Ethics Matter!

Sustainability: It's a Right-versus-Right Issue

Is there a way to define sustainability success?

Local government leaders have defined sustainability as the predominant issue of the age. That said, there is considerable debate about what sustainability really means. Is sustainability a good management practice or a leadership imperative?

Is it defined by the triple bottom line of environment, economy, and equity? Or should there be another metric of success?

There may not be at this stage a clear, universally accepted definition of what sustainability means. And lacking that, we may not be in agreement about the way forward. But one thing that we should agree on is that the underlying principles were embraced by the local government profession from the very beginning. And they remain core to the profession to this very day.

When those pioneer city managers drafted the first Code of Ethics in 1924 to define the values for a new profession, they thought about the future of the communities they led.

BACK IN THE DAY

"A City Manager will be known by his works, many of which may outlast him, and regardless of personal popularity or unpopularity, he should not curry favor or temporize but should in a far-sighted way aim to benefit the community of today and of posterity."

This 1924 statement from the Code could have been interpreted more to emphasize the responsibility of individuals to set aside their egos in the pursuit of professional accomplishments than to build for the future. Societal changes brought new obligations and challenges that perhaps helped the profession better define its values.

In 1938, the ICMA Code of Ethics dropped the tenet above but added this one: "The city manager has a firm belief in the dignity and worth of the services rendered by government and a deep sense of his own social responsibility as a trusted public servant."

The reference to social responsibility makes the ethical commitment of the profession and the professional clear. As individuals, we have an ethical obligation to act so that the community and society at large benefit.

Success isn't just meeting the needs of one segment of the community at the expense of others. Nor is success found in short-term gains made at the expense of long-term accomplishments. Building communities that would last and meet the needs of future generations required a commitment to social responsibility.

Fine-tuned over time, Tenet 2 of the ICMA Code of Ethics calls all professionals to "Affirm the dignity and worth of the services rendered by government and maintain a constructive, creative, and practical attitude toward local government affairs and a deep sense of social responsibility as a trusted public servant."

PHILOSOPHY

With our guiding principles in hand, how do we move forward? Begin by recognizing that, for the most part, issues around sustainability are right-versus-right dilemmas. The values on both sides of the equation are legitimate and good.

These are not the typical ethical issues of good versus evil or right versus wrong. The decisions local government managers make in the sustainability arena are hard because the underlying values involved in any of the options are sound.

The Greeks gave us the Athenian Code that prompts us to leave our communities in better shape than we found them. That requires us to think beyond tomorrow and not to worry about who gets the credit.

As the Greek proverb reminds us: "A society grows great when old men plant trees in whose shade they know they shall never sit."

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