

2014

Developing leaders should be 'Job One' for ICMA!

PREPARED BY: ICMA Task Force on Leadership

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## ICMA Task Force on Leadership Development, August 2014

The ICMA Task Force on Leadership was created in 2013 to

- elevate leadership to the essential core of who we are and what we do as professional local government managers
- align the human and financial resources of ICMA to accomplish this charge
- recommend to the ICMA Executive Board at the September 2014 meeting in Charlotte, North Carolina, specific actions to implement the strategy.

The report of the task force advocates a dramatic shift of organizational focus to leadership development.

### The Charge to the Task Force

Our international professional organization provides a wide variety of leadership activities, training opportunities, and content that are not fully coordinated or focused as a priority. The topic of leadership has been discussed several times in recent years under ICMA Executive Director Bob O'Neill's leadership. That said, ICMA is not structured to emphasize leadership development.

The 2008 ICMA Strategic Plan repeatedly speaks to leadership. "This Strategic Plan places this call to leadership at the forefront of everything ICMA and its members will do to bring a legacy of professional success into the new century." The strategic plan describes local government management as being a profession of innovative, competent, principled LEADERS committed to promoting the integrity of local governance, meaningful community participation, and representative democracy. In terms of professional development, it recommends positioning ICMA at the forefront of local government leadership and professional development.

ICMA President Farbrother wishes to move toward action and fundamental organizational change by infusing leadership development deeper into ICMA's DNA. Late in 2013 he assigned a task force to examine how our professional association can foster leadership skills among its members for success in this new century.

### Task Force Composition

The Task Force on Leadership comprises 33 members representing cities and counties from all regions of the United States and four countries. It is an especially thoughtful, accomplished, and diverse group of ICMA members who share a deep and abiding commitment to public service through local government management, our profession, and ICMA. Rod Gould, city manager of Santa Monica, California, and Susan Sherman, assistant city manager of Olathe, Kansas, co-chair the task force.

The task force met in person for two days in Phoenix, Arizona, on January 31 and February 1, 2014, and worked through a series of provocative questions. The remainder of the task force's work was conducted via telecommunications technology, culminating in the recommended actions at the conclusion of this report.

The task force believes that ICMA should be known as much for leadership development as for ethics. Leadership development should be a key value proposition of ICMA membership and an utmost priority for ICMA. In short, we must realign ICMA to better prepare, support, and strengthen members to exercise leadership in the face of challenges that lie ahead in this 21st century.

The task force respectfully submits this report, which advocates an actionable series of recommendations and incorporates comments from our academic and strategic partners. The white paper provides a high-level summary of the many constructive thoughts and insights offered by the group. The meeting of the ICMA Executive Board in Charlotte, North Carolina, in September 2014, at the conclusion of our association's 100-year anniversary, is the appropriate time and place to begin this work in earnest.

## WHAT FORCES AND CHALLENGES WILL AFFECT LOCAL GOVERNMENT MANAGERS IN THE NEXT 10-25 YEARS?

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The task force easily identified the accelerating pace of technological innovation as one of the foremost drivers of change in local government in the foreseeable future. Not only does technology affect how we communicate, it also alters how we perform our work, how rapidly we respond, and how we deliver and track services. Issues regarding data security and open data loom large before us.

Over a decade ago, former ICMA President Michael Willis identified sustainability as the issue of our age. Since then, its definition has expanded. Now we certainly focus on safeguarding the **environment**, including all of the ramifications of climate change, energy policies, natural resource depletion, and competition for water. But we also include **economic** sustainability—both in the macro sense and in terms of local government policies, as well as our communities' financial viability. Social **equity** is the third “e,” meaning that local government must deliver justice and opportunity for all to be sustainable. Lastly, we strive to make our governmental organizations sustainable through organizational development, succession planning, and modern workplace rules and cultures.

Sweeping demographic changes are affecting communities virtually everywhere. Local populations are changing rapidly in racial and ethnic makeup, socio-economic stratification, aging, and growing income inequality. Members must be both sensitive to and adept at assessing and adapting to these demographic shifts.

Public expectations over what local government can and should do are also changing. This includes variations in service delivery, demands for greater civic engagement, conflict over the costs of service versus demand, polarization and mistrust of government, increasingly fragmented sense of community, and the need for greater inclusivity and transparency.

The role of local government professionals, especially the manager's, is also evolving. Elected officials and communities are facing increased pressure from polarizing issues, competing

public policy objectives, and fragmented policy development. The role of ICMA members to analyze factual information and to effectively frame policy discussions in the face of these challenges is critical. In many cases, local government policies, procedures, and operating structures have not evolved to meet the current demands of local governments. As a result, these structures may be embedded in inefficiency and bias and may limit discretion to be responsive to timely problem-solving needs. Members must ensure community and organizational adaptability and resiliency in the face of rapidly changing conditions and shocks.

In other words, ICMA members have an increasing need to better engage with the community and build trust while involving partners on a regional level. ICMA members must focus on developing staff as future leaders and managers, as well as on recruiting and retaining the workforce and creating a culture that aligns itself with community values.

## **WHAT LEADERSHIP SKILLS MUST ICMA MEMBERS POSSESS TO MEET THESE CHALLENGES?**

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The task force agreed that 21st century ICMA members must possess and wield exceptional team-building and interpersonal skills. Leadership through position, power, and authority is less relevant for today's members.

Instead, we must be adept at facilitation, negotiation, engaging various groups and individuals, and leading without being in control of all the moving pieces. It is not enough to be smart; we also must have a high emotional IQ, including empathy and control over our own emotions. In addition, we must fundamentally accept that leadership is not limited by position, because leadership can be exercised by anyone regardless of position.

Modern ICMA members must be highly nimble, versatile, and comfortable with change as the pace of work and the policy environment evolve rapidly. We must be able to connect with a wide range of people, including diverse cultures, to effectively frame and facilitate public discussions for productive dialogue. Setbacks will occur along the way, so we need to be able to build resiliency for ourselves, our organizations, and our communities.

While it is essential that we exhibit solid technical and functional knowledge about all local government disciplines under our purview (especially strong skills in financial management and the use of technology), again, such hard skills are not enough. Today's ICMA members are required to provide more than expert management and administration of their organizations. Increasingly they must lead!

The ICMA Code of Ethics helps to set boundaries to assist members in carrying out their duties in an apolitical manner. However, members play an important role in complementing the leadership of elected officials, especially when they face such challenges as limited experience, interest, fear, or polarization. We must be politically astute without becoming politically aligned.

Excelling at the small “p” politics is essential. This can take the form of clarifying the collective vision of the community and elected board or council and then aligning resources and focusing systems to effectuate that vision. Often the line between policy and administration is blurry, and the manager must carefully navigate it without overtly trespassing into the policy realm. ICMA members who develop both critical thinking skills and a boundary-less perspective (meaning truly open thinking) can have an advantage in helping their elected officials, staff, and community sort through jumbled policy objectives and options.

It has long been obvious that local governments have neither the resources nor the answers to fully meet their wide-ranging communities’ needs. Hence, today’s ICMA members must be highly skilled at building collaborative relationships with various entities and seeking expertise outside the bounds of their organizations.

Sometimes we must be able to perceive the institutional biases that prevent effective service delivery and governance. Moreover, we must be intelligent risk takers and inculcate a culture that objectively assesses risks and rewards—openly leading to fact-based recommendations. The effective ICMA member is always scanning the horizon to anticipate the future needs, challenges, and opportunities for the organization in hopes of emulating the great Wayne Gretzky in skating to where the puck will be.

As you can see, most of the needed skills are considered “soft” as opposed to technical expertise in a number of functional areas. The task force believes that members should develop broad functional expertise as a given and then must supplement those “hard” skills with the kinds of skills identified above.

## **WHAT DOES SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?**

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If ICMA can transmit these necessary leadership skills to its members, the payoff should be highly beneficial and discernible over time.

Local public professionals with ICMA training and support will oversee the most vibrant sustainable and inclusive communities. The residents and businesses of these communities will enjoy greater safety, quality of life, opportunity, and well-being. ICMA members will ably assist their councils or boards and communities in determining the most pressing community goals and then aligning plans and resources for measurable progress against those goals.

The staff of these organizations will be more reflective of the communities they serve and will become stewards of the whole by transcending departmental silos. In fact, more collaboration and shared leadership throughout these organizations will include dynamic partnerships in their localities.

Further, we expect that ICMA member-led communities will exhibit greater trust in government, along with more respectful discourse in politics and higher voter turnout. These governments will do a better job of promoting achievements and acknowledging failures, and therefore will enjoy better relations with citizens groups and the media.

The task force believes that verifiable indicators must be developed to test these assumptions about the value proposition of an ICMA laser focus on leadership.



## **HOW CAN ICMA PROVIDE THESE SKILLS?**

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The task force believes that the type of leadership skills identified above should be standard ICMA offerings to all who are associated with our professional association, including members, staff, range riders, and senior advisors. All training and content offerings should be viewed through the lens of leadership.

The ICMA annual conference should showcase professional trainers and subject matter experts as part of a rigorous leadership track leading to a certificate. All state association meetings and conferences should emphasize leadership skills training. Our credentialing, emerging leaders, fellow/internship/peer mentoring, and awards programs should be aligned to a curriculum of leadership skills. We need to make serious efforts to reach out to members of nontraditional backgrounds to ground them in public leadership skills. We should support the knowledge transfer of leadership as the Boomer generation retires and focus skill building in early- to mid-career members. Executive level courses on technical subjects, such as disaster management, advanced financial analysis, use of social media, and technology, should be offered through formalized networks.

ICMA should strengthen ties to schools offering a master's of public administration or public policy to offer more and better courses on leadership. We should partner with other public and private entities for governmental leadership development and provide a package of training for member organizations and affiliates. Further, ICMA must keep current on research on emerging trends and competencies required of executive leadership and management. Eventually, ICMA could become a clearinghouse on leadership development for local governments worldwide.

## **HOW MUST ICMA ORGANIZE ITSELF TO MAKE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT A CORE PRIORITY?**

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The ICMA Executive Board must commit itself to leadership development at all levels as a principle priority for our organization. It should be reflected in ICMA’s mission statement and infused in everything ICMA does—just as is the case with ethics. ICMA must become more prescriptive in leadership training than ever before. This represents a significant shift in emphasis.

A mechanism is needed to enable members and staff to collaboratively chart leadership skill development, review core competencies, and guide the implementation of this overarching realignment. To do so, ICMA must assess all its current training programs and offerings to identify and fill gaps and to create career development pathways. This means aligning systems, such as ICMA University, credentialing, assessments, and conferences, around core competencies and where one is in one’s career. The desired outcome is to create inclusive leadership development paths that guide members through existing and new programs. This means establishing a leadership curriculum that is the ICMA standard. We should consider engaging a curriculum expert to that end.

A revision and updating of the Applied Knowledge Assessment Tool should focus less on credentialing and more on guiding leadership development. The goal should be that each member have an annual plan to drive his/her leadership development training.

In order to gather intelligence for this effort, the task force recommends:

- a. Conducting short surveys of members and engaging heavily in discussions with state affiliates, range riders, and senior advisors
- b. Using focus groups on leadership at state meetings and regional summits, through the international committee, and at the annual conference
- c. Working with other professional organizations, including those affiliated with ICMA (e.g., the International Hispanic Network, the National Forum for Black Public

Administrators, and the National Association of County Administrators), and the private sector to leverage our knowledge base.

Part and parcel of being an ICMA member includes carrying out leadership skills daily. To be a member in good standing, we must actively cultivate those skills, and ICMA will be there to help us.

## **RECOMMENDED BOARD ACTIONS**

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The task force recommends that the ICMA Executive Board take the following actions to achieve fundamental organizational change that makes leadership development a priority:

- 1) Commit to leadership development and ethics as ICMA's coequal overarching priorities going forward, as reflected in a revised mission statement and revised enduring values.
- 2) Commit to the development of a standard ICMA leadership curriculum and to individually tailored leadership training plans for members. ICMA must take a more prescriptive stance with members on leadership development.
- 3) Create a standing ICMA Executive Board committee on leadership development.
- 4) Direct ICMA staff to prepare an implementation plan, including reorganization, work plan, budget realignment, and action steps, and provide this plan to the full board and leadership development committee in 180 days.
- 5) Ask the ICMA Committee on Professional Conduct (CPC) to advise as to whether leadership should be more directly referenced in the ICMA Code of Ethics.
- 6) The newly formed leadership committee and ICMA staff should prepare concrete decision packages for board action at the 2015 Annual Conference in Seattle to realign ICMA to accomplish this new focus and directives.
- 7) ICMA staff should regularly report progress to the board and members using the full gamut of communication tools.

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The Task Force on Leadership wishes to thank Bob O'Neill, Martha Perego, and Felicia Logan for excellent staff support in this endeavor.

Leadership Task Force Member Roster

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