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Chronic Career Stress: What It Looks Like and What to Do About It

Joseph LaBeau

For the past several years, in addition to being a city manager, I have shared my counseling training with local government managers and their staff members to help them manage job stresses. I have held training sessions on how to manage stress reactions, how to find some measure of relief from tension and anxiety, and how to toughen up psychologically and be less susceptible to those workplace hassles that unnerve and undo even the best of us. After the formal portion of the workshops, people seem to want to talk, and I listen to lots of stories about career government service.

Some are inspirational. All too often, though, the stories I hear are heartrending and humbling. So many people really do love to serve the public. Yet so many also persevere in terribly distressing work circumstances. These people are enmeshed in a long-term work situation that is toxic or even deadly. Some of these good people recognize the connection between their work and their unhappiness. Some don't. Yet they all continue to serve.

A few are in a category that I would call "the worst of the worst." They continue a daily travail that has fractured their self-confidence, contorted their work relationships, and distressed their families. They are truly the walking wounded.

Other folks just say they feel tired all the time. They seem to know only that they are not themselves anymore. During some of my workshops, we talk about moments of joy at work. When we do, these people look like they are watching the discussion through binoculars. Afterward, they talk vaguely about their haunting sense that something is lost in the one-third of their life spent at work.

Still other people carry big buckets of anger around. For them, the image they see in the mirror of the workshop is frightening. They are startled to see just how furious they are and what that seething pot of rage is doing to them.

Almost all of these people, especially the angry ones, have an unspoken belief that someone or something always has been out to get them. There is more truth to this than they realize, but the belief, as they hold it, amounts to a curse.

In this article, the development of chronic unhappiness at work is discussed. My goal is to help chronic stress sufferers understand the cloud that follows them around and to know how to find the sunshine again.

Your Career Identity

To begin to truly explain long-term stress, we must concentrate on a different concern from your day-to-day or even month-to-month pressures. We also have to look beyond the physical symptoms of stress, which are the normal focus of educational articles and workshops. To get a real sense of what is going on, we need to go to the beginning, when a person first steps out into his or her professional field of choice.

The first important fact to know is that career selection and all other major career choices result in what counselors call a career identity. Like a personal identity, career identity grows as the person matures and gains more and more knowledge of who he or she is professionally. An entry-level worker, for example, has a career identity that is largely defined by basic job interests and fantasies of career success.

As this person enters actual service, she begins to define her professional self more and more accurately in terms of professional competence and opportunities for development. She begins to recognize her place in the labor market and learns how people in her occupation can advance and accomplish something worthy. She begins to know her professional style.

Stress and the sense of achievement arising from successful career adjustments hold an emotional-language dialogue throughout a person's professional life.

That is, she begins to know what aspects of the job she excels in and which aspects are struggles. She also develops a professional/social understanding of what her relationship is to her peers, her community, and her profession in general. Is she the up-and-coming star? At professional conferences, is she the one speaking or the one playing hooky? Does she even attend these conferences? Is she her work community's taskmaster, villain, clown, prophet, or poet? Does she like to shake things up, or does she prefer to be the oil that soothes troubled waters? Literally thousands of these questions are asked and answered by her work life and work experiences.

When all is well, this career "feedback" is rich in achievement and brings positive resolution to a career identity that serves her well. She becomes what counselors call a mature professional identity. Because of this, she will tend generally to perform well. She will also feel excited about her future, find interest in daily work routines, and progress professionally at a pace and to a level that she will find satisfying.

While she will also doubtless undergo career difficulties, she will recover quickly from these. Emotionally, she will be stable, slow to wound, and easy to heal. In the latter years of her active professional work, she will look backward at her accomplishments with satisfaction and look forward with optimism to the next stage of her life.

So, when our work tells us we are generally successful, we have accomplished much, much more than simply earning an income. We are defining ourselves, at least in part, as a successful person. Like it or not, for many people, this status carries with it a sense of personal adequacy and usefulness, which, along with a stronger sense of identity, allows them to mature emotionally as adults.

Erik Erikson, a great writer on human development, says that work-successful persons tend to develop a clearer sense of their identity, and therefore are able to develop a deeper capacity for true intimacy with other human beings. According to Erikson, they tend to look forward to leaving a legacy in the service of the next generation.

Finally, he says, they become able to bring positive closure, not just to their careers but to their life experience in totality. Perhaps this is what English poet Tennyson meant when he said (and I paraphrase from memory), “At the end of our journey, we will return to the place where we began, only to see the place for the first time.” In short, work success enables life success.

Self-Dialogue

It is interesting to note that, from this perspective, stress—even rather severe stress—can play a positive role in career development. One acid test of professional maturity, for example, is the ability to master the most stressful challenges of your profession. Often, these challenges include making the transition from position to position and employer to employer. In our earlier case, our young professional might be motivated to move to another position by recurring feedback that her full capabilities are not valued in her present position.

To the degree that the job she moves to seems to lead her to increased professional achievement, she will gain in confidence and positive self-definition. If we liken her to a sort of professional package, she will move from being a loosely wrapped, undervalued parcel to being a more nicely wrapped package whose value is recognized both in the market and in her own eyes.

In effect, this and later transitions will serve as a dialogue between her view of herself and the real world of work. So, the work-life discussion helps her adjust the package. As her adjustments succeed, she becomes wiser, more mature, and work life becomes more satisfying.

In a way, then, stress and the sense of achievement arising from successful career adjustments hold an emotional-language dialogue throughout a person’s professional life. This emotional dialogue is the source of the professional beliefs that control career decisions. In addition to specific and controlling career beliefs, more fundamental beliefs are developed at earlier stages of life.

These have an even deeper impact. Do people believe themselves to be losers or winners? The answer is largely influenced by people’s perceptions of their personal win/loss ratio, formed in their minds over the course of their lifelong achievement histories. These sets of beliefs—both professional and basic—can come together and, if they are largely negative, lead to the development of defensive leadership styles and workplace roles that powerfully undermine a career.

In effect, these roles become people’s shadowy, unrecognized, implicit career plans. In short, they are the someone or something holding a person back. For most people, thankfully, basic achievement and professional beliefs involve more positives than

negatives and guide them to much more success than distress. But this is not always so.

Leadership Tendencies

Suppose, for example, somewhere down the road a person gets the fundamental idea that he or she is supposed to keep other folks happy and always to meet their expectations. Suppose also that in this person's work environment performance results are intangible, as they often are in government service, and that therefore clear performance feedback is absent.

After some years of working "blind," suppose that this same person accepts a leadership position. This person is now in a bind, right? He must commit to a view of himself as competent without reference to actual experience. He has good reason to doubt his own professional abilities. Add to this an entrenched need to deny his needs in the service of others, and you have a pretty toxic belief cocktail.

Here is one view of how such a background might play out for a manager. In 1964, a management theorist named W. Reddin identified four particularly ineffective management styles. One of these he called the "missionary." These are the types of leaders who overemphasize harmony and are generally ineffective because of their need always to see themselves as good and even heroic persons. You are almost sure to dislike this type of behavior. These are the people who attempt to influence others by feeling everyone else's pain, confessing their every fault, and throwing themselves on the swords of their exaggerated promises.

Can you see how easily a person with these experiences and these belief limitations could slip into this leadership style and eventually into career role of organizational "missionary"? It isn't hard to see how a missionary would seriously burden work relationships and undermine his or her own sense of worth in this role. Even more to the point, besides being a royal pain to everyone else, clearly the person in this role would find playing the eternal hero stressful, even chronically stressful, wouldn't you agree?

Reddin's three other ineffective leadership tendencies also provide express tickets to trouble. Say, for instance, that another young manager comes to the job with a chip on his shoulder. His plan is to dominate, and by and large he is pretty successful at playing the role of the city hall autocrat. Let's also say that, one day, in a rare moment of alpha-male clarity, he becomes alarmed at the community's coolness toward him, a coolness born from his "My way or the highway" attitude. Probably, this fellow will have no clue as to his career handicap and will register genuine surprise (not shock because alpha males never get shocked) when the community tries to shuffle him off.

Finally, to round things out, let's say that his neighboring colleague has a different set of bad beliefs and career achievement needs, so he plays a different role. His role allows him to recognize that his enemies have accumulated and that his future is looking grim. Chess player that he is, he seeks the reprieve and protection of a power figure, say, the mayor. But this type of relationship now requires that he take on the role of "compromiser" and abandon his personal and professional values.

Not long after this, he finds that he is so worn down that he must now take on a role of "deserter," showing up at city hall in person but not in spirit. To add insult to injury, his now-obvious self-disgust begins, as it always will, to generate reciprocal

treatment from others. The mayor begins to sandwich public slights with private “loyalty” meetings. In a meager last-ditch effort at self-respect, our poor fellow walls off any awareness of distress and clings to an unhappy situation because the constant intimidation has finally caused him to believe he is a worthless imposter, not really worthy of his keep. Such is the devastating power of wounded expectations, bad thinking, bad leadership styles, and even worse career roles.

What to Do

In all of these cases, these managers will experience more stress than success. In turn, this will lead to a losing expectation that will then contribute to an emotional dependency upon the very career circumstances that so distress and hurt them. This is the background and context of chronic, debilitating stress, especially as it applies to leaders. The result of the prolonged suffering that goes with it could be considered an occupational disease, in that certain clusters of symptoms develop and can be diagnosed as burnout.

“Burnout” itself is a self-descriptive term. It is a point at which critical career care is needed. It signals a crisis in your relationship with work. Its symptoms are emotional exhaustion, cynicism, depersonalization, and a decreased ability to sense personal accomplishment. Burnout is clinically proven to be associated with insomnia, alcohol use, medication use, irritability, anger toward family, alienation from family, headaches, depressive symptoms, absenteeism, turnover, overreliance on rules, decreased job performance, and even abusive acts towards the recipients of local government services. At this stage, you can see that the circle of career pain from burnout is indeed large.

To recap, then, job stress—even serious job stress—is a normal part of professional development. It can be understood as a reaction to ongoing feedback from the work environment. It is useful to the degree that it helps you make productive adjustments, which should lead to greater personal accomplishment and career satisfaction. On the other hand, unresolved career stress leads to physical affliction and emotional misery.

The origin of all this unhappiness is a breakdown in the capacity to adjust your career identity or career package in correspondence to the feedback you get from the work you do. Ultimately, this breakdown leads to debilitation and illness. An important part of this picture is the fact that the suffering person may not be aware, or may not allow him- or herself to be aware, of the sources of dissatisfaction leading to this condition of burnout. So the question arises: “How do I know where I stand in terms of chronic stress, and what can I do about it?”

The first and single most important aspect of career stress management is awareness. This is the ability to understand the stress’s origin, recognize its manifestations, acknowledge its presence, and know its consequences. Awareness, of course, is a problem both of education, which this article aims to enhance, and of assessment.

A good place to start your assessment is to ask yourself some simple questions. Am I generally happy about my career and enthusiastic about my work? Do I think I am operating at my full potential? Am I recognized for my abilities? Are my career expectations justifiably optimistic? Am I happy with the impact of my career on other aspects of my life, like my family? If the answers to reflections like these concern you, I would urge you to consult a career counseling professional.

Even if you don’t feel any great concern, though, you might want to consider

professional career advice for another reason. If you are like most achievement-oriented professionals, you will want to get the most out of your work efforts. To do this, you will need to have a well-tuned set of basic and professional career beliefs.

Career Assessment

Let's use the image of a car to illustrate how important this point is. Think of the achieving, career-interested part of you (your career identity, remember?) as a car. Picture the car as having the regulation four wheels, two at the front and two at the back. Now, think about the front two wheels, left and right, and imagine that they respectively represent your career beliefs on the one side and your career actions on the other. Suppose now that the rear two wheels represent your feelings about your career and your physical and emotional health as it relates to your career. I guarantee you, wherever your front wheels go, so will your back wheels.

So, if your career thinking is off just a little, say 10 percent, you probably won't fly off the road into a ditch, but you will never make your optimum speed and will certainly experience chronic low-grade friction and excessive wear and tear. For many people, this is enough of a reason to have their front-end alignment checked, so to speak.

Chronic career stress, like all significant pain, is a signal that change is needed.

A professional career assessment checks your alignment from several angles. Daily work concerns and major career conflict are two examples. Among your daily concerns, work-situation factors—levels of hostile contact, work volume, community status demands, and so forth—are important considerations. A good survey of an individual's daily concerns should also inventory key work behaviors, distress levels, and any physical symptoms associated with hidden stress.

At the career-conflict level of assessment, the survey should look at conflicting, dysfunctional career beliefs held by the person. Two commonly recognized instances are the tendency to take things too personally (personalization) and the tendency to exaggerate task requirements (a trait of perfectionism).

Once dysfunctional beliefs, behaviors, and roles have been identified, goal setting and good, old-fashioned hard work are what needs to happen next. It helps to have a plan, usually referred to as a personal or professional development plan. It is your action strategy for career reprogramming or, to stick with the simile, your diagnostic recommendation for career realignment.

Heed the Signals

The point here is that chronic career stress, like all significant pain, is a signal that change is needed. Determining whether the change should be in your position, career field, work habits, training goals, or point of view, is the task of a careful assessment. Last, the most important point is that, as noted, chronic career stress is a grave threat to your mental, physical, and professional health. No one should accept career suffering. In fact, most of us really have no reason to settle for less than full-fledged success and enjoyment.

So, lose the friction. You are a work in progress, the most important aspect of which is your professional identity. Your professional identity needs genuine career achievement and success as much as your body needs nutrition, exercise, and rest. In

fact, career success is your guide to health and satisfaction with your work, your long-term career, and even your life outside of work.

So, if you have clear concerns or suspect that you are not using your full potential, I invite you to consider obtaining a personal, professional career assessment. After all, to milk the last drop from our simile, if your car deserves periodic tuning and maintenance, certainly your career does as well, don't you think? The many, many dedicated but struggling public servants I have met seem to think so. So do I.

The Faces of Chronic Stress

Chronic stress emerges as patterns of concerns, behaviors, and emotional experiences that pull a person down slowly, cumulatively, and inevitably. Here are some complaint patterns of people that Joseph LaBeau has counseled.

Pattern #1: Unresolved series of concerns about several of the following:

- Workload
- Contact with people
- Expectations of others
- Concentration required to do work
- Complications in work
- Criticisms at work
- Work conditions or location
- Pay or benefits
- Persons to whom you report
- Persons whom you work with
- Customers or clients
- Victims or complainants (for law enforcement and human services workers)
- Personal safety
- Trouble getting things accomplished
- Trouble feeling that work is worthwhile
- Chances to advance or be promoted
- Job security

Pattern #2: Multiple recurring stress-related behaviors:

- Use sarcasm
- Avoid certain people
- Dread certain work events or tasks
- Need to calm down after work
- Have trouble coming to work or getting started at work
- Replay work incidents over and over in your mind
- Forget things that you should remember
- Have frequent disagreements at work
- Have enemies that are out to get you
- Regret things you say
- Have trouble letting others stand in for you
- Have difficulty concentrating
- Daydream, surf the Internet, or take long or frequent breaks
- Work too much or too long
- Have trouble stopping thinking about work
- Let things slip out that are better left unsaid
- Procrastinate

Seem to others to be irritable and cranky
Perform your job well some days but quite poorly on other days
Pretend to be nice to people who you feel do not deserve it
Regret that you didn't speak up
Have trouble relaxing
Get angry to get others to do things they should do anyway
Schedule two things at once
Get sick from work
Slam doors or other things
Have frequent accidents

Pattern #3: Intensifying and recurring stress-related emotional experiences:

Rushed or hurried
Angry or "bottled up"
Weak or fatigued
Distrusted or watched
Forgotten or ignored
Insulted or disrespected
Confused or lost about what to do next
Sad or hurt
Embarrassed or guilty
Taken advantage of or "picked on"
Disliked or rejected
Controlled or manipulated
Worthless
Passive or powerless
Exhausted or "washed out"

Joseph LaBeau is city manager of Midlothian, Texas (labeau@sbcglobal.net). He is a licensed professional counseling intern working in the area of career development for public officials. Author retains article copyright.

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Ethics Inquiries

When the TV Host Skewers the Guests

Scenario: The city manager was invited to appear on a cable television show to discuss council-manager government. Meanwhile, a charter review commission is considering changes to the charter that could affect the city manager's authority. While the manager would like to explain the issues to the public and feels that the changes would not be good for the community, she is torn. The show's host has an antagonistic, even hostile approach. He lost his bid to serve on the city council a year ago and does not support council-manager government. The city manager asked for advice on how to handle this invitation and wondered whether the ICMA Code of Ethics could offer guidance.

Response: The ICMA Code of Ethics encourages managers to keep the community informed of local government affairs and contains a guideline that outlines the role a member may play when there may be an election on the council-manager plan.

Managers may assist in preparing and presenting information about the form of government. It is an appropriate political activity, provided that the work is done within local regulations and in a professional manner. In some circumstances, the manager may feel that it is difficult to be the "face" for this information, which may appear self-serving.

This scenario is particularly troubling because the television host has been active in local politics. The city manager may find that a better approach is to share information directly with the charter review commission. She may want to avoid a forum that could turn into a debate. As an alternative, she may offer the names of other managers or former managers who are willing to participate.

Receptionist Applicants Raise Eyebrows

Scenario: The town manager has had headaches in filling the receptionist's job. After he offered the position to one woman, she stayed on the job for just three days. The other strong applicants took other jobs or decided they were not interested. Now, the mayor has begun to apply pressure on the manager to offer the job to the girlfriend of the mayor's son.

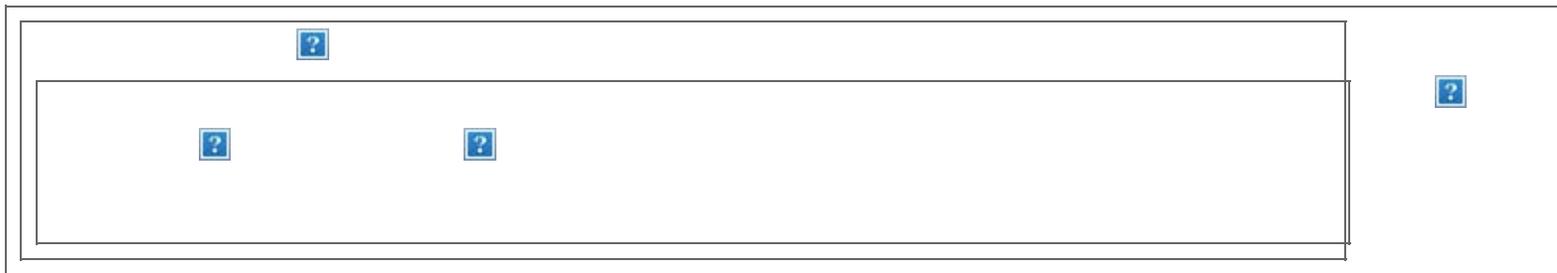
The girlfriend was ranked at the bottom of the list of candidates. The town manager needs to fill the job, but he is not convinced that she is right for the position. How can he handle this situation diplomatically and retain his professionalism about the recruitment process?

Response: One of the most important principles in the ICMA Code of Ethics is a commitment to the merit system. The town manager should resist the temptation to appease the mayor and hire a candidate that he does not feel is well qualified for the job. The manager may want to advertise the position again and allow the questionable candidate to reapply. In addition, if the town did not use a job-related test to assess the candidates' skills the first time, administering this type of exercise the second time might strengthen the process and help provide an objective basis on which to evaluate candidates.

Ethics advice is a popular service provided to ICMA members. The inquiries and advice are reviewed by the Committee on Professional Conduct, the ethics committee of the ICMA Executive Board. Some of the inquiries are revised and published as a regular feature in *PM*, to give guidance to members in the big and little ethical decisions they make daily. If you have a question about your obligations under the ICMA Code of Ethics, call Elizabeth Kellar at 202/962-3611, e-mail, ekellar@icma.org or Martha Perego at 202/962-3668, e-mail, mperego@icma.org.

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Corporate Profile: IBM Corporation Improving Government Communications and Service Delivery... Building for the Future

IBM's Global Government Industry offers a broad portfolio of services and products, including consulting, systems integration, availability services to improve critical IT infrastructure, and managed operations. IBM also offers a wide range of open software and computing systems to assist all levels of governments with meeting the demands and expectations of their constituencies.

With considerable industry experience, IBM works with local governments to develop successful enterprises applications in key functional areas, including revenue and fiscal management, health and human services, public safety and justices, research and development, land management, and services. IBM's value and investments in e-business technologies enable governments to connect their critical business systems to key constituencies—customers, citizens, employees, vendors and suppliers—using Web-enabled technologies.

Meeting Service Delivery Challenges and Increased Expectations

Throughout the nation and around the globe, service delivery challenges continue. Local governments are being asked to improve the way they legislate, deliver critical services to the public, manage internal operations, and interact with constituents. Citizens and businesses are demanding more convenient services, such as Web-based transactions and direct links to policy makers. Political leaders are mandating accountability for performance and use of public funds. And most government officials want to boost economic development by using the Web to attract new

businesses, resources, and educational opportunities.

At the same time, expectations about where, when, and how these demands can be met are being reshaped by new technologies. Mobile computing is enabling fundamental changes in the nature of human interactions. Technology that enables citizens to attend public hearings remotely are more common today, and local government leaders are beginning to use new technology to collaborate through community dialogues. Local elected officials attending formal sessions can even communicate silently with their office staffs and conduct real-time research on the Internet as political debates are under way.

The Current Transformation

Driven by greater demand for such capabilities, local governments have begun to transform their technology foundations and improve internal efficiencies in order to deliver citizen-focused services faster and more conveniently. To succeed, services, processes, management, and delivery channels must be integrated and linked to internal departments and outside stakeholders. A strategy for short-term and long-term integration goals is the cornerstone of a successful plan to build for the future. This strategy must be directed by strong leadership, a commitment to transform, a willingness to adapt to change, and an experienced and proven partner.

With tools, technologies, and resources from IBM, you can help transform the way your organization works, collaborates, and serves by building a secure e-government that's prepared for the challenges—and the rewards—of being intimately involved with and responsive to the needs of your constituents.

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Profile

Man of Myrtle Beach



Tom Leath, city manager of [Myrtle Beach, South Carolina](#), shares a laugh with councilmembers during a council meeting.

When Myrtle Beach officials decided a couple of years back that they wanted to build an oceanfront park at Mr. Joe White Avenue, they struggled to conjure up a vision of how it should look.

So, one day, City Manager Tom Leath sketched out his idea on a Post-it note. He put in trees, curving sidewalks, and benches. “It should look something like this,” he told the other officials. The park ended up being built from Leath’s rough sketch, a small symbol of Leath’s deep influence on the Strand’s central city for more than 15 years.

Though Myrtle Beach has a mayor and council, 23,000 residents and millions of visitors, ask anyone who deals with him—critic or supporter, developer or official—and they will say this is Tom Leath’s town.

He's the man to call if you want to build a high-rise resort or have your sidewalk swept. Leath is the chief executive officer of a corporation with nearly 800 employees and a \$110 million budget that offers a host of services, including police and fire departments, water, sewer, recreation, and transportation.

"Like it or not, he runs this city, and he always has," Mayor Mark McBride said.

And Leath relishes his work. "I get to talk to Ms. Doe about her garbage can being too close to the street and go directly into a meeting about a \$40 million bond issue," he said. "It's never the same thing. But to Ms. Doe, that garbage can is as important as \$40 million in bonds."

The city, more than just an employer to Leath, has provided an anchor for the rest of his life. Leath's wife, Stephanie, died unexpectedly in 2000, leaving him to raise their son, Austin, now 16. He said the city has been a source of stability. "The city has been good to me," he said. "I wouldn't know what to do if I didn't have it."

With a 15-year tenure, Leath, 51, is one of the state's longest-serving managers. He's also one of the most qualified, as an attorney with a master's degree in public administration. He guards his personal life with professional competence and a matter-of-fact confidence. But sometimes, through bits of sarcastic humor or fiery fits of temper, Leath lets down his shield.

"You won't get family secrets or personal stuff from Tom," said architect Tom Pegram, who has worked with the city on dozens of developments. "He's not going to give you the story of his life. But you can see his work is his life."

Even Leath's critics, who say he is too controlling, do not doubt his dedication. Leath refuses to leave town for more than a few days. And when he is not at work, like a few weeks ago when he had strep throat, his absence is palpable.

"It's not a 40-hour-a-week job," said City Councilman Wilson Cain, who met Leath in 1985, when Leath was hired as assistant city attorney. "He puts his heart and soul into this city. I don't care who you're talking about, Tom has given this city more than anybody."

Finding His Niche

The son of Dr. [and Mrs.] Thomas Leath, Sr., Leath was born in Spartanburg and grew up mostly in Charlotte, North Carolina. While growing up, he, his sister, and mother made frequent summer trips to Myrtle Beach. A childhood friend, Ron Joye, remembers meeting up with Tom at the beach.

"People say you go to the beach to look at the ocean. That's crazy. You go to look at girls. And that's what we did," said Joye, now a South Carolina Department of Transportation official. "We always had fun, but Tom was never a hell-raiser. He was a lot of fun, and he has a great sense of humor, but he was always levelheaded."

Leath went to the University of South Carolina, where he studied history because, as he said, he wasn't good in English or math. Radio was his real passion. During college, he worked at WCOS-FM in Columbia and longed to be a radio disc jockey. Imagining Leath as a wise-cracking radio host is tough, even he admits.

"You never really know a person inside," he said. "That's true for anybody. You never know what a person is like by themselves, at home. That's true for me, too."

He and a friend spent many weekends driving to Chicago to listen to favorite DJs, taping hours of radio along the way. “Those were great times,” he said. “We worked our shifts at the station and drove all night just to get up there. Just past Tennessee, you could get WLS [a Chicago rock station], and we’d start taping. We’d drive all around Chicago, listening and taping, and then drive back overnight.”

But Leath said he knew he didn’t have the talent to make a career in radio. “If I could have made money at it, I would still be doing it,” he said. He still has his collection of vintage broadcasts and has donated money to radio archives.

Leath went on to law school and graduate school. He worked for the state for three years, then practiced law in Bennettsville. Then he heard Myrtle Beach was looking for a new assistant attorney. He got the job. Within two years, he was promoted to assistant city manager. Former city councilmembers said they quickly learned to respect Leath.

“If you asked him a question, he’d always get a straight answer for you,” said former Councilman John Maxwell. “He never messed around or played politics or acted as anything other than a conscientious professional.” Leath’s boss, City Manager Richard Marvin, often butted heads with councilmembers. When the council forced Marvin out, the city looked for a less antagonistic replacement. Though the council interviewed candidates from across the country, it decided to promote Leath.

That was in 1987. Within years, the city would confront unprecedented growth: the city’s greatest fortune, and Leath’s greatest challenge.

Embracing the Challenge

Leath takes no credit for the growth. He can, however, accept some of the responsibility for how it has been managed. “We sort of saw it coming,” he said. “We knew, when the economy kept going higher, that things would change. But we had no idea what the reality of it would be.”

Big hotels went up, and attractions went in. The Myrtle Beach Air Force Base closed. Countless tourists poured in. Growth required careful attention to roads, neighborhoods, and zoning to knit the community together. At the center of it all was Leath.

“I would give him an A-plus,” Pegram said. “He’s a straight arrow. He doesn’t mess around, and he doesn’t give you a lot of bull. I deal with a lot of city managers all over, and I’d take Tom over all of them.”

Whether it’s litter on U.S. 501 or the new convention-center hotel, Leath knows all the details and can quickly sum up a situation. When the city council said at its budget retreat [in April] that there was no way it would support a tax increase, Leath, Budget Director Mike Shelton, and Assistant City Manager John Pedersen went to a back room and came out, in less than two hours, with a new, balanced budget proposal—sans tax increase.

Leath said if he has one talent, it’s his ability to hire skilled employees. Many of them, such as Shelton, have won awards for their service. “They say to hire people who are smarter than you,” Leath said. “I do that.”

But Leath sometimes faces criticism that he’s a control freak. McBride, who made

Leath a favorite target until recently, has ridiculed Leath, saying he mismanaged city funds, made back-room decisions, and treated the police department like a personal security force. That changed when McBride won reelection in 2001. Leath said he had been ready to resign when McBride won. But mutual promises to work together kept Leath at his post. Now, McBride rarely criticizes Leath publicly.

As an attorney with decades of experience with developers, Leath would be right at home at a development company or a law firm. And he'd probably make a lot more than the \$120,000 he makes now. Leath admits he has had offers. "I didn't get into this for the money," he said. "And I won't leave it for the money."

Developer David Stradinger, who served as Myrtle Beach city manager in the late '70s, said he understands why Leath stays put. "It's a tremendous amount of fun," he said. "It's a different job every day, and it's tremendously challenging. But it is incredibly taxing."

Close to Home

The late '90s were a tough time for Leath. Mayor Robert Grissom, a longtime friend, died in 1998. Then, his wife, Stephanie, died of unknown heart problems. Leath found her dead at their home after returning from the beach with Austin.

A year later, good friend Assistant City Manager Allan Blum died. "I learned not to work as much," he said. "I was working from 6 to 6 or 7, routinely. And then working more at home. I don't put in those kinds of hours anymore. I realize now it could all be gone tomorrow." With a shrug, he said, "It's sort of too late now."

Now, Leath balances his time with Austin, a junior at Myrtle Beach High School. He keeps a row of Austin's childhood shoes in his office. Some days, Leath said, he wakes up in the early hours of the morning and goes for drives through Myrtle Beach. If he has favorite spots in the city, he won't name them.

Leath spends weekends working on his boat and, as he puts it, "putters around the house." He says he "goes out on dates," but he won't divulge details.

He doesn't vacation. Unless he travels somewhere for a city-related meeting, he rarely leaves the state. Still, once Austin graduates from high school, Leath may buy a bigger boat and take it on "the great circle" up the coast, down the St. Lawrence Seaway to the Great Lakes, down the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico, and home again.

"If I'm out of town for more than about two days, I get nervous," he said. "I can't handle it. I could never go away for a week or two. But who knows. I'll take a longer one. Someday."

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