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# How Professionals Can Add Value to Their Communities And Organizations

**E**very so often, members of a profession look inward, asking themselves such questions as these:

- What are the enduring qualities that anchor our profession?
- How are we changing and what is driving the change?
- How do the enduring elements and contemporary changes affect our understanding, first, of who we are as professionals and, second, of what value we add to society?

The fact that professionals engage with these questions helps their professions to assert their sense of worth, to foster their members' continuing commitment, and to convey to others the value of their work.

This last point—conveying to others the value of a profession—is crucial to that profession's legitimacy, which is rooted in external judgments. Legitimacy itself leads to the respect, trust, and discretion needed to do good work without inordinate supervision.

Some fundamental forces are shaping the public's view of professionalism in local government. On the one hand, increasingly familiar as the public is with modern society's domination by complex organizations, the concept of a chief administrative officer (CAO) has become more and more familiar and accepted. For many people, it would be odd to think of a complex organization without an administrative director, selected on the basis of merit. In this context, the public has grown accustomed to the position of local government manager, even if citizens are unfamiliar with the specific term.

While it may be difficult for managers and academics to articulate satisfactorily what the manager actually does, to say simply "She or he is the chief administrative officer of the community, a multimillion-dollar operation with X number of employees that ensures public safety, cleans your water, treats and eliminates your sewage, picks up your trash, manages the jail and courts, fixes your streets, plans for the community's future, maintains open space and parks, and administers X number of programs and other services" probably conveys more than enough information to average citizens.

People can fill in the gaps, cognitively connecting a "city/county CAO" with a business CEO. While we may not wish to be equated to the world of the business CEO, the connection is not bad as a means of creating legitimacy for the profession of local government management.

On the other hand, we have grown tired of hearing that the government ought to operate like a business, knowing that values like representation, social equity, and individual rights influence managerial work as much as the value of efficiency. In this sense, managers have to distinguish themselves from the business CEO and the world of business.

In the scholarly community and in the practitioner's world, the task is to draw on the familiarity that citizens feel with the concept of a CEO

and then shape it to fashion a highly specific image unique to city/county management. ICMA's professionalism project and the practices presented in this article have been developed toward this goal by the ICMA Task Force on Professionalism. But the task of articulating the special value of the local government professional is a major challenge, for historical and conceptual reasons.

### **SOME HISTORICAL AND FORMAL PROBLEMS**

Traditionally, the position of the local government administrative professional has been associated with council-manager government. A little

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after the turn of the 19th century, the council-manager form was created as an expression of a progressive political and social movement. This context, with its emphasis on morality and expertise in the service of democracy and social improvement, should not be underestimated in forging the identity of local government management.

In the early 1900s, council-manager government was proposed as a solution to incompetent and inadequate

local government, as well as to the corrupt partisan politics that had infiltrated the personnel, purchasing, and service-delivery aspects of local government. Council-manager governments embodied the vision of "model cities" in their purposes and programs, their operations, and their values.

This form of government, by unifying rather than separating legislative and executive authority, formed a new, constitutional approach not previously found in the United States. It became an instrument of reform imbued with moral qualities. Governmental authority was concentrated in the hands of a governing board, and at the helm of cities and counties was someone called a city or county manager.

Until the 1970s, the value of city and county management as a profession was associated with council-manager government itself—a form of government that symbolically joined the values of effectiveness and efficiency with the passion of morality. The vitality and popularity of this form of government legitimized the local government profession. No other source of legitimacy was needed.

Although CAOs were present in many mayor-council cities as well, the mayor-council form was opposed by council-manager advocates because in mayor-council cities the ability of managers to practice their profession was limited or ambiguous.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, to some, the mayor-council form symbolized the very world that council-manager government was intended to reform. The defenders of council-manager government had clearly endorsed the new profession of local government management.

But herein lay the challenge. As Professors Frederickson, Johnson, and Wood have shown, over time, localities have made so many adaptations that while forms of government can be defined distinctly, occasionally they cannot be easily distinguished in practice.<sup>2</sup> Different forms of government actually share many characteristics.

Strong mayor forms often hire qualified professionals, and council-

manager governments have significantly added politics: district elections, direct election of the mayor, and occasionally a mayoral veto. In addition, many county governments, with a traditionally more diffused structure than cities, have increasingly professionalized public management positions and hired professional CAOs.

City and county manager advocates of the council-manager form understand that the full exercise of professionalism presumes that local government managers are able to interact with and advise a full governing board and that they have overall authority to direct the administrative organization. These characteristics are found “naturally” in the council-manager form and are usually present in mayor-council-CAO cities, where the council approves the appointment of the CAO and the mayor delegates to the CAO extensive administrative authority.

These governmental features take full advantage of the distinctive qualities of local government professionals and permit them to make their unique contributions. But, form of government and the preconditions that foster professionalism are far more familiar and convey much more meaning to local government professionals than to the average citizen, elected official, business leader, or journalist. Furthermore, while the form’s label and these structural preconditions encourage something called professionalism, they do not describe what that means nor the value that professionalism adds to local governance.

On top of this, the absence of large-scale corruption in contemporary local governments removes the moral imperative that motivated early advocates of council-manager government. If form of government does not in itself legitimize professionalism, what *are* the practices that set local government professionals apart from the inexperienced and from those not fully aware of ICMA’s ethical standards? And how can ICMA members articulate to people outside the pro-

fession the value that professionalism adds to a city or county?

Bob O’Neill, executive director of ICMA, when faced with the challenge of defending council-manager government and professional management, has responded by turning the challenge inward—to the members of ICMA. He asks: “What is the ‘value proposition’ of professional

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managers to public service? What difference does employing a highly trained, skilled professional really make?”<sup>3</sup> And then he brings down the gavel with his final challenge: “Prove it!”

In 2004, O’Neill charged the ICMA Task Force on Professionalism with developing “value propositions.” This group met at two ICMA annual conferences and conducted several e-mail exchanges about form of government, council-manager relations, the importance of efficiency versus equity, the manager’s role and responsibility in community building, and so on. The task force developed the set of value-added practices that are part of this article.

## **PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES THAT ADD VALUE**

Successfully governing contemporary local government—government that earns and maintains citizen respect—requires an effective relationship between administrative and political leaders. Administrative leadership involves many skills, practices, and attributes shared across sectors.

In addition—and uniquely in the public sector—democratic values matter. Professional city and county managers help in handling the increasingly complex arenas of policy interests, administrative practice, and democratic/community values. Their goal is to help build, maintain, and preserve communities that are economically and socially healthy and vibrant and that people regard with pride.

The box on page 38 contains a list of the six practices that define the skills, commitments, and goals of local government professional administrators. The ICMA Task Force on Professionalism presents these practices to members of the management profession, and challenges them—individually, in groups, and in state associations—to make these practices their own in helping to craft a message of what it is they do, why they are committed to their work, and why their work is so important.

To broaden the discussion, the current authors have invited task-force members James Keene and James Svava to comment on the practices. James Keene has worked in public management in medium-sized and large jurisdictions, in cities and counties, and in different geographic regions. Now, he heads the California State Association of Counties. Although he points out that the value of professional practice transcends form of government, he also argues that discerning nuances in context will matter to the skilled professional. Finally, he suggests that the six practices be viewed comprehensively, with practitioners drawing upon one practice, then another, and then several in combinations, as they craft their work.

Professor James Svava has done extensive work on city management in the United States; his research has also taken him to Europe, where he has studied in depth the question of professionalism in local government. For readers unfamiliar with professional practice in the United Kingdom and Denmark, Svava opens our eyes, showing us the striking similarities in professional practice in Europe and America.

### **WHY THE PRACTICES MATTER: JAMES KEENE EXPLAINS**

We know that the lines between forms of government are blurring and that roles are shifting within forms. It is no longer enough to assert our value through our titles as city or county managers, or only through our advocacy of the council-manager form of government. In Berkeley, California, where I served as city manager, there was a strong charter role for the manager (even the city clerk and city attorney were hired by the manager). And yet delivering public value required skillful negotiation with intense and often angry community political activists and with a divisive and bickering council.

In my managerial experience, the existence or nature of a charter often had little relevance to getting things done. I once managed an Arizona county with a fragmented organizational structure and no charter, where half of the department heads were elected. And yet the county functioned like a textbook “plan” government, largely thanks to a cohesive and deliberative governing board. Many other managers can tell similar stories.

In our postmodern age, structure seems a less definitive factor. Roles seem more temporary, less clear, and open to challenge from all sides. We wrestle with the value of professional public management, not because the practices and the values they emanate from are suspect but because the world in which we apply them is so ambiguous.

We live in a time when function

and responsibility are confused and misunderstood because of rapid changes in communities, the frequent mismatch between jurisdictional lines and problems, and a federalist system of great influence but questionable efficacy, stronger interest-based politics, more diversity, and intense media scrutiny. And because the context of our work is the public realm within

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a democratic society, divergent opinions and conflict are the norm. Both democracy and community are as much ends as means.

Today, what is important for the public manager lies as much in how we manage and participate in relationships as within which form of government we work. This is why the practices matter. They shape our identity in relation to elected political leaders, the community, and our organizations. They serve as both a compass and a vehicle for navigating the forces at play in the world; they are also the language of our relationships with our partners.

The practices presented here are more than an explanation of what we do—they represent who we are. They flow backward to the tenets established in the ICMA Code of Ethics and to our progressive-era beginnings. But they also flow forward, adding

value to our communities and organizations as they are manifested and applied in contemporary contexts.

From my experience, the practices are applicable in different communities and organizations across the United States and yet are consistently important. The practices are a package whose elements are interconnected. They influence each other. We cannot convincingly talk of efficiency and delivering results that matter if we do not pay attention to the longer term or the broader community. Otherwise, our results are not sustainable. Likewise, we cannot speak of fairness if we ignore the future, the next generation. We must continuously balance efficiency and results with ethics and involvement.

At the same time, the practices discussed here are contextual, existing in relation to the values and capacity of the political leaders, the particular community, and the manager’s organization. All of the practices are relevant, but how and when they are applied varies. There are times and places where some practices may be emphasized over others. In Berkeley, for example, we reoriented city departments toward neighborhoods as a means of achieving greater efficiency and results. But we had to do this in a manner that would be appealing to a city council organized by districts, focused on neighborhoods and community building, and concerned about the equity of citizen participation and of the distribution of services.

Because the organization is the primary vehicle allowing the professional public manager to apply the practices on a sufficient scale and with sufficient effect, this was an important strategy. Here, we merged structure with community and political values in a union of several practices.

Good political leadership is always essential to effective public management and to ensuring the maximum benefits from professional management. As John Nalbandian has reminded me over the years, “Good management cannot overcome

bad politics.” In Loudoun County, Virginia, in the late 1980s, we were able to undertake a bold community visioning project, a general-plan revision based on emerging smart growth principles, and a zoning ordinance rewrite, all because our board focused on the future. Four years later and with a different board composition, this effort would have been impossible. In fact, one of the new board’s first actions was to approve a Home Depot on the site we had planned for an urban town center.

The partners of professional management—elected political leaders, the community, and the organization—are dynamic and have their own identities. They are not under the manager’s control. Rarely are all partners in perfect alignment. *For professional public managers, the practices are their craft, but their application is an art.* How hard to push a practice depends upon context. Timing, degree, balance, order, and emphasis all must be considered in their application. Often, the practices must be unfolded expertly.

To seek public value by invoking such a practice as efficiency and results, or a long-term and community-wide perspective, can bring a manager into conflict with the elected political leadership, the community, or the local government organization. Application of the practices requires great skill, timing, and good political instincts. With structure and roles getting more blurred and the demands of our communities becoming more important and complex, the professional public manager must walk a razor’s edge between politics and ethics, results and participation, and capacity and progress. The six practices discussed here do provide a sure path, but not a protected one.

We make our biggest mistake when we presume that the practices operate in isolation and not in partnership with elected political officials, community culture, and civic life. These factors make equally powerful contributions and are fundamental to success. We must remember that we speak of *value added*

because we are not the only providers of value. We can best understand our contributions as professional managers as applying the practices in concert with political leaders and the community. How we play our parts together ultimately determines the degree of value *multiplied*, our effectiveness, and the quality of our communities and organizations.

### **AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE: FROM JAMES SVARA**

Local government professionals in the United States may feel that they are more challenged and less appreciated than their counterparts in Europe. At first glance, these views seem warranted. In most European countries, the structure of local government is based on the principle of integrated executive and legislative authority—and this is roughly similar to our council-manager form of government. The tradition of the strong administrative state in Europe and the large size of the public sector anchor the higher esteem conferred on professional managers there than in the States.<sup>4</sup>

In a broad sense, professional managers are more institutionalized in Europe than in the United States, so one might think that reflecting on their work—much as we did in the ICMA project reported on here—would not be a high priority for them. But, despite a broad definition of roles and the seemingly valued position of local government professionals, the European equivalents of our city and county managers experience many of the same changes, strains, and pressures that American managers undergo. There is an increasing realization that new approaches to governance are changing the relationship of top administrators to politicians, to their own organizations, and to their communities.

In the United Kingdom and Denmark, where I have conducted extensive research, major effort has been expended to define and assert the value of professional management. The Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) has produced a strategic report entitled *Leadership*

*United* that presents the respective contributions of politicians and administrators.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the Danish Forum of Top Executive Management has assessed what top administrators at all levels of government contribute to governance and has enunciated a code for chief executives setting forth nine standards that all administrators should seek to advance.<sup>6</sup>

A review of SOLACE’s report and that of the Danish Forum, alongside the practices presented for the United States, shows considerable overlap. The key points are summarized in Figure 1. With only one exception, the statements developed by the British and Danish CEOs advance themes that match the U.S. practices.

The exception is that the European reports do not explicitly refer to promoting equity and fairness. The extensive governmental commitment to advancing social welfare that is found generally in Europe may mean that social equity is taken for granted. The increasing diversity of the population both in Europe and in America, and the related strains over the presence of immigrants do, however, begin to raise social equity concerns in Europe that are similar to those found in the United States.

Another (and a major) difference is that the British and Danish reports give more explicit attention to administrators’ relations with politicians. The European statements 1) stress the need to be responsive to politicians and implement their goals, and 2) assert the need for politicians to give clear direction and avoid interference with administrative affairs. The purpose is not to drive a wedge between the two sets of officials but rather to establish the grounds for a constructive and cooperative relationship. This same purpose is advanced in a number of U.S. practices, rather than being addressed separately.

These few differences aside, managers and administrators in the United States and Europe are all giving voice to the distinctive contributions that they themselves make. The SOLACE report makes a point that also applies to the United States and one that

## Figure 1. U.S. Professional Practices Compared with Those of Denmark and the United Kingdom

United States	United Kingdom	Denmark
Efficiency, quality, and results that matter.	Lead organizations that are capable of successful service delivery. These provide clear guidance on levels of quality and outcomes that citizens and customers can expect.	Make certain that the political goals are observed throughout the organization. Require that the organization place a focus on results and impacts.
A long-term, community-wide perspective.	Maintain a focus on strategic and long-term issues, develop a vision/strategic view for the organization and local area, and communicate a sense of collective purpose and priority.	Advance the public good, balancing special interests with holistic considerations, and short-term interests with long-term considerations.
Commitment to ethical standards.	Set an example through personal conduct—integrity and openness; champion and display values of public service and excellence in service delivery.	Display professional and personal integrity.
Community building and support of democratic and community values.	Promote effective community engagement and participation in government; develop and enable effective partnerships and external relationships; orchestrate effective public and private partnerships for both strategic development and service delivery.	Create an organization that is responsive and can influence the surrounding world; safeguard the public sector's legitimacy and democratic values; and create an organization that acts as a part of an integrated public sector.
Developing and sustaining organizational innovation and competence.	Lead and integrate performance management; create a culture focused on high performance, innovation, and customer service; sustain continuous improvement across all service areas; facilitate the continuous growth of the top team; and demonstrate the achievement of public value.	Incorporate exemplary ideas and practices from outside sources, and work strategically to improve the performance of the organization in accomplishing its assigned tasks.

James Keene has also raised, namely, that exemplary practices are interrelated and support each other.

The corporate and strategic role of chief executives has become an accepted part of the orthodoxy of managing councils. The point, however, is seldom made explicit that this role involves more than simply high-order service coordination and top-level policy advice to members of the council.

The role demands a thorough and comprehensive managerial approach to the design and delivery of all services, together with a grounded appreciation of these services' relative efficacy, efficiency, and equity. Chief executives must be satisfied that they

have maintained appropriate relationships with politicians, directors, auditors, and inspectors, to ensure that they obtain the right information and that services are being delivered successfully.

As the ICMA task force found out, the key relationships also include those with the citizens and organizations in the community.

### COMMON CONTEXT

A project that produces "value-added practices" has no end, just rest stops. In an important way, these practices provide clues to the profession's identity. And identity must change over time. We can see in some of the practices described here the foundations

of local government management; others are newer, reflecting changes in the environment in which city and county management is practiced.

James Keene's observation that the practices travel well across diverse work settings, and James Svara's valuable comparison of European with American practices (showing remarkable similarities), suggest a common context. Organizational life, driven by the forces of modernization, has an enormous global, homogenizing effect. In some ways, if we define politics in western democracies as attempts to solve public problems in the context of competing values like representation, efficiency, equity, and individual rights, we can anticipate

## Practices That Add Value

Here is a roster of practices that define the skills, commitments, and goals of local government professional administrators.

**1. Professionals add value to the quality of public policy and produce results that matter to their communities.** Local government professionals are directed by and work in partnership with elected officials to develop sound approaches to meeting community aspirations and solving problems. Efficiently and effectively, they produce results that matter. Professionals believe they should offer a balanced assessment of policy options in pursuit of the public interest. While politically aware, they shy away from becoming politically aligned as they assist elected officials in fulfilling their policy-making role. Professional managers bring their knowledge of performance management and a government-wide perspective to the successful stewardship of public assets and resources; they pursue quality and transparency in the design and delivery of public services.

**2. Professionals take a long-term and community-wide perspective.** Local government professionals are most effective when guided by long-term community plans that establish a framework for policy formulation and goal setting. Local government professionals are well positioned to bring a community-wide perspective to policy discussions. They strive to connect past and future while focusing on the present. They are committed to serving the interests of the entire community while respecting the interests of all of its components.

**3. Professionals commit themselves to ethical practices in the service of public values.** A reform tradition and a professional association support and foster ethical conduct. Members of ICMA are accountable to ethical principles put forth by the Association, its Code of Ethics, and its Declaration of Ideals. It is through commitment to a higher set of ideals that professional managers “affirm the dignity and worth of the services rendered by government and maintain . . . a deep sense of social responsibility as a trusted public servant.”

**4. Professionals help build community and support democratic and community values.** Professional managers help build community by facilitating partnerships among sectors, groups, and individuals. They work with informal groups of people as well as established groups, organizations, and other governing institutions. Local government professionals—through their values, training, and experience—support democratic values and work effectively toward inclusion, accountability, and transparency. Developing effective partnerships with elected officials and generating community engagement are as important as the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery in helping to build a sense of community.

**5. Professionals promote equitable, fair outcomes and processes.** Professional managers have an obligation to promote equity and fairness. They seek to ensure that services are fairly distributed and that both the design and the implementation of administrative processes avoid favoritism.

**6. Professionals develop and sustain organizational excellence and promote innovation.** Professional administrative leaders relentlessly focus on efficient and equitable service delivery, policy implementation, and evaluation. Administrative systems are aligned with values, mission, and policy goals created and/or legitimized by elected officials and community. Excellent organizations produce information that informs public deliberation and policy making and that supports both qualitative and quantitative measures of performance.

Highly trained professionals—hired on the basis of merit and committed to professional development for all employees—promote innovation while valuing consistency and continuity, and strive continuously to strengthen organizational capacity to produce results that matter.

increasing homogeneity in the broadest contours of politics as well.

But no matter the similarities, it is hard to imagine a day when the relationship between administrative and political arenas will be routinized and when community building will be accomplished by formula. As long as people seek to transform spaces into places with identity, politics will matter, and so will administration; we will continue to work toward defining the value added by practitioners from both spheres, as well as exploring the relationships between the two.

O'Neill has used the practices as a way of stimulating dialogue among the local government management audiences he addresses, with John Nalbandian joining him at the University of North Carolina on one of these occasions. Nalbandian was pleasantly surprised to find the degree of interest among those present in discussing this topic, in going back and reflecting upon the history, describing the present, and thinking about the future of the profession.

And, no matter how much we try to systematize our understanding of these practices, as Keene points out, an indispensable element of the city or county manager's work can only be described in terms of a craft, or even an art, in which professionalism is infused with both the personal and the contextual.

Finally, the task force's work is not done—even in the short term. Similarities in the practices in America, the United Kingdom, and Denmark are comforting for people concerned about the validity of this project. But do these practices really add value? The answer is a resounding yes.

Not only can they energize discussion among those who practice public management, but they also reach out to the academic community. In academia, those who live the life of a skeptic can scrutinize more systematically what has been produced here. Together, professional and academic, we continue to forge relationships, looking for ways in which we can add value to each other's work and life, in the name of public service. **PM**

<sup>1</sup>Also until the 1970s, government CAOs were often "local appointees" with little training who served with a specific mayor rather than "careerists" who moved across council-manager cities, as Richard Stillman observed in *The Rise of the City Manager* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974), pp. 81–82.

<sup>2</sup>H. George Frederickson, Gary A. Johnson, and Curtis H. Wood, *The Adapted City: Institutional Dynamics and Organizational Change* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2004).

<sup>3</sup>Robert J. O'Neill, Jr., "Professionals Must Make Noise About Making a Difference in State and Local Government," posted at *Governing.com* and dated June 7, 2006.

<sup>4</sup>Poul Erik Mouritzen and James H. Svava, *Leadership at the Apex: Political-Administrative Relations in Western Local Government* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002). Despite these differences, city managers and administrators in the United States rate their influence in policy making as higher than in most countries in Europe.

<sup>5</sup>*Leadership United*, Final Report of the SOLACE Commission on Managing in a Political Environment. The full report may be found at <http://www.solace.org.uk/links/leadershipunited/index.htm>.

<sup>6</sup>Forum for Top Executive Management, *Public Governance: Code for Chief Executive Excellence* (Copenhagen: Forum for Top Executive Management, 2005). The full report is available at [http://www.publicgovernance.dk/resources/File/FFOT\\_bog\\_UK.pdf](http://www.publicgovernance.dk/resources/File/FFOT_bog_UK.pdf).

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