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**Ethics Matters!**

**What Price Political Neutrality?**

No city manager should take an active part in politics. That clear, succinct statement of the profession's bedrock principle of political neutrality was expressed in the first ICMA Code of Ethics. As the profession evolved to include city and county managers, assistants, and professionals at all levels, the statement of the principle changed as well.

Today, Tenet 7 of the Code, approved by the membership in 1998, requires all those who work in local government to "Refrain from all political activities which undermine public confidence in professional administrators. Refrain from participation in the election of the members of the employing legislative body."

Staying clear of all political activity other than voting for the candidate of your choice is really a statement of respect and support for our democracy. It's an acknowledgement of the unique rights and contributions of the voters to select the political leadership to govern and, in turn, appoint the professionals to manage. For insight into how political activity can undermine the public's confidence in our work, consider these two real-world scenarios:

**Scenario no. 1:** The public information officer has a true passion for public service that extends beyond his work for the county. The announcement that the district's state legislator plans to retire at the expiration of her term has the PIO contemplating a run for the position.

He could be a strong contender given his extensive network of contacts in a wide-open field. Because success is not a certainty, though, his strategy is to retain his position with the county while spending his off hours quietly building a base of support among party leaders, meeting with constituent groups, and raising funds.

When the actual campaign starts, he may take a leave of absence. He doesn't think that running for elected office would have any negative impact on the county. After all, he isn't the county manager and doesn't aspire to the position.

**Advice:** As one who deals with the media and the public, the PIO is naive to believe that his stealth campaign will remain a secret for long. Once disclosed, his role as the voice of the organization delivering the policy positions of the elected officials and news of staff efforts is compromised.

In this era of policy and funding disputes between levels of government, will it be crystal clear to the public that he presents the views of the county in such matters and not his own? Will his political activity tarnish the reputation of staff who strive to be professional and nonpartisan? What's his relationship now with members of the governing body who may choose to support other candidates for this seat?

With each media appearance, will anyone wonder whether it is driven by county news or just a desire to raise his visibility with voters? It's a big sacrifice to walk away from a job to seek another, but in the interest of serving the public the PIO should resign his position before conducting any campaign activities.

**Scenario no. 2:** Council adjourned into executive session with the city manager and city attorney to discuss personnel issues. The mayor thanked the manager for her efforts but informed her that the council wanted to "go in another direction." The manager was caught off guard because the council was so new they hadn't even had time yet to talk about her performance. The mayor asked for her resignation, noting that if she declined to offer it, she would be terminated. The manager recovered enough to inform the council that this approach violated the city charter, which required council to present her with a list of deficiencies and then hold a public hearing for her reply.

In response, the mayor simply reiterated his request. Word of the council's action leaked out. Within a day the manager was deluged with calls from business and community leaders offering support and promising to use their clout to bring an end to this crazy idea. The manager confirmed the rumors but did nothing more than thank callers for their support.

As she considered her next steps, the manager decided not to resign because the council's approach clearly violated the city charter. She expressed that opinion in a letter to council with a copy to the city attorney. Refusing to be a party to an illegal act, the manager did not resign and was terminated by the council before a packed audience filled with the manager's supporters and the media.

An effort to recall the mayor and council was launched, and the now former manager was asked to support the effort. The manager is tempted to join the effort because elected officials who violate the law and act in such a reckless manner should be removed from office. Should she support the recall effort?

**Advice:** No! As difficult as it is to be terminated without cause or in an unfair manner, this member must respect the council's right to decide who should serve as the manager. The manager was right to point out to officials the deficiencies in the process, but now that the decision has been made, she should exit gracefully with her integrity intact. Leave the decision of whether the council acted in the public's best interest up to the public.

Building trust with the public we serve requires a commitment to a higher standard even at the sacrifice of some of our fundamental rights to participate in our democracy.