

Ethics

Things to consider when first impressions are often lasting ones



Q. Who would imagine that a warm welcome to a community could be troubling to the new city manager? Within days of joining the city, individuals and organizations welcomed the manager and invited him to various functions in order to introduce him to the community. Several of the invitations raised concerns.

He and his spouse were invited to attend a pricey fundraiser at the boat club; leaders from the economic development council invited him to join their golf outing; and dinner with the former mayor, whom the manager had not met before, ended up taking place at a private club. Coming from a more modest environment, the manager recognized that some of his initial concerns were about the scale of the welcome. Is there a difference between dining at the home of an elected official versus dinner at a club?

But still he was bothered about the appearance of being wined and dined, and he was concerned that he was stepping into an unforeseen quagmire. Should the city pay for him to attend these events if this was the cost of doing business in this community? After all, the previous manager attended many of these events. Should community norms trump this professional's standards? Should his need to quickly build solid relationships outweigh his ethical concerns?

A. It's good that this manager's GPS was homing in on the ethical dilemmas because people will be watching and assessing his leadership and character from day one. In this economic climate, using public resources to attend social events is sure to draw criticism; and attending fundraisers causes added concern because it could result in public funds going to the organization's bottom line (as in the boat club example).

If the manager feels that the local government should pay the cost of his attendance at ticketed events, both a conversation with the governing body to outline expectations and a provision in the employment agreement confirming the arrangement are essential for transparency's sake.

In the alternative, the manager might consider accepting a few of these ticketed invitations, putting community-based organizations and events with a high "public good" factor at the top of the list. Decline certain invitations: from vendors; to exclusive, high-priced events; and, of course, to political party fundraisers. Have a conversation with your council about the approach so that there is mutual acceptance of the ground rules. Taper off the events as you get to know the community.

What's a preferred approach? Meet the leaders in the community for breakfast or lunch; offer to speak at civic, neighborhood, and church gatherings; and generally be visible. If invited to a

ticketed event that serves a networking purpose, pay your own way. The benefit of this approach is that you are apt to be more judicious in how you spend personal funds and perhaps more accurate in assessing the public benefit versus the fun factor.

This is the most conservative approach, which enables you to build relationships without incurring criticism. And, frankly, anything that's fun—like those NCAA basketball tournament tickets—would raise an eyebrow with the public and should really be on your tab anyway. Be proactive in creating and implementing an outreach strategy that engages you with all segments of the community without the thorny considerations of who pays and who gains undue influence.

Q. During the amicable negotiations to bring the job offer to a close, a commission member offered to assist the new county manager with her search for a home. Although there are a number of real estate agents in the area, this commissioner has been in the business for a long time and has a large book of business.

A. It's not a violation of the ICMA Code of Ethics per se for members to hire an elected official in their jurisdictions to provide a personal service. It is generally advised, however, that you avoid doing so unless you are in a small market with limited choices.

If there is any tension with the house hunt or problem with the deal, it could affect your relationship with this commissioner. Even absent a problem, doing personal business with one elected official may create the appearance that you are too friendly with one, to the detriment of your commitment to serve all equally.

Q. Given the challenges of the housing market, it took the county manager 10 months to relocate her family to the new community. When the costs for the sale of the old home, the move, and settlement in the new home were totaled, the manager realized that the amount she had negotiated for settlement costs wasn't sufficient to cover her actual expenses. Moving expenses turned out to be less than negotiated, so the manager wanted to know whether she could simply reallocate the funds or whether she needed approval to do so.

A. The terms of the employment agreement should be followed to the letter, always. All exceptions, changes, or areas of ambiguity should be addressed by formal action of the governing body. It is especially important in a new relationship for the manager to demonstrate that she is a stickler for the details, fairness, and process.

To that end, if the agreement delineated separate ceilings for relocation and settlement, the manager should not assume that savings in one area can be used to cover an overage in another. If the agreement provided a lump sum to be used for all relocation and settlement expenses, then the discretion about how to allocate those funds rests with the county manager.