

Commentary: Rescued From the Beach

Over the years, I have enjoyed the candid personal stories of success, failure, and luck that *PM* has published from veteran local government managers. And I have been haunted by the perennial fear of being "in transition" or "on the beach" someday. Well, here's my story, now that I have sidestepped the axe for 37 years in the business.

Under a hybrid strong-mayor form of government in Fresno, California (population 460,000), I worked for the mayor as city manager. My job was to embrace his vision of a high-performance city hall and equal opportunity for everyone. I did so with enthusiasm and loyalty for four years.

Five months after my article celebrating the successes we had realized in Fresno appeared in the September 2004 issue of this magazine, however, the mayor called me into his office. Coming out of that meeting was a mutual agreement that the time was right to make a change, as he was beginning his second term. I was treated fairly, with 12 months' severance and five months' vacation pay.

I told the mayor, sincerely, that I had been dedicated to his vision for Fresno before I arrived and would feel the same way after I left. If I could best support his program by stepping aside and if it was time to do so, then I would, keeping it all on a high plane.

In concluding my meeting with the mayor, I requested three things: 1) that I would prepare a very supportive letter of resignation, effective immediately (no use in hanging around); 2) that he would honor my contract; 3) that he would give me a good letter of recommendation. He replied that I had these things without even having to ask for them. This was characteristic of our relationship of mutual respect and friendship. But, of course, the change still hurt.

That night, after I told my wife, I called an executive-recruiter friend to share my new development. He said, "Have you looked at your e-mail tonight? I'm inviting you to interview for two cities in the next three weeks!" (One city paid \$30,000 more than I was paid in Fresno; the second city paid \$90,000 more.)

Two days after my meeting with the mayor, on the official day of my resignation, I had a phone interview at the request of a different search firm about the manager opening in a Southwest city of 1 million population. Four

days after that, yet another search firm called to see if I might still be interested in a position that I had checked out the previous fall. I said I was very interested.

Over the next two weeks, I sent out resumes, filled out supplemental questionnaires, and had a number of phone interviews. Three weeks after my resignation, I was offered and accepted a new city manager position with a smaller community but one still in California and not too far away from where I was living. It came with a 25 percent pay increase and substantial, needed housing-loan assistance.

But, most important for me, I had fallen in love with the city council in the interview. I hadn't planned on it, wasn't in the mood for it, and didn't expect it, but it happened, and I was energized.

At the time I accepted the new job, seven cities were in various stages of discussion with me about city manager positions, which included two challenging assistant city manager positions.

To my amazement (and relief), I received fair, even relatively favorable, treatment at the hands of what I considered to be the aggressive print and electronic media in Fresno.

What happened in Fresno? Well, frankly, as I wrote this piece, I was still processing it. The short version is, I had run out of political capital, said no to too many people, or didn't say yes fast enough to others. But I had carried the mayor's reform banner high with the city council, the organization, and the community.

I had been tackled politically from time to time, but my team had scored frequently. I had probably lost a half-step in my running game for a variety of reasons, however. The article in that September 2004 issue of *PM* had contained a force-field analysis describing what I was up against in making reform changes in a tough Fresno political environment, which lost me some capital. But I had been proud of the reform record achieved by "us," not "me."

Another factor contributing to my reduction in political capital had involved my being a finalist for the abortive Dallas, Texas, city manager opening 90 days earlier. After conducting publicized interviews, the city postponed the search for six months. It was a high-profile item in the press and raised questions about my long-term commitment to Fresno.

So, what are the lessons we can take away from this experience?

- Always have an updated resume and materials ready to go. It's too late to put them together when you need them. The new job I secured was the result of a follow-up resume that was already in the mail regarding a previous position on the day after the mayor and I talked.
- Think positively as often as you can-but always be ready for the "what if."
- Conduct yourself with the professionalism and class expected of ICMA members.
- The harder you work, the luckier you will get.
- Call ICMA colleagues going through transitions. It does make a difference. I remember each call.
- Two "lessons" to disregard-based on the advice of a close colleague and name in the profession-are that this was not pure luck and that there are not always a lot of jobs available when you need them. I changed jobs in the true manager mode: hard work, years of experience, and strength coming from somewhere when it counted.
- Unfortunately, a number of ICMA members in transition don't fare well and go for many months before getting reemployed, as another close colleague reminds me. There are emotional and family consequences when this happens. It is natural to have feelings of anger, hurt, and damage to your confidence and self-esteem. I've seen it in the best local government managers in the business.
- The political process is not always fair or rational. That's just the environment we have chosen to work in. Also, our environment is not much different from what private sector middle-management folks go through during mergers and downsizing. A lot of unfairness exists!
- Pray. I spent a lot of time on my knees in Fresno. It was good for my soul and for my perspective. I was never alone, even when I was by myself.

I feel blessed. I love transition stories with happy endings!

—Daniel Hobbs
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