June 2010 · Volume 92 · Number 5

**Ethics Matter!**

**The Two Faces of Social Media**

*When we speak, is it personal opinion or official position? And how could anyone tell?*

The infiltration of social media into our personal lives and workplaces is creating some interesting ethical issues for local government organizations. Organizations have always had an overriding interest in and an expectation of controlling who speaks and what’s said on behalf of the organization. Social media networks now make for quick communication to an exponentially large audience but often without that distinct line between personal opinion and official position. It’s highly likely that you will encounter one of these situations.

1. The city manager learned that a library employee started a Facebook page promoting the idea of a new library for the city. This news surfaced after a councilmember was asked to be a “fan” of the page. The manager checked the site and discovered that the employee was indeed listed as the administrator of the page. It was not clear from the information posted whether the employee had direction or approval of the library board to set up the site.

The manager was uncomfortable with a city entity or employee promoting the development of a new facility without engagement with the city council, and he sought advice about how to proceed. Should he order the employee to take down the site?

1. Regardless of whether it is via a blog, Facebook, or the now seemingly archaic letter to the editor, all employees have a First Amendment right to comment, after hours and on their own equipment, about city matters. Even though this might create discomfort at the leadership level, the activity cannot be banned outright.

Probably a wise approach would be to talk with the employee about the importance of staff working in concert with the leadership on projects rather than running a solo effort, and that is what the manager in this case did. If the library staff person is really interested in helping the cause, she might be willing to take the site down and rethink her strategy.

Upon reflection and after a conversation with the manager, the employee decided it was best to turn the task of administering the site over to a member of the local “friends of the library,” especially since the effort would have mandated that she stay on top of the site during work hours. She continues to be a proponent of a new library but on her own time.

Would the manager take a different tack if the employee in question was the library director? Certainly. Management personnel represent the organization, and when they speak, their comments should reflect the official position of the agency. It would be inappropriate for the library director to promote a concept that had not been vetted with the city manager and governing body.

Social media sites, when branded with city logos or authored by staff, are an extension of the local government’s information network. For that reason, the organization has a vested interest in making sure that the information presented represents its official position.

1. The human resources (HR) director received a packet of information from an anonymous source containing blog entries allegedly written by the assistant city manager. Using a catchy pseudonym, the author commented on news articles and other postings ranging from foreign policy to cultural issues of the day. None of the postings related to city matters.

As she read through the entries, the HR director was startled by the blunt, direct, and at least in her assessment, rude comments made by this individual. If these entries were indeed the work of the assistant city manager and his identity was revealed, it would not reflect well on the city. But since none of the entries was related to city matters, should the HR director pursue this?

1. The ICMA Committee on Professional Conduct had the opportunity recently to weigh in on a similar scenario. The committee noted that Tenet 7 of the ICMA Code of Ethics gives members the leeway to voice their opinions on policy matters or on issues of the day. If the policy matter relates to the ICMA member’s workplace, the member ought to carefully consider the impact of expressing a personal opinion although the member is still free to do so.

With regard to blogging about non-employer situations, the committee offered members this guidance:

* Use of a pseudonym is OK, but be cognizant that anonymity is never guaranteed.
* It is not appropriate to use municipal networks to express personal opinions.
* Don’t leverage your position or use your title.
* Think carefully about how comments or views may reflect on your ability to perform, your organization, your profession, and your professionalism.
* Consider the principles of Tenet 3 of the ICMA Code of Ethics, which encourage members to conduct themselves in all professional and personal matters in a manner that promotes public confidence in the profession.

Cities and counties are just now starting to develop policies to provide guidance on the official use of social media, and many readily acknowledge that what appears to be personal communication can bleed over into the work world. For that reason, some organizations ask employees to omit references to their place of employment or their job titles on personal sites.

Other communities are more liberal in allowing references to work and accomplishments but with the caveat that all content should be consistent with the organization’s values and professional standards. They make it clear that if the writer does not follow those guidelines, it could affect future advancement and employment. Blog and twitter away … please just be civil and clear whether you are expressing a personal opinion or speaking on behalf of the organization you serve.

**Martha Perego**ICMA Ethics Director  
Washington, D.C.  
[mperego@icma.org](mailto:mperego@icma.org)