PM
PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

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City Manager
Ventura, California
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CYBERSECURITY AND AI

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NOVEMBER 2026 VOL. 108 NO. 11

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ICMA
International City/County Management Association

More Than a Conference: Reflections on Connection and Community

The 2026 ICMA Annual Conference reminded us that the greatest strength of our profession lies in the people who support one another.

BY JULIA D. NOVAK, ICMA-CM

JULIA D. NOVAK, ICMA-CM
is executive director of ICMA.

Last month, more than 5,600 people gathered in Long Beach, California, for ICMA's 2026 Annual Conference. Attendance set a record, the weather was perfect, the setting was divine, our keynote speakers were top-drawer, and the education sessions covered a wide range of the challenges local governments face and the solutions that work.

By most measures, that makes for a successful conference. But what we hope for most is that members leave feeling connected—to one another, to the roots of the profession, and to the association that is here to support them on their journey.

I loved watching members take advantage of the opportunities to learn, grow, and connect. Liz Bohannon's closing keynote, "Collective Resilience," however, hit me hard. While we talk openly about how hard the work is—and, of course, that #ItsWorthIt—we are less inclined to talk about how the rest of our lives affect our ability to do our best work. Liz asked attendees to answer one question anonymously: "What is something you don't often (or ever) share out of fear of being a burden?" Nearly 250 people responded about the issues they are wrestling with. Liz shared the responses with ICMA, and I asked Copilot to help me summarize them.

The most common issue, by far, was some version of self-doubt: not feeling good enough, smart enough, or capable enough to lead. Close behind were struggles in marriages and relationships, loneliness, and mental health challenges like anxiety and depression. Many of you are also quietly carrying worries about your children, chronic pain or illness, financial strain, addiction, burnout, doubts about whether you're in the right job, or uncertainty about aging and retirement.

What struck me most was how many of you said you feel isolated because of the leadership roles you hold; you're expected to have it all figured out when you don't. If there's one thing I hope you take from this, it's that you are not alone. The very things we hesitate to share are the things so many of our colleagues are

ICMA

International City/County Management Association

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November 2026

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Our new address:
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ICMA
Creating and Supporting Thriving Communities
ICMA's vision is to be the leading association of local government professionals dedicated to creating and supporting thriving communities throughout the world. It does this by working with its more than 13,000 members to identify and speed the adoption of leading local government practices and improve the lives of residents. ICMA offers membership, professional development programs, research, publications, data and information, technical assistance, and training to thousands of city, town, and county chief administrative officers, their staffs, and other organizations throughout the world.

Public Management (PM) aims to inspire innovation, inform decision making, connect leading-edge thinking to everyday challenges, and serve ICMA members and local governments in creating and sustaining thriving communities throughout the world.

While we talk openly about how hard the work is—and, of course, that #ItsWorthIt—we are less inclined to talk about how the rest of our lives affect our ability to do our best work.

carrying, too. Our profession asks a lot of us. Part of ICMA's job, and each of ours, is to make it a little easier to say "I'm struggling," and to reach out to a colleague who might be.

That is why connection matters so much. I hope ICMA is a place where you find your people professionally, and I hope you have at least one best friend in the profession, someone you can be completely honest with. I also hope we can all get more comfortable raising our hands and saying, "I need help." Showing vulnerability is one of the best ways to model authentic leadership. As ICMA past president Mike Land reminded us in his final address, "If you don't *take* a break, you *will* break."

ICMA is a big tent, and within it there are many places for all of us to gather. Our alumni networks bring together Leadership ICMA, Local Government Management Fellows, veterans, and graduate school alumni. Our domestic affiliates—including NFBPA, LGHN, CivicPRIDE, I-NAPA, and NACA—provide incredible opportunities for learning, growth, and connection. And groups within ICMA, like SheLeadsGov and the ACAO Committee, work hard to create meaningful connection. These communities are there for you, and I encourage you to find one and get involved. We are a better organization when our members are connected and engaged with us and with one another.

I will continue to sit with all of it: the energy that "Vibe City" brought to our Annual Conference, the messages of our keynotes, and the reminder of the very human struggles we all share. Whether we're on the dais or in the back corner, everyone is carrying something, and you do not need to carry it alone. Thank you for an amazing time together. I'm already looking forward to Philadelphia. PM

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AI *and* Public Trust

Navigating **ethical** applications of artificial intelligence.

BY JESSICA COWLES

As public servants, we ask the community and the organization to trust our use of artifical intelligence (AI). AI is no longer an "emerging" issue or technology—it's here and we're expected to apply it ethically and responsibly. This means local governments will continue to balance AI's potential benefits against public concerns about privacy, bias, discrimination, and transparency.

In this month's column, we share a case study that demonstrates how a local government responded to an AI-related incident in a way that enhanced confidence in how the organization handled this situation and others that will inevitably follow. It demonstrates why a primary indicator of organizational trustworthiness and transparency is communication.

Enhancing External Public Trust

An AI model used a public form to submit false information about an unsolved homicide. The media release from the Philadelphia Police Department (PPD) shows issues of public trust about AI in action.[1] The city issued this statement the next day after an AI company disclosed the matter to them:

> "According to [the AI company], its model was conducting a test involving interactions with randomly selected websites when it accessed PhillyUnsolvedMurders.com and submitted false information concerning an unsolved homicide…
>
> The submission was flagged as spam and was never forwarded to the Real-Time Crime Center for investigative vetting or dissemination… The department's regular investigative process for crime tips requires human review and vetting before any tips are disseminated for investigative follow-up.
>
> Regardless of who submits information or how it reaches the department, a tip is a lead to assess—not an established fact. Investigators evaluate its credibility and seek corroborating evidence. An automated submission does not bypass that process.
>
> Those [PPD] safeguards limited the impact of this incident. They do not diminish the seriousness of an AI system presenting fabricated information as though it came from a person with knowledge of a homicide."

We can take from this case study how the organization's communication can inspire public confidence, as Tenet 9 of the ICMA Code of Ethics intends:

> **Tenet 9.** Keep the community informed on local government affairs. Encourage and facilitate active engagement and constructive communication between community members and all local government officials.

PPD acted quickly to explain what occurred and how the department responded, then explained the homicide tips process and reassured the public of how its safeguards limited the AI model's impact.

Evolving Internal AI Ethical Dilemmas

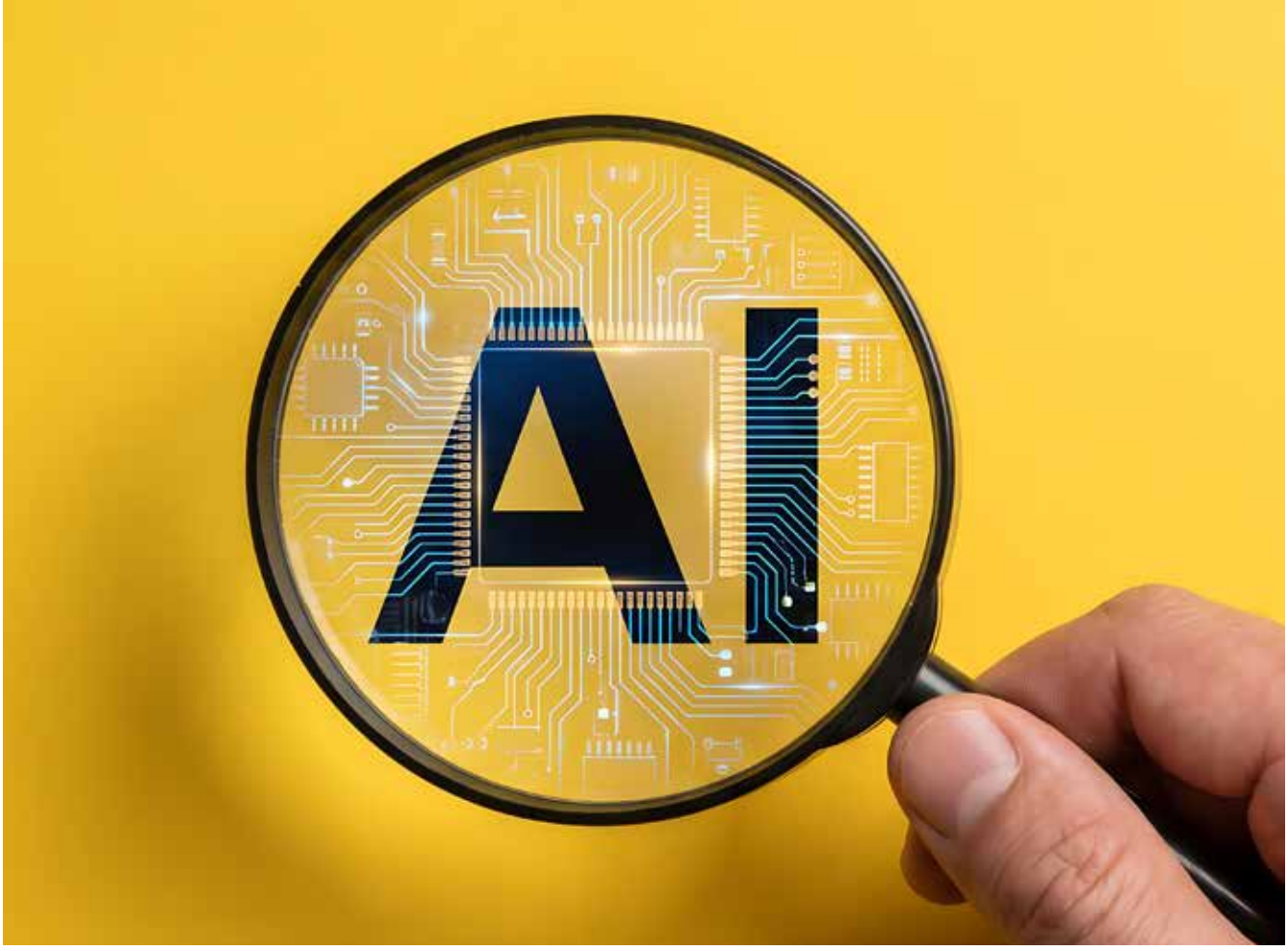
Political philosopher Michael J. Sandel is a professor of Government at Harvard University who cautions about the promise of AI:

> Algorithmic decision-making…seems to offer an objective way of overcoming human subjectivity, bias, and prejudice. But we are discovering that many of the algorithms that decide who should get parole, for example, or who should be presented with employment opportunities or housing … replicate and embed the biases that already exist in our society."[2]

We hoped AI would be a tool that facilitates our work without being subjective, biased, or prejudiced. But it is not. Those negatives exist in society and AI unfortunately replicates it. Consider the principle in Tenet 4 of the Code of Ethics and its guidelines and always balance this ethical commitment with the organization's AI implementation:

> **Tenet 4.** Serve the best interests of all community members.
> Effects of Decisions. Members should inform the appropriate elected or appointed official(s) of a decision's anticipated effects on community members.

JESSICA COWLES
is director of ethics at ICMA (jcowles@icma.org).



"Local governments will continue to balance AI's potential benefits against public concerns about privacy, bias, discrimination, and transparency."

> Promote Equity. Members should ensure fairness and impartiality in accessing programs and services and in the enforcement of laws and regulations. Members should assess and propose solutions to strive to eliminate disparities.

One of the foremost resources for local government in the AI space is the GovAI Coalition. It was established to give local government a voice in shaping the future of AI and ensure AI development is geared toward the benefit of society with one of its goals being to ensure "ethical, non-discriminatory, and responsible AI governance."[3] As a starting point, the GovAI Coalition provides a comprehensive list of templates, use cases, policies, and resources.[4]

In practice, three *PM* articles are resources on the AI and public trust journey:

"Algorithm as Public Servant: How AI is reshaping local government and raising ethical dilemmas" by Renee Cummings.[5]

"Six Key Local Government AI Insights Leaders Need Now: Public-sector practitioners share what local leaders should know about AI in 2026."[6]

"AI in Your Municipality: Implementation and Governance" by Marc Pfeiffer (assisted by Claude.ai) demonstrates how local governments use AI to include strategies that enhance public trust:

> "Residents may worry about government AI use if there is no proper communication. Given the sensitivity of different use cases, consider involving the community early through public meetings, website updates, and council presentations. When AI is being trained or used to make recommendations, clearly explain what data you're using, how decisions are made, and what human oversight exists. For significant applications, especially those involving facial recognition or surveillance, consider creating a resident

"Use AI to improve efficiency, not to replace human review and judgement. No one wants to hear, "It sounds like AI wrote the staff report on these proposed zoning changes."

advisory panel. Transparency prevents misinformation and builds confidence."[7]

Additionally, I offer these tips on AI and the public trust:

- Disclose when AI provides an assist, as Marc Pfeiffer did in the previously mentioned article.
- Use AI to improve efficiency, not to replace human review and judgement. No one wants to hear, "It sounds like AI wrote the staff report on these proposed zoning changes."
- Ensure that any AI use does not unintentionally share data beyond those who have a right to know it.
- Recognize that AI is constantly changing, be honest in what you know and what you don't know, and provide realistic timeframes.
- As with any evolving technology, you may not get it right the first time; be honest about successes and challenges.

AI is not just the future—it's a challenge and an opportunity for today. The example in Philadelphia demonstrates how the city both successfully handled the matter and used it as an opportunity to enhance public trust.

Share the Philadelphia case study with your team and assess how your organization would respond to such an AI-generated situation. Consider whether the use of AI aligns with the ethical obligation to "serve the best interests of all community members." PM

ENDNOTES AND RESOURCES

[1] https://6abc.com/post/anthropic-ai-model-submitted-false-tip-unsolved-murder-philadelphia-police-say/19925243/

[2] https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/10/ethical-concerns-mount-as-ai-takes-bigger-decision-making-role/

[3] https://www.sanjoseca.gov/your-government/departments-offices/information-technology/ai-reviews-algorithm-register/govai-coalition

[4] https://www.sanjoseca.gov/your-government/departments-offices/information-technology/artificial-intelligence-inventory/govai-coalition/templates-resources

[5] https://icma.org/articles/pm-magazine/algorithm-public-servant

[6] https://icma.org/articles/article/six-key-local-government-ai-insights-leaders-need-now

[7] https://icma.org/articles/pm-magazine/ai-your-municipality-implementation-and-governance

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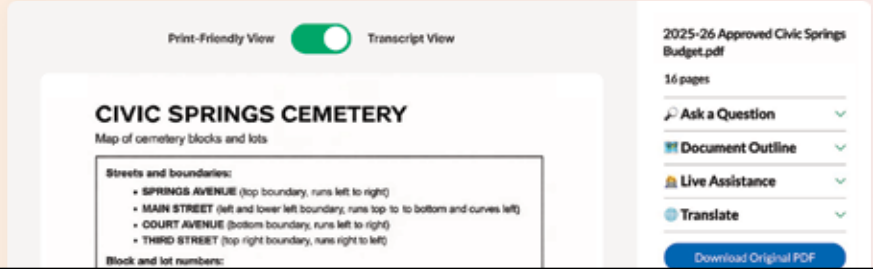

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Government Runs on Workflows — What If You Could Automate Them?

For communities facing growing demands and limited staff resources, automation makes sense.

BY DIVERSIFIED TECHNOLOGY

A resident reports a pothole. A permit application arrives. Someone rents a soccer field.

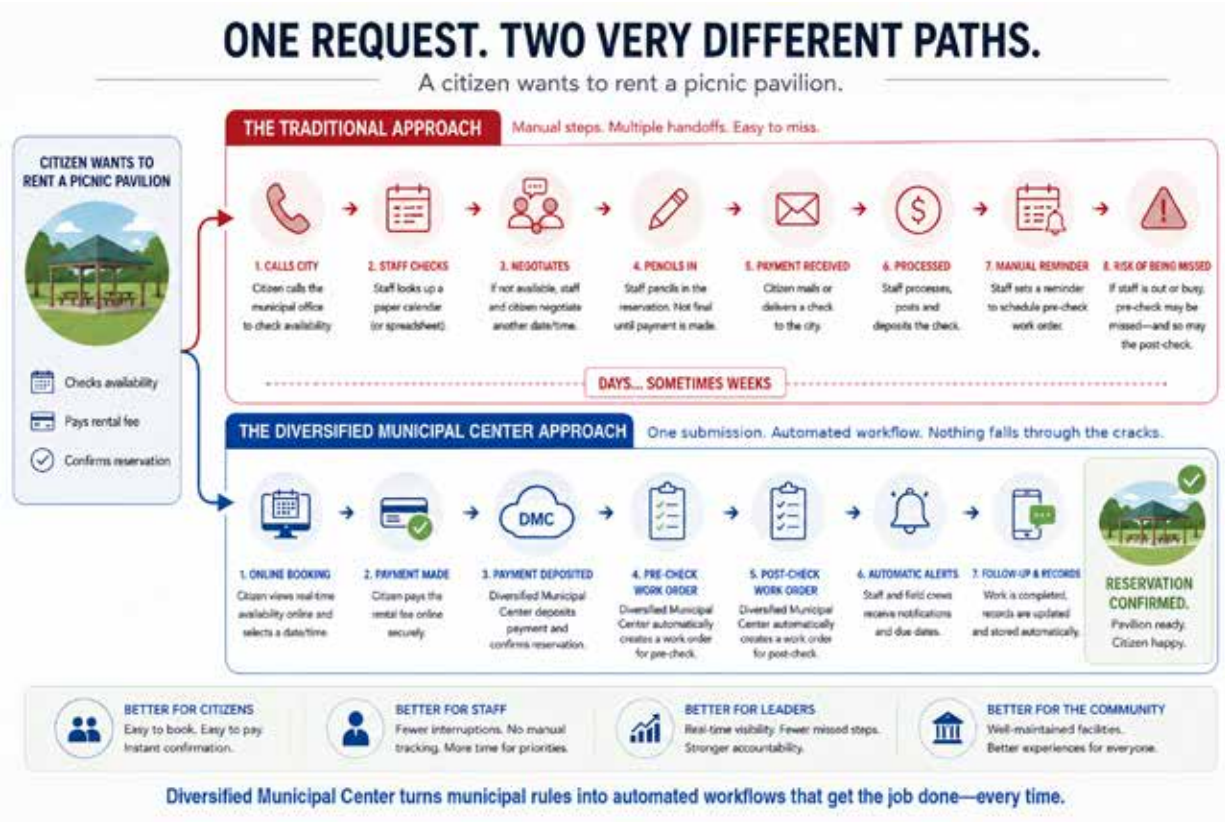
None of these events is particularly complicated.

Yet municipalities routinely spend significant staff time moving these simple processes from one step to the next. A form is received. A payment is posted. An email is sent. A work order is created. A calendar reminder is set. Someone checks whether someone else completed a task.

The work gets done. But too often, the workflow itself depends on people remembering what happens next. That is the opportunity presented by workflow automation.

The Diversified Municipal Center, a municipal operating system from Diversified Technology, is designed to automate the routine steps that move municipal work forward. Municipalities establish the rules that govern a process, and the Diversified Municipal Center uses those rules to initiate actions, route work, and keep processes moving across departments.

Consider a building permit. In a traditional process, the workflow is a collection of manual handoffs: application, attachments, payment, review, filing, notification and—if necessary—an inspection. With the Diversified Municipal Center, the system can check applications for missing information, process payments, route the completed application to the appropriate staff member, and update the appropriate records. When an



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inspection is required, the Diversified Municipal Center can check inspector availability and create the work order.

The staff member still makes the decision that requires professional judgment.

But the municipality no longer relies on a person to remember every administrative step surrounding that decision.

The same principle applies to something as simple as renting a municipal facility. In a traditional process, a staff member may consult a paper calendar, pencil in a reservation, wait for payment, update the reservation, and set a reminder for a pre-rental inspection. If the employee is absent, the reminder—and the inspection—can disappear with them.

With the Diversified Municipal Center, facility availability is visible online. The resident selects a time and pays. The system deposits the payment and automatically creates the work orders for the pre- and post-rental inspections.

The potential impact is even greater when a resident needs help. A pothole, a fallen stop sign, or an overgrown lot should not require a resident to navigate the municipal organizational chart. The Diversified Municipal Center can use smart forms to collect the information staff need, including photographs, and route the issue to the employee responsible. When human review is not required, the system can initiate the work itself. The request is acknowledged, tracked, and kept open until resolved.

The Diversified Municipal Center is designed to automate the routine steps that move municipal work forward.

These examples are different, but the principle is the same. Workflow automation is not about automating one municipal process. It's about making municipal rules and procedures executable. For communities facing growing demands and limited staff resources, that distinction matters.

The most efficient municipality may not be the one with the fewest processes. It may be the one that has stopped asking its employees to manually manage every step between them.

Try it. Right here. Right now. Explore a fully functional demonstration of the Diversified Municipal Center at diversifiedtechnology.com/try-it. PM

Thinking *Outside* the House

Bondurant, Iowa, turned an infrastructure challenge into a creative solution that saved taxpayer dollars, preserved a home, and benefited the community.

BY MARKETA OLIVER, ICMA-CM

It's not every day you see a house roll down the street, but that's exactly what happened in Bondurant, Iowa, this past April. Residents watched as a 1,400-square-foot house made its carefully orchestrated journey to a new location over a mile away. Some even brought out lawn chairs and crockpots to tailgate as the house rolled by. What might have seemed like a spectacle was, in fact, the final step in a thoughtful, cost-saving project years in the making.

A Creative Solution Takes Shape

At a time when communities are focused on budgets and property taxes, the successful relocation of a home shows how creative problem-solving and responsible decision-making can benefit residents, businesses, and city government.

The story began in January 2025, when the city of Bondurant approved a purchase agreement for a property at 601 Lincoln Street Northeast. The acquisition was part of a broader effort to support critical stormwater improvements tied to future growth, including the Truman Drive Northeast corridor, a planned elementary school, and the development of Pleasantview Park.

For the property owner, the agreement was a welcome opportunity. Ready to move forward and build a larger home, they were a willing partner in a transaction that ultimately benefited both their family and the community.

Weighing the Options

The city council carefully evaluated how best to proceed once the property was acquired. City staff researched options such as selling the house and relocating it to another city-owned lot, partnering with organizations like Habitat for Humanity or the Bondurant-Farrar Community School District to relocate the house, and demolishing the structure entirely. But with the home being less than 10 years old, demolition seemed wasteful and costly.

MARKETA OLIVER, ICMA-CM is city administrator of Bondurant, Iowa.

From Bid to Big Move

Instead, in October 2025, the city authorized a request for proposals for the sale and relocation of the house. In November, the city council formally approved a bid of $10,000 for the sale of the home. Over the following months, plans were finalized, logistics coordinated, and anticipation quietly built. Interest quickly followed, fueled in part by the local realtor involved in the project who actively shared updates on social media. The posts generated significant buzz, turning the project into a point of community curiosity and excitement.

By the time moving day arrived in April 2026, the project had captured the community's attention. Families gathered along the route to take in the rare sight of an entire house inching its way down the street. "It felt like a parade," one resident remarked, only instead of floats, it was a home getting a second life.

Big Savings, Lasting Benefits

Beyond the spectacle, the project delivered substantial financial and community value. By purchasing the property instead of boring underground for stormwater infrastructure, the city saved more than $500,000. Relocating the home, rather than demolishing it, avoided an additional estimated $47,950 in demolition costs, while bringing in $10,000 in revenue.

Meanwhile, the land itself will play a vital role in Bondurant's future. The city will retain ownership of the parcel to accommodate stormwater improvements, provide pedestrian access to the future elementary school, and support the development of a park, bringing new green space and connectivity to a neighborhood that lacked both. The neighborhood in the area previously had dedicated parkland, but years ago the city had to convert that land into a detention pond to protect homes from flooding when it was discovered that the developer had miscalculated the stormwater runoff from the adjacent farmland.

A Win for All

In the end, this project is more than just a memorable moment of a house on the move. It's a case study in creative problem-solving and collaboration. It was a win-win-win-win-win-win-win-win!

- Taxpayers saw significant savings—more than $500,000!
- The original property owner was able to move forward with their plans.
- A new homeowner gained a quality residence at a great price.
- The neighborhood will benefit from improved infrastructure, park space, and connectivity.
- The home remains in Bondurant and continues to contribute to the tax base.
- The city avoided $47,950 in demolition costs.
- The businesses involved (local realtor and home mover) were able to profit from the activity.
- The developer sold a lot.
- Waste from demolition was diverted from the landfill.

Not every infrastructure project draws a crowd, but in Bondurant, this one did. And as the house disappeared down the street that April afternoon, it left behind more than just an empty lot. It left a lasting example of how thoughtful planning can turn a challenge into a true community win. PM

A *Working Mother* and Still Ambitious

Why working mothers should be free to define success, pursue leadership opportunities, and adjust their priorities on their own terms.

BY EMILY COLON

A friend recently had her first child. As we talked about motherhood and careers, she told me she saw me as a model for how to have both. I was incredibly flattered. I also felt like a complete fraud.

My children are 10, 7, and 3. They are my greatest accomplishments. I also feel very far from having any of this figured out. What my friend sees is a career I love and three children I adore. What she cannot see are the complicated calendars, missed practices/games, work calls taken from parking lots, help from family and friends, convenience dinners, difficult choices, and all the things I have simply allowed to remain undone.

So, to the new mother wondering whether she can remain ambitious: You can. But it may not look like the polished version of "having it all" that we have been taught to expect. It's tempting to look at women further along in motherhood (and their careers) and assume they have found the formula. Most of us have not. We have developed systems, learned to ask for help, made tradeoffs, and become more comfortable disappointing people occasionally.

The women who look like they are doing it all are usually making choices, accepting help, and letting some things remain undone. That is not failure.

EMILY COLON is a partner with The Southern Group.

Motherhood does not have to erase ambition, but it may change its pace or appearance.

It's reality. A meaningful life does not require equal attention to every priority every day. Some weeks, work gets more of you. Other weeks, your family does. Balance may be less about achieving a perfect split and more about noticing when something important has been neglected for too long.

Motherhood does not have to erase ambition, but it may change its pace or appearance. There may be seasons when you want the promotion, the difficult assignment, or the seat at the table. There may also be seasons when predictability and flexibility matter more. Neither choice permanently defines your potential. A slower season is not the same as a smaller life.

We often describe ambition as a steady upward climb. In reality, careers are rarely that linear. Ambition can mean pursuing the next role. It can also mean building expertise, protecting your capacity, doing excellent work where you are, or preparing quietly for an opportunity that is not right for you today. But women should be allowed to decide for themselves what they want their next season to look like.

When I was pregnant with my first child, a superior at the county I worked at suggested that a part-time position we were adding to the budget that year would be perfect for someone like me—a less demanding role for a working mother. I don't believe he was trying to be malicious. He may have even thought he was being helpful. But he was making an assumption about my ambition before I had expressed any desire to change it.

My pregnancy had changed how he saw my career before it changed how I saw it. That experience has stayed with me. Support does not mean deciding that a mother should want less. It means creating an environment where she can be honest about what she wants without having her commitment questioned in either direction.

Working motherhood is often framed as a woman's personal balancing act. If she can just become more organized, manage her time better, or find the right routine, perhaps she can make everything fit. But the ability to sustain a career while raising children is not determined by individual effort alone. Partners, families, colleagues, supervisors, and workplace cultures all play a role.

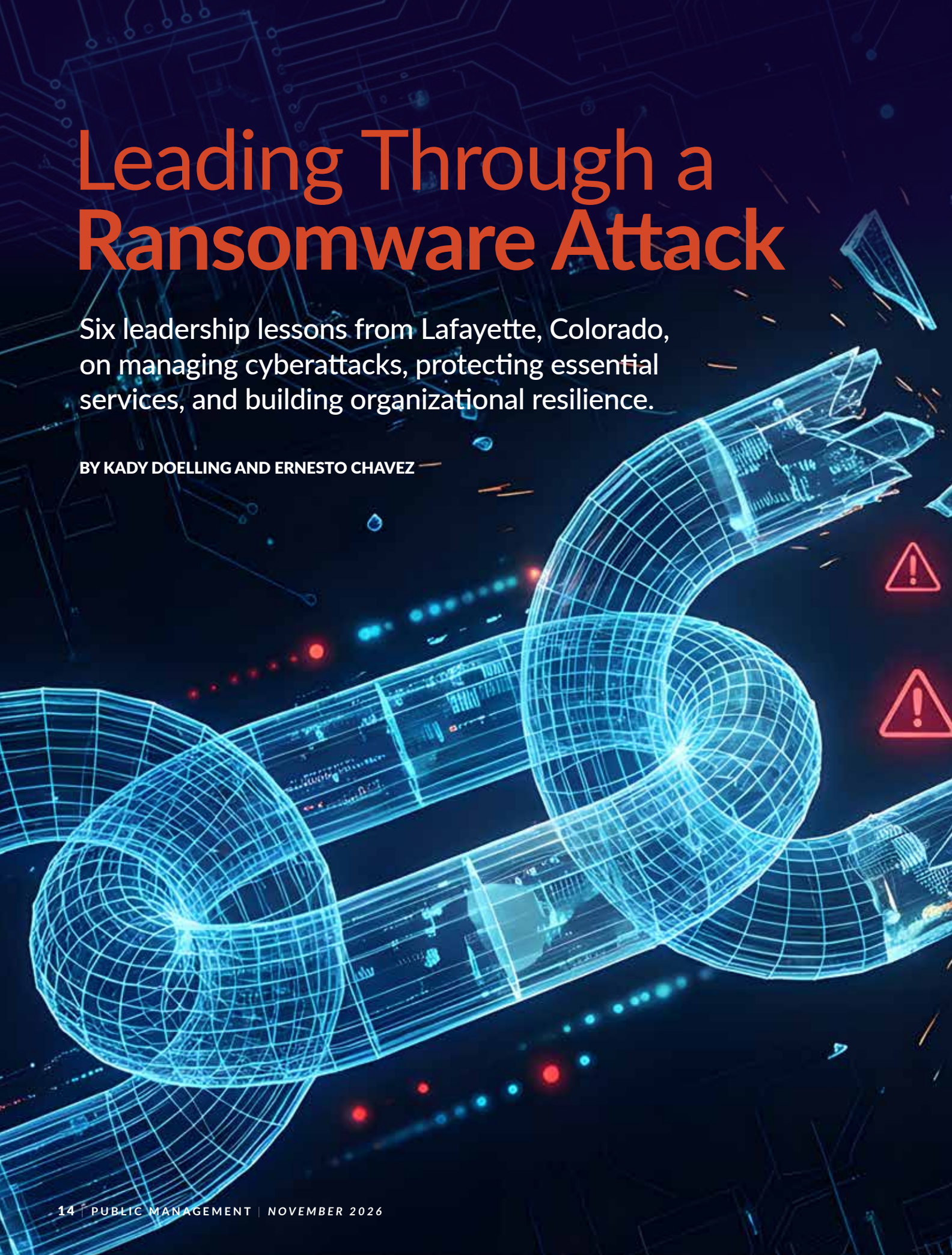
Managers should not assume a new mother wants less responsibility or is no longer interested in advancement. Keep offering the visible assignment. Keep asking about her goals. Focus on results rather than constant presence and provide flexibility without quietly reducing opportunity.

I hope my friend continues to see possibility in my life. But I also hope she knows she does not have to recreate it. Ten years into motherhood, I am not her model because I figured it out. I am simply evidence that she can keep adjusting, keep choosing, keep asking for help, and keep wanting more. Her children do not need her to surrender her ambition. They need her to build a life that is honest, sustainable, and fully her own. PM

Leading Through a **Ransomware Attack**

Six leadership lessons from Lafayette, Colorado, on managing cyberattacks, protecting essential services, and building organizational resilience.

BY KADY DOELLING AND ERNESTO CHAVEZ



On the morning of July 27, 2020, in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, Lafayette, Colorado faced a crisis unlike any it had encountered before—one with no visible damage, no emergency sirens, and no visible signs of disruption on the streets.

The threat was digital, silent, and deeply seated into our technologies by the time employees powered up their computers. A ransomware attack had infiltrated the city's network, abruptly locking staff out of essential systems and shutting down services that thousands of residents relied on daily.

For the city's leadership, the moment represented more than a technical malfunction. It was a test of crisis management, organizational resilience, and decision-making under intense uncertainty. And, as with so many modern threats, it arrived without warning.

When the Digital Becomes Operational

The city first noticed trouble shortly before 2:00 A.M., when routine logins failed and screens displayed the unmistakable signs of file encryption. Within minutes, email and phone networks were inaccessible, online payment portals shut down, and key internal applications went dark.

From a leadership perspective, the incident revealed a truth that organizations across all sectors are confronting: digital infrastructure is now synonymous with operational infrastructure. When the network goes down, communications halt, revenue flows pause, and the organization's ability to function can be compromised as severely as it would be by a physical disaster. For Lafayette's leaders, the immediate challenge was to restore order and clarity in an environment dominated by ambiguity.

An Unfolding Crisis Demanding Coordinated Leadership

City executives quickly assembled a cross-functional incident response team. IT professionals worked to isolate infected systems and set up an entirely new email system, while department heads assessed operational impacts and developed temporary workarounds. Communications leaders drafted messaging to employees and the public, and the emergency manager coordinated with state and federal partners who could support the technical and investigative response.

The early hours of any cyber incident are often marked by limited information—something that can be especially challenging for leaders accustomed to making data-informed decisions. In this case, the cause of the intrusion was not immediately clear. Investigators suspected either a phishing email or brute-force attack, but full confirmation would take time. With systems encrypted and limited visibility into the extent of the breach, executives were forced to make urgent decisions based on partial information.

This scenario is increasingly common across the public and private sectors. Leaders are learning that modern crises—especially cyber incidents—do not wait for complete clarity. They demand action even as understanding evolves.

The Ransom Decision: A Leadership Crossroads

Perhaps the most consequential decision facing Lafayette's leadership was whether to pay the ransom demanded by the attackers. Rebuilding systems from scratch was technically possible, but the process could take several months or years in some cases. During that time, residents would be without access to vital online services—including payments, building permits, communication channels, and recreation systems. At the height of the pandemic, when digital services were already under strain, such an interruption risked significant disruption to community life.

Paying a ransom is never an easy choice, nor one that leaders take lightly. It comes with ethical, legal, and practical implications. But it is also a decision many organizations—public and private—have faced as ransomware attacks have grown more sophisticated.

After weighing the options, Lafayette leadership authorized a $45,000 Bitcoin payment to the attackers in exchange for decryption keys. The decision was guided by several factors: the need to restore critical services quickly, the logistical and financial burden of rebuilding the entire system manually, and the importance of minimizing prolonged disruption to the community.

While cybersecurity improvements require budget and commitment, the cost of inaction can be far greater.

For leadership audiences, this moment reflects a broader theme: sometimes the "right" decision in a crisis is not the ideal one, but the one that best manages risk, continuity, and public welfare under imperfect conditions.

Transparency, Trust, and the Public's Right to Know

In the days that followed, Lafayette adopted a transparent approach to public communication. City leaders informed residents about the attack, outlined which systems were affected, and offered guidance on how individuals could protect themselves if personal information had potentially been exposed.

This transparency—though challenging to deliver—reinforced public trust and set a tone of accountability. Leadership experts often point to trust as a renewable resource, one that can be strengthened or diminished in times of crisis. Lafayette's approach provided a model for how public institutions can communicate difficult news without eroding confidence.

Transparency also helped redirect public conversation toward solutions and long-term improvements rather than speculation or frustration.

Strengthening the Organizational Core

Once core systems were restored, Lafayette began the work of fortifying its defenses to prevent future incidents. Leadership prioritized investments in:

- Secure, isolated data backups to reduce dependence on decryption keys in future incidents.
- Updated cybersecurity tools capable of detecting modern threats.
- Staff training designed to reduce humanfactor vulnerabilities such as phishing.
- Comprehensive incident response planning and simulations.
- Deeper collaboration with cybersecurity agencies at the state and federal levels.

These actions reflect a key lesson for leaders: resilience is not built in the midst of crisis—it is built between crises. But crises often create the momentum needed to catalyze systemic improvements.

Lessons for Today's Leaders

The 2020 Lafayette attack has become a case study in executive leadership under digital threat. Several lessons stand out for leaders across sectors:

1. Cyber readiness must be a strategic priority. It is no longer solely the domain of IT. Executive teams must understand and champion cybersecurity as part of organizational risk management.

2. Rapid decision-making is essential—even when information is incomplete. Cyber incidents evolve quickly, and delays can worsen the outcome. Leaders must be prepared to act decisively and adjust course as information is available.

3. Communication builds resilience. Transparent messaging during and after an incident strengthens community and organizational trust.

4. The human element matters. Staff training and organizational culture are often just as important to managing risk as firewalls and software.

5. Collaboration is critical. No organization—especially in the public sector—can navigate a major cyber incident alone. Partnerships with state, federal, and industry experts are essential.

6. Investing in resilience pays dividends. While cybersecurity improvements require budget and commitment, the cost of inaction can be far greater.

The ransomware attack on Lafayette was not simply a cybersecurity event—it was a leadership defining moment. The city's response demonstrated the importance of agility, transparency, and strategic thinking when navigating Twenty-first–century threats. As cyber risks continue to evolve, leaders at all levels are increasingly recognizing that protecting digital infrastructure is central to protecting communities themselves.

For Lafayette, the lessons learned in 2020 continue to inform its approach to governance and resilience. And for leaders everywhere, the story serves as a reminder that the most significant threats may be the ones we cannot see—but must still be prepared to face. PM

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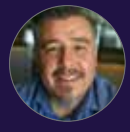

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CHOOSING THE RIGHT AI PROJECTS FOR YOUR LOCALITY

BY SIRI RUSSELL

How to stop chasing moonshot AI by identifying high-value, low-risk AI projects for your city, town, or county.

Imagine a Wednesday morning in your conference room. The city manager has pulled together a dozen people: the IT director, the head of community development, two permit technicians, a budget analyst, a public works supervisor, and a few others. City councilmembers have been asking about AI. The city manager's question is simple: "Where should we start?" By the end of the hour, the whiteboard is full of ambitious ideas (chatbots and predictive analytics opportunities abound!) but there is no agreement on which ones are realistic, affordable, or worth the risk.

This scene plays out across local governments everywhere, and it mirrors a pattern that researchers have documented across industries: many teams skip structured ideation, jump to pursuing the first idea that sounds exciting, and end up working on the wrong problem. It's no surprise that most AI projects fail to deliver value.[1] Too often, the people who understand the work and the people who understand AI aren't together in the same room and the resulting brainstorming runs the risk of producing either moonshot ideas that can't be built or technically elegant solutions to problems nobody has.[2]

Researchers at the University of Virginia's School of Data Science, in collaboration with Carnegie Mellon University, have worked to develop and test a method for innovating AI use cases. Their insights may change how you think about leveraging AI in your organization.

"Good Enough" May Be Exactly What You Need

"Good enough" isn't typically a winning slogan, but when it comes to AI, that may not be too far off the mark from what you actually need. When researchers analyzed 40 commercially successful AI applications across 14 domains (healthcare, manufacturing, finance, government, and more) they found that 25 out of 40 required only moderate performance to be useful.[3]

This isn't really too different from how many of us are already using AI. Consider automatic speech recognition—we would likely agree that despite only running at about 90–95% accuracy (meaning voicemail transcripts/video captions can get a meaningful share of words wrong), it's still much more useful than no transcript at all.[4] Even so, when considering where to start with selecting an AI project, teams frequently gravitate toward the hardest problems, situations where AI would need to be nearly flawless (high risk and high effort).

Another, more relevant example: Your planning department receives 200 permit applications per month, and each one needs to be read, classified by type, and routed to the right reviewer. A staff member spends roughly 15 minutes per application doing this (about 50 hours per month). Imagine an AI tool that classifies applications correctly 85% of the time. It misroutes about 30 applications per month that a staff member needs to redirect, but it handles the other 170 instantly. That's 40+ hours per month back for higher-value work. When selecting the "right" AI project, keep in mind: *AI doesn't need to be perfect to achieve a significantly positive outcome. It just needs to be good enough.*

Google trains its internal product teams using a vivid image, popularized by data scientist Cassie Kozyrkov: think of AI as an island of drunk people.[5] There are a lot of them, so they can handle enormous volume and work fast, but they make mistakes, so don't expect precision from any individual. A helpful reframe of the AI question to apply for your team: instead of "where do we need a genius?" try "where would a fast, imperfect workforce still be an improvement over what we have now?" Instead of asking, "where could AI make a perfect decision?" ask, "where are my employees spending hours on tasks that AI could do pretty well in minutes?" That question, applied across departments, is where the real opportunities live.[6]

AI doesn't need to be perfect to achieve a significantly positive outcome. It just needs to be good enough.

Running an AI Design Sprint in Your Organization

Let's go back to that Wednesday morning and think about how it might look with the adoption of a research-informed AI Design Sprint model for identifying/designing AI applications for your organization.

The AI Design Sprint is a structured workshop (1–4 hours) that brings together a cross-functional team to simultaneously consider what AI can do and what problems staff actually face. It combines two approaches that don't work well alone: starting from user needs (which tends to surface problems AI can't solve) and starting from technology capabilities (which tends to produce solutions nobody wants). The method blends both—the researchers call it combining "user-centered design" with "matchmaking." No technology purchase is required for this, and no data science expertise is needed to make use of this method. The output is a prioritized list of use cases. Technical specs come later, and with a much smaller investment, when you're confident you're solving the right problem.

Who Should Be in the Room

- 2–3 department heads or senior staff who know the operational pain points.
- 2–3 frontline employees who do the daily work.
- 1–2 people from IT/data who understand what systems and data exist.
- 1 person from budget/finance who can reality-check cost implications.
- Total: 6–12 people. The research is clear that the right mix matters more than the right technology.

How It Works

1. Set the scope (pre-workshop, 30 minutes): The city manager and a facilitator define a focus area. Not "AI for the whole city" but something concrete: "AI opportunities for our permitting and inspections workflow" or "AI to support internal operations across departments." Broad enough to explore but anchored enough to be actionable.

2. Review AI capabilities (20 minutes): The facilitator presents 8–10 plain-language slides showing what AI can do,

each paired with a familiar everyday example:

- Summarize text—auto-generated meeting recap.
- Extract and format data—pulling structured fields from a scanned document.
- Classify things—email spam filter.
- Answer questions about documents—searching a policy manual by asking a question.
- Cluster similar items—grouping 311 complaints by topic.
- Discover patterns—spotting seasonal trends in code violations.
- Forecast demand—predicting next month's permit volume from historical patterns.

The point is not to be exhaustive. It's to give everyone in the room a shared, non-technical vocabulary for what AI can realistically do.

3. **Brainstorm** (30 minutes): Everyone writes ideas on sticky notes individually, then shares with the group. The key prompt: *Where in your work would any of these capabilities be useful (even if it only worked 80 or 85% of the time)?* The facilitator actively pushes back on ideas that require near-perfect performance and probes for situations where "pretty good" is still an improvement.
4. **Sort and cluster** (20 minutes): Group the sticky notes into themes.
5. **Detail top concepts** (30 minutes): For the highest-rated ideas, the team works through a simple concept sheet:
   - What data would this need? Do we have it?
   - What's the AI capability involved?
   - What would the output look like?
   - What would the staff member do with that output?
   - How accurate does the AI need to be for this to be useful?
6. **Assess impact and effort** (30 minutes): Map the top concepts on a 2x2 matrix—high impact versus low impact, high effort versus low effort. The sweet spot is the upper-left: high value, low effort. The research consistently found that these "low-hanging fruit" exist in every domain, but teams almost never find them without this structured process.

The AI Design Sprint isn't a silver bullet for AI adoption, but it can be a starting point to bring the right people together and identify where "good enough" can create great value for your organization and community.

What You Walk Out With

A prioritized shortlist of 3–5 AI use cases, each captured with enough detail to evaluate for a pilot or proof of concept. Increased AI literacy is an added bonus. A well-structured AI Design Sprint doubles as AI literacy training. Across every team the researchers worked with, participants reported that the brainstorming exercise itself was as valuable as the specific ideas it generated.[7]

Some Final Thoughts and Resources

Consider a half-day workshop that brings the right people together, grounds them in what AI can realistically do, and searches for the best places to use it, while also building the shared AI understanding your team needs to evaluate vendor pitches, write smarter RFPs, and have more productive conversations with elected officials about what AI can and can't do.

The AI Design Sprint isn't a silver bullet for AI adoption, but it can be a starting point to bring the right people together (grounded in what AI can realistically do) and identify where "good enough" can create great value for your organization and community. For local governments, this means the best AI opportunities probably aren't in replacing expert judgment or automating trivial tasks; they're in augmenting expert work with moderate-quality AI that handles the tedious, time-consuming parts.

A great resource for getting started was developed by the University of Virginia's School of Data Science professor Dr. Nur Yildirim: an open-source toolkit containing plain-language AI capability cards with real-world examples, sample slide deck, concept assessment sheets, and impact-effort matrices. Access it for free at bit.ly/4AS58vC. To learn more about the AI Design Sprint or have a UVA researcher facilitate a free workshop, contact us at sds_caal@virginia.edu. PM

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[4] Munteanu et al., 2006, as cited in Yildirim et al., 2023.

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[6] Ibid, note 1.

[7] Yildirim, N. et al. (2026). "AI Design Sprints: Facilitating AI Innovation within Cross-functional Industry Teams." *Designing Interactive Systems Conference (DIS '26)*. Tested with cross-functional teams in insurance, accounting, and consulting — regulated industries with dynamics similar to local government. Full paper: https://doi.org/10.1145/3800645.3812991

Next in this series: Once you've identified the right AI use case, how do you evaluate whether the tool you're buying is trustworthy? We'll explore what recent research reveals about AI security, reliability, and the questions every city/county should ask before procurement.

SIRI RUSSELL is associate dean for community and government partnerships at the University of Virginia School of Data Science.

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BETTER PROMPTS, BETTER GOVERNMENT

The distance between a disappointing AI answer and a genuinely useful one is rarely the tool. It's how you ask.

BY LEE FELDMAN, ICMA-CM

Not long ago, the phrase "artificial intelligence" in a city hall conversation conjured images of a distant, expensive future. Today it sits on the desktop of nearly every employee who has opened a web browser. Surveys suggest that a majority of government workers are already using generative AI tools in some form during a typical week. The question facing managers is no longer whether our organizations will use these tools, but whether we will use them well.

In my years managing cities of very different sizes, I learned that the most powerful technologies are the ones that amplify good judgment rather than replace it. Generative AI is exactly that kind of tool—but only if we ask it the right way. The most common reason a manager comes away unimpressed is not that the technology failed; it's that the request was vague. A better question produces a better answer, and asking clear questions is a skill local government managers already possess.

It Starts with a Better Question

When I coach colleagues who are new to these tools, I offer a simple structure that turns a shrug-worthy response into a useful draft. Think of it as four parts: role, task, context, and format.

Give the tool a role ("Act as a municipal budget analyst.") State the task plainly ("summarize," "compare," "draft," "critique.") Provide context—the specifics only you know ("for a council work session in a city of 40,000 with a structural deficit.")

And specify the format you want back ("one page, in plain language, with a short list of risks.")

Put together, a weak prompt like "help me with my budget message" becomes: "Act as a city budget director. Draft a 300-word budget message introduction for a city of 40,000 facing a modest structural deficit. Tone: candid but reassuring. End with three priorities for the coming year." The difference in output is dramatic—and it took only 15 seconds more to ask.

Where AI Earns Its Keep

The uses that hold up best are the ones that take routine drafting and synthesis off a manager's plate, freeing time for the work only a manager can do.

Council and governance. Feed a long staff report to the tool and ask for a one-page summary of key points, risks, and fiscal implications for councilmembers. Ask it to play a skeptical councilmember and pose the five toughest questions you should be ready to answer before a work session. Turn rough notes into clean draft minutes.

Budget and finance. Ask the tool to translate three budget scenarios into plain language a neighbor could follow, or to generate the probing questions you should put to a department head during a budget review.

Public communications. Draft an email to neighbors explaining a new program, a social media post inviting people to a hearing, or a rewrite of a dense notice at an eighth-grade reading level. These are the tasks that pile up and delay everything else.

Resident inquiries. Draft a courteous, empathetic reply to a heated complaint that de-escalates while staying factual, or summarize the themes across dozens of public comments and group them by issue.

Policy analysis. Ask for the potential unintended consequences of a proposed ordinance and who might be affected, or a side-by-side comparison of two policy options.

In every one of these cases, the AI produces a first draft. You supply the judgment, the local knowledge, and the final word. That division of labor is the whole point.

The Guardrails that Matter

Enthusiasm without discipline is where managers get into trouble. A few rules have served me well.

Treat every output as a first draft, never the final word. These tools can be confidently wrong—the industry calls it "hallucination." Verify facts, figures, names, and especially anything with legal weight before it leaves your building.

Keep sensitive information out. Personnel records, neighbor personal data, security details, attorney-client material—none of it belongs in a consumer AI tool. Assume that anything typed into a free service is not private.

Remember public records law. In many states, the prompts you enter and the outputs you receive may themselves be public records subject to retention and disclosure. Check your state and local rules before weaving AI into routine workflows, and bring your clerk and attorney into the conversation early.

Be transparent. When AI meaningfully shapes a public-facing decision or communication, your neighbors deserve to know—and your credibility depends on it.

Start Small and Scale to Your Community

None of this requires a large budget or a data science team. Many capable tools are free or low-cost, and the paid enterprise versions—which offer stronger data protections and are worth the investment for government work—remain modest compared with most technology line items. A community of 5,000 and a city of 500,000 can begin the same way: pick a handful of low-risk, high-volume tasks, such as drafting routine correspondence, and let staff practice there first.

As comfort grows, so can ambition. Designate someone to stay current on the tools and your policy. Write a short, plain-language acceptable-use policy before wide adoption, not after. And treat this as an ongoing conversation with your team rather than a one-time rollout. The organizations that succeed with AI will not be the ones with the fanciest technology. They will be the ones whose people were prepared to use it thoughtfully.

The Judgment Stays Yours

For all the understandable anxiety about artificial intelligence, I find it clarifying to remember what our job actually is. Managers are paid for judgment—for weighing competing interests, reading a community, and standing behind a recommendation. No tool does that for us. What a well-prompted AI can do is hand us a faster first draft, a sharper set of questions, and a little more time for the human work of governing. Asked well, it is one of the most useful assistants a manager has ever had. Asked poorly, it's a novelty. The difference, as it so often is in our profession, comes down to how we choose to communicate. PM

RESOURCES

1. International City/County Management Association, *Local Government AI Strategy Workbook* (2024).
2. Government Technology, "50 ChatGPT Prompts for State and Local Government."
3. University of Michigan Ford School of Public Policy and the Michigan Municipal League, Artificial Intelligence Handbook for Local Government (2024).
4. National League of Cities, AI in Action: Empowering Local Governments.

Readers who would like the author's two-page prompt cheat sheet, adapted from this article, may request a copy by emailing him at leefeldman@zencity.io.

LEE R. FELDMAN, ICMA-CM is senior advisor for local government strategy at Zencity and a past president of ICMA. He previously served as city manager of Gainesville, Fort Lauderdale, Palm Bay, and North Miami, Florida.

How Local Governments Can Thoughtfully Evaluate Artificial Intelligence Tools

The AI Matrix, a Leadership ICMA capstone project, is a scoring framework designed to help organizations evaluate AI tools before implementation.

BY SUSANA CARBAJAL, COREY COSTELLOE, AND CJ HEATON

Artificial intelligence (AI) is no longer a distant concept for local governments. It's already embedded in daily operations across communities of all sizes. From drafting council reports to improving public safety analytics, AI tools are quietly reshaping how local governments deliver services. Yet while adoption is accelerating, governance, evaluation, and training often lag.

Our 2025–2026 Leadership ICMA program capstone project offers a timely and practical response to this challenge. Drawing on survey data from local government professionals across the United States, the project introduces a structured AI Matrix, a scoring framework designed to help organizations evaluate AI tools before implementation. The findings reveal both the promise of AI and the pressing need for clearer guidance.

AI in Local Government: Already Here, Still Evolving

The data is clear: AI has moved beyond experimentation and into everyday use. In a survey of 28 local government professionals from various municipalities, 82% reported already using some form of AI in their work.

This adoption spans a wide range of tools and applications, including popular platforms and customer-service chatbots. These tools are being used for drafting council agendas and reports, conducting planning and zoning analysis, enhancing public safety monitoring, providing website navigation assistance, delivering real-time information to residents, and translating and transcribing meetings and documents.

In many cases, AI delivers tangible value. Public servants report time savings, improved access to information, and enhanced responsiveness to residents. For example, AI tools are helping residents quickly find information on government websites, while also enabling staff to summarize lengthy reports for elected officials. Like any other tool, it's only as valuable as the training and proper use allow.

The Other Side of Adoption: Risks and Uncertainty

Despite these benefits, the survey also highlights

significant concerns. AI adoption often happens in an unstructured way, with individual staff experimenting independently rather than within a formal framework. Respondents identified several key challenges, including a lack of training and knowledge, data privacy and security concerns, unclear policies and governance structures, accuracy issues and unreliable outputs, difficulty integrating AI into existing workflows, and skepticism among staff and leadership.

This tension between rapid adoption and limited oversight is where many local governments currently find themselves. AI is being used but not always evaluated systematically.

Why Local Governments Need a Better Evaluation Framework

Traditional IT procurement processes are not always well suited to AI. Unlike conventional software, AI systems are dynamic, probabilistic, and often opaque in how they generate results. Our Leadership ICMA project identifies a critical gap: many organizations lack a consistent, structured process for evaluating AI tools before adoption. Without such a process, governments risk implementing tools that do not align with organizational needs, overlooking ethical or privacy implications, failing to measure performance effectively, and creating inconsistent practices across departments.

The AI Matrix: Treating AI Like an Employee

At the heart of the project is a simple but powerful idea: evaluate AI tools the same way you would evaluate a potential employee. This analogy reframes AI from a passive tool into an active contributor to organizational work. Just as you would not hire an employee without an interview, reference checks, and performance expectations, AI tools should undergo a similarly rigorous evaluation.

How the AI Matrix Works

The AI Matrix is a web-based scoring tool designed to assess AI platforms across multiple dimensions, evaluating functionality, workforce impact, human interaction, ethics, and data security. Each AI tool is scored on a 30-point scale. A score above 16 indicates the tool passes the evaluation, while lower scores suggest the need for further research or reconsideration.

Beyond Evaluation: The Importance of Governance

The AI Matrix is only one piece of a broader strategy. Local governments are also seeking formal AI policies, training programs for staff, governance frameworks, regular review cycles, resident notification procedures, and oversight structures for AI use. These elements are essential for responsible AI adoption. Without them, even well-chosen tools can create unintended consequences.

Key Lessons for Local Government Leaders

AI adoption is inevitable, but it must be intentional. As local leaders, we are all tasked with maintaining public trust and keeping a keen eye on spending. Fully vetting and understanding new technology is vital to making the best decisions. AI poses many questions, and being able to provide sound answers to our communities is key. Structure reduces risk. Training is critical. Oversight is non-negotiable. Transparency builds trust.

Looking Ahead: A Framework for Responsible Innovation

AI has the potential to transform local government in profound ways. But these benefits are not guaranteed without careful evaluation and governance. Local governments are at a pivotal moment in the adoption of artificial intelligence. By adopting structured evaluation tools like the AI Matrix and establishing clear governance frameworks, they can harness the benefits of AI while minimizing risks and maintaining public trust. PM

Access the AI Matrix via the QR code or at bit.ly/3U4oRYD.

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BEYOND AI TRAINING

Designing an AI Adoption Ecosystem in Local Government

How Douglas County is building the support employees need to apply AI in their everyday work.

BY MARYNA SHEVERIA

What is getting in the way of generative AI adoption in your organization? Douglas County, Colorado, began asking that question in 2025, when an employee survey found strong interest in generative AI but limited regular use. Eighteen months later, the gap has changed shape rather than disappeared. Some employees use AI regularly; others are experimenting or have yet to find where it fits. What looked like a divide between users and nonusers is now a spectrum of readiness, confidence, and capability—even within a single team.

That changed how we think about adoption. Access and training do not automatically lead to sustained use. What matters is the support employees receive as they start applying AI to real work. Our response is to build an AI adoption ecosystem that meets employees wherever they are on that spectrum and helps each person take the next useful step.

This article focuses on generative AI in everyday knowledge work—not larger implementations requiring more extensive governance, technology, and investment.

What We Tried—and What We Learned

Our 2025 survey gave us an early baseline. More than 500 employees responded—about one-third of the county workforce. Of those, 151 had explored AI, but only 71 used it frequently at work; more than half did not use it at all.

Despite limited regular use, the interest was there. On a five-point scale—where 5 meant very positive and 1 meant very concerned—the average rating was 3.51. Just over half of respondents selected 4 or 5, 31% selected the midpoint, and 18% selected 1 or 2. Employees were broadly open to AI, but they approached it with different levels of confidence and concern.

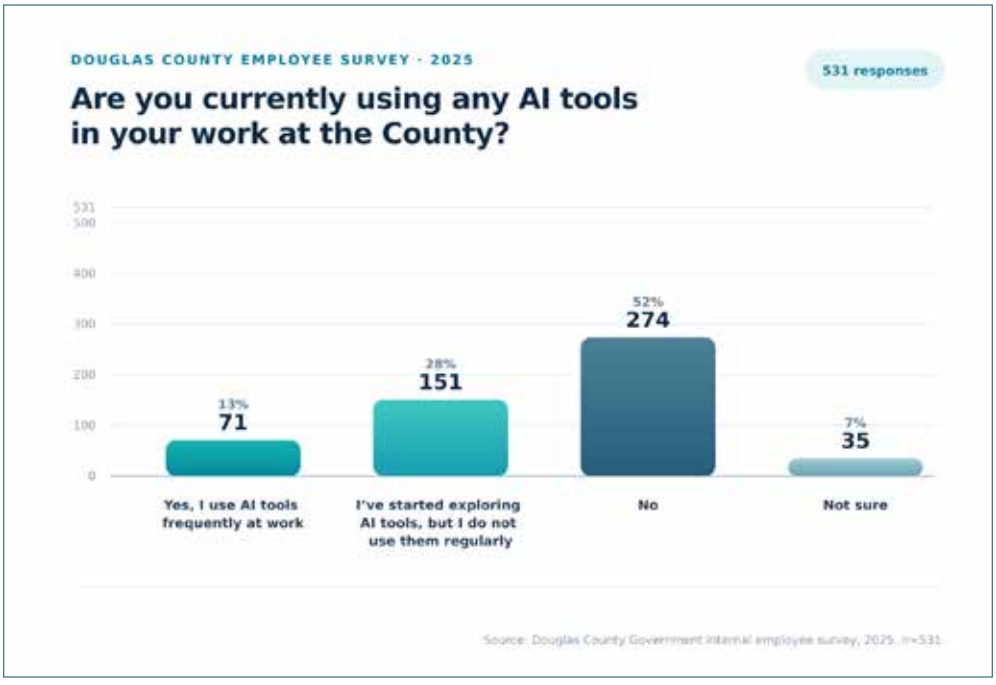
That combination—interest without regular use—shaped our initial response. We introduced self-paced learning, examples, and use-cases that employees could test, and an AI Champions program that provided AI tool licenses and encouraged experimentation. Roughly 150 licenses were issued.

A year later, about 40 license holders were using the tool at least occasionally. Several factors were at play. For some employees, the tool itself did not meet expectations—the experience felt clunky or inconsistent and did not always produce useful results. Much of the learning also centered on the technology and sample scenarios, leaving employees to make the harder connection for themselves: How does it help me do my job?

For some, that connection came naturally. For others, the combination of an evolving tool, limited time, uncertainty, or difficulty identifying a useful application meant experimentation never became part of regular work. That experience did not lead us away from training or the technology. It led us to rethink what training—and the support around it—needed to look like.

The Adoption Gap Today

By 2026, the picture had changed but not simplified. Nearly 30% of AI Readiness Check-in respondents said they were already using AI regularly—directionally



higher than the 13% who reported frequent use in the larger 2025 survey. At the same time, 18% still did not see a clear fit for AI in day-to-day work, 33% had not had time to learn or experiment, and others remained concerned about accuracy, safe data use, and approved tools. The lesson was clear: adoption was growing, but employees were moving at different speeds and needed different kinds of support.

Our AI "world tour"—a department-by-department listening tour—confirms that pattern. We ask three questions: How are you using AI today? What is getting in the way? What would you like AI to help you do?

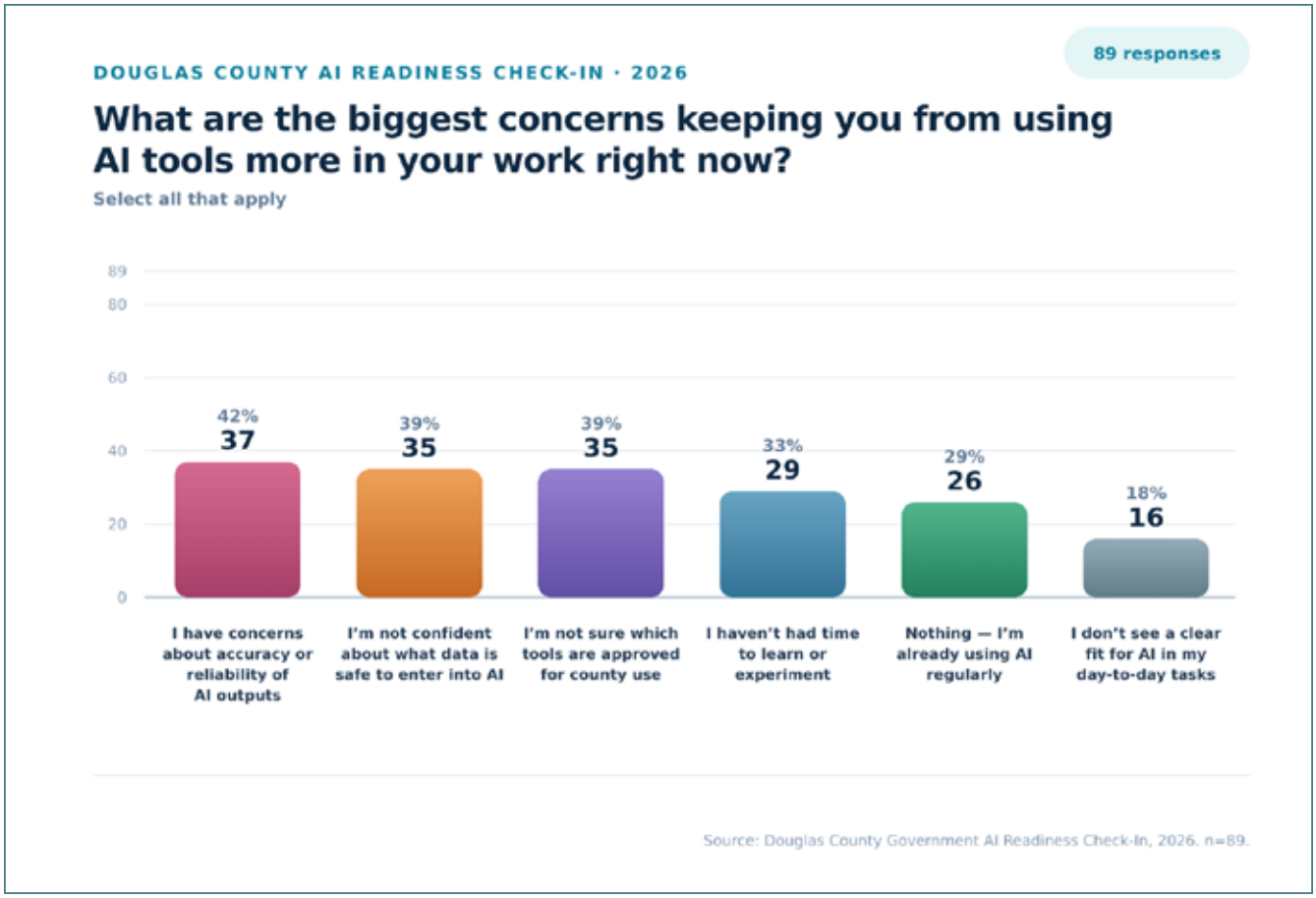
Even within the same department, adoption can look very different. One employee may describe AI as part of everyday work, while a colleague is experimenting with a few basic tasks and another has not tried it yet. Some are ready to build repeatable workflows; others are still asking what tools are available, what is safe to use, or where to begin. Employees doing similar work may therefore need very different support.

Building the Bridge Between Training and Use

Our current approach starts with two ideas: training must reflect employees' work, and support should not end when the class does.

In practice, that bridge combines work-relevant training, a centralized AI Hub, real-world use-case spotlights, peer learning, and hands-on support.

Developed and delivered with a vendor, the AI literacy program uses Douglas County and local-government scenarios to teach responsible use, prompting, and practical application. Employees practice with work they recognize and



begin identifying where AI could help.

The AI Hub is an internal resource site with approved-tool information, guidance, short how-to resources, training materials, and county-specific prompts. Use-case spotlights show how colleagues are applying AI to real work, while regular updates and an interactive communication space help employees exchange ideas and continue learning. Office hours and individual working sessions provide somewhere to turn when questions arise during actual work.

Together, these elements create a feedback loop: listen to employee needs, support practical application, capture what works, share it, and improve what comes next.

The most useful support often begins with a real task. In individual working sessions, we ask, "What are you trying to accomplish?" We then examine the task and current process. The answer may be a better prompt, a reusable workflow, stronger source material, a simpler process—or recognition that AI is not the right solution.

Meeting minutes are one example. The fairgrounds team supports roughly 100 board and committee meetings each year. Preparation previously took 30 minutes to two hours; using county-provided tools, the team reduced it to a few minutes—an estimated 80–90% reduction. For community development's four advisory boards, preparation dropped from five to seven hours per meeting to about 30 minutes, saving roughly 250 hours annually.

Those results required more than asking AI to summarize a transcript. We worked with staff to design workflows that reflected each board's requirements for content, format, tone, and detail. We also accounted for county recordkeeping requirements, and staff continue to review and approve every draft.

The value is not that AI writes the minutes. It's that a recurring task became faster, more consistent, and human-reviewed. Once proven, the workflow became an example others could adapt, turning individual support into organizational learning. Adoption happens where new technology meets an employee's actual work.

Scaling Practical Support

Douglas County is still building and evaluating this approach. A two-person team within the department of strategic solutions leads the work, supported by IT, communications, and staff across departments. The team coordinates the AI listening tour, AI Hub, use-case storytelling, and individual working sessions. Even when a workflow uses existing tools, the broader ecosystem requires staff capacity and ongoing coordination across departments.

That creates its own challenge: the hands-on support that helps close the adoption gap is difficult to scale when it depends on two people.

Rather than continuing the AI Champions model, we are exploring a different approach centered on peer learning and support across departments. Participating employees would share examples from their own work, help colleagues adapt those approaches, facilitate individual working sessions focused on real tasks, and remain connected to the central support structure.

The goal is not to decentralize AI governance; it's to decentralize practical support.

A Framework Other Governments Can Adapt

From this experience, five practical lessons have emerged. Together, they offer a framework that other local governments can adapt to their capacity, workforce, and stage of AI readiness.

1. Listen before designing support. Use multiple channels to ask employees how they are using AI, what is getting in the way, and what they want help accomplishing. Organization-wide surveys can provide a baseline, department conversations can reveal local patterns, and individual discussions can surface needs or concerns that employees may not raise in a group setting.

2. Start with the work, not the tool. Begin with "What are you trying to accomplish?" Examine the task, process, available information, and required result. The answer may be a prompt, a reusable workflow, a simpler process—or recognition that AI is not the right solution.

3. Build a bridge from training back to the job. Give employees somewhere to turn when questions arise during actual work. Office hours, approved-tool information, short guides, reusable prompts, and peer discussion provide ongoing support. Individual working sessions or small-group workshops go further by helping employees work through real tasks, troubleshoot barriers, and develop approaches they can reuse.

4. Turn successful experiments into reviewed workflows. Document the sources, required output, review steps, privacy and recordkeeping requirements, and points requiring human judgment. Test and refine the workflow, adapting it for each department or team as needed.

5. Capture, share, and measure what happens next. Use-case spotlights, peer-led examples, and internal communication channels can spread practical knowledge and sustain momentum. Measure progress not by licenses issued or training completed, but by greater employee confidence and improvements to everyday workflows.

The framework does not require every jurisdiction to build a large AI program. A smaller organization might begin with one recurring task, one staff lead, a shared resource page, and periodic office hours. A larger organization may need a departmental peer network and a more formal support structure. In either case, practical support can be distributed while governance, privacy, security, and tool approval remain coordinated.

When readiness varies even within the same team, no single training course can close the adoption gap. Going beyond AI training means building an ecosystem that connects learning to everyday work—giving employees at every stage the support to apply AI where it adds value and take the next useful step. PM

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Enhancing the City Manager/City Attorney Relationship

Partners in good governance

BY ROD GOULD, ICMA-CM, JAN PERKINS, ICMA-CM, DR. FRANK BENEST, ICMA-CM & DAVID BENOUN

The city manager and city attorney positions are critical to the success of the council-manager form of government. Both are appointed directly by the city council and can be removed at any time for any reason.1 Both are essential for the success of local representative democracy. The individuals in these positions must work hand-in-glove for the ultimate benefit of the community, but they have distinctly different duties. Our experience is that managers and attorneys strive to work collaboratively, respecting each other's roles, with the same aim in mind: moving forward the council's and community's goals.

What makes for a great working relationship? What are some steps that managers can take to foster the type of relationship that gets important work done for the agency and is a true partnership? How can the manager and attorney avoid stepping into each other's lanes? In this article, we suggest some ways to maximize the effectiveness of the relationship.

Differing Roles, Both Important

Municipal government has never been more legally complex. Planning and land use, housing policy, labor relations, police oversight, environmental compliance, homelessness response, procurement, public records, open meetings, ethics, elections: every one of these domains is shaped by overlapping layers of federal and state statutes, administrative regulations, and interpretive case law.

City attorneys are responsible for interpreting and navigating all of it. They develop, review, and advise on every ordinance, resolution, agreement, and conveyance the city makes. It can take many years of dedicated municipal legal practice to develop the expertise required to perform this work at a high level.

The city attorney is the chief legal advisor and representative for a municipal government. They help officials avoid legal pitfalls. The city attorney represents the municipal corporation and provides legal counsel to the governing body and city staff but does not serve as attorney for any individual city official—elected or appointed. Nor does the city attorney provide legal services to the public in general.

City attorneys act as the city's lawyer in lawsuits, labor disputes, contract conflicts, and civil rights claims either directly or through outside legal counsel. They can be full- or part-time city employees or contracted through a municipal law firm. They must be licensed to practice law in the state or province. Some oversee in-house legal staff. City attorneys in some cities also serve as prosecutors.

In this respect, their responsibilities dovetail with the city manager's duty to lead, manage, and oversee most of these same functions and services on the operational side. The city manager's position entails multiple responsibilities for providing policy advice, high-performing management and administration, organizational development, community building and leadership.

"When the city attorney and city manager have a thought-partner relationship, where we strategize about how to navigate sticky issues and work together on a unified approach, the city is best served. I've always had the view that the city attorney is a strong partner. They have a different set of tools at their disposal, but combined we can be even more effective."

—Sherilyn Lombos, City Manager, Tualatin, Oregon

The Municipal Attorney as Partner and Strategic Advisor

Every municipal service, program, and project has legal dimensions. The city attorney should be part of the conversation from the beginning of policy or project formulation, not brought in at the end to bless a finished product. The attorney can help determine the best way to address community needs consistent with all laws and regulations. They should be consulted early and often.

When seeking the attorney's advice, start with the "why." Explain the end goal: what you want to change and what outcome you are trying to achieve. Provide context about the political, administrative, technical, financial, and staffing realities surrounding the proposal. Also make sure that all of the underlying facts are disclosed as the relevant facts can materially change the legal advice given. Then walk through the proposed approach together. If the attorney identifies aspects of the plan that are legally risky, brainstorm alternatives together to eliminate or minimize legal exposure.

Flexibility on the means to achieve the end is essential. Be patient if research is needed before the attorney can advise. The best city attorneys don't simply tell you what you cannot do. They help you get where you need to be on the strongest possible legal footing.

"The easy part of being a city attorney is identifying legal issues and risks. The creative and harder part is finding solutions that achieve the desired policy outcome in a lawful way that minimizes legal risks. This process requires careful listening and communication."

—Greg Stepanicich, former City Attorney, various cities in California; Town Attorney, Ross, California

Frame and Minimize Risk—Don't Just Flag It

Effective city attorneys go beyond binary legal/illegal assessments. They evaluate the relative risk of challenge and the likelihood of successful defense for any proposed course of action. The goal is not zero risk, which would paralyze any government, but informed and managed risk: limiting (but not erasing) liability exposure so that the city can act in the interests of its residents, business people, or other community stakeholders.

This requires the attorney to understand context and the manager to take legal concerns seriously, even when they complicate a preferred path forward.

More Than Simply a Legal Resource

Top city attorneys are highly educated and ethical, intelligent, good communicators and problem-solvers and dedicated to public service. Not only do they provide necessary legal advice, but they can also act as excellent sounding boards as they are knowledgeable about the community and staff. Because they are hired by an elected governing body, they generally have a high degree of political astuteness and therefore they may be able to offer practical advice about how recommendations will be received by councilmembers.

"Given the complexity of municipal governance, it's essential to establish an effective, harmonious, and strong working relationship with your city attorney. The city manager and city attorney are the only two municipal professionals a city council hires. It's imperative for us to work together in a positive manner to protect the city from legal liability while supporting the implementation of policy set by the council."

—Marcela Piedra, City Manager, Rohnert Park, California

City attorneys may also help facilitate council decision-making, particularly when tensions run high or if alternatives are complicated.

City managers are wise to confer frequently with city attorneys. This critical relationship must be grounded on mutual respect, collegiality, and shared commitment to public service.

Build a Culture of No Surprises

Perhaps the single most important norm for this relationship is simple: no surprises. The city manager and city attorney should keep each other informed of emerging issues, political dynamics, and potential problems. This ensures that they can work both collaboratively and effectively while also respecting their distinct roles. Neither should learn about a significant development for the first time in a council meeting.

Protect the Boundaries

Some boundaries must remain clear. The city attorney represents the municipal corporation, not any individual official, elected or appointed. The attorney provides counsel to the governing body and to city staff but does not serve as a personal attorney for the city manager.

If a dispute arises regarding the city manager's employment or contract, the city manager is *strongly encouraged* to seek outside legal counsel. The city attorney's fiduciary duty runs to the municipal corporation as an entity, and in city manager employment matters, that means the council—not the city manager.

While the city manager and city attorney work together in bringing proposed policies and programs to the council, it can happen that one or the other may step over each other's roles. Conflict can result. For instance, the attorney may disagree with a policy or program recommendation supported by the manager and not only point out the legal risk but inappropriately oppose the recommendation. Likewise, the manager may wish to recommend a policy or project and inappropriately ignore or minimize the attorney's concern about the legality of the manager's recommendation or the legal risk involved. If the manager

A Playbook for Both Sides

The following practices can strengthen the city manager/city attorney partnership from both directions.

For the City Manager:

1. *Invest in the relationship.* Take time to build rapport with the city attorney outside of crisis moments. Strong relationships make problem-solving faster and more effective.
2. *Bring legal in early.* Consult the city attorney at the beginning of policy or project development, not after decisions have been made.
3. *Lead with intent.* When requesting advice, explain the goal of the proposed action, the "why" behind the recommendation. This gives the attorney the context needed to find workable solutions.
4. *Take legal concerns and risks seriously.* When the attorney raises risk issues, engage with them substantively. Dismissing concerns erodes trust and increases organizational exposure.
5. *Eliminate surprises.* Keep the attorney informed of political dynamics and emerging issues that may have legal implications.
6. *Ask solution-oriented questions.* Frame requests as "To minimize legal risk, how might we..." rather than presenting a finished plan for rubber-stamp approval.

For the City Attorney:

1. *Invest in the relationship.* Build rapport with the city manager proactively. Understanding their priorities and communication style pays dividends when complex issues arise.
2. *See your role as enabling, not blocking.* Your job is to help staff act effectively within legal guardrails, not to prevent action.
3. *Raise concerns early.* Share legal or risk issues at the front end of policy development when adjustments are easiest and least costly.
4. *Offer practical alternatives.* When you identify a legal problem, suggest workable paths forward that allow the policy or project to advance in acceptable ways.
5. *Eliminate surprises.* Keep the city manager informed of legal developments, pending litigation, and regulatory changes that affect operations.
6. *Lead with "yes, and..."* rather than "yes, but..." focus on constructive guidance: "Given your intent, here is how I would suggest you proceed to achieve this on solid legal ground."

and attorney intrude into each other's domain, conflict ensues.

When this occurs, councilmembers invariably perceive the tension between their two directly hired employees. This lack of a unified approach undercuts policy deliberation by the council and can lead to poor or inconsistent execution by the staff.

Clear and open communication between the manager and attorney about issues, roles, and conflicts (when they arise) is essential in avoiding contentiousness in the relationship. Conflict between these two key players serves no one well, wastes time, and confuses the governing body and organization. Working through differences in perspectives in a way that preserves the relationship, and clarifies roles, should happen before difficult patterns are established that are hard to break.

A Partnership Worth Investing In

The city manager/city attorney relationship is one of the most consequential professional partnerships in local government. Winning lawsuits is good. Avoiding them in the first place is better. The best city attorneys assist city managers in moving policies and programs forward legally and effectively. They can also be valuable guides and advisors on matters beyond the law and regulations. Together, you can make serious civic progress by working together effectively, while supporting the city council, staff, and community volunteers in your city.

When the relationship works well, the council receives clear, coordinated guidance. Staff operates with confidence. The community benefits from a government that is both responsive and legally sound. When it breaks down, everyone pays the price. Like any important relationship, this one requires intentional effort, honest communication, and a shared commitment to something larger than either role: effective, ethical governance in service of the public. The investment is worth making. PM

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What Local Government Leaders Actually Need to Know About Coaching

Examining three different approaches to personal development and how a coach can support them.

BY MICHAEL HERBERT

I've sat in both chairs.

The one where you're being coached, and the one where you're doing the coaching. For most of my career, I was the one being developed—workshops, seminars, retreats. I'd come home from a weekend energized, convinced something had changed. Monday went great, then Tuesday happened, and the next budget crisis, the next personnel problem, the next 11:00 P.M. board meeting. Whatever had shifted quietly shifted back.

I don't regret any of it. That work made me better. But it took years of leading organizations, including ten and a half as a town manager, before I hit the limits of how I'd been developing and understood there was something different. What I finally had to learn was what each of those experiences was actually good for—and what I'd been asking them to do that they were never built to do.

Three Ways We Develop

After many years of leading and coaching, I've come to recognize a pattern—in myself, in colleagues, and in the executives I work with now. There are three basic approaches to growth, and I spent a long time treating them as a ladder. I don't anymore. They're more like three tools that do different jobs.

The first phase/approach is building skills and situations. Setting goals with tangible qualities. The promotion. The larger community. The larger department. I'm at Place A, I believe Place B will be better for me, and getting there gives me something I want or need. Skills are real. A manager who can't navigate a negotiation or build a budget has a skills gap, not a mindset problem, and the fastest fix is training. I built my early career this way.

After a while, one of three things happens. Sometimes it keeps working, and you're satisfied. Sometimes you reach Place B and something's still missing—you're achieving and it feels hollow. And sometimes the skill gap compresses. Early on, the growth curve is steep; sit in the seat long enough and it flattens. The ways you get better stop being obvious, and you feel a pull toward a new perspective. How do I focus on the culture when the day-to-day is eating the work I'm actually here to do?

The second phase/approach is working on perspective and mindset. At some point you figure out that changed circumstances don't fix everything, and you start working on how you see things. Where your time goes. The story you tell yourself about the pressure you're under. You read the books. You reframe. This is where most leadership development lives, and it earns its place.

This approach has its own ceiling, and you find it in two ways. The first is the most frustrating. You have the insight. You have the knowledge. You can articulate exactly what you should be doing, and you still can't do it. The second is the compression factor again, but tighter this time. It's not as much about adding to your toolbox as it is learning to employ the tools you have differently.

The third phase/approach is harder to describe. If I had to name it, I'd call it full awareness. It came to me last, and it works from a different direction. Instead of striving toward Place B, you look at all the sides of Place A. You slow down. You notice what you weren't aware of before. You learn that things can get better not by adding or changing skills and frameworks, but by subtracting

your perspective around them. To see it clearly enough that it loses its grip.

For years, I asked the first two approaches to do the third one's job. I'd build a skill or adopt a mindset and expect it to dissolve a negative pattern neither could touch because the pattern lived underneath both. That's why the weekend seminar never survived Tuesday. It wasn't a bad experience. It was the right tool for a different job.

A special few leaders intuitively use all three and have gotten good at diagnosing which one a given moment calls for. That diagnosis, it turns out, is half of what coaching helps with.

The Thing Nobody Tells You About Knowledge

Let me expand on the gap between the second and third approaches because it's the part most leaders find uncomfortable.

The executives I coach almost always know what they need to do. They know they need to have the difficult conversation they've been avoiding. They know they don't need to attend every meeting on their schedule. They know they need to delegate more, react less, slow down before they respond, take action instead of thinking about the issue. They know and they still can't do it.

This is where the three approaches sort themselves out. If the gap is knowledge or skill, training closes it. If it's perspective, a reframe closes it. But for most experienced executives, the gap is neither. It's what's underneath. The internal block that makes the difficult conversation feel impossible in the moment. The identity you've developed that keeps you from delegating. The old pattern that kicks in under pressure no matter how often you've promised yourself you'd respond differently.

A good coach doesn't tell you what you already know. A good coach helps you identify what you already have that's getting in the way.

Finding the Right Coach Doesn't Have a Clear Road Map

When municipal leaders hear coaching, they usually picture one of three things: a sports metaphor, a performance improvement plan, or someone who might not know the difference between an open public meeting and an initial public offering. None of that is wrong, exactly. But coaching runs a spectrum that maps onto those same three approaches: skills work that's really mentoring, performance coaching in the middle, and the slower, messier transformative work I'm most often called on for. The point isn't which is best. It's which gap you need to close.

A good coach doesn't tell you what you already know. A good coach helps you identify what's getting in your way.

The Weight of Having No Choice

The third approach can be thought of like this: we do a lot automatically without noticing. Eventually we stop seeing things objectively, and we lose sight of the choices we have to see things from different angles and act differently. What good coaching helped me see (slowly, not in a weekend) is that "That's just who I am" is almost never literally true. Maybe what you're doing is actually providing you something you didn't realize

before. Maybe you've locked onto one way of seeing it and narrowed it, without realizing, to the only way.

When you see there are other parts of the same issue that you were missing, something changes. The straitjacket you've been wearing turns out to have buckles. You were never stuck. You were choosing without knowing you were choosing. That doesn't make the job easier, but it gives you more freedom inside it.

That's not semantics. For leaders who have been in their roles a while, it can be the difference between growth that's fulfilling and moves the needle...and development that feels like repetitions.

What to Look For

I know a lot of town managers and other leaders curious about what a coach could do for them. Part of why I'm writing this is to hand you a rough map so you can find yourself on it. So start with the honest question: is one approach resonating with you more than the others right now?

It's not black and white. Early on, elements of all three serve you; so do they 15 years in. But the longer I served as town manager, the more of the technical and mindset work I'd worked through. Then I was stuck. I was fortunate to find a coach who showed me the third approach, and that's what got me into this work. Start there, and the question of who to work with gets a lot easier.

Understand what credentials do and don't tell you. An ICF certification means a coach has been trained, supervised, and held to a consistent standard, both ethically and competently. That's worth something; it tells you what you're getting. It doesn't tell you whether this coach will be good for you, and its absence doesn't mean you won't get something helpful. Some of the most useful developmental conversations of my career came from people with no credential at all. Treat certification as information, not a verdict.

Then there's our world specifically. You don't have to have served as a town manager to be a good coach, but a coach who hasn't served in that capacity will never fully understand what that weight feels like. You can't teach someone what it is to be the chief executive of an organization. So if you need someone who has shouldered that weight, find that person. If you'd rather have someone from outside it, that can serve you, too. They'll see what a peer would miss. Just know which you're choosing and why.

Ask about their approach. A coach who can't explain how they work, not just what outcomes they produce, is worth questioning. And notice how you feel after a sample conversation. Not inspired in a motivational-speaker way. Seen. Challenged without being judged. More clear about something you walked in confused about. That's the signal.

Its Own Craft

City/county manager roles share a lot in common with CEOs in the private and nonprofit sectors, but local government leadership is its own craft, its own discipline. Some pressures are unique, and the public nature of the work is relentless.

The experienced leaders I've watched struggle, including myself, aren't the ones who lacked skill. They're the ones who stopped developing and stopped becoming aware of the real issue. I've been that person—several times. The role has a way of doing that if you're not paying attention.

Coaching isn't a cure for that. But chosen well, a coach can help you name what you're actually working toward and speed up progress in ways you wouldn't reach alone. The leaders who make it, really make it and not just survive, are the ones who never stop asking harder questions about themselves. They've found a way to be okay with who they are as a leader while staying humble about how much they still have to grow. That's not a personality trait. It's a practice. And in this job, it might be the most important one you develop. PM

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Recommended Reads for Leading with Courage and Conviction

An ICMA regional director discusses two books that made her reflect on her experience leading through transition and crisis.

BY KATE FITZPATRICK, ICMA-CM

"In Our Region" is a special column in *PM* Magazine written by ICMA's regional directors. In this edition, Pam Brangaccio, southern regional director, reviewed *two books on navigating crises as a leader, staying grounded in personal values, and helping local government organizations adapt under pressure.*

As a reminder to ICMA credentialed managers, you can receive 10 hours credit for each professional book that you read.

Pam Brangaccio,
Southern Regional Director

What books did you choose to highlight and why?

I chose two closely connected books: *Seven Lessons for Leading in a Crisis* by Bill George and *True North: Emerging Leaders Edition* by Bill George and Zach Clayton, an update to the earlier True North, which remains a personal favorite. Both books profile leaders navigating moments of pressure—whether guiding teams through crisis or identifying the values that define their leadership. Emerging Leaders makes the point that "when you are forced to make value-based decisions with a lot to lose, you learn what is most important in your life."

Many managers in transition (MITs) will tell you their MIT status resulted from standing firm in defense of their personal values. My MIT experiences came from refusing to promote or terminate specific staff members when an elected official "strongly suggested" it, and from declining to change recommendations to council based on who would continue to benefit from an existing procurement or construction management practice. My "true north" values were shaped 20 years earlier, when I was a young assistant city manager in West Palm Beach. I watched my mentor, city manager Ron Schutta, model transparency, honesty, and defense of professional staff and their recommendations.

Bill George's seven lessons for leading in a crisis are:

1. Face reality, starting with yourself.
2. Don't be Atlas—get the world off your shoulders.
3. Dig deep for root causes.
4. Get ready for the long haul.
5. Never waste a good crisis.
6. Follow your true north when you are in the spotlight.
7. Go on offense and focus on winning now.

George defines "crisis" as an opportunity for leaders to reinvent themselves and their organizations, and "true north" as the values and principles that guide leaders as they engage, support, and inspire others. *True North: Emerging Leaders* calls for "emerging leaders to settle upon their values and beliefs that will guide them throughout their lives. Throughout centuries, leaders have been judged by their character, courage, and capacity. Those remain core values in navigating though today's rough waters."

How did the books encourage you to think more broadly or change your mind on an issue?

The books reminded me that local government leaders need to seek help from their teams and personal networks, and to be honest, open, and vulnerable. We often try to shield our work teams and families from crises, even though the best solutions often come from their involvement. The books also reinforce the importance of personal resilience: keeping our bodies in

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reasonable shape, our minds clear, our spirits high, and our sense of humor intact—even when our NFL teams are struggling before the regular season begins.

I especially appreciated Dov Seidman's "pause moment" that was included in *Emerging Leaders.* In addition to keeping a daily journal, Seidman pauses to ask himself:

- Did I make a difference in someone's life today?
- Was I helpful to my team today?
- Am I thinking about where we are going and looking around corners?
- Am I living my values?
- Am I leading by example and making a positive difference through the way I lead?

What practical strategies from the books can local government leaders apply?

Managers should always consider a crisis as an opportunity to make lasting organizational improvements. During a crisis, local government leaders are in the spotlight, so they need to stay grounded in their true north, clearly communicating their values and principles. Managers need to be transparent with their team and community, tell the truth without minimizing or exaggerating the impact, and remain visible rather than hunkering down.

Crises are also an opportunity for managers to learn about themselves. Examples from *Emerging Leaders* include working hard and doing your best, caring for people, treating everyone with respect, and demonstrating ownership and accountability. The book also emphasized that authentic leadership requires clarity about values, leadership principles, and ethical boundaries. Staying true to those values takes moral courage, especially when professional managers can face adverse consequences for doing the right thing.

Did you find anything in the books that was relevant to your region?

Our members need to sustain hope for the future and identify practical professional solutions rather than feeling powerless in the face of changing landscapes they cannot control. The Southeast Region is feeling the effects of national policy shifts that are placing stress on local governments. These challenges include state mandates on funding priorities; ballot initiatives to reduce local property tax revenue; limits on community diversity initiatives; mandates affecting building codes, zoning, planning, and economic development authority; and growing pressure on retirement and pension fund financing. A sailing proverb says, "If you can't change the direction of the wind, adjust your sails." The same applies to local managers, who must continue to face new challenges while remaining the calm center for staff.

Our members need to sustain hope for the future and identify practical professional solutions rather than feeling powerless in the face of changing landscapes they cannot control.

Have you already implemented any ideas from the books?

I applied lessons from *Leading in a Crisis* during a severe global and state economic downturn, much like the fiscal pressures communities later faced during COVID-19, and the 2023 hurricanes. Over three years, my community lost 30% of its tax base because of sharp declines in property values, requiring significant budget reductions. We responded with transparent community engagement, clear communication, outcome-based budgeting with department teams, negotiated contract adjustments with employee unions, position freezes, new revenue sources, and departmental work-process reviews.

These efforts made the city leaner and stronger and helped build a unified team during the fiscal crisis. As Bill George writes, "This is a great opportunity to strengthen chemistry within your team because the strongest bonds are built in crisis."

Did any part of the book spark a memory or experience you would like to share?

As mentioned earlier, as a young assistant city manager in West Palm Beach and then as a first-time city manager in Safety Harbor, Florida, I found my true north through the ICMA and FCCMA mentors I could turn to for guidance. Several of those mentors now serve as ICMA senior advisors and remain valuable one-on-one resources for ICMA members. Whether through a coach, mentor, peer network, or by serving as a true north for new managers, it's important to help one another find direction. PM

From First Responder to City Manager

Bill Ayub's public safety career taught him to make decisions under pressure—experience he now draws on as a city manager.

BY JESSI FINLEY

For Bill Ayub, city manager of Ventura, California, public service began with an example close to home. His father worked as an electronics engineer for the U.S. Navy designing missile guidance systems, and he continuously chose public service over more lucrative private-sector opportunities. "He instilled in me the pride and sense of accomplishment he felt in serving his country as a public employee," Ayub reflected.

That example stayed with him, and by junior high school, Ayub was considering a career as a police officer. Encouraged by a youth minister who became a deputy sheriff, he began building experience as a police cadet, dispatcher, and reserve officer while attending college. "I found the work thoroughly rewarding and challenging, and I loved every minute of my service."

Ayub went on to serve 37 years in law enforcement, including four years as the twentieth sheriff of Ventura County. Appointed Ventura's city manager in 2023, he now oversees 11 departments and more than 700 employees. His career in public safety informs how he approaches the broader responsibilities of municipal leadership.

"My cumulative experiences in public safety ran the gamut from critical split-second decision-making to strategic long-range planning, all of which contributes to and supports an adaptive leadership approach that is situational."

For Ayub, those experiences helped develop his ability to assess risk, make balanced decisions, and focus on high-quality service. He sees leadership as a skill that first responders practice throughout their careers. "First responders are trained to be leaders in the academy and then become career-long practitioners of leadership."

Preparing for the Unexpected—And Building Trust While Doing It

That perspective is particularly relevant when it comes to emergency preparedness. As a coastal community, Ventura faces risks that include wildfires, flooding, seismic activity, and human-caused disasters. Ayub considers preparation a core responsibility of the city manager's office—one that requires anticipating future needs, maintaining trained and equipped personnel, and ensuring the city has the financial capacity to respond.

Emergency planning, he explained, involves "futuring"—anticipating what may come and preparing accordingly.

Training and plans must be reviewed and updated regularly so the city can respond to foreseeable scenarios and mitigate their impacts.

Preparedness also depends on trust. Strong relationships and clear, balanced communication help residents feel confident that their local government is ready to act. Local government employees, too, need to understand and believe in the organization's readiness.

"Continuously growing public trust is critical before a crisis is at hand," Ayub cautioned. Being accessible and communicating with the public about preparedness are essential to keeping the community safe.

Bringing a Public Safety Perspective to City Management

Ayub's move from public safety to city management grew from his connection to Ventura and his desire to improve services for residents. As a longtime resident and public-sector employee, he saw opportunities to address gaps in service delivery and believed his management experience could make a difference.

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His law enforcement leadership had provided experience in human resources, finance, crisis communication, community engagement, intergovernmental relations, and public safety. But leading a city also meant recognizing what he did not know. "Perhaps most importantly, I learned that the chief executive of a large organization could not and need not know everything about the organization, but they better surround themselves with people that do," he emphasized.

When Ayub recognized that land use and development were areas where he needed more expertise, he hired an assistant city manager with a strong background in community and economic development. The addition helped round out the leadership team—a practical example of matching organizational needs with the right knowledge.

Advice for the Next Generation

For emerging local government professionals, Ayub recommends finding mentors and learning from peers through professional associations. He continues to connect with other leaders to discuss challenges, exchange ideas, and explore creative solutions. He also encourages professionals to take on opportunities that push them beyond their comfort zones. "If that is public speaking, for example, they should seek out opportunities to improve their skills in public speaking through practical experience or joining a club such as Toastmasters."

Ayub also points to professional associations as a valuable source of peer connection and learning. Since becoming

city manager, he has joined ICMA and remains involved with the California League of Cities and the Municipal Management Association of Southern California.

"The closest thing to a peer that a city manager has is another city manager." Connecting with other managers and aspiring leaders through ICMA, along with the association's training opportunities, has been especially valuable to Ayub. "Professional associations, such as ICMA, are a vital component to success in local government management."

Leading the Community He Calls Home

While serving his peers and the profession itself is something Ayub prioritizes, serving Ventura carries a more personal meaning. He was born and raised in the city and continues to call it home. Ayub's knowledge of its history and his relationships across the community help him hear candid feedback about city services and identify where improvements may be needed. "I love serving my hometown."

For Ayub, staying accessible is one key way to strengthen his residents' trust and confidence in local government. From his first days as a young police cadet to leading a city with more than 700 employees, Ayub's career has been shaped by service, preparation, and the willingness to keep learning. His experience offers a reminder that effective local government leadership depends not on having every answer, but on anticipating challenges, building trust, and surrounding yourself with people who bring the right expertise. PM

WANT TO HEAR MORE?

Watch the full ICMA Member Spotlight interview with Bill Ayub on YouTube at *youtube.com/watch?v=dAP0hdVImbc*.

Transitioning from Department Director to ACAO

Five tips to make it a success.

BY NICKIE LEE

Recently, I worked on a webinar series titled, "Is the ACAO Your Next Career Move?" For me, this has always been my goal, and my path through finance was the happy accident. In this article, I'll impart some tips on how to successfully transition from a department director to assistant or deputy city administrator within the same organization. Also, city managers should read, too, as it may help you aid a successful transition!

I remember being an MPA student at the University of Kansas and feeling like the only career path modeled to me was one of jumping from town to town, moving up in career title and size of community. I knew from the start this wasn't for me. I wanted to stick to one metropolitan area so my husband could also develop his career and we could be near family. Committing to one area would mean I may need to be flexible with my title and path to the manager's office.

I graduated with my MPA in 2010 during the Great Recession so flexibility was key. After a short stint working for the State of Kansas I came across a budget analyst role for the city of Olathe. I knew the leadership and culture in Olathe were great, so I applied, not expecting to stay in budget and finance for a decade.

However, budget and finance turned out to be a great fit for me. The work is cyclical, task-oriented, and the backbones of organizations. I got to learn a little about everything in these roles, eventually transitioning to another city. Five years ago, it brought me to a finance director position at my current city, Prairie Village.

Over time it became more and more clear that an assistant manager role was my next move. The daily weeds of the finance position, especially at a small organization, began to feel tedious. Fortunately for me, the prior deputy city administrator moved on to another organization, and I was appointed to her role.

The transition from a technical department to a leadership position was not easy! Most notably, the new role oversaw planning and community development, which I had never overseen. And while learning the basics of planning and zoning, the community was in a political debate about attainable housing. Even though this was extremely stressful, it truly forced me to understand the basics of planning and housing, and quickly. Despite the challenges, I immediately loved the new role and knew it was a good fit for me.

The following are practical tips that helped me transition successfully within the organization:

1. **Shift from tactical to strategic thinking.** You will need to shift from being a "doer" to a "director." This was hard for me! Going from completing numerous specific daily tasks to some days where all I did was "think" all day, it can feel unproductive. But we all know this is the most productive time spent.

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is deputy city administrator for Prairie Village, Kansas.

2. Backfill your old role as soon as possible. Do *not* fall into the trap of continuing with a prior role while transitioning to the new one. This is common when someone is promoted within an organization. Thankfully, in my situation we had someone in mind to take my old role who was in the position to apply.

3. Explore areas of the organization you didn't touch in your prior role. In my case, this included joining the citizen's police academy, going on police ride-alongs, and doing park tours. This not only educated me but exposed me to more employees throughout the organization to allow them to start seeing me in a different role.

4. Create a fresh start. Change offices if you can! For me this was just a move down the hall. Depending on the size of your organization, the new role may be in a new building so a move may be inevitable, but for me I could have stayed in place. A change of scenery went a long way. Also, consider switching up some of the details. I upgraded some of the little things, like getting a new water bottle, coffee cup, and lunch bag. It sounds silly but it helped me feel like I was "starting over."

You will need to shift from being a "doer" to a "director" — from tactical to strategic thinking.

5. Refer to ICMA's publication, *The First-Time Assistant Chief Administrative Officer's Guide.* (Shameless plug.) The guide includes an entire section on moving up successfully within the organization. Additional resources, such as state-specific documents, are included in the guide.

If you or a department director in your organization is looking to move up—congrats and good luck! Most of the required skills and experience for an ACAO are consistent with department directors: leadership, management, decision-making, communication, and business acumen. Your unique technical skills may be exactly what is needed for the broader organization. PM

The People Who Connect the Dots

LOCAL GOV 250

Looking under the hood at the human capacity that helps local government build trust and get things done.

BY NICOLE MANAPOL

As the United States marks 250 years of democracy, local government leaders are working in an increasingly difficult environment. Polarization is high, trust in institutions is strained, and communities expect visible progress while many local governments contend with limited staff, constrained resources, and increasingly complex problems.

I have spent much of my career in places experiencing some version of this tension. Before joining the International Economic Development Council (IEDC), I spent nearly two decades in international development, much of it with communities recovering from conflict and economic disruption. In 2017, I returned home to rural western New York, where I encountered the same question I had wrestled with elsewhere: how do communities begin believing that change is possible?

What I found was remarkably simple. Small, visible changes mattered—a building reopening, a stalled project moving, organizations beginning to collaborate. Progress created momentum and pride of place. And almost always, someone had brought those pieces together.

Over the past three years, the Economic Recovery Corps (ERC) has let us explore that idea at greater scale. Through a $30 million cooperative agreement with the

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U.S. Economic Development Administration, IEDC and a coalition of national partners, including ICMA, embedded 65 experienced professionals in distressed communities nationwide. Many of these communities were not lacking ideas. They lacked the capacity to coordinate, build relationships, and move those ideas forward.

At ICMA's Local Government Reimagined Conference in Philadelphia this May, I explored what we have learned with three ERC fellows and one host partner. Their communities could hardly be more different, but a common lesson emerged: rebuilding trust is not simply an engagement challenge. It is shaped by whether institutions have the capacity to listen, connect, and act. And that capacity comes down to people.

Look Under the Hood

We usually measure local government capacity in positions, departments, and budgets. My work on ERC caused me to think differently. Some people can see across a system: they notice relationships others miss, bring organizations together, and help turn conversation into action.

They are connectors, and they are not always economic development professionals. They may be planners, librarians, nonprofit leaders, public works staff, or the resident everyone calls when something needs to get done.

Four ERC practitioners offer some clues about how to find and support them.

1. Connect the Pieces You Already Have.

ERC fellow Landdis Hollifield relocated from North Carolina to Highland County, Virginia—rural, mountainous, about 2,200 residents across 400 square miles—to help the Highland Economic Development Authority implement the county's economic development plan.

Landdis encountered a challenge familiar to many small communities: limited resources. What surprised her was that even in a place that small, multiple organizations were sometimes doing similar work. She had seen the same thing in an earlier role, with nonprofits receiving public support for overlapping services. In Highland County, she connected them instead.

Organizations clarified what each did best. Resources could be pooled, duplication reduced, and opportunities pursued together that none could have pursued alone. Local governments often assume increasing capacity requires adding something new. Sometimes the greatest opportunity is making what already exists work better together.

Coordination is capacity. And it's easy to undervalue, because when it works, the connector can begin to look unnecessary.

For managers, that suggests a practical starting point: before creating something new, look across the system you already have. What isn't connected? And who has the relationships to bring those pieces together?

2. Strengthen the Infrastructure That's Already There.

If Landdis's experience shows the value of connecting existing organizations, ERC fellow Deeneaus "Dee" Polk's work in rural Louisiana goes one step further: sometimes the capacity a community needs is already embedded in institutions that have been there all along.

Hosted by St. Tammany Corporation, Dee's project focuses on regional coordination in Washington and St. Helena parishes, neither of which had the staffed economic development infrastructure found in larger markets.

Dee connected early with economic development foundations already operating in both communities. They were locally rooted institutions made up largely of volunteers who had been quietly working on behalf of their communities for years, including people who had left, built careers elsewhere, and returned home wanting to contribute what they had learned.

Rather than build a parallel structure, Dee leaned into what was already there.

That became increasingly important as St. Helena began navigating the prospect of more than $1 billion in clean energy investment. The local foundation had been involved from the beginning. Dee saw an institution others might have overlooked and helped strengthen its ability to play a larger role.

His experience shifts the question. Before asking, "What do we need to create?" ask what already exists that we could strengthen. Which institution has trust? Who consistently shows up? What network could play a larger role if local government removed barriers or connected it to resources? Communities often contain more infrastructure than we recognize because it does not resemble what we are accustomed to looking for.

3. Make Room for Unlikely Leaders

The same can be true of people. We can overlook leaders who do not come with the titles or credentials we expect. Few stories illustrate this better than LaVonya Goodwin, executive director of Omaha's North 24th Street Business District Association, an ERC host partner, and now a member of the Omaha City Council. She did not begin the North 24th Street Streetscape project as an engineer, planner, or elected official. She entered almost by accident.

In 2020, she attended a ribbon cutting at her alma mater, Creighton University, marking streetscape improvements that stopped at Cuming Street—a boundary she describes as separating investment to the south from decades of disinvestment to the north. Afterward, Creighton's president suggested the improvements should continue north and pointed her to the project's consultants.

Within a month, she was discussing a project for which she had no funding and no technical background. They took a risk on her, as she put it, and she took a risk on work she knew nothing about.

That conversation eventually became a $50 million+ initiative to transform a 2.3-mile corridor rich in jazz and civil rights history. To move it forward, LaVonya navigated universities, consultants, public works departments, residents, and political leaders with very different perspectives. A planning director once told her he had never received a proposal from someone in her position. Yet she was the person moving the project forward.

One of her observations has stayed with me: *sometimes people don't speak your language, but that doesn't mean you can't communicate with them.* It's about finding the right currency, the thing that matters in a place.

LaVonya worked with leaders whose politics differed sharply from those of many residents she represented. Rather than requiring agreement as a precondition, she focused people on a tangible community need. Communities do not have to agree on everything before they can work together on something.

Her experience also raises an uncomfortable question. Government responsiveness toward her changed dramatically once she became a councilmember, though she was the same person with the same knowledge and relationships.

Whose expertise are we overlooking because it does not come with the title we expect?

4. Turn Listening Into Action.

Recognizing who can lead is one part of the equation. ERC Fellow Servola Frazier's experience in Fort Lauderdale shows what this kind of leadership can look like in practice.

Servola joined ERC to work inside the City of Fort Lauderdale on the historic Sistrunk Corridor, once a thriving center of Black business and culture before decades of disinvestment. Redevelopment has brought significant capital improvements, but her assignment focused on ensuring those investments benefit local businesses and residents.

Servola was warned that certain groups would not work together and that residents would not trust an outsider. She did not try to convince them otherwise. She listened. She spent time understanding residents' concerns, then looked for alignment between what they told her and priorities already in the city's plans. She brought meetings to residents rather than expecting residents to come to government and connected people to resources many did not know existed. Organizations that had operated in silos began convening.

The approach can be summarized simply: *listen, find alignment, act, close the loop.*

None of that requires a new department, but it does require a different orientation toward engagement. Dee described communities frequently "engaged" because their economic indicators make them attractive candidates for grant-funded initiatives, yet rarely seeing those conversations translated into action.

When we ask people to participate, we create an expectation. If they provide input but cannot see what came of it, engagement becomes another source of frustration. Trust grows when residents can trace a line from voice to decision to action to result.

Cultivate Connector Capacity

Taken together, these stories are not really about a particular economic development strategy. They are about a way of working—and the people with the skills to work that way.

When communities designed their fellowship projects, we asked them to focus not on a backlog of things they wanted to get done, but on catalytic work that had stalled because no one had the time or capacity to move it forward. Fellows then adapted those projects with their hosts based on what they found on the ground.

City and county managers can act on this without an ERC Fellow. Look across your organization and community. Who can walk into a room of people who disagree and find enough common ground to move forward? Who listens before prescribing? Who can translate between community and government?

Those are not "soft skills." They are implementation skills, and increasingly essential management capabilities. Recognizing them may also require us to rethink what this work looks like day to day. A connector doing the job well may be having coffee with a business owner, walking a neighborhood, introducing two people who should know each other, or sitting in a meeting outside their job description. That presence isn't time away from the work. It is the work.

For managers, that means creating conditions in which these capabilities can flourish: permission to work across boundaries and recognition for relationship-building alongside more easily measured outputs.

Make Invisible Capacity Visible

That matters because much of this work remains difficult to see—and therefore difficult to value. A meeting isn't a new building. A relationship isn't a ribbon cutting. An introduction isn't a grant award. But those activities are often the infrastructure behind the outcomes we measure, and they rarely appear in the metrics we use to justify investment—part of why this capacity tends to be the first thing cut and the last thing funded.

ERC let us invest in it deliberately across 65 communities and see what became possible when someone had the time, mandate, and support to do the work.

Not every community needs an ERC Fellow, and not every connector needs to be an economic developer. But we should become far more intentional about recognizing and investing in the human infrastructure that allows communities to get things done.

Democracy Happens in the Doing

At a time of extraordinary polarization, it is tempting to think rebuilding public trust requires solving the divisions confronting the country. These communities suggest a more immediate place to begin: a deteriorating Main Street, an infrastructure gap, a neighborhood that has spent years waiting for investment.

Local problems create opportunities for people with different perspectives to work together—not because their differences disappear, but because they can see what becomes possible when someone connects the right people and resources around a shared challenge.

Rebuilding trust may not require local governments to do more. It may require us to work differently: listen more carefully, connect what already exists, strengthen institutions communities already trust, recognize leadership wherever it emerges, and develop the people who can translate those pieces into action.

If democracy is experienced locally, its most important infrastructure may be the people who help communities see that they can still solve problems together. PM

Learn More about Local Gov 250

In collaboration with other local government associations, ICMA is commemorating America's 250th anniversary by celebrating the "democracy at the doorstep" facilitated by cities, counties, regional councils, and tribal governments. Learn more at **localgov250.org**.

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