



After recent council elections, 16 Texas city managers were no longer employed, which is about 3 percent of the total city management profession in the Lone Star state.¹ This number does not seem unwarranted, especially in the aftermath of the annual May city elections when turnover occurs frequently on councils, followed by increased city manager turnover. The first culprit identified in manager turnover is usually the elected officials who want change. Is this really the case, or is it just coffee table talk? Academic

research has identified other factors than the council that influence manager turnover, and 20 of these factors are discussed below.

Managers leave their jobs for a variety of reasons, most of which can be categorized as either “push” or “pull” factors. Push factors include unstable local politics, the council’s lack of confidence in the manager, or managerial disagreements with the council.²

Pull factors—ambition factors—include the manager’s career advancement, salary advancement, desire for

a larger government organization, and desire for new experiences. Push is usually the council’s decision; pull is the manager’s.

Usually the first cause of manager turnover is identified as the top elected official’s displeasure with the manager, which results in pushing the manager out. The council’s role in pushing out the manager also is not surprising, but why the council pushes is not easily identifiable. Councils are notoriously vague in explaining why managers are fired, possibly a wise strategy because

of legal or political reasons. Legally, councilmembers know they might be sued by the manager, and politically, they know they might lose the next election, especially if the manager is popular in the community.

I propose, however, that frequently councilmembers are not sure why they fire managers. The reason might be nonperformance; conflict with the council; citizen complaints; noncongruence between the council and the manager in style, roles, or behavior; or the fact that the council just happened to meet when they all had problems with the manager.³

Councilmembers might be vague because they are being pushed by such outside forces as citizens who have issues with the manager or a sense of the community that it is time for a change. Consequently, the council believes that something must be done, and firing the city manager is a good way of doing something.

Twenty Turnover Factors

To avoid termination for as long as possible, managers would be wise to know the factors that influence turnover and then address the appropriate factors for their personal situations:

1. Conflict. Many types of conflict are inherent by-products of the democratic process; conflict is not necessarily a bad thing because it can lead to better decisions.⁴ Ongoing conflict is not conducive to a pleasant work environment, however, and it does not facilitate policy making and can lead to manager turnover.

A survey of 174 managers in 1999 by James Kaatz, Edward French, and Hazel-Prentiss Cooper found that political conflict causes increased burnout among managers, but policy conflict does not cause burnout. It is possible that burnout is more prevalent among managers who are more technically inclined than politically oriented.⁵

Political conflict among councilmembers or between mayor and council does not necessarily push the

manager out of a job, but it could create problems if the manager is identified with the faction that loses control of the council. Also, constant conflict within the council can lead to the manager searching for another job.⁶ Nonpolitical conflict between the manager and elected officials includes disagreements over public policy or differences between the manager's behavior and the officials' behavior.

Ideally the council establishes the city's mission and the manager administers city operations. Any deviation from this pattern may lead to role conflict. A council that meddles in city operations increases conflict.⁷ Community conflict over issues such as school board politics or neighborhood problems may affect the relationship between the council and the manager. Also, partisan conflict involving Democratic Party or Republican Party disputes may also spill over into council and manager relations.⁸

2. Manager's role orientations. The roles taken by the manager—active versus passive policy making or strong versus weak community leadership—must meet the elected officials' expectations.⁹ There should be a good fit between the manager and the council on roles taken and roles expected.

3. Managers with less than full confidence of the council. Managers reporting less than full confidence of the council depart within two years even if local politics are stable. If policy disagreement also exists between the manager and the council, the probability of turnover is even higher.¹⁰

4. Elected mayor. Conflict between an elected mayor and the manager is more common than with an appointed mayor. Elected mayors often conclude that they have a mandate to do something, and they want the manager to be supportive and not a hindrance. The potential for conflict is great, especially when the mayor wants to do something not supported by the council or not good public policy.

5. Council changed by election. The greater the proportion of coun-

BEEN THERE?

If you've ever been terminated, or narrowly avoided termination, would you be willing to share your insights about the warning signs—how to spot them, how to handle them, or even how to avoid a state of denial—by contributing your story to PM?

Of the 20 factors James Thurmond identifies, which ones were a strong component of your experience? What changes did you make as a result of your experience? Your colleagues will appreciate hearing from those of you who've been there. Send your story to bpayne@icma.org.

cilmembers not reelected, the greater the chance the manager will leave. Managers must understand that the new council has its own new organizational chemistry, which requires a learning curve by both parties.

6. Demographic composition of the city. Cities are either homogeneous or heterogeneous in such areas as income, race, ethnicity, and social conditions. Because homogeneous conditions reduce conflict and increase political stability, turnover should be lower in homogeneous cities.¹¹

7. Poverty rate. The proportion of population below the poverty level is associated with lower turnover. For each percentage point of the population below the poverty level, the manager's tenure is increased by one month.¹²

8. Financial condition of the city. Wealthy cities are more politically stable, and the manager's performance in wealthy cities may be noncontroversial, thus leading to less turnover. Finance-related issues as taxes, debt levels, and bond ratings have no significant effect on turnover.¹³

9. Manager's performance. Two indicators for performance in economic development activities—economic change

FIGURE 1. Checklist of Managers' Turnover Factors

WARNING SIGNS FOR AT-RISK MANAGER JOBS

Check the turnover factors that exist in your city or county, with your elected officials, and in your job. The more factors you check, the higher your risk for termination by the council. Note that the risk is related to the magnitude of the factor. Also, several factors with low magnitudes might equal one factor with a high magnitude. The checklist should facilitate your awareness of your job situation so that you can take appropriate action to avoid termination.

FACTORS PUTTING YOUR JOB AT RISK	MAGNITUDE OF YOUR TURNOVER RISK	
	LOW	HIGH
☐ Conflict between councilmembers	Infrequent	On-going
☐ Conflict between you and council	Infrequent	On-going
☐ Conflict between your roles and council's roles	Infrequent	On-going
☐ Conflict in the community	Infrequent	On-going
☐ Partisan conflict	Infrequent	On-going
☐ Elected mayor	Supported by council	No council Support
	Initiates good policy	Initiates bad policy
☐ Council turnover	New members have no agenda	New members have an agenda
☐ City managerial years of experience	High	Low
☐ High number of managerial positions previously held	Without employment agreement	With employment agreement
☐ MPA degree	Yes	No
☐ Possess bargaining skills	Yes	No
☐ Possess collaborative management skills	Yes	No
☐ Per capita income is low	Yes	No
☐ Economy	Has little effect on turnover. Bad economic news is high risk in short run. Good economic news' increases tenure in the long run.	

and per capita personal income—can influence turnover. Economic change, good or bad, actually has little effect on turnover especially in large cities. Positive economic change must be longer term to effect a modest decrease in turnover. The higher the level of per capita income in a community, the more likely it will retain its manager.¹⁴

10. Local politics. In a study of 10 Florida cities, two-thirds of manager terminations were the direct result of political disputes.¹⁵

11. Negative environment. A survey of 177 newly promoted city managers indicates that 9.8 percent were trying to escape a negative work environment in their previous jobs.¹⁶

12. Monetary. Thirteen percent of newly promoted managers were seeking more pay in a new position.¹⁷

13. Normal career advancement. Six percent of newly promoted manag-

ers were advancing on their planned career paths.¹⁸

14. Lack of negotiating and bargaining skills. A survey of 74 city managers showed that managers might experience difficulty in adjusting to the bargaining environment found in policy making with the city council.¹⁹ Lack of either bargaining skills or the desire to use them, especially in what a manager considers a political situation, can lead to turnover.

15. Council election format. City manager tenure may be shorter under councils elected from districts because political conflict and parochial interests increase in district formats.²⁰

16. Employment agreements between council and manager. Employment agreements indirectly affect turnover. The push factor of community conflict exerts more influence when managers work under an employment agreement. Pull factors are influenced even

more by agreements. Managers who have held more previous positions have shorter tenures when employed under employment agreements because agreements may facilitate managers' movement and provide review mechanisms that speed their exits.²¹

17. MPA degree. Managers holding master's of public administration degrees are more likely to have longer tenure.²²

18. Years of experience. Managers with more years of experience have longer tenure.²³

19. Growth and no-growth communities. All categories of growth, from zero growth to rapid growth, appear to have no effect on tenure. Long-serving managers are found in all categories of growth.²⁴

20. Managerial behavior. A survey of 31 city managers reveals that a lack of collaborative behavior—persuasion, bargaining, negotiating, team building, and facilitating—leads to shorter job tenure.²⁵

No Single Factor

As shown by these 20 factors, many variables can affect managers' tenures; it is difficult to attribute turnover to one variable; and the specific situation of each local government, the council, and the manager is important.

Localities can be vastly different, council compositions and issues vary, and managers' skills and experience vary as well. The main commonalities among council-manager cities are their form of government and state and federal laws establishing the constraints within which they govern.

Managers' commonalities include professional norms (ICMA Code of Ethics) and education levels (most have MPA degrees). Council commonalities consist of elected-official norms (association of mayors, councilmembers, and commissioners), democratic processes, and political party affiliations in some of the larger cities.

Simply put, differences are great and similarities are few, and finding a single factor that explains turnover is unlikely.

Most Important Factors

Several of the factors discussed here are statistically significant, however, and consequently they have the potential to exert more influence on managerial tenure than the other factors. These important factors include various types of conflict, managerial performance, elected-official turnover, MPA degree, years of managerial experience, number of managerial positions previously held, negotiating and bargaining skills, and managerial behavior.

By adapting to these significant factors (Figure 1), managers have a higher probability of surviving in their jobs. In other words, new councilmembers require new perspectives by the manager; more conflict requires more managerial negotiating and compromise; council district elections require more managerial empathy with councilmembers' perspectives; and having a newly elected mayor requires flexibility in adapting to the mayor's role expectations.

Once managers have identified the factors that could potentially affect their job tenure, they should develop a plan to address these factors.

Don't Wait to Identify the Factors

Most managers understand that there are many factors affecting their job tenures. The problem is that they wait until they are being pushed by the council to identify the factors. It is usually too late

by that time. Managers should identify the specific factors before they actually influence their job tenures and take action to remedy the factor before the council pushes them out. **PM**



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ENDNOTES

- 1 Council-manager cities in Texas comprise 295 general law cities plus 299 home rule cities; this equals 594. See Terrell Blodgett, *City Government That Works* (Austin: Texas City Management Association [TCMA], 1998).
- 2 Ruth Hoogland DeHoog and Gordon P. Whitaker, "Political Conflict or Professional Advancement: Alternative Explanations of City Manager Turnover," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 12, no. 4 (1990): 361–377.
- 3 James Kaatz, Edward French, and Hazel-Prentiss Cooper, "City Council Conflict as Cause of Psychological Burnout and Voluntary Turnover Among City Managers" *State and Local Government Review*, 31, 3 (1999) 162–172).
- 4 Former Corpus Christi and Laredo, Texas, City Manager Marvin Townsend once advised that he tried to avoid gathering all the councilmembers together at one time when the subject was the city manager. He thought that only bad could come of it because every manager is almost always involved in a controversy or issue that has at least one councilmember perturbed. Because annual performance reviews are usually required in today's employment agreements, such gatherings are almost impossible to avoid, and managers should not necessarily be surprised by negative outcomes. Richard C. Feiock and Christopher Stream, in "Explaining the Tenure of Local Government Managers," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1998): 127, suggest that agreements provide a review mechanism that can speed a manager's exit.
- 5 Douglas M. Ihrke and M. Scott Niederjohn, "Conflict on City Councils in Wisconsin," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 27, no. 4 (2005): 453–462.
- 6 Gordon P. Whitaker and Ruth Hoogland DeHoog, "City Managers under Fire: How Conflict Leads to Turnover," *Public Administration Review* 51, no. 2 (1991): 156–165.
- 7 Ihrke and Niederjohn, "Conflict on City Councils in Wisconsin."
- 8 Feiock and Stream, "Explaining the Tenure of Local Government Managers."
- 9 Whitaker and DeHoog, "City Managers under Fire."
- 10 DeHoog and Whitaker "Political Conflict or Professional Advancement?"
- 11 Douglas J. Watson and Wendy L. Hassett, "Career Paths of City Managers in America's Largest Council-Manager Cities," *Public Administration Review* 64, no. 2 (2004): 192–199.
- 12 Feiock and Stream, "Explaining the Tenure of Local Government Managers." 1998.
- 13 Barbara Coyle McCabe et al., "Turnover among City Managers: The Role of Political and Economic Change," *Public Administration Review* (2008): 380–386.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Gladys M. Kammerer et al., *City Managers in Politics: An Analysis of Manager Tenure and Termination* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1960).
- 16 Daniel M. Barber, "Newly Promoted City Managers," *Public Administration Review* 48, no. 3 (1988): 694–699.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Joseph La Beau, "Executive Summary and Full Report to the Texas City Management Association on City Manager Personality and Career Impacts" (Austin: TCMA, 2005).
- 20 Feiock and Stream, "Explaining the Tenure of Local Government Managers"; James C. Clingermayer and Richard C. Feiock, "Council Views toward the Targeting of Council Benefits," *Journal of Politics* 57 (1995): 508–521.
- 21 Feiock and Stream, "Explaining the Tenure of Local Government Managers," 127.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Douglas J. Watson and Wendy L. Hassett, "Long-Serving City Managers: Why Do They Stay?" *Public Administration Review* 63, no. 1 (2003): 71–78.
- 25 James Thurmond, "Managing in the Bureaucratic and Collaborative Contexts" (Doctoral dissertation, University of Houston, 2007).