

Don't Drop the Ball with Your Council!

by Bill Garrett, Janice Schreuder, and Bill Mathis



The nature of the job for elected officials puts their local government business into the combined time squeeze of work, home life, family, and recreation.

Unless the elected official enjoys “retirement,” the juggling act for the citizen-turned-elected-official can be chaotic if the local government manager, staff, and citizens do not support the effort to govern.

Managers can develop consistent and helpful strategies for supporting their elected officials (referred to as the council in this article) and for dispelling fears that things may fall through the cracks or that council won't follow up.

They need to remind staff that councilmembers are the elected officials of their communities and tend to get busy and distracted. Neglecting this point has gotten a lot of staff and local government managers into trouble because they took their elected officials for granted and, as a result, council did not feel respected.

We get busy with hectic schedules and crises, and there doesn't seem to be enough time in the day to get our own things taken care of. When everybody has his or her own important agenda to carry out, it becomes easier to work with and see a councilmember as “just another city employee” who may become disregarded, or one we hope to avoid if possible. A councilmember might, after all, have yet another request, suggestion, question, or something that may take too much time, and maybe we can't really help. That could be even worse.

Unhappily, there has been more turnover in localities' managers and assistant city managers as councils have become disillusioned with top management. Some of this could have been avoided if councilmembers had felt and believed that they mattered to management and that management listened to them, took notes, and followed through for them, then got back to them so they knew they were being heard and responded to.

Basic Ground Rules

Honor confidentiality and fairness. Treat each councilmember fairly and equally. (This is nothing new, just sometimes overlooked.) Do not play favorites with councilmembers; this will spell disaster for the manager. Do not repeat confidential conversations with councilmembers to others.

If and when necessary, have the local government's attorney or the manager's confidential assistant present when issues need to be documented. Councilmembers will understand this. Have your police chief present if a meeting involves information regarding crime or follow-through on crimes.

Sometimes, councilmembers will share gossip, frustrations, or what grates on their minds. There is no problem in just listening to what is being said and not feeling the need to answer or "do something." In a few cases, however, councilmembers will share concerns that cannot be kept in confidence, such as suspected illegal activities, malfeasance in office, or dishonorable public practices, and these concerns must be acted on with either the council or the city or county attorney. Also, it is important for the manager to give guidelines to councilmembers after each new election.

Keep confidences. Confidences often add up to councilmembers' expressing ideas just to hear how they sound and to ruminate or practice on the manager before presentation in public. These confidences should be kept and valued because they indicate trust in the manager's wisdom and ability to appropriately analyze an idea.

Managers should not develop the idea that "if you tell me, it should be shared with all members of the council to show fairness and equity." Telling everyone would undercut the council's view of the professional manager—who can listen and assist them in expressing their views better.

Communication is not enough. Take notes at every meeting. There are no informal meetings when councilmembers or board members are present. Make sure that you always have pen and paper with you or a designated staff member who understands the members' initiatives to take notes of all suggestions, requests, and ideas during a meeting.

Discuss and delegate certain topics to staff for more information after the meeting. Staff may already have information available because a councilmember has mentioned the topic earlier. Then, follow through in another conversation to make sure that any request is still valid. If it was just an idea for the moment and not a heartfelt request, the matter may end there.

Take notes during telephone calls from councilmembers. Don't blow an elected official off as just another caller who likes to hear himself or herself talk. If councilmembers prefer to send e-mail messages, make sure these messages are followed through on, too. Delegate requests to the department heads who can follow up. And get back to councilmembers.

When giving information to a councilor, give the same information to the mayor first and then to all councilmembers. Be fair and equal. Elected officials need to be oriented to how a manager processes ideas and concerns. An understanding of the manager's thought process will help councilors appreciate the manager's sincerity, organization, and willingness to listen actively and then respond.

Council's Designated Staff Member

Managers should be savvy enough to designate an intelligent staff member to the councilmembers, one who can serve them in several ways. The staff member should be able to:

- Understand their needs.
- Understand all personalities.
- Serve as a concierge.
 - Provide directions to the places they will travel.

- Make hotel reservations (with confirmation numbers).
- Reserve automobiles (get councilmembers' vehicle preferences).
- Make airline reservations.
- Make conference reservations, and confirm them.
- Keep an extra copy of all reservations, confirmations, phone numbers, and addresses in case councilmembers want this information again.
- Notify mayor and all councilmembers of public events, meetings in town, or functions requesting council's presence.
- Follow through for mayor and councilmembers on all city or county events.
- Follow through on council's e-mails, and respond to them.
- Clue in the manager on what is going on. Do not leave the manager out of the loop on anything.
- Copy the manager on councilmembers' requests and messages to department heads.
- Prepare a room for all meetings with any and all councilmembers in the local government building or specified place of meeting.
 - Have coffee or desired beverages ready prior to meeting time.
 - Have paper and pens on hand.
 - Be prepared for councilmembers; think ahead for them.
 - Prepare councilmembers for their meetings, and solicit questions before meetings.

No elected official wants to be out of the loop, with no answers and no strategies, when something goes wrong or a crisis occurs.

When bad things happen or a crisis occurs, make sure the elected body is informed by you, the manager, and not by the press, other staff members, or callers. No elected official wants to be out of the loop, with no answers and no strategies, when something goes wrong or a crisis occurs. Keep your councilors informed up-front. Also, be prepared with strategies and options for councilmembers so they can be reasonably prepared to make a response to whatever might take place.

Two Systems That Work

Complaint Tracking System. One manager reports: "Our citizen complaint process is processed through the manager's office. (In an attempt to lessen the negativity of the word "complaint," the term has been modified to "customer service request.") The idea is not only to have a centralized processing area but also to ensure that the manager's staff is aware of the issues presently of interest to the community. It also provides us with the opportunity, for example, to track trends of issues and problem areas."

When asked how a complaint management system works, the manager replied: "The staff processes the requests using a Microsoft Access program and records a service number,

department(s) to whom the request is routed, service address, description, name of person making the request, and his or her telephone number.

"Generally speaking, we do not accept anonymous comments. If the staff person believes the issue is compelling enough to investigate—for example, an allegation of a major health or safety issue—we will notify the appropriate department and ask that it be checked out.

"The department is expected to respond to the request and report back to the manager's office of their findings within 10 days. Additionally, the department is required to notify the requestor that the investigation has been completed and if action has already been or will be taken to remedy the concern. If no response is received by that date, a reminder is sent to the department. This is rarely necessary.

"If a service request comes through a councilmember on behalf of one of his or her constituents, we use the same process. In this case, of course, we would notify the councilmember of the results as well."

Calendar Reminders. The biggest complaints from staff usually involve a councilmember forgetting or losing a reminder about a significant community date or event. The biggest need for a governing body might be a centralized calendar and special automatic reminders, such as wake-up calls at hotels, signals of upcoming civic events, memos of appointments, and the like. A busy council will designate highly sophisticated systems to complete this task.

Regular e-mail contacts or daily cellphone reminders often work well. This activity should not be considered babysitting but a necessary part of tracking business for elected officials.

Pandering or Babysitting versus Support

To a great extent, if a councilmember believes that a certain level of support is important to him or her or to his or her constituency, it doesn't matter if staff members consider it pandering, babysitting, or anything else they might want to call it. Staff members must realize that they look at the world through different-colored glasses than do elected officials.

Managers are the professionals who ensure that things are done as efficiently and effectively as possible, whereas elected officials look at things from a political perspective and want to see results that will enhance their political positions. It is imperative, however, that administrative staff recognize that councilors have indeed been elected by the residents of the community and are the ones that know the pulse of the constituents.

So, from the management perspective, as long as a councilmember's request doesn't violate any local rules or regulations or the ICMA Code of Ethics, the manager is going to make sure the elected official is accommodated (even down to the question "Where are we going to dinner tonight, now that we're at the league's annual conference?"). From a jaundiced perspective, managers are sometimes indeed the "hired help."

What Are the Small Irritants That Could Become Larger?

Here are some personal statements that answer the question "Do small things matter?"

"I know a manager who was fired because, although he was great with the big-picture items, he didn't get the potholes fixed that councilmembers had told him needed to be done."

"Councilmembers frequently pay a lot of attention to their pay and benefits packages. If they don't think they're getting all they're due, staff is sure to hear about it."

"Councilmembers want to be sure they're treated with the respect they think they're due because

of the office they hold. If they don't think staff respects them, things can get really tough."

"An offhand remark at a public gathering that's perceived as being negative toward a councilmember will invariably get back to that councilmember and can easily come back to bite you."

Following Through Ensures Your Credibility

Important Issues

1. Get the facts straight.
2. Don't jump ahead of councilors.
3. Give them the public spotlight.
4. Prepare them for facing public issues.

When your councilmember has a request, mandate, or suggestion, make sure it is followed through on immediately, even before the job has been completed. Many times, it will take several hours, days, or maybe weeks before the request can be completed. The councilmember, however, should be notified as soon as the task is delegated, concerning the timeline, the work backlog, and the equipment needed.

Councilmembers need to know that their requests were taken seriously and that they were heard. Seeing that this is so will save a lot of frustration and misconceptions down the road.

Council and the manager's staff form a unique and eclectic partnership that is chosen by the electorate. The manager must develop staff members to be able to meet the challenges.

Show Up!

One of the comments most often heard from an elected official is that the manager doesn't show up at public events. Managers need to make an effort to pick the events that are most important to be seen (by council) and to attend them. For many events, designate the assistant manager or deputy manager and, in some cases, a department head to attend. Managers need to be seen by the mayor and councilmembers as being participants in the community.

Councilmembers Should Know They Count

Councilmembers feel more comfortable when they know they count as their localities' elected officials. They also need to know they count as people; they have feelings, and they know when they are being brushed off and disregarded. They are the bosses; they are elected to make changes and to make a difference, and staff members are hired to follow through for them.

The council's "pet peeves" should not be revisited over and over again. A manager should remember what they are. The manager also should make sure that councilmembers know they have been heard, that action will be taken when needed, and that there will be follow through.

Council and the manager's staff form a unique and eclectic partnership that is chosen by the electorate. The manager must develop staff members to be able to meet the challenges inherent in their jobs. The ideas identified in this article represent some of the most common issues and resolutions.

You certainly don't have to drop the ball when it comes to your elected officials' needs.

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