

A Guiding Light For Those in Transition: Member Insights

■ DON'T CLOSE YOURSELF OFF

My in-transition experience, 20 years ago, was precipitated by the sad abandonment of the council-manager form of government, which has been a bit less personal experience but nonetheless an equally traumatic one. Being between positions gave me many lessons that have remained valuable throughout my life. Here are my reflections.

Colleagues

This should be your greatest source of support. I lost count of the personal phone calls and messages (this was before e-mail and the Internet) just to see how I was doing and whether assistance could be rendered. These messages also included invitations to have lunch, dinner, or other social interaction.

Colleagues reminded me that registration fees for the state association conference were waived for members in transition and actively encouraged me to attend and “have a good time”! They continued to invite me to smaller, regional groups that met for lunch, usually gratis, and a most memorable and unannounced visit came from the executive director of the managers’ association just to see how I was doing.

Being in transition brings with it not only the loss of position but also a psychological loss of prestige. So we, as individuals or state and regional

associations, should endeavor to make those in transition feel that they are still valued members of the management profession.

Let the World Know

The biggest mistake a person who is in transition can make is not telling others they are out of work and looking for a job. Unemployment carries a foolish, yet still prevalent, stigma. And unfortunately, the corresponding reaction is to just cover it up and/or not mention it. ICMA does an outstanding job of letting our members know when a colleague is in transition, but did you ever consider that a busy manager might just miss your particular notice or be a little behind in their reading?

If you do start contacting colleagues, you will find that many have faced similar situations and will become invaluable sources of empathy and support. Additionally, and I say this from personal experience, your colleagues will be major sources of job leads, interim consulting assignments, volunteer opportunities, and even that new job itself.

Support from Unusual Sources

I am a Roman Catholic, and during my transition I became friends with and found support from, of all persons, a Baptist minister—and little of the support was spiritual in nature. During our relationship, we

learned from each other that job tenure for city managers and ministers was pretty much the same: you can stay as long as they like you. His “sin” was a novel notion to focus on youth activities in order to revitalize and sustain his congregation (church elders felt neglected). My “sin” was hiring youths to do a lot of backbreaking maintenance work during the summer months (job retirees would have liked to supplement their income).

Coincidence? The individuals calling for the minister’s ouster were the same as the ones leading the petition drive for the change of government in my jurisdiction. This relationship was a wonderful opportunity for mutual commiseration, and laughing and joking about our experiences eased the situation for both of us.

Keep the Faith

I did not, and later I regretted it. During my in-transition period, I stopped going to church. A number of parishioners were ardent supporters of the move to abandon the council-manager form of government. Wanting to avoid these individuals, I made a conscious decision to compromise my faith.

This chicken came home to roost many years later, when I was again attending church regularly and was moved by a sermon dealing with forgiveness. The message really hit home, as I had just gone through a difficult divorce, but it also brought me back to that in-transition experience. To this day, I often think to myself, “What if I had allowed myself to hear that message sooner?”

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If you find yourself in transition, you are definitely going to have to deal with forgiveness, namely, the real issue of bitterness and letting go of this emotion. There is no magic formula for dealing with this; you as an individual must come to grips with it on your own terms.

Experience has taught me to guard against the temptation to close myself off and become isolated from those things that can prove supportive. So, “keep your faith,” whatever it is. You never know what might get you through this difficult time, so allow your heart, mind, and person to be open and receptive to all possibilities. Not only will this openness help you survive the transition but also you will be a better person for it.

—Kevin Kenzenkovic, city manager, Slater, Missouri
(1984 to 1986); kenzeinc@aol.com

■ NEGOTIATE YOUR TERMINATION

As I’ve heard and read, firings seldom come as complete surprises. There are usually signs along the way indicating that there is “trouble in River City.” Reading these signs properly can give you both the incentive to begin updating your resume and a chance to reflect on desirable options. Reacting to the signs can cushion the shock and lessen the panic reaction when the ax falls. Bottom line: Don’t bury your head in the sand and assume a denial mentality. Preparing for the inevitable makes the blow easier to absorb.

Often, the governing body is not interested in creating a political issue for itself by firing a manager outright, especially if the firing arises from an issue of disappointing performance. If the firing arises from an egregious moral or legal issue, it is a totally different problem for the manager. The governing body has little to lose and everything to gain by terminating the relationship on its own terms.

But if the firing is a performance issue, the governing body is often motivated to negotiate a manager’s termination, as opposed to risking a public vote on the manager’s ouster. A public vote increases the potential for citizen supporters and detractors to point their accusatory fingers at the governing body or at the manager, laying blame, with the result that a nasty public, political mess ensues.

My Advice:

Bargain for the best deal you can get for a negotiated termination. It is amazing how agreeable a governing body can be when it wants to avoid a public controversy. You have more leverage than you might expect.

I have seen situations in which the manager feels strongly enough about a challenge to his/her professionalism and work quality that he/she will throw down the gauntlet and challenge an ouster effort. What a mistake. Pride and indignation cloud a longer-term perspective.

Our survival instinct should energize us to seek an avenue to best survive professionally. The longer-term perspective, which calls for protecting our professional reputation, should point the way toward an easier avenue to later employment.

Typically, the manager will not win a battle against his/her ouster. It’s possible that the manager may gain some modest improvement on the termination package, but it’s not likely. What is more probable is that the governing body will dig in its heels and defend its opinion about the manager’s need to go. In either case, the issue becomes public, and the manager is ultimately ejected from the job. The end-result is an ugly, open trail of performance problems that tarnishes the manager’s reputation and creates added baggage in seeking new employment.

One of the benefits of being employed, of course, is the sanity it can provide. You have structure and order; you have a sense of mission and accomplishment at the end of the day. When you’re suddenly without a job, all of this disappears. It will help your wounded psyche to establish a new structure and order, to give you a similar sense of accomplishment at the end of the day. I made a deliberate

decision to bring order and structure to my days. I used the morning hours to look for new work opportunities, making personal/phone/e-mail contacts through a growing network of potential resources.

My Schedule

I drafted and mailed or emailed applications and conducted follow-up correspondence and phone calls. In the afternoon, I reserved time for activities in which I had 100 percent control of effort and outcome. I reserved the afternoon for a regular exercise regimen at the local gym, a tremendous benefit both physically and mentally. I did those household jobs that I never had had time to do before.

My advice? Bargain for the best deal you can get for a negotiated termination.

It is amazing how agreeable a governing body can be when it wants to avoid a public controversy.

I made a conscious effort to involve myself in activities and a routine that got me out of the house and away from the temptation of waiting for someone to call. Being a hermit allows too many negative demons to plague the brain; exposure to outside activities can bring not only a healthier mental outlook but also an unexpected avenue for successful networking.

—Pat Guilfoyle, ICMA-CM, city administrator,
DeSoto, Kansas; pguilfoyle@desotoks.us

■ LEARN MORE SKILLS

This past year was my second time of being “on the beach,” and the circumstances have changed. The first time around, I looked at establishing a consulting business and kept myself entertained with writing a business plan and prospecting. I thought I could take advantage of my strong network of local government contacts to secure at least some small assignments and was partially successful.

This time around, I had returned to the state of Oregon after a 17-year absence, my new Oregon job had ended after only nine months, and I knew hardly anyone locally any more. Fortunately, I selected the Portland metropolitan area as a place to live and work, with the idea that it might have multiple state and local job opportunities.

With this in mind, I took advantage of the lull in my activities to take a beginning Spanish-language class. Many communities in the area have substantial Latino populations, and I knew of two vacancies where the Latino population would soon reach majority status.

Cornelius, Oregon, had its city-manager candidates

speak to a public gathering, so I opened my remarks in Español, explained my beginning language skills, and quickly reverted to inglés for the remainder of my presentation. The risk paid off, and I got the job. Now, months later, things are going well, and I have been to numerous community meetings with translators. I'll return to the classroom this fall for another semester and will continue to build my language skills.

—Dave Waffle, ICMA-CM, city manager,
Cornelius, Oregon; dwaffle@ci.cornelius.or.us

■ DEAL WITH YOUR LOSS POSITIVELY

Dealing with loss involves the four steps that this process entails: denial, anger, grieving, and acceptance. Unfortunately, it is not a linear process, and even long after acceptance occurs, with a new and better life, a little anger can creep in! Oddly, even in the midst of anger or grieving, acceptance can show up. Then again, after two years, some justice can occur after the next election!

—Roger Swenson, town manager,
Dewey-Humboldt, Arizona; rogerswenson@cableone.net

■ STAY ACTIVE AND BE UPBEAT

Coping with being in transition depends a lot on your specific domestic circumstances. Single, married, kids or not, and whether they are in school makes a big difference in how you handle your situation. Keeping a positive mental attitude during a transition can be challenging; a lot depends on the support you get from your spouse and kids. It's important that they understand why you are no longer working, instead of being gone 50, 60, or more hours a week as you were before.

They need to accept the fact that money should not be as easily spent. They also need to understand that being in transition will affect them in other ways, too. If your children are in school, depending on their age, they might be confronted by other kids about why you are no longer working. Since being a city manager is a visible position, they might be teased or even harassed because you got fired.

Out of the House

Just as important, over the years I have learned that staying in the house all day is probably one of the worst things you can do. Even if you are busy on the computer or whatever else you might be doing, you are still disrupting the routine that has been your norm.

Getting out and being with other people at the library or coffee shop breaks the routine of being home. Because it's important to be available for an interview in another city whenever you are called, it's not too good to get tied down to “just a job,” unless your financial circumstances demand it. Volunteering for a nonprofit is a good way to see another side of the community you are living in. Everyone needs volunteers. Try working at the local food bank or art center. It's a good move for your resume as well.

Going back to school has been extremely helpful to me. There are usually community colleges that offer a variety of courses of interest to everyone. I took paralegal courses online and got certified. During another transition, I took computer and environmental courses. Online courses are challenging because it's up to you to get those assignments done and get them in on time. For the more traditional learner, it takes a lot of extra effort to get what you need using e-mail, instead of by talking to the instructor and classmates in person.

The circumstances that put you in transition have a lot to do with your mental attitude. If it was an amicable parting of the ways (very unusual), then you can have some peace of mind. However, if it was a bitter firing, with the public closely watching the spectacle, you feel some humiliation and after a while keep wondering what went wrong. What could or should I have done differently so that my family wouldn't have had to suffer the hardships they now endure?

Money Management

There's really no way to know how long you will be in transition. After a while, your finances will become a bigger and bigger issue. It's then that you will start seriously wondering how long you can afford to continue looking for another management position. Is a career change in your future? One time, I took an interim management position, and it only lasted a week. However, the new manager hired me on as an assistant, which lasted for six months until I found another manager position. That was quite unusual.

Here's one suggestion not readily accepted by the folks who seem to know about financial matters. You are supposed to have about six months' savings put away just in case you are terminated. Instead, I have always relied on credit cards to carry me through. One time, I was more than \$60,000 in debt and about to start cashing in some of my retirement funds. However, I got a good position and paid it all off within a couple of years.

If you have a Range Rider or a similar person in your state whom you can keep in touch with, this can be a positive factor. He or she can help you find temporary work and give you insights into positions that might be coming open soon. Also, ICMA sends a packet of information to those in transition that is helpful. Finding someone to talk to who understands local government management, with all the challenges of the position, is important. Commiseration can be a positive factor when you really get emotionally down.

—Ivan Widom, Canon City, Colorado;
iwidom@earthlink.net.

■ BELIEVE ME: TRANSITION CAN BE A BLESSING

Turn adversity into opportunity. That was my goal in February 2004, when I was forced to resign as city manager of Bristol, Tennessee.

After nearly eight years as city manager there, working for a proactive city council, events changed after an election. Intense pressure was put on me to leave by the new majority. Finally, I resigned.

Serving the people of Bristol was a privilege and a challenge. My family and I loved the community. We still have close ties to the many friends we made there. It's at times such as these that you find out who your real friends are. Despite the disconnect that happens with a few people, many friends and colleagues will likely provide needed support.

My wife and children were a true Rock of Gibraltar during this episode. Friends, family, and associates give you moral support. Discussing with them what happened can be therapeutic and can help you retain your professional focus.

After my transition began, I decided to follow this course of action:

- Maintain personal dignity and professional attitude.
- View the change positively. Don't look back!
- Get back in the game.

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at those who have treated you
poorly, but don't do it.
This puts you in the same
gutter with them.**

Periods of adversity bring out the true character of a person. There is a great sense of relief when they pass, and meanwhile the experience prepares you to face the next challenge down the road. In my case, the downtime was also a time-out with my family, an opportunity to exercise more, and a chance to get recharged.

It is tempting to lash out at those who have treated you poorly, but don't do it. This puts you in the same gutter with them. Their behavior defines their values and character, and who wants those traits? Move on. There are more important things for you to do and concentrate on.

I used my down time to focus on taking the necessary steps to get my career back on track. I read inspirational materials, stayed in contact with professional colleagues, talked to positive people, and concentrated on my job search.

Things do often work out for the best. In my case, I was offered the position of city manager of Frankfort, Kentucky, the state capital. This chance has opened up a whole new world for me, professionally and personally. There was, and still is, the excitement of being the new manager in a community. The political dynamics of being in a state

capital are exciting, and the opportunities are challenging and energizing. My family has adjusted quickly as well.

My transition has turned out to be a blessing in disguise. It has enhanced my career.

No doubt about it, going through a transition is difficult. It can also be a great learning experience. It can teach you patience and give you a perspective you can't gain from staying put. It can also teach that your future is what you make of it.

—Anthony Massey, ICMA-CM, city manager,
Frankfort, Kentucky; amassey@fewpb.com

■ RECOGNIZE THERE IS LIFE BEYOND CITY MANAGEMENT

During my local government career, I have had two in-transition periods that each lasted about a year. While I was not overly depressed about being in transition, some people do become depressed and might undergo significant pain if they have the same experience I had. Here's what I'm talking about:

While between management positions, I was called upon by a retired manager to have lunch. We did. Then, I found myself at our lunch trying to cheer him up about being retired. I felt better before we had our meeting than I did after it. I've always hoped that he felt better afterward because I did the best I could to make him feel better. I don't know if he had ever been in transition, but he seemed to think that not working was the end of the world. I didn't think it was at all.

There are a lot worse things that can and do happen to people, even managers. The fact of the matter is, though, that I didn't find being in transition all that difficult. It's one of the things that managers need to include in their repertory of "what the future may hold" possibilities. I have always had a life besides local government management, and I found this life to be a good source of strength. Of course, a supportive and understanding spouse and family are invaluable assets.

Another thing that is clearly helpful, I found, is to get calls, e-mails, and letters from peers. Even better—and this also happened to me—is being called in to help on consulting-type assignments with local agencies and a local government organization or two. Such consultancies brought me some income, which was welcome, but more important, they allowed me to stay better connected to the profession.

—Roy Pederson, retired manager,
Scottsdale, Arizona; royped@cox.net

■ RECOMMEND SEVERAL BOOKS

I always read the *ICMA Newsletter's* "in transition" column when it is published and, to assist my local government management colleagues, send everyone listed in the column an e-mail message to encourage them. You wouldn't believe the nice replies I receive. I thought your readers

might be interested in knowing how one who has "been there, done that" has chosen to assist today's managers. (As a side note, I began my public career in 1947 in Roanoke, Virginia.)

The e-mail is based on this wording: "As a life member of ICMA, I'm sorry you are in transition. I have been where you are now. I 'retired' in 1976 here in Sumter, under pressure. Subsequently, I enjoyed working in the private sector selling solid waste equipment with another city manager who was also in transition. We made out okay financially, but my heart was always in city hall. I bit the bullet, however, and started out on my own in 1980.

I like to recommend several books that may be of interest. If you do not have it yet, get a copy of Doug Ayers's book titled *Right in the City* (Trafford Publishing, 2002). Ayers is a longtime friend of mine going back to the 1940s, when he and I entered the field. He relates his city-manager experiences in California. It's a fast read.

Another book of special interest to managers is *Spending a Lifetime: The Careers of City Managers* by Douglas J. Watson and Rollin J. Watson. For information, go to the Web site of the Carl Vinson Institute of Government (University of Georgia), and click on Books.

I wish you well and am adding you to my prayer list. Good luck."

—Powell Black, retired manager (since 1976),
Sumter, South Carolina; pblack@sc.rr.com

■ GET YOUR LIFE BACK ON TRACK

No doubt about it. Being in transition is stressful—financially, personally, and professionally. The experience for me was positive because I took advantage of the time to strengthen my bonds with my family, take a step back and consider career alternatives, and take control of my finances.

But first I should say that I never liked the term "in transition." Each month, I had to decide how to identify myself at our state association meeting and would say that I was on sabbatical, on an extended vacation, or undecided. It wasn't that I was uncomfortable being out of work, but I didn't want to bring negative attention to myself. I always thought that being on a path to my next adventure was a good thing, with the realization that the path had to end somewhere if we were to continue to have food on the table.

Jack Coughlin, an ICMA life member and Range Rider, said it best: "You aren't somebody until you've been fired." Jack is right: I know that when I'm faced with a dilemma between making tough choices and doing what is necessary to keep my job, I will stand for what is right for the municipality, our profession, and honest, hard-working employees.

I was happy to be in transition, in the sense that the town I worked for did not necessarily share my values about professional management and many other things. Luckily, my wife was extremely supportive and understood

that I needed to leave the town that I had worked for. Professionally, I used the opportunity to explore various careers outside my normal comfort zone, including nonprofit foundation management.

In this connection, during my six-plus months of interviewing, I was considered for president of a national education foundation and vice president of an international relief organization. Both positions would have allowed me to explore the connection between some of my personal interests and my management experience.

In the end, I reaffirmed my commitment to local government management and became manager of a town that truly values our profession and that allowed me to use my extensive experience in economic development. I don't know if I would have enjoyed or appreciated this position if I had not had the opportunity to reflect upon my career and to "hold out" for the position I took. Maintaining a positive outlook allowed me to stay clear-minded enough to stay away from the jobs we all know we shouldn't take, and to keep my stamina up for the job-search marathon.

Personally, the time allowed me to reacquaint myself with my family, given the long hours we often put into our jobs. When available, I picked my daughter up at school and also spent as much time as I could with my son, who was less than 2 years old at the time. I was lucky in that my wife could not have been more supportive, despite her tendency to worry about finances. She gave me the job of painting and finishing our basement, a project I would not otherwise have had the time to complete.

Our relationship grew in strength through this period, and we came to make joint decisions about the life choices you face when in transition (geographic options, residency requirements, and so forth). We did enjoy the weekend in a resort town where I interviewed for city manager.

In the end, I took the job I currently have, abided by the residency requirement by moving two miles from township hall, am able occasionally to come home for lunch and take my daughter to soccer practice, and can be home for dinner on council-meeting nights.

To summarize, the experience of being on temporary leave from a paid vocation should be considered a chance to get your life on track to where you should be going.

—Stuart Brown, ICMA-CM, township manager,
Aberdeen Township, Aberdeen, New Jersey;
stuart.brown@aberdeennj.org

■ REMEMBER: YOUR NEXT JOB IS LIKELY TO BE BETTER

Being out of a local government management job is definitely not my idea of a fun experience. I have been in transition twice during my nearly 30 years in local government management, and I don't believe that either situation could have been predicted. One thing I did learn, however, is that a manager should not become complacent. In other words, don't get too comfortable in a job because you never

know when the political whims of elected officials might be dropped upon you.

Being in transition forces you to reevaluate whether this is the type of work you want to continue doing. Being out of work allows you a respite to conduct this evaluation and also to take some time for yourself and your family. There are always things to do at home that you have procrastinated about, and there are always school-related events that you may not have been able to be a part of, thanks to the schedule you have kept as a local government manager.

Network with your friends and colleagues. When they call you to have lunch, say yes because not only will they offer you the opportunity to vent but also they'll give you ideas and resources to investigate regarding your next job. Network as much as you can, and take advantage of the programs and services that ICMA and your state associations offer.

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Start your job search by examining your resume and making appropriate revisions. Consider interim work, either as a manager or at the department-head level. The more clearly you can show your next employer that you have been continuing to work in the field while searching for a full-time position, the better off you are. Any major gaps of time in employment status wave red flags for prospective employers.

After a reevaluation of my career and interim work opportunities, I have again landed a full-time position with a city. I am grateful to the organizations that provided me with interim work and thankful for the assistance that my friends and colleagues showed me during my in-transition periods. ICMA and my state organization, the Minnesota City-County Management Association, were also extremely helpful during these times.

Remember that, in most cases, managers are forced into transition because of politics and not because they are incompetent. You need to remain professional and optimistic, as your next opportunity is usually better than the one you left.

—Edward Shukle, Jr., city administrator,
Jordan, Minnesota; eshukle@ci.jordan.mn.us

■ A PARODY: YOU'RE NOBODY 'TIL SOMEBODY FIRES YOU

When I read in the *ICMA Newsletter* that managers are in transition, I send them this parody that I wrote when I was fired. As the only person I know who has been fired in four hemispheres, I feel eminently qualified to write these lyrics. Along with wishing managers well in their job searches, I express my hope that reading (singing) the words will help them as much as writing them helped me. (Perform to the tune of "You're Nobody 'Til Somebody Loves You.")

You're Nobody 'Til Somebody Fires You

You're nobody 'til somebody fires you,
You're nobody 'til you're out the door.
You may have fame,
You may have plaques that cover your walls,
But plaques won't get a job for you
When that old ax falls.

Our jobs are all the same,
We just rotate them.
We just change address, you and me.
You're nobody 'til somebody fires you,
And you're where my next job may be.

—Jack Coughlin, retired manager,
Englishtown, New Jersey; jackcoughlin@hotmail.com

■ TAKE TRANSITION AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO GROW

No matter how you look at it, being fired or forced to resign from a highly visible position in the community is stressful on you and your family. Yet, it can be an opportunity to grow—you've heard the saying "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

We have been told that the stages we go through after job loss is not unlike the stages of grieving after the death of family member. Both are true. Take the time to try to understand this, and coping with these reactions and feelings will come easier. It is hard to see that while you are both trying to sort through the present circumstances (the personal disruption to you and your family, the impact on one's self esteem and concern about your reputation, and in some cases, the financial consequences of job loss) and begin to think about the future (what are the next steps, what does the future hold, should I continue in public service, who do I need to contact for what purpose, and when will the answers arrive).

I offer the following advice: at one point or another in the experience, they helped me to cope and emerge from the experience "intact and with a positive and healthy outlook." That's not to say that I want to go through it again.

Find someone or several people that you can discuss what is on your mind during this time of transition; that can be a spouse, a trusted professional colleague, a close friend, a clergyman, a counselor, or all of the above. Depending on the issues, having a cadre of supportive people

can meet a variety of needs and situations. Our doubts, anger, fears, and uncertainties are sometimes better shared with one person over another and many can help us put them in the appropriate context.

Put your financial affairs in order so that you know exactly what capacity and capability you have as you address the financial transition period. Make sure that your insurance needs are properly addressed and do not become a problem during this time period.

Find the appropriate outlets that help create well being. For me, exercising kept me alert and prevented me from becoming lethargic. Taking charge of the "next phase of my life" gave me a sense of purpose and helped lead to a better understanding of what I wanted next and what I had to do to get it.

I evaluated several possible career paths simultaneously: consulting to the public sector, careers in the nonprofit sector, and continuing in city or county management. I talked with people actively engaged in all three fields. I explored the pros and cons of all and actually considered bonafide job offers in all three. I ultimately chose to continue in city management and have no regrets about that decision.

As a result of that process, however, I realize that at some point in the future I will seek out opportunities in one or both of these other areas:

- Find ways to use and sharpen your skills—whether that is a regular golf game, volunteer work, or securing a part-time or temporary position in another local government. I look back on the nearly 11 months I spent in transition as time not wasted. I sharpened my skills in several temporary assignments. That's not to say that I wasn't anxious or didn't grow impatient for resolution and clarity about the future.
- Keep in touch with your peers and use the network that you have cultivated while you were active in the profession. This is a good source of professional opportunities and ideas, both short term and long term.
- Take time for yourself and your family, whether this is a vacation or doing the things as a friend, spouse, family member, or parent that the demands of a professional management position made just a little difficult to do. The next opportunity will emerge when it is supposed to and in the meantime, these other activities can be rewarding and reassuring in terms of one's own self esteem and the "return on investment" that inures to you and to others.

In closing, I would ask that employed ICMA members think about these situations too and reach out to colleagues who are working through the transition.

—Robert LaSala, ICMA-CM, city manager,
Lancaster, California; rlasala@cityoflancasterca.org

This article was edited by Robert Morris, Evanston, Illinois, retired manager of Glencoe, Illinois. He served as an ICMA Range Rider for 15 years. When he was about to be in transition after 32 years as a manager, he got comfort out of the expression "Don't let the turkeys get you down."