

TALES OF *De-Termination*



Two *PM* readers generously share their encounters with employment terminations, prompted by *PM*'s call for stories in

the September 2009 article, “Causes of Manager Turnover,” by James Thurmond. It is one thing to read about the termination phenomenon from a studied perspective and another experience to hear about it first-hand from someone who has lived it. These two stories validate Thurmond’s “20 turnover factors” with personal insights that any manager can relate to.

Termination Lessons

Spring 2009 ushered in two significant professional milestones for me. The first was a notice from ICMA recognizing 30 years of public service; the second was a notice from my board of supervisors exercising the termination-without-cause paragraph of my contract.

I had spent 29 years in California county government, 20 of them as a chief administrator. During that time, I had had the difficult task of firing some people, but this was my first time being on that proverbial other side of the table.

The story also happened to be a local media delight because it involved allegations from the assistant CAO of a hostile work environment and revelations of her affair with a union official while negotiating with him on behalf of the county. Several months after my termination, her personal relationship led to her firing for cause and her subsequent lawsuit against the county, which also named me personally for allegedly creating that hostile work environment.

Although the ACAO's allegations were not the reason for my termination, they provided an opportunity for some of the supervisors to push for my departure. The board was careful to make clear that its action to end my employment was on a contractual "for convenience" basis and, in fact, board members did not investigate the allegations until after voting to terminate me.

The connection, however, was made in the local media, and although I believe the legal process

will ultimately show her allegations to be without merit, there is no question my career will be tainted by these events.

So, I'm responding to James Thurmond's article in the September *PM* on what insights I can offer colleagues from this experience. Thurmond's 20 turnover factors certainly capture the various dynamics that come into play when a termination happens, and mine was no different. For this discussion, I will split the factors into two groups: personality and circumstances.

Personality

I was CAO in San Luis Obispo County, California, for 11 years and, by 2009, board membership had completely turned over since the supervisors hired me in 1998. The 1998 board had wanted a strong-manager model and looked to me to run the organization. Turnover brought in different personalities who wanted to be much more hands-on, and lines of authority became much more ambiguous.

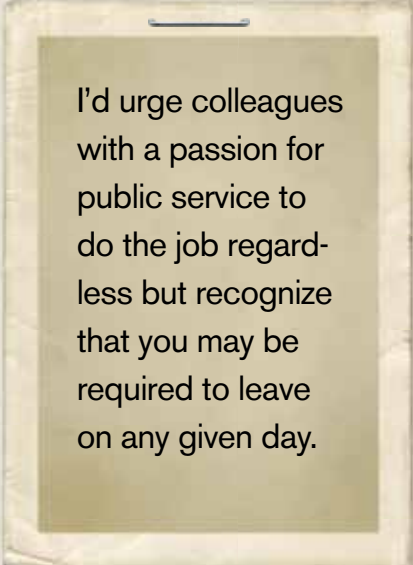
By 2009, tension on this issue was real with four of the five supervisors. This tension was exacerbated by a feeling among the supervisors that I was associated too much with the previous board—a board that had been rejected by the voters in the 2008 elections. Most managers know such circumstances are not unusual in our business, and the democratic process may bring a personality mix that simply doesn't work. A manager must learn to recognize this reality quickly and be prepared to move on—or be moved on!

Circumstances

Tensions within the organization, or the community, are often bad news for a manager's tenure. In San Luis,

such tensions were generated by budget and growth management—both familiar territory to many of my colleagues. In bad financial times, the manager is the face of a cut budget, which is welcomed by neither the community nor the elected body.

Such was the case in San Luis and, after two years of budget cuts, I had accumulated significant negative baggage. In addition, growth management had been the focal point of the 2008 elections and, in a sharply divided community, two incumbents were defeated. A pro-development



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board was replaced by a pro-environment board, and association with the old board was not good news. The new board members forced out the county planning director shortly before they fired me—both of us having that old-board baggage by the nature of our jobs.

The third variable to note under this category is the type of manager running the organization. In my case, the 1998 board had hired me, specifically, to act as a change agent. They believed

the organizational culture lacked an emphasis on accountability, performance, and customer service.

Although such a shift is not new in our business, it was a huge shift for San Luis, and it generated a lot of resentment from those who were benefiting from the status quo. That resentment found some sympathetic ears when board members changed.

By May 2009, this mix of personality and circumstances left me with a board that did not value my role as an organizational leader. I believe they were content to let me stay through my planned retirement at the end of the year, but they were also ready to take advantage of the particular circumstances at the time and fire me in order to show their intent to change the organization.

Lessons from My Story

In politics, perception trumps performance. Those things that I was hired to do were done effectively, but when I was perceived as the problem, the performance became irrelevant. I'd urge colleagues with a passion for public service to do the job regardless but recognize that you may be required to leave on any given day.

It can be lonely at the top. My experience suggests that one can be friendly—but not friends—with employees or elected members. The manager is always the manager, and for many individuals the top job may not be the right job. I submit, for many, the most fulfilling and satisfying position is in a key assistant slot. I'd encourage colleagues to think deeply on this issue and not be swayed by our "promotion = success" mentality.

Communicate, communicate, communicate. The organizational culture will create the stories in

the absence of your leadership conversation. Keep employees in the loop. For the elected body, show appropriate professional deference in the public setting but be willing to have what David Whyte calls "courageous conversations" with them in private. I believe effective government depends on the person who is willing to tell the emperor he is wearing no clothes. This is the manager's role, and sometimes it may cost you your job. If you don't do it, however, you are no longer effective.

Have a comprehensive employment agreement. Divorce court is not the place to be working out the details! On the occasions that I had terminated people for no cause, I had always offered a resignation-letter-plus-severance-package option to them. I had not, however, included such language in my contract. When we reached the point of separation, the board of supervisors was not willing to offer the resignation option unless I agreed to a lesser severance.

Ours is a noble and fulfilling profession. This is more a post-script than a lesson. I would not have chosen this particular finale for myself, but I cannot imagine a better career overall than I have been privileged to enjoy for the past three decades.

Public service remains a most noble profession, and pursuing continuous improvement in one's community and the organizations that serve it is worth all the personal sacrifices that go along with the job of chief administrator. I'd do it over without hesitation.



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One Take On Understanding Management Turnover

I served as the town manager of Cave Creek, Arizona, from July 1990 through February 1995. It was my second position as town manager, and I thought I was ready for it. My master's degree is in regional planning.

In retrospect, maybe I was overreaching. My years at Cave Creek were some of the most harrowing of my life. I say this because the town's politics was so volatile that I never knew from one day to the next whether I would be terminated—regardless of my job performance. Of the 20 factors James Thurmond identified in his September *PM* article, certainly conflict among the members of the town council played a part in my eventual termination.

I was hired by the Cave Creek Town Council several months after the mayor survived an extremely divisive recall election. In turn, I was hired on a split town council vote, and from the beginning of my employment I certainly suffered from less than full confidence of the council.

During my tenure a new mayor took office each year. The last mayor in that string of mayors was the only member of the town council who voted against terminating me when the question came up the final time.

As each new mayor took office, I had to determine how to respond

to that mayor's demands to change my approach to such major projects as the expansion of our wastewater treatment and collection system, the management of our road maintenance and improvement program, the prosecution of zoning enforcement, town zoning, and our daily operations.

The first mayor was strong on zoning enforcement and uninterested in the wastewater system because she feared that an improved system would foster growth. My second mayor was the opposite. My third mayor was by profession an engineer who generally opposed actions in support of growth, although he had an intense interest in the details of our gravel road maintenance and improvement program.

My fourth mayor was a strong no-growth advocate who, although she inherited a major wastewater system improvement that was in the final preliminary design stage, really didn't want the project to be completed.

Issues to Confront

The attitudes and approaches of each of these mayors resulted in issues being raised in open town council meetings without any advance warning to staff, consultants, or other councilmembers in order to disrupt a process or confuse opponents. In such a situation, it was difficult for me to develop any rapport with my mayors, who generally considered me a partisan opponent in relation to their high-interest issues.

A significant amount of turnover on the council also occurred during my tenure. The demographics of the town's leadership were changing in the early 1990s, from longtime resident businesspeople to newly arrived and younger professional commuters from the central Phoenix metro area.

A year before I was hired, the town council, which appoints the planning commission members, filed an unsuccessful lawsuit to attempt to overturn a

decision of their own planning commission. During my tenure, I wrote a completely new zoning ordinance for the town (it was recognized as the "outstanding project" of 1993 by the Small Town and Rural Planning Division of the American Planning Association), and I wrote the town a new general plan, which was adopted by the planning commission and town council.

Turmoil and contention were constants on the town council during my tenure, with split votes initially generally favoring the old-timers. During one council executive session, one member of the council stood up abruptly and before walking out of the meeting threw a three-inch binder of wastewater system reports and studies across the oval table around which we were sitting, hitting our 69-year-old mayor full-square in the chest. The mayor chose not to take legal action.

At least a couple of times before I was terminated, I was advised privately by members of the council that it looked like the council would vote to terminate me at the next council meeting. I did not take any evasive or assertive action in response to those warnings; neither did I encourage anyone to provide me with such warnings because I intended to continue to attempt to do my job to the best of my ability. I had a personal commitment to the citizens of the town that I intended to attempt to fulfill regardless of shifts in the town council's attitude toward me.

Have Your Parachute Ready

As far as what others can take from my experience, I suppose it is that not all warnings of impending terminations need to be believed, no matter their source, and that it is never good to accept an appointment to a top management position without some "parachute" included in your employment agreement. I took the position somewhat out of a sense of urgency

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about leaving my last position, and, as a result, did not assure before I accepted the position that I had a reasonable exit policy outlined for my eventual departure.

I should have either declined to accept the position when it was first offered to me or negotiated an employment contract that would have provided me some security in case of a termination. Failing to do that left me in an extremely vulnerable position during my entire tenure with the town.

As a result of my experience in Cave Creek, I began to look more closely into the politics of the towns I considered applying to for employment, because I did not want to work for another town like Cave Creek that was in the midst of so many divisive changes. My experience taught me that 1) some local governments have a culture that supports sacrificing management leadership as a problem-solving tool, and 2) it is perfectly reasonable, professional, and noble to decline an appointment to serve in such communities. **PM**



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