

PM Bulletin Board

Here are the answers that were received in response to the PM Bulletin Board question posed on page 26 of the March 1998 issue of *Public Management*. If you have served as the first administrator or manager of a local government, what tips do you have for colleagues who might accept a similar position? What helped you with the local government's transition to a new form of government?

If the position is as an administrator, you should insist, before accepting the position, that the administrator will be able to call the shots on a daily basis. Department heads who are out doing their own thing without reporting to the administrator can only cause confusion. Someone has to be in charge.

Establish a plan of goals and objectives if one doesn't exist. The local government may have struggled along without any vision prior to establishing the position. This plan can be useful in documenting that the transition was effective and that things are being done.

Get out of the office into the local coffee shop, and get to know the residents. Sell the plan there.

Visit with your supporters frequently, but don't ignore those who aren't big supporters. Winning over the latter can be helpful.

What helped me with the transition was previous experience in establishing two other positions in Kansas and the base of support from a council majority and other individuals in the community who were in favor of the change.

Best of all, if you last more than two years, you're doing great!

—Rick Shain

City Administrator
Medicine Lodge, Kansas

I was the first city administrator of a city in 1967, which also was my first position as a city administrator. While that was a long time ago, there

are certain things that still are vivid in my memory about that experience.

- Try to ascertain in advance whether all of the elected officials were supportive of establishing the new form of government. If a significant minority were opposed, or if a key player, such as the mayor, did not favor the change, then you might want to consider not seeking the position.
- Before you decide to take a first city administrator position, check to see where the local news media were on the issue during the decision-making process to change forms of government. If there are strong local media, they can be useful during the initial stages of your tenure if they have supported the professional administrator concept, because they will want you to be successful.
- In my case, there were some elected administrative positions—city clerk and city collector—that remained as elected positions even after the city administrator form was adopted. The people in these positions were difficult to work with because they saw the city administrator and the new form of government as a potential threat to their tenure.
- If a city has been managed without professional assistance for a number of years, don't expect to be able to correct all of the management problems immediately. It may be difficult

to get department directors to become part of the team, and they may see proposed changes as criticism of their previous management.

—Kent Leichliter

City Manager
Crestwood, Missouri

In response to the question, I offer the following thoughts after having been the first administrator in three communities.

- Be prepared. Learn as much about the community, elected officials, and your employees as quickly as you can. Do your own assessment. Don't buy into someone else's opinions about people or needs.
- Be pleasant. Don't begin by dictating how things are going to be. Transition is always difficult, but when you have existing employees who have been "in charge" prior to your arrival, it will be easier to adapt if your attitude is one of cooperation rather than control.
- Be thorough. Know your role. Know your business. See that good policies and procedures are put into place, and then follow them. Treat everyone fairly.
- Lead gently but forcefully. This is a big change for everyone, and even the elected officials who hired you are not really prepared for what you will be doing.
- Be patient. Things will smooth out and progress will be made.

There is a special challenge in serving in the role of first administrator, and I really enjoy that challenge. Hopefully, those who have followed me have found a good base established.

—Ann Daniels

City Administrator
Riverside, Missouri

It is critical, above all else, to ensure that the council, staff, and administrator fully understand their representative roles in the organization. This goes beyond the drafting of a job description; your role must be understood, believed, and supported. In exchange, you must be willing to take command; fear of failure must not be used as an excuse for a lack of leadership on your part. As a first-time

PM Bulletin Board

administrator/manager, you have the opportunity to build a strong organization that will reap benefits far beyond the next budget for years to come.

—Scott A. Botcher
City Administrator
Delafield, Wisconsin

As the first village manager of Waynesville, Ohio (the antiques capital of the Midwest), I offer the following tips:

- Pay attention to history. Find out what motivated the community to choose a manager/administrator form of government in the first place. This will tell you a lot about the community's expectations of you.
- Develop your listening skills. As you are introduced in the community, listen carefully to what is said (and not said) about the community's needs and desires.
- Pay close attention to developing management systems. Try to develop a consistent way of approaching people, problems, and concerns. Remember, the next manager will have to make sense out of the systems you put in place. Take time. Think ahead!
- Enjoy your unique position! There can only be one first manager in a community. It can be fun to blaze your own trail.

—Kevin Harper
Village Manager
Waynesville, Ohio

When serving as the first administrator or manager, I have some suggestions that could prove useful in assisting a municipality in its transition from the government of the past to the new form. Underlying, overriding, and permeating all the suggestions are the twin concepts of patience and understanding.

It is critical to keep in mind that the "rules of the game" have changed for elected officials, government employees, and the people of the community. The rules have changed for everyone. Everyone, that is, except you. You are familiar with the new form; you are the professional, potentially a leader of the new form. But community members need your understanding of the new

rules and your patience as they become accustomed to the changed environment. They also need your ability to educate, inform, and eventually lead the community toward acceptance and enthusiasm for the professional management of local government.

—Melinda R. Carlton
County Administrator
Kent County, Michigan

As the first full-time administrator of Rochester (population 4,300), I offer this response. Prior to accepting a position as the first administrator, go through a "feeling-out" process with your potential employers. Explore every potential issue, including lines of authority, and, most important, develop a set of written, measurable expectations. What is your employer's expectation of you in the management position?

On what level is the elected leadership prepared to delegate decision-making authority? Are they willing to hand you the reins, or are they more likely to stand over your shoulder, micromanaging? Do they firmly believe in the policy-versus-administration dichotomy? If there is a new charter, do they understand the role of the administrator?

As the first administrator, you need to understand these perceptions *before* taking a position. There is a good chance that if you are the first-time administrator, the elected leadership may not know what they want. In the absence of a charter or other legislative document, it is your job to define the position. Just remember that, in some cases, this information can be difficult to come by.

—Russell J. Dean
Executive Secretary
Rochester, Massachusetts

Tips for the first-time administrator:

- Realize that you represent change to a lot of people; their negative reactions to you are not necessarily personal but reflect their fear of change.
- Plan on speaking to as many civic clubs and organizations as possible in your first three to six months; people will relax if they think they're

getting to know you and if you appear to be a "reasonable" sort.

- Assemble the town staff in one place as soon as possible; introduce yourself, and tell them to continue doing exactly what they are doing now. Tell them that you don't plan to fix what isn't broke but that you do need some time to look at the entire organization. Have a question-and-answer period so they can start to get some idea of the kind of person you are. Rumors and fears will flourish if your employees are kept in the dark about you. On the other hand, the town's employees can be some of your most important supporters.
- Make a point of going to each volunteer organization that supports the town and meeting with them. The most important could very well be the volunteer fire department, but all the volunteer organizations have a significant impact on the well-being of your town.
- Meet the mayor and each councilmember at his or her place of business. You don't need to get into heavy details on what you will be doing; the point is that they see another side of you outside the office.
- Strive to keep your family life as normal as possible; make it clear from the interview that your home life is key to avoiding burnout and that your family will be a part of the community but are not to be put under the same public scrutiny as you will encounter.
- Find a local church that you and your family can attend; you will be tested in many ways, and your church can be one of your best supports when your character and integrity are questioned and trashed by people of ill will.
- If your town has not done goal setting before, set up a special meeting to get the mayor and council on board as to what they see as the top 10 goals for the town in the coming year and what they will do to support these goals. Then the inevitable complaints will be more easily seen as the special pleadings for the well-connected inner cliques that they are.
- These top 10 goals will then become the guide for you and the staff in the first year, helping you focus your attention and efforts.

PM Bulletin Board

- Keeping focused on the town's goals is vital to your long-term effectiveness and success.
- Seek out every reasonable saving in conducting town business, and every appropriate grant that would support town business or goals. At the end of the year, these savings can be considerable.
- Add together all savings and grants, and express that figure as a "return on investment" in your salary. For

instance, if your salary is \$50,000 and you save and/or bring in a total of \$1 million, then the return on investment is 20-to-1.

- Cultivate good relationships with members of the press. They can be among your most consistent supporters. One way to do this is to set up a press table at the location of council meetings. It need not be elaborate, but a table—with its own lights, writing pads, supplies, and

folders containing all documents and materials being discussed during the meeting—will make reporters' jobs much easier and ensure that major points raised in the meeting will be reported correctly.

- Develop your own long-term list of what you think needs to be done, but realize that timing is everything.

—Tom Cannon

Town Administrator
Dandridge, Tennessee

Work Is Under Way for "First-Timers"

In 1997, ICMA created a First-Time Administrators' Task Force to gather information that would lead to the development and dissemination of a package of resources to help first-time administrators prepare for and do their jobs.

The task force is attempting to address the concerns of ICMA members who are either serving as the first local government manager or administrator in a community or are serving as a manager or administrator for the first time in their careers. Chaired by Jim Berzina, city manager of Wichita Falls, Texas, it has 25 members nationwide.

Information that has been collected is being organized under several categories: (1) how to research the community in preparation for an interview; (2) what to do once you've been offered the job; (3) what to do the first day, week, or month on the job; and (4) how to deal with trouble spots and pitfalls. Task force members also are interested in gathering information on ways to take care of yourself and your family and on specific suggestions from those who have been promoted from within to their first manager positions. Beyond that, we would like to hear from you on what we've missed: What would you like to know if you are going to become a first-timer?

What follows is just a taste of the information that has been gathered about the pitfalls and trouble spots the first-time administrator in a community may face.

- Often, the hiring of a new manager means the phasing-out of some previously elected positions.
- You may be able to appoint some of these people, like the clerk. This will provide political support as long as it is clear that you now are in charge.
- Honor the past, and empathize with the problems the council was trying to deal with that led to your hiring. Solicit the council's version of what the issues were and how they attempted to resolve them.
- A 60/40 percent referendum vote means four out of every 10 people in town don't want a manager. Keep that in mind.
- Remember, the elected officials are used to being in charge. Solicit their advice whenever possible to ease the transition to this new form of government.
- The best part of being a first-time administrator is that you get to create a new organizational structure. You have the opportunity to build a team. If you approach this opportunity properly, you can't help but increase the efficient operation of the organization.
- Get to know surrounding managers both because they might become a personal support network and because they are likely to know what the issues were that led to the change in government.
- Discourage savior expectations, the belief that a new person will solve all problems and do it quickly.
- Employees are used to running their

own show. A new person overseeing and coordinating is not always a welcome addition. It will take time and patience to instill a team philosophy and create a management team.

- The potential for conflicts of interest is particularly prevalent in small towns. Relatives of elected officials often work for the city. Managing these situations can be tricky.
- Roles and relationships need to be worked on. Councilmembers and employees may be used to working together closely, with employees routinely lobbying elected officials for their pet projects.
- Don't be afraid to admit mistakes.
- Don't get discouraged. You want to win the war, so a few strategically chosen losses are okay.
- If you are the first manager, your public style will define the community's perception of the local government manager's role and function. You carry the weight of your profession and its professional association on your shoulders.

It's been my privilege to serve as staff support to the task force. We look forward to hearing from you on your thoughts concerning first-time administrators. Send your comments to Carol Zar, Center for Governmental Studies, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois 60115; e-mail, czar@niu.edu; fax, 815/753-2305.

—Carol Zar, First-Time
Administrators' Task Force