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A "quiet crisis" has been reached in attracting young people to local government management careers. **Michele Frisby, Washington, DC** Read article

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What Can Be Done? Attracting Young Adults to Careers in Local Government

Figure 1. Age Distribution of Appointed Managers

Age	1934	1971	2000
Under 30	7%	26%	2%
31–40	34%	45%	16%
41–50	37%	21%	40%
51–60	19%	5%	37%
Over 60	3%	3%	6%

Note: Percentages for 2000 exceed 100 percent because of rounding.

Michele Frisby

This past year, ICMA launched its *Building Communities . . . It's No Small Chore* public awareness campaign to help members spread the word about the value that professional local government management brings to our communities. While researching which messages and tools could best be used to educate the public about their local government's operations, ICMA repeatedly heard from members and the public that today's young people have a limited knowledge of how their communities operate and lack an interest in pursuing careers in local government management.

To learn more, ICMA began an investigation into the status of the civic engagement and career choices of high school and college students. During this research, in addition to numerous related studies, the Association found that several other groups, including the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) and the City Managers' Department of the League of California Cities, already had launched a number of activities designed to reach out to students and new

recruits to the field. ICMA also conducted its own survey of two classes of undergraduates at Cleveland State University to test a series of questions that focused on the career choices of young adults.

This article examines the challenges imposed by the changing workforce demographics and their impact on the next generation of public service employees. It also summarizes some of the current research into the amount of local government engagement and the professional choices of high school and college students, while giving an overview of efforts by ICMA, NASPAA, the California League, and other organizations to attract young adults to careers in government.

Challenges Facing the Public Sector

According to a report cited by the Next Generation Working Group of the City Managers' Department, League of California Cities, the "quiet crisis" of attracting bright and talented young people to employment opportunities outside the private sector was recognized as early as 1964. In that year, the Brookings Institution conducted a landmark study that predicted problems for the federal government in competing with businesses to hire highly skilled workers.[1]

While a number of issues contribute to the predicted shortage of talented young people to fill essential public sector positions, of these factors the "age bubble" of retiring baby boomers, the competition for a finite number of gifted job candidates, and changes in the attitudes and workplaces of younger employees are of particular interest to public sector employers.

The Challenges of Advancing Age

As recently as May 2002 during a discussion on "Young Americans' Call to Public Service: The Hart-Teeter Study," Patricia McGinnis, president and CEO of the Council for Excellence in Government, stated: "By 2005, more than half of federal workers will be eligible for retirement, including a very large number of senior executives. And many state and local governments are facing the same set of challenges."

Nowhere are these challenges more obvious than in the field of local government management. In his book The Rise of the City Manager, published in 1974, Richard Stillman compared data from a 1971 survey on the age distribution among city managers with those collected by Clarence Ridley and Orin Nolting in the early 1930s. When we contrast data from these early years with the numbers from ICMA's State of the Profession Survey—Fringe Benefits 2000, conducted in July 2000, it becomes clear that the "greying" of the American population already has had a significant impact on the local government management profession (see Figure 1).

In 1934, for example, 41 percent of the managers surveyed were aged 40 or younger. This percent rose to 71 in 1971, with the entrance of the first wave of baby boomers into the workforce. By the year 2000, however, the portion of appointed managers aged 40 or younger had dropped to only 18 percent.

The percentage of managers aged 51 and above decreased from 22 percent in 1934 to only 8 percent in 1971, justifying Stillman's 1974 comment that "city management has always been a relatively young man's game." Reflecting the impact of the baby boomers, however, by 2000 the proportion of age-51+ managers had jumped to 43

percent, with only 2 percent being under the age of 30.

Local government, like all levels of government, is experiencing the effects of the unprecedented movement through the workplace of a mass of employees born shortly after World War II.

The Challenge of Competing for Talent

In the article "The Human Capital Challenge," published last spring in The Business of Government by PricewaterhouseCoopers Endowment, authors Nicole Gardner, Ruby DeMesme, and Mark Abramson observed: "The new conventional wisdom is that all sectors of society are engaged in a 'war for talent.' While the 'supply and demand' of talent tends to fluctuate with changes in the national economy, the key point is that talent can no longer be taken for granted and that all organizations must now engage in competition for the best and brightest in the nation's workforce."

The article describes today's human capital game as being about proactively seeking out qualified candidates, rather than waiting for them to respond to recruitment advertisements.

Remarkably, these shifts are taking place in tandem with a marked rise in young adults' overall trust in government and positive feelings about voting and politics. According to a national study of 1,500 young adults between the ages of 15 and 25, young people's current positive perceptions of government in general are a direct result of the September 11 terrorist attacks, as reported in the March 2002 study Short-Term Impacts, Long-Term Opportunities: The Political and Civic Engagement of Young Adults in America.

This study also reported, however, that "young people appear to be more positive about government of late but still aren't keen on pursuing careers in this field." And while government continues to mine schools of public policy and public administration for the best and the brightest, according to Gardner, DeMesme, and Abramson, "Even students who had chosen to obtain a master's degree in public policy [are] now leaning toward seeking employment in the nonprofit or private sectors rather than the public sector."

The Challenges of a Changing Workforce and Workplace

Exactly why are so many of today's young people disillusioned with the actual prospect of a career in local, state, or federal government? One theory focuses on the amount of personal sacrifice demanded by a career in public service. When interviewed in 1990 by Kathleen Branch, a government reporter turned county employee, on the future of public administration, former Calvert County (Maryland) Administrator Jack Upton was described as saying that people entering the field face far greater disincentives than ever before: "With more and more public disclosure and ethics laws, people pay a higher price for entering the profession of public administration. It's not just the fact that they have to live life under public scrutiny but the fact that they are subject to all kinds of liability—even for alleged violations that may not have been legitimate. This can be a real burden and does produce a lot of emotional stress."

A summary of the initial meeting of the Next Generation Working Group in February 2002 also named a number of workforce and workplace characteristics adding to the difficulty of drawing young adults to careers in professional city or county management and retaining them once they are there. These included:

- The attitude of "Generation X" assistant managers and other mid-career professionals in local government who want a balanced life and who shun the onerous demands of a city, town, or county manager's position.
- Antigovernment sentiment, which leads to fewer college graduates' aspiring to careers in government.
- Inadequate "mentoring" of early- and mid-career employees.
- The highly visible fact that the majority of current managers are white and male.[2]

Gardner, DeMesme, and Abramson, in their report, also cite the changing workplace as a second critical challenge facing government employers. They call for "a [new] workplace in which individuals find fulfillment and satisfaction, and achieve their personal—and the organization's—goals."[3]

Today's young adults are intolerant of the "thick hierarchies, rule-bound processes, and limited opportunities for meaningful work [that] keep government from offering the kind of challenging work necessary to draw and retain top people," says author Paul Light. In The New Public Service, published by the Brookings Institution Press in 1999, he discussed a survey of five cohorts of students of public policy and administration programs who graduated between 1973 and 1993.

The study revealed that "these students are turning away from the traditional careers in government service that their predecessors pursued," with fewer than 50 percent of the students choosing government as their first job after college, versus closer to 75 percent 20 years ago.

Rather than shying away altogether from careers in public service, according to Light, the survey respondents were considering alternatives to jobs with the government and instead were looking at the private sector organizations and nonprofit entities with which local, state, and federal governments partner to deliver essential public services. Careers with these "new public service" entities offered the graduates the sense of mission, the flexibility, and the opportunities for growth that appealed to them. Can local government match these offerings?

Current Research

The Hart-Teeter Findings

A study called Young Americans' Call to Public Service, whose research was conducted by the Hart-Teeter research firm in May 2002 for the Council for Excellence in Government, revealed a significant shift in motivation toward government service. A total of 54 percent of respondents cited either "helping people" (38 percent) or "serving community" (16 percent) as the most appealing aspect of a job in government service, compared with 30 percent for helping people and 10 percent for serving community in 1997.

The report went on to say, however, that while young Americans' interest in government service had grown from 35 percent in 1997 to 40 percent in 2002, the

percentage of young people who preferred to work in the private sector (66 percent in 1997 and 62 percent in 2002) still significantly outpaced those who preferred to work in public service (24 percent in 1997 and 27 percent in 2002).

Interestingly, the Hart-Teeter study also revealed that, when questioned as to whether anyone had ever asked them to consider working in government while they were in high school or college, only 38 percent of respondents said "yes," while 62 percent said "no." These data may point out significant areas for research and marketing that might be pursued by local governments that want to compete for talented employees.

ICMA's Preliminary Survey Research

In September 2002, ICMA pretested a survey concerning undergraduate career choices. The pretest was administered to 65 students enrolled in two introductory urban affairs classes at Cleveland State University (CSU), and focused on areas of research identified by ICMA staff and the Next Generation Working Group. A breakdown of the CSU undergraduate demographic information is shown in Figures 2, 3, and 4.

While nearly 61 percent of respondents said that they would consider a career in local government, only 13 percent indicated that they had ever considered a career as a city, town, or county manager.

The two classes of students surveyed varied in their undergraduate concentrations. The survey choices included political science, other social sciences, public administration, business administration, engineering, information technology, or some other major. Most of the students identified themselves as pursuing majors in business administration (20 percent), engineering (20 percent), or another major not listed, such as pre-law or pre-med (41.5 percent).

Not surprisingly, nearly 51 percent of the respondents indicated that they planned to go on to obtain an advanced degree, with business administration being the largest advanced-degree category (21 percent). Only 6 percent said that they planned to pursue an advanced degree in either political science or public administration.

When asked which career sector they would most likely consider after completing their academic studies:

- 43 percent of the students chose the private sector.
- 18.5 percent opted for the public sector (specified as local, state, or federal government).
- 1.5 percent selected the nonprofit sector.
- 37 percent of the students said they didn't know which job sector they planned to pursue after their educations.

Just over one-third (34 percent) of the students said that they had chosen the post-education career sector they would most likely pursue when they were college undergraduates, while others had made the decision either in high school (27 percent) or when they were "very young" (12.5 percent).

Figure 2. Ages of Respondents

Ages	Percentage

Under 18	4.8
18–20	46.0
21–25	30.1
26–30	14.3
31+	4.8
Total	**100.0**

Figure 3. Respondents' Gender

Gender	Percentage
Female	44.4
Male	55.6
Total	**100.0**

Figure 4. Respondents' Race/Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity	Percentage
African-American	31.7
Asian-American	0.0
Caucasian	57.1
Hispanic	6.3
Native American	0.0
Other	4.8
Total	**99.9**

Twenty-three percent said that they were "still not entirely certain."

Interestingly, discussions with parents (8.8 percent), specific college classes (15.8 percent), and the career choices of their parents (5.2 percent) had had significantly less influence on these students' choices of career sector than had work experience, defined as summer jobs or internships. Nearly 30 percent of respondents indicated that these work experiences had led them to choose the job sector they eventually planned to pursue as a post-education career.

While 19.3 percent of the students stated that an "attractive starting salary" was the single most important factor for them in considering a career, a total of 28 percent said that either the "opportunity to make a difference within a community" (15.8 percent) or the "opportunity to help others" (12.3 percent) was the most important factor.

One of the most interesting results of the survey involved the students' responses to the notion of a career in local government, which was defined as working for a city, town, or county. While nearly 61 percent of respondents said that they would consider a career in local government, only 13 percent indicated that they had ever considered a career as a city, town, or county manager.

Among those students who had considered a local government career, the "opportunity to make a difference within a community" (28.6 percent) and "attractive starting salaries" (17.1 percent) were the single most influential aspects of a career in this field.

Among those who had not considered local government as an option, 50 percent cited "bureaucratic environment" as the aspect that most turned them off. In general, 41 percent found a career in local government "fairly-to-very appealing," 34.4 percent found it "slightly appealing," and 24.6 percent found it "not at all appealing."

Of the 87 percent of students who had never considered a career as a city, town, or county manager, nearly 23 percent said that they simply had "never considered the possibility." Others cited "don't exactly know what city, town, and county managers do" (20.8 percent), "bureaucratic environment" (16.7 percent), "don't want to work for elected officials" (16.7 percent), and "low salary" (14.6 percent) as other reasons for not considering careers as city, town, or county managers.

Kennedy School Data

In sharp contrast to the findings already described, a September 2002 report that examined 76 graduates of the master's program in public policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government revealed that 83 percent of the class of 2002 had accepted positions in public service—the highest percentage in more than 20 years. This figure represents more than a 35 percent increase over the previous year, in which 61 percent of the graduates chose these types of careers.

The fact that more than eight in 10 graduates chose public service careers is noteworthy, despite the study's definition of a public service career as a position with government (63 percent) or a nongovernmental organization (20 percent). Again, the 9/11 terrorist attacks were cited as contributing to the increase. According to John Noble, director of career services at the Kennedy School, "There's a sense that the tragic occurrences of 9/11 may have rekindled a sense of purpose and passion in public sector work."

The data for the entire Kennedy School class of 2002, which includes graduates who earned master's degrees in public administration, public administration/mid-career studies, and public administration/international development, are also noteworthy. Nearly 59 percent of graduates accepted positions in the public sector, 20 percent accepted jobs with nongovernmental organizations, and 21 percent opted for careers in the private sector.

Meeting the Challenges

Clearly, there is no shortage of data and information on the current status of the civic engagement and career choices of America's young people. The challenge facing local governments today becomes how to persuade those talented, intelligent young adults

who already possess positive, post–September 11 perceptions of their governments to actively choose a career in public service.

Specifically, how can ICMA members, in partnership with the many organizations currently examining these issues, successfully promote careers in professional local government management?

What's Being Done

The wealth of research into the civic and political engagement and career choices of young Americans has led a number of public interest groups and related organizations —including ICMA—to focus on ways their members can help attract and recruit talented young people to careers in government.

Calling Students to Public Service

In 1998, NASPAA formed the Public Service Careers Initiative Advisory Council to develop a high-profile public relations campaign to "address negative student attitudes toward careers in the public and nonprofit sectors."[4] These attitudes had been revealed through an ambitious study of 970 Phi Beta Kappa seniors and 740 first-year M.P.A./M.P.P. students randomly selected from 27 schools nationwide.

Commissioned by NASPAA under a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts, the study was conducted by the public administration department of the George Washington University and focused primarily on student interest in careers with the federal government. A few questions, however, discussed local government careers, and these findings revealed that:

- While there was no strong, clear pattern of predictors of motivation toward a career in local government, interest was greatest among those who saw opportunities for personal growth.
- Political science and related majors exhibited the most interest in local government as a career.
- There was less confusion within either the Phi Beta Kappa or the M.P.A./ M.P.P. student group about the hiring process for local government jobs than there was about the process of applying for a federal position.[5]

The study also showed that "a majority of students feel that government and public decision-making jobs are less attractive career options than working in other fields" and that the lack of interest in these options stemmed, not from apathy or self-absorption, but from the lack of reinforcing messages about the vast opportunities and rewards that a career in public service could offer.[6]

As a result of the study data, in 1999, NASPAA published a tool kit, Calling Students to Public Service: A Resource for Undergraduate Faculty and Advisors. In addition to information on student perspectives, internships, obtaining careers in public service, promoting public service, and linking service learning with public service careers, the tool kit included "Look, Ma! I'm a Bureaucrat!"—a glossy, 12-page viewbook that depicted the images and true stories of nine young public service professionals "who are anything but bureaucratic."

NASPAA is currently engaged in a number of other efforts to attract and inform potential students about the various degree programs and diverse career opportunities available to them. One such effort involves the development of a database of

NASPAA-member programs, in which the association profiles alumni of M.P.A./M.P.P. programs. NASPAA also is developing a new brochure that its members can send to potential M.P.A./M.P.P. students.

Finally, the association has revamped a section of its Web site (http://www.naspaa.org/students/students.asp) as a one-stop location where potential students can learn about public service graduate education, careers, and salaries.

Preparing the Next Generation: A Two-Part Strategy

In February 2002, members of the City Managers' Department of the League of California Cities held the kickoff meeting for a Next Generation Working Group. The group plans to implement a twofold strategy to address the issues identified earlier in this document. The strategy will involve:

1. Grooming professionals already in the pipeline by:
   a. Identifying best practices for preparing early- and mid-career professionals.
   b. Marketing the benefits and rewards of contributing to public service as a city, town, or county manager.
   c. Working with recruiters to "widen the net" when seeking qualified talent from outside the field.
2. Attracting young talent to the field of local government by:
   a. Approaching universities to identify existing data on who is and is not entering public policy and administration graduate programs.
   b. Identifying university professors willing to conduct research into the attitudes of college juniors and seniors toward the public sector.
   c. To further this dual strategy, the Next Generation Working Group also is embarking on the development of marketing and recruitment approaches for college and university students.

Training the Next Generation of Leaders

To "deepen students' understanding of national government, issue advocacy, ethics, and international affairs,"[7] St. Albans School in Washington, D.C.—through a partnership with Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government—has launched a four-week, live-in program designed to immerse high school students in civics and public service.

The St. Albans School of Public Service welcomed its first residential class in the summer of 2002. In explaining the mission of this unique program, the school's director, Mary Ann Waikart, said that the purpose was to increase students' understanding of how they can "translate their passion into meaningful action through careers in public service." The college-level curriculum combines role playing; academic classes; and interaction with political, business, media, and nonprofit leaders through the case-study method that has been successfully integrated into a number of graduate-level courses.

By reaching out to civics and social studies teachers throughout the United States, The School of Public Service at St. Albans plans to create a network of educators who can motivate young people to "make public service their life's work."

ICMA's Internship Tool Kit

ICMA's Executive Board recently directed staff to develop a tool kit on internship programs. Board members believed that more should be done to promote the profession to students and young people, and that internships were a good way to instill the values and traditions of local government management in future leaders. Also, this effort would support the ICMA Strategic Plan, which calls for the Association to develop new ways of recruiting individuals into the profession and ICMA.

In spring 2002, ICMA produced its Internship Tool Kit to help members build successful local government internship programs in their communities. Available online as a member benefit, this 48-page document includes:

- Information on which type of internship is right for a local government.
- Guides for setting up undergraduate and graduate programs.
- Advice from local governments that have already established well-run programs.
- Tips on making the internship experience more meaningful, finding the right interns, and budgeting the appropriate resources.
- Information on privacy issues and Fair Labor Standards Act provisions.
- Guidelines for evaluating an internship program and ensuring its continued success.
- Best practices and references.

Appendices to ICMA's Internship Tool Kit include sample job descriptions, project proposals, and announcements, plus two PM magazine articles on internships and mentoring.

Next Steps: Future Strategies for ICMA

The examples discussed under the headings above are just a sampling of the many activities currently under way to attract and recruit young adults to careers in public service. There are many more, and ICMA will continue to locate and publicize examples of successful or promising programs.

In the meantime, the Association must energize its members and develop additional tools they can use to promote careers in local government. In light of the preliminary data reviewed in this document, ICMA recommends the following strategies for future research and materials development.

Continue to listen to young people. While studies that focus on public service careers with the federal government abound, and while these data and items of information often apply to other levels of government, there has been little research done into what kinds of messages would motivate young adults to focus specifically on careers as professional city, town, or county managers.

While the small sample size and single-city location of the CSU data limit ICMA's ability to generalize to a larger population, the facts (1) that only 13 percent of the students surveyed had considered careers as city, town, or county managers, and (2) that nearly 21 percent did not know what city, town, and county managers do, suggest that additional research into what would motivate students to consider such careers—in the form of a series of national focus-group meetings plus a nationwide survey—seems appropriate.

Reach out to members and friends. Many ICMA members teach classes at local colleges and universities or have developed programs and curriculums geared toward young people. ICMA should tap into the knowledge acquired by these individuals as it decides how best to reach out to young adults.

This preliminary article is intended to provoke thinking about ways to encourage young people to enter and remain in the field of professional local government management. As part of ICMA's overall public awareness strategies, the ICMA Executive Board will launch an initiative focused on this subject in 2003. The Association welcomes comments, feedback, and examples of best practices that local governments want to submit. E-mail them to mfrisby@icma.org.

ICMA might also partner with other organizations—such as NASPAA, California's Next Generation Working Group, National League of Cities, National Association of Counties, National Academy of Public Administration, American Society of Public Administration, National Civic League, and others—to identify areas for joint projects and/or higher visibility for public service careers.

Finally, the Association continues to solicit feedback from members on the direction of this phase of its public awareness activities.

Develop a database of academy curriculum and other successful education efforts geared toward high school and college students. The CSU data suggest that one of the factors of greatest influence for young adults who are considering career choices may be hands-on work experience in the form of summer jobs and internships. While the model promoted by The School of Public Service at St. Albans, which combines direct interaction with public service leaders and academic study, may be ambitious, local governments can achieve similar results by conducting regular youth academies and offering mentorship and internship opportunities. ICMA could provide significant value to members by partnering with other organizations to collect and publicize best practices in these areas.

Develop a marketing tool kit for ICMA members. As with the *Building Communities . . . It's No Small Chore* tool kit, putting new promotional information directly into the hands of ICMA members would offer an excellent chance to leverage a nationwide network to raise understanding among young adults about the benefits of a career in professional local government management. This guide would explain how to launch a student academy, establish student mentorship/internship programs, and promote these opportunities to young adults throughout a community.

Notes

[1] Brintnall, Michael, and Kathryn Newcomer in *Calling Students to Public Service Careers: A Resource for Undergraduate Faculty and Advisors* (NASPAA, 1999). At the time of publication, Michael Brintnall was executive director of the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration. Kathryn Newcomer, Ph.D., was chairwoman of the department of public administration at the George Washington University, Washington, D.C.

[2] "Preparing the Next Generation of Managers." Summary of the first meeting of the Next Generation Working Group formed by the city managers' department, California League of Cities, in February 2002.

[3] Gardner, Nicole; DeMesme, Ruby; and Mark A. Abramson in "The Human

Capital Challenge," *The Business of Government* (Spring 2002), p. 29.

[4] Brintnall and Newcomer in *Calling Students to Public Service Careers*.

[5] Student Attitudes toward Careers in *Public Service: Preliminary Highlights* (National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration [NASPAA], 1998).

[6] "Public Life for the 21st Century: Hearing What Young People Are Saying," *Calling Students to Public Service Careers*.

[7] Johnson, Amy Bell, "Program Uses Innovative Methods to Train Next Generation of Leaders," *Public Administration Times* (Washington, D.C.: American Society of Public Administration, May 2002), p. 4.

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Ethics: Ask the Expert

Q: What is the difference between disloyalty and whistle blowing, and how are they related?

This question is answered by Frank Navran, principal consultant, Ethics Resource Center, Washington, D.C. (www.ethics.org).

A: Loyalty versus whistle blowing represents a classic example of competing values. Competing values are the basis of ethical dilemmas—choices between competing "rights," as opposed to right-versus-wrong choices.

Some classic dilemmas used for teaching ethical reasoning include: "Is it ethical to steal a loaf of bread to feed a starving child?" and "If (in 1944 Europe) the Nazis had come to your door and asked if you were harboring Jews in your home, would it have been ethical to lie?" The value of these examples is that the most obvious answers might not always be the best "right" choices. What is called for is a review of the facts and a thoughtful determination of the consequences of each possible alternative course of action.

Loyalty is a strong value in our society. In the case of whistle blowing, we often focus on loyalty to a fellow employee. But there also is the question of loyalty to the company, and this is further compounded by the apparent erosion both of employee loyalty to employers and of employer loyalty to employees—an erosion seen, for instance, in massive layoffs of the past 20 years and the shifting notion of lifetime employment in every sector of our society. Loyalty is nonetheless seen as a positive, a good thing to demonstrate.

Whistle blowing, on the other hand, has a less positive connotation in our experience. We don't have positive word images of people who engage in this activity. In fact, we have mixed messages. On the one hand, we demean "rats, finks, tattletales, snitches, informants," and the like. The other reality is that we have responsibilities to others, which sometimes require us to "tell."

In the extreme case, it could be argued that it was loyalty winning out over whistle

blowing that could be blamed, in part, for disasters such as Columbine, where peer pressure stressing loyalty kept students from expressing their concerns to the authorities. And look at the suffering resulting from the debacles at Enron, WorldCom, and so on.

On a practical level, most employers have a reasonable expectation that, when an employee is in possession of information about a potential threat to the well-being of the organization—its employees or interests—the employee has an affirmative responsibility to bring that information forward. This often is detailed in employee codes of conduct and supported by the creation of special helpline/hotline functions to receive warning calls while protecting the identity of the caller.

The position I take is that, barring extenuating circumstances, employees have an affirmative obligation to their employers to act in ways that serve the employers' legitimate (and legal) interests, including the reporting of actions by fellow employees (up to and including the board of directors) that act against those interests and/or the public good. Loyalty to a friend should not come into the equation because no true "friend" would put you in a position where you had to choose between doing what is right and protecting your friend from the consequences of doing something they should not have done in the first place.

For an excellent treatise on the subject of right-versus-right decision making, I recommend "Defining Moments" by Jospeh L. Badaracco, Jr. You may also wish to read "Whistle Blowing: The Mixed Message" by Frank Navran, which was published in the Spring 2002 issue of *Ethics Today*.

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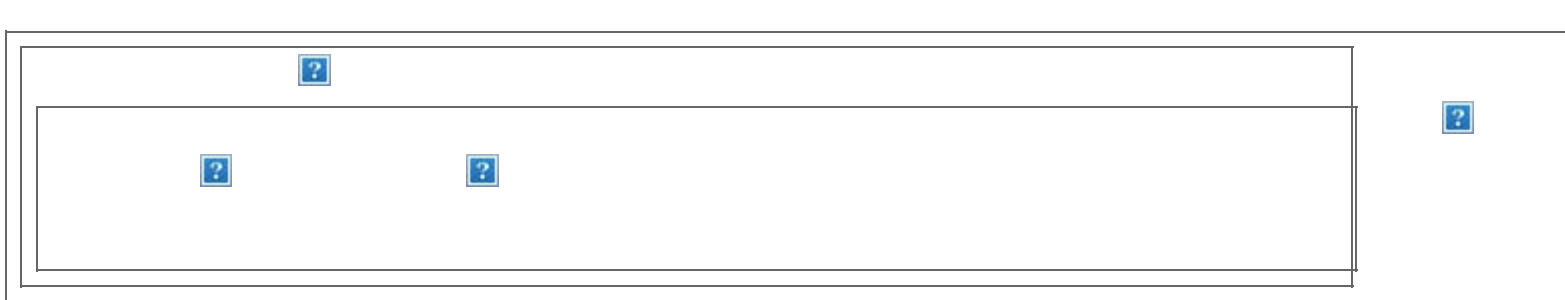
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Profile

Dave Osberg: Bridge Builder, City Administrator

City administrator Dave Osberg [Hastings, Minnesota] sits at his desk, drinking coffee. A bust of Thomas Jefferson rests on the shelf behind him, along with pictures of his family. As Osberg talks, his words are firm and sure. He hesitates often before speaking but only to be certain what he says is articulate. Mayor Mike Werner has said Osberg "really works for the right thing to do," but he also looks hard for the right thing to say.

The Mississippi River bridge, a Hastings hallmark, takes up nearly the entire view through the window at Osberg's city hall office. It is an appropriate symbol for a man who works with an enormous array of people, from police officers to contractors to politicians. He is a bridge builder.

Osberg took the job at city hall in 1989 to do exactly that. He was hired after a six-month search to replace the former administrator who was asked to leave by the city council because of, among other things, irreconcilable differences.

But Osberg nearly didn't come to Hastings. Of the 267 resumes initially received at city hall for the position, Osberg's was not among them. A consulting firm hired to pare down the candidates to five for the council called Osberg personally and asked him to apply. Osberg was reluctant at first, but in the end he did send a resume and was one of five finalists for the job, all of whom he beat out for the position.

The city administrator has many functions. He is a liaison between elected officials and city staff, including all of the department heads and city hall employees. He is a tutor for incoming councilmembers. He shows them around the city, gives them a city charter, and introduces them to the various department heads who explain to the freshman councilmembers how the city operates.

Not Political

One key to being a successful city administrator is not playing the political game. Elected officials are responsible to the public as is the city staff, but the staff does not make the decisions that affect the public. The city administrator bears the task of bringing a wide array of options to the council. "I don't like to get involved in the politics." Osberg said. "The job is difficult enough with what lands on my desk."
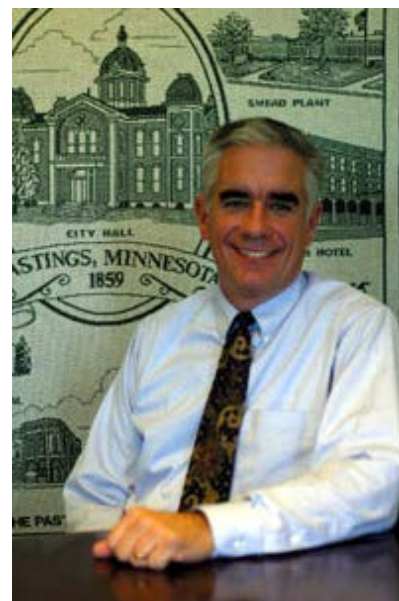
By all accounts, the council appreciates the job Osberg does. Werner has been on the city council longer than any sitting member, first as a councilmember and currently as mayor. "Dave is a true professional." Werner said. "He has incredible integrity."

Integrity is a recurring theme when people are asked about Osberg. Councilmembers Ed Riveness and Paul Hicks independently used that same word when asked about Osberg. "I think we have one of the superior city administrators in the state," Riveness said. But when you have a good thing, others will notice. Osberg makes that point clear when he talks about development in Hastings.

Growth Brings Challenges

Although he started in Eagan when it had a population of only 25,000 during its growing years, Osberg said he has never experienced a development surge such as that currently happening in Hastings. "We're an easy place to find," Osberg said. "People are realizing that Hastings is a good place to live, a good place to raise kids."

The city is feeling the pressure, not only from potential residents looking to move to the city but also at other cities attempting to coax Osberg into moving elsewhere. There was a period last year [2001] when other cities were making overtures to Osberg, and he did explore other options. The city decided not to pressure Osberg into staying or sweetening his deal. "We needed to let Dave make that decision on his own," Riveness said.

In the end, Osberg decided that he and his family would stay in Hastings. Riveness estimates that the administrator will be with the city for a long time. Now Osberg looks to the future. He touts one of his proudest achievements as creating a cohesive relationship between staff and elected officials.

"He's molded a good staff through his leadership," Riveness said. "His day-to-day operations with department staff are excellent," Hicks said. Osberg prides himself on building a cohesive relationship with all the people he works with.

He has also built a bridge between the school district and the city. In fact, he and former School District 200 Superintendent Wayne Haugen merged their maintenance departments, something few other communities would be able to replicate. This remains a high point for Osberg, personally. "The school and city have a good relationship," Osberg said, "That was not always true."

The city administrator looks forward to the new challenges of this expanding community but notes that during a recession, his task becomes more delicate.

"The important thing is to get a grip on the pace of development and recognize what we can and can't do —what we should and shouldn't do—under tight economic times," Osberg said, "because we are at a crossroads."

Who better than a bridge builder to help at a crossroads?

Ben Ganje, Staff Writer
Hastings Star Gazette, Hastings, Minnesota

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