matter how small the city, when two or more of these values conflict, the policy-making/decision-making process gets messy. There are natural incentives to avoid them, especially when smaller, more manageable issues are available to deal with. It also may be why it is so easy for council members to see themselves as customer service representatives rather than community builders. It is easier to be effective helping citizens deal with their individual problems on an ad hoc basis, than to build and maintain a sense of community by addressing big-picture issues.

**Overcoming Constraints to Dealing with the Big Picture**

City councils work under a set of conditions that can impede work on difficult issues. They include:

- Vague task and role definition;
- No hierarchy;
- No specialization;
- Little feedback or evaluation of performance; and
- Open meeting requirements.

Few council members have experienced these working conditions prior to coming on the council. When tasks and structure remain vague, it is difficult to know what to do in order to be competent. These conditions produce a lot of uncertainty for council members. Trying to deal with value conflicts under these conditions is guaranteed to produce anxiety! The natural response to anxiety is to make the offending issue go away, and to avoid it and similar issues in the future. A more psychologically comfortable route is to deal with smaller, more manageable problems and constituent services. Council members find it easier to be competent when their job is defined in terms of constituent services, because that task is relatively concrete.

Parliamentary procedure and voting are the most basic methods designed to provide the council with structure, but they are rarely enough. Personal relationships try to fill the gap with loyalty and trust, and knowing who one's friends are. These informal and often fragile relationships among council members can become burdened and strained because the formal structures and processes (task definition, hierarchy, specialization, feedback, and multiple forms of personal communication) we rely upon to get our work done in the business world are absent in the council chambers. When the personal relationships fail, there is little structure to substitute for the glue they provide.

**Adding to the Council's Capacity**

In addition to the capacity that the individual members might bring to the council, what can be done to add to the capacity of the council as an effective governing body and take some of the pressure off personal relationships? Strategies include:
Recognizing the "legacy value" of making progress on big-picture issues;
Developing and agreeing upon norms of behavior;
Using techniques to reduce uncertainty, such as goal setting/strategic planning and team-building retreats, and practicing group problem-solving techniques; and
Defining the relationship with staff as a partnership in building and maintaining a sense of community.

Properly harnessed, staff knowledge and problem-solving capabilities can be a tremendous help in enhancing the effectiveness of a city council.

Managing the Council-Staff Partnership

There are two specific obstacles to developing a productive relationship between staff and council.

- The first is that all council members may not see themselves as members of a team: the governing body. In this case, staff has a difficult time discerning exactly what the council wants. Vague direction from the council neutralizes much of staff's capacity to serve the council.
- The second obstacle is that while using the same words, council and staff don't always speak the same language. Thus, communication can be muddled.

The Senior Citizens' Request For a Crosswalk

Imagine you are a council member who has received a request for a crosswalk from a group of senior citizens living in subsidized housing. They indicate in their handwritten letter that they cannot cross the four-lane street in front of their apartment building to go to church or the ice cream parlor. The request is processed routinely by the city's traffic engineer. Based on traffic counts, site distances, accident history and other objective criteria in the traffic manual, the engineer recommends against any traffic control at the intersection. So far, this seems like one of those 2+2 problems mentioned earlier.

Then, you as a council member are invited to the apartment house to meet with the residents. What you learn is the story behind the request. They tell you that for the elderly, dignity is tied to their mobility and independence. Not being able to cross this street confirms their worst fears, and they seem to be asking, "Isn't it appropriate for the city government to help the older citizens in this community maintain dignity in their lives?"

The 2+2 problem just turned political. It's not that the staff is wrong. Their role and orientation are to the facts, instead of sorting out the values. Council members are elected to do that job with support from a staff sensitive to the council's role.

The chart above depicts the differences in politics and administration as contrasting ways of thinking about problems due to differences in logic.

Differences in Problem-solving Approaches

Politics involves problem solving, but not in the same vein as it does for administrative staff. The lifeblood of administration is solving problems and delivering services efficiently and equitably. I have never heard an administrator talk about the "game of administration."

Representatives, not experts, play the "game of politics," and this is essential to understand. Almost all local
government elected officials (including me) are amateur politicians. Although most of us do this work as a calling, we don't put the same effort into developing our skills that we did in our primary careers. When I try to act politically, when a balancing of interests is required, I probably make mistakes that a successful "career politician" would not.

"What do you Hear?" vs. "What do you Know?"

Officials are often elected for what they say, not for what they have accomplished as politicians or for what they know. This is not true for professional staff who come to their jobs with resumes filled with accomplishments.

Political conversations often center on anecdotes. "What do you hear?" frequently activates the political conversation. The question invites a story. Stories are very important to politics because politics and community building are about values. That's why I am not ashamed to say that what politicians say is often more important than what they know or what they have accomplished. Values are best conveyed between diverse groups through symbols. That's what stories do. They convey symbolically how people feel and what they value. I can write a treatise about justice, or I can tell a story about police brutality. The former is an academic exercise; the latter is a political one.

"What do you know?" elicits a different way of thinking. It invites a fact-based conversation presumably between experts. Often, it results in the ever-present staff report.

A Different Rewards System

The currency of politics is power. Power is crucial to politics because politics does not take place in the familiar organizational surroundings that most of us are used to. Without hierarchy and expert specialists, it is difficult to know to whom to listen and to whom to respond. There are no annual performance appraisals, raises or promotions. As a council member, you have to find ways of letting people know how effective you have been as their representative because there is no organizational structure, no supervisor, and no performance report to do it for you. In its simplest form, political power is the ability to get people to listen to your stories. You have to build a base of power without anyone showing you how it's done.

The dynamics of politics are conflict, compromise and change. The political world is charged with the passion and the drama of community building. Learn the game, play the game, get things done quickly. The time horizon is very different for staff. Long-term associations are difficult to build on conflict. Harmony is more conducive to building relationships and solving problems. Compromise and negotiation are appropriate for making choices about values. But cooperation and continuity are essential to staying the long course.

The City Manager's Role

Politics and administration encompass really different ways of thinking, and someone needs to translate in order for the partnership between council and staff to be effective. In council-manager government, that person usually is the city manager. The city manager must take the passion of politics, the stories, the conflict, and disparate thinking of the council and translate them into problems to be solved and policies to be developed in order to productively engage staff.

City managers can be more effective in their role if, first of all, they understand the role and needs of mayors and council members as described above. The manager should recognize (not fight) the natural tendency of
elected officials to focus on immediate constituent issues. But city managers should also then work with staff to bring to the council policies, recommendations, and activities such as strategic planning that build the council's capacity to address the big-picture issues. Don't feed the council small issues, then suddenly expect it to function effectively when it hits a big issue filled with value conflicts. Give the council choices that represent different values.

There is nothing easy about governing, and sometimes I wonder why we are so disappointed in ourselves. Politics has to be messy because there is no easy formula to tell which problems are more important than others and whose values should prevail. Too often, conflict is attributed to a clash of personalities or motives when actually it is a virtual certainty built into "the system." But it doesn't have to be nasty. I hope this article contributes to a better understanding and less tension as we go about doing the challenging work of public service.

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**Hear More About This Topic At the Annual Conference**

John Nalbandian will be leading a workshop at the League's annual conference, "Enhancing Council-Staff Relations," on Monday, Oct. 11, 1:30 to 4:30 p.m.

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**Comparing Approaches**

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**Conversation** "What do you hear?" → **City Manager** ← "What do you know?"

- **Storytelling**
- **Reports**

- **Pieces**
- **Interests/symbols**
- **Information, money, people, things**

- **Currency**
- **Power**
- **Knowledge**

- **Dynamics**
- **Conflict, compromise, change**
- **Harmony, cooperation, continuity**

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**For More Information**
For more information on council-staff relationships and related topics, the League offers the following resources:

- *Mayors and Council Members Leadership Guide* (1999). This book provides strategies and tips for effective leadership and covers topics ranging from effective meetings to council-staff relations;
- *Guidelines for a Successful City Council-City Manager Employment Relationship* (1994). Published by the California City Management Foundation, this publication is designed to provide an overview of the employment relationship between a city council and a city manager.

To order, call the League’s fax-on-demand service at (800) 572-5720 and request document 11, the publications order form.

The California City Management Foundation is committed to fostering positive council-manager relations. Toward this end, the foundation is pleased to have been involved in securing this article. *Western City* thanks the California City Management Foundation and the City Managers Department of the League for their assistance in bringing this information to *Western City* readers.

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**Don’t miss These Sessions On Leadership at the Annual Conference**

The League’s annual conference, Oct. 10-12, 1999, in San Jose, will offer a number of sessions addressing leadership issues for city officials, including:

- Preparing Civic Leaders for Tomorrow;
- City Collaboration to Increase Influence;
- Practical Ethics for Local Officials;
- Enhancing Council-Staff Relations;
- Performance Measurement and Accountability;
- And More!

It’s not too late to register and take advantage of the annual conference’s excellent professional development opportunities. To register or obtain more information about the conference, call (916) 658-8200.