

BY ARTHUR PIZZANO, ICMA-CM

LEADING FROM THE CENTER

A manager's skill: learn to detect danger and avoid it

When elected officials entrust their city to a professionally trained manager, particularly one who hails from outside the community, they usually expect that the new manager will bring in new ideas to further the public interest. Facilitating progress can be treacherous, but less so if guided by a healthy respect for local traditions and values while nurturing change under the mantra of “evolution not revolution.” Keeping in step with one’s constituency (aka the public, elected officials, businesspeople, and others in the community) is critical as perceptions of needs shift.

My early years as a planner and economic development officer were periodically laced with frustration in not being in a position to accelerate the pace of transforming policy into action. For instance, unrealistic political expectations and the passage of time had rendered a downtown redevelopment project, planned two decades earlier, all but unviable as socioeconomic forces and the market shifted. The local newspaper characterized the project’s transition from the original 1960s-era vision of a convention center and office complex to an interim farmers market with the headline: “Fish Heads in the Streets Downtown?” In this case, the dichotomy was not so much that the local constituency’s expectations had changed but rather that they hadn’t.

At the midpoint of my career journey I was appointed city manager in a rapidly growing community. That environment provided prompt visual (as well as citizen) feedback on the organization’s successes—and its occasional stumbles. Elected officials and staff felt great personal pride in their accomplish-

ments and convinced themselves of the public’s continuing appreciation. Then a hastily put together bond referendum for three capital construction projects was put on the same ballot as the names of those vying for available council seats. Immediately the incumbent elected officials found themselves in the throes of a coup d’état and were swept out of office by an alliance of disgruntled individuals who, for various reasons, accused officials of being unresponsive. Life for the administrative staff was never the same after that.

We all learned to be wary of moving too rapidly toward our goals, by inadvertently overreaching amid our enthusiasm. We stopped believing our own press clippings and paid greater attention to staying alert to the emergence of new or shifting constituencies whose expectations were often diametrically opposed to those of incumbent officeholders. The big takeaway, as evidenced by my scars from this experience, is to make time to check the public’s “tolerance pulse” periodically and to recognize that *effective leadership is best positioned from the center rather than from the front.*

In 2004, ICMA presented the community that I have been privileged to serve since 1998 with its Program Excellence Award for Outstanding Public-Private Partnership. The key word here is “partnership.” Council’s goal to create a neo-traditional, mixed-use downtown in a community that had lacked one was daunting. Fortunately, political resolve, rooted in community pride, yielded fertile territory. Innovative and resourceful financing techniques found favor and earned credibility by continuing to keep the community informed on less visible, yet important issues. Staff came



to embrace the value of paying close attention to details.

City officials also accepted the reality that the master plan for the Fairfield Village Green was indeed a work in progress that required a flexible, market-driven focus. At times that focus would shift as elected officials who prided themselves on birthing the plan were replaced by those who often needed time to buy in fully.

Public sentiment, however, displayed its steadiness during the evolution of the project. This enabled the result to be one that has not only been embraced by the community but is indeed woven into its very fabric.

I have learned more than a few lessons during my local government service. The need to stay in touch with the community would seem to be self-evident, but how adept a manager is in influencing or adjusting to the aspirations and tolerance levels of a community over time is what ultimately determines a manager’s ability to detect danger and avoid it. **PM**



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