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**Ethics Matters!**

## The Profession's Foundation:

## Celebrating 85 years of the ICMA Code of Ethics

O. E. Carr, city manager of Dubuque, Iowa, addressed 100 of his colleagues gathered in Montreal in 1924 at the ICMA annual conference to present them with a code of ethics for the profession. Quite a remarkable milestone for the “city management profession” entering just its second decade and still very much a work in progress.

The significance of this contribution to the profession can be measured in two ways. First, Carr and his committee had the foresight and wisdom to recognize that a true profession is more than a body of knowledge implemented by experienced practitioners. A true profession is anchored in and guided by a set of commonly held core principles.

Those principles not only guide the individual's conduct but create a set of expectations and a bond with society. Professionals act with integrity in the conduct of their personal and professional lives in order to merit the trust of those they serve.

Writing about the recent failures of the private sector management profession in an article published in *Harvard Business Review* last fall, authors Rakesh Khurana and Nitin Nohria reflected that “True professions have codes of conduct, and the meaning and consequences of those codes are taught as part of the formal education of their members. A governing body . . . oversees members' compliance. Through these codes, professional institutions forge an implicit social contract . . . . Trust us to control and exercise jurisdiction over this important occupational category. In return, the profession promises, we will ensure that our members are worthy of your trust . . . . On balance we believe that a profession, with well-functioning institutions of discipline, will curb misconduct because moral behavior is an integral part of the identity of professionals— a self-image most are motivated to maintain.”

Taking that first step to create a core set of principles so early in its infancy was fundamental to the success of the local government management profession. Today, those core principles are taught in MPA programs, reflected in local government management practices, and enforced in a peer review process governed by ICMA.

Second, the principles outlined in 1924 are timeless. Our commitment today—to integrity; public service; seek no favor; exemplary conduct in both personal and professional matters; respect the role and contributions of elected officials; exercise the independence to do what is right; political neutrality; serve the public equitably and governing body members equally; keep the community informed about local government matters; and support and lead our employees—comes from that first code.

Even the inspiration for the new focus on sustainability has its very roots in the last tenet of the 1924 code:

*A City Manager will be known by his works, many of which may outlast him, and regardless of personal popularity or unpopularity, he should not curry favor or temporize but should in a far-sighted way aim to benefit the community of today and of posterity.*

Over the past 85 years, the Code of Ethics has been revised seven times to make it more relevant to the conditions of the day as well as to strengthen principles that perhaps were losing meaning and visibility to the profession. There is little doubt that the code—debated, challenged, and amended over time—has been, along with the implementation of a strong enforcement mechanism, a crucial element in defining and sustaining the profession.

It's a source of inspiration for leaders. As ICMA's current president, David Limardi, ICMA-CM, noted “The ICMA Code of Ethics has provided a profound foundational framework for leadership with character for the past 85 years. The 100-year legacy of professional local government management, a legacy of ethical, transparent, efficient, and innovative leadership, has relied upon the Code of Ethics to provide a moral leadership compass. The code hangs in my office as a reminder to me and all who enter there of the ideals upon which our democracy was built. We owe a debt of gratitude to those who had the foresight and courage to author this historic statement of ideals.”

As the profession returns to Montreal this month to launch a year-long recognition and celebration of the code, we have an opportunity to share and learn from our experiences. We all face those defining moments in time—do I do what is easy or do I do what is right? When you reflect upon such a moment in your career, how do the values expressed in the ICMA Code of Ethics support your decision?