

City Management Job Swap: A Trade That Paid

For local government professionals, it is easy to get caught up in the day-to-day hustle and bustle of leading, managing, scrambling, listening, switching hats, negotiating, supervising, facilitating, and convincing. Sometimes, managers and assistants just wish that someone else would "walk in our shoes" for an hour, a day, or maybe even a week.

We traded jobs for two weeks this past January to gain a better understanding of each other's position, as well as to experience the dynamics of another organization. It was time to put on those walkin' shoes!

Finding a Shoe That Fits

The management exchange was the brainchild of Steve Crowell, city manager of Greenwood Village, Colorado (population 8,700), and Bill Christopher, city manager of Westminster, Colorado (population 90,000). During the summer of 1995, at a monthly Colorado Metro Managers' meeting, these two officials explored the concept and logistics of implementing a job exchange between the two of us, Beth and Mike, their respective assistants. They agreed that an exchange would broaden our perspectives and experiences, as both of us had worked for only one city during our local government careers.

This experience was more than career development for us. It was an exercise in letting go of our "turf" and what is familiar to us. (We acknowledge that the safety net of knowing we would be returning to our own

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Perspectives

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**Mike Simmons
 And
 Beth Cutler**

local governments and positions made it easier.) The idea of the exchange required "out-of-the-box" thinking, or letting go of the known to experience the unknown. This type of thinking can cause a great deal of anxiety for some people.

All of us involved in the exchange met to develop support and to determine ground rules and objectives. It was agreed that the exchange would last for two weeks and that we would carry out each other's responsibilities as if no one had ever left his or her office.

Specifically, each of us was expected to attend city council meetings and department head and staff meetings, to answer the phone, to handle citizen complaints and service requests, and to complete specific projects identified by each city manager.

The easy part was getting us to agree to participate in the exchange. More difficult, however, was finding a convenient time for the exchange that would not conflict with already scheduled council retreats, meetings, and project deadlines. After several setbacks and delays, a specific two-week time period was established. As it worked out, some meetings could not be rescheduled, which in effect made the exchange truer, since we each attended and participated in these meetings, retreats, and events.

To better understand each other's organizations, we each attended a half-day orientation session at the new work site. We were briefed on projects that would be ours to work on, trained on new computer systems, introduced to key staff, and given a brief tour of new surroundings. To make the transition smoother, notices of the exchange were distributed at each organization so that employees and council would be prepared to see a new face at city hall. On Monday, January 22, 1996, it was time for the fun to begin.

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What Was It Like in Those Shoes?

As temporary assistant manager of Greenwood Village, one of us (Mike) found himself switching hats quite often throughout each day. Responding to calls from citizens, answering cable franchise questions, and attending to internal communications kept him busy. He worked on special projects that included commercial annexation and a review of Greenwood Village's risk management and safety program. Also, he participated in staff and department head meetings and attended council meetings and special sessions. He wrote press releases and conducted research on a general aviation airport nearby, with issues that resembled those of an airport near Westminster.

Meanwhile, the other of us (Beth) was responding to internal calls from various Westminster depart-

ments regarding budget questions. As part of her work on the budget, she reviewed the Westminster format, bringing the advantage to Westminster of her external perspective. She prepared drafts of sample citizen surveys on proposed flextime hours for city hall and worked on the city's methods for communicating with its citizens, including a fax hotline, an interactive information kiosk, and internal and external newsletters.

Both of us learned the lay of the land while doing site reviews and inspections with city staff; both of us worked on state and federal legislation from the perspectives of our exchange cities.

Similarities and Differences

Westminster and Greenwood Village do share some similarities: issues of growth management, transportation, economic development, annexation, and airport noise and traffic, plus a question of finding a new revenue generation source or retail and sales tax. Both organizations have invested deeply in customer service.

Westminster is nearly 10 times the size of Greenwood Village and employs nearly 750 individuals, while Greenwood employs about 160 people. Demographically, Westminster is more diverse in its population and its housing and retail/commercial mixes than Greenwood Village.

The Greenwood Village commercial sector leans toward such white-collar service-oriented firms as insurance, telecommunications, law, accounting, and engineering, as well as some retail and restaurant business. Westminster is home to one of the major shopping malls in the Denver metropolitan region. Westminster's business sector includes some manufacturing and soft industrial and much retail. Both cities receive nearly 70 percent of their revenues from sales taxes. Housing and lifestyles in Greenwood Village are

more affluent; Westminster's housing types are broader.

The intraorganizational modes of communication also are quite different as to size and number of employees within the community. Due to its size, Westminster uses its electronic mail system extensively throughout the organization, while Greenwood Village continues to strive for a reliance on personal contact.

Nevertheless, during this exchange, each community was able to benefit, as both assistants brought back to our respective cities new ideas and a fresh viewpoint on issues and problems.

How Many Miles Did Those Shoes Travel?

The job exchange provided each of us with a great personal experience and a better appreciation for the work accomplished at both local governments. One of us was able to see how a larger organization functions and communicates, as well as to learn more about water, wastewater, and fire operations—services not provided by Greenwood Village. In contrast, the other experienced the dynamics of a smaller organization and learned to wear many different

hats with an opportunity to get hands-on experience.

The experience further brought to light the innovations that abound in local governments of all sizes, the commitment of employees to providing high-quality public service, and the wide range of issues that all managers must face daily.

In addition to gaining personal experience, we cultivated a statewide public information effort on the innovative nature of the local government exchange. The *Denver Post* and the *Rocky Mountain News*, Colorado's major daily newspapers, each did a feature story on the exchange, which also received significant coverage in community newspapers and was highlighted in the Colorado Municipal Management Assistants' newsletter.

Finally, the exchange has brought the two cities closer together in sharing information and using each other as resources for implementing new ideas and service enhancements. We continue to ask each other for advice and suggestions on issues ranging from budget development to public information and marketing.

Closing Thoughts


Management exchanges are a great opportunity for two organizations to benefit without spending any resources. Participants can experience firsthand how other organizations function in terms of management style, organizational culture, council-staff relations, communication processes, and issue management. An exchange also allows for personal growth by providing a change of pace, a chance to meet new people, and the excitement of working on new projects in a new environment. Ideas are shared, new perspectives are gained, and enthusiasm for the local government profession is reaffirmed.

The most difficult challenge in implementing a job exchange is finding the time in a busy schedule to com-

mit to such a project. (The most difficult challenge for the two managers was finding staff who wanted to participate in an exchange.) While the two of us agreed on a two-week exchange, we admit that a three-week time frame might have been more beneficial. With any new job, much time is spent in the first week on familiarizing oneself with new procedures, new computer software and hardware, and new issues. Thus, there is not always time to delve into detailed operational analyses, program reviews, or longer-term projects. Two weeks provide a good taste of city issues and processes, but three weeks would enable a participant to achieve a higher comfort level with a new organization and would allow more time to complete assignments.

We recommend that followup meetings are held with all participants, including the managers. This provides an opportunity to trade stories, experiences, and ideas. An added bonus from the exchange is a stronger relationship between the two cities. It is not unusual for us to contact each other to get information about a policy or project, so both cities benefit.

As a result of our experience, the authors encourage other local government employees to get involved in job exchanges with colleagues in neighboring local governments. For those who can commit the time to make it happen, to develop a realistic list of objectives and assignments, and to be flexible in a new environment, an exchange is a great way to learn about another community, to develop new skills, to share ideas and information on programs that work, and to make new friends.

Do not feel apprehensive about putting on those walkin' shoes and taking a hike. The trip is worth it. 

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