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**Ethics Matters!**

**Professional Courtesy**

We are so focused on our ethical obligation to the community, elected officials, and staff that most of us probably don't spend much time thinking about our ethical commitment to our colleagues.

**Scenario no. 1:** An advocate for recruiting new talent to the profession, the city manager didn't hesitate to take a call from a member of a U.S. senator's staff who wanted to pursue a career in local government. The staff member readily admitted that just a passion for public service combined with her federal experience alone wouldn't position her to secure the job of a city manager. She needed some serious coaching on how city management works.

During the next weeks, the city manager provided his input in response to questions she posed by e-mail. The staff member then telephoned with an urgent request to meet the next day. Her goal of moving into a city manager's position was in sight as she had an interview at week's end. When the city manager asked where, she disclosed the information, but on a confidential basis.

They agreed to a breakfast meeting the following day. Because the manager wasn't familiar with the candidate's prospective employer, he reached out to the state league staff for some background. He learned that the community currently had a city manager as well as a considerable amount of turmoil, with a new council publicly calling for the dismissal of the police chief.

Hearing all this, the manager thought twice about his mentoring role and wondered what obligation he had to his beleaguered colleague who was attempting to steer the community through its problems.

**Advice:** The manager's promise to keep the interview confidential is trumped by his obligation to his colleague and to the profession. The guideline in the ICMA Code of Ethics is clear: no one should seek a position when the administrator has not resigned or been officially informed that his or her services are to be terminated.

A stealth recruitment that lacks both transparency and fairness in dealing with the incumbent manager should not be supported by colleagues. The city manager should share all available information with the colleague to avoid what could be an awful surprise. Next, he should enlighten the candidate about the importance of fair play and the damage to public trust when processes lack transparency.

**Scenario no. 2:** New to the county but with many years of experience under his belt, the county manager is working hard to resolve the current budget crisis while moving the county forward on critical fronts. As in a game of chess, almost every significant proposal he puts forth for discussion with the commission is met by opposition from one county commissioner.

Always open to opposing viewpoints, the manager is getting frustrated because the commissioner is advocating for failed strategies supported by the prior administration and is presenting detailed yet incorrect information to support his position. Where is this commissioner getting all this information?

The county manager finally realizes and confirms that the former assistant county manager, who was unsuccessful in getting promoted to county manager and is now serving as a manager elsewhere, is in regular communication with this county commissioner.

**Advice:** It is unethical for the former assistant to discuss county business with his former commissioners without the knowledge of the incumbent manager. When contacted by a colleague's governing body members, ICMA members have an obligation to let their colleague know about the contact and to bring it to an end.

How should the county manager deal with this situation? The best option is the direct one: call the colleague to ask that he cease and desist because his backdoor communications are disruptive and unfair. Surely this individual, who is also new to a manager's position, will understand how critical it is for the manager to quickly build credibility and trust with the governing body.

If this approach doesn't work, the county manager should report the matter to ICMA. The Code of Ethics encourages members to report possible violations so that they may be vetted in the formal peer review process.