

DEPARTMENTS

Ethics Inquiries

Confidentiality and the Elected Official

Scenario: A councilmember drops by the city manager's office to ask him to read a statement that he, the councilmember, planned to read aloud at the council meeting. The statement was highly political, and the city manager suspected that it would offend some of the councilmember's colleagues. The manager offered some comments about the nature of the statement and suggested that the councillor think about what he was trying to accomplish.

The city manager's suspicion was correct. When the councilmember read the statement, it offended one of his colleagues. The offended councilmember asked the manager if he was aware of the statement, and when she found out that he was, she said he should have called the rest of the council to advise them. The manager tried to explain that he believed that the statement had been shown to him in confidence. Upon reflection, he wondered what level of confidentiality should apply to his conversations with individual elected officials.

Response: When an elected official asks for assistance on a matter that is essentially political, the best approach the manager can take is to keep as much distance as possible from it. The manager can let the councilmember know that it is inappropriate for him to get involved because it is a political matter.

This could be a good occasion for him to explain his obligations as a professional manager to abide by the ICMA Code of Ethics. Then, if another councilmember asks what the local government manager knows about a political matter, the manager can reply honestly that he chose not to be informed about it as soon as he learned it was political.

Striking a balance between establishing comfortable communications with individual councilmembers and staying out of conversations that are political in nature is challenging, to say the least. Councilmembers will want the assurance that they may have private conversations with you and that you will treat these informal conversations confidentially. Councilmembers generally respect a manager who is clear about his or her efforts to treat all of them in the same way.