

## Advice on My Career Path from Five Wise Men

by Mark Israelson

I am one of those people who naturally have a lot of questions and little patience. I am often quoted as saying that I want patience, and I want it now! It is a horribly annoying trait. I also happen to be, however, a fortunate assistant. I have a boss and mentor who is patient and can see the potential in someone who can drive the sanest person mad.

As is my nature, I frequently question my boss on the future of the local government management profession and, more specifically, on my future in the profession. It was during one of these many discussions that my boss decided I needed to find answers to my questions from a new source: five wise men.

The wise men and I discussed decisionmakers versus advisers. Advisers are valuable people, such as department directors or assistant managers. They develop alternatives and can master a situation but may feel uncomfortable making a decision and living with the consequences. A manager must be a decisionmaker who will live with the consequences.

To begin with, let me say that I did not go into this meeting with these men as a representative of assistants for the state of Texas. I went into it with a purely selfish intention, that is, to find answers to my questions. But these are questions that most, if not all, of us have. You see, I am not a representative of you. I am you!

As I arrived at the meeting, I was a bit apprehensive. I'd never met any of the wise men. I had simply spoken to one of them on the phone to set up the meeting and to forward my resumé so they could all have a glimpse at my qualifications and experience.

Heading into the meeting, I had no idea what to expect. All I knew was that these men had vast experience in the local government management profession and were greatly respected by my boss. And because my boss had called in a favor, they were willing to meet with me and answer my questions.

My first question was: What is the job of a city or county manager? I know, I know, you all think this is an easy question with an obvious answer. But I don't know if you ever tried to articulate what a manager does. Think about it. There are so many different things that a manager does in a day, let alone a career. How do you simplify the job description into one simple statement?

The short answer is: you can't. Being a manager is being a "jack of all trades and master of some." Be a good generalist, the wise men told me. The wise men gave me several essential duties that, when connected, gave me a great foundation for understanding the responsibilities of a manager.

### **There Are Duties**

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The first duty is setting an agenda for the council. In other words, you need to coordinate requests from council, staff, citizens, and the business community into one organized program.

Second, you need to be a representative of the community. You should attend community festivals, meetings of the chamber of commerce, football games, and lunches with businesses and developers.

Third, a manager has the duty to protect the council by assessing the risk and importance of programs and decisions. The council doesn't need to be burdened with making decisions over routine or small items, but it does need to know the implications of making a policy decision. It is the manager's job to know when decisions can be made by staff and when a policy needs to be made by elected officials.

Last, and probably most important, is the responsibility of the manager to coordinate communications. It is the manager's job to ensure that all councilmembers have the information they need to make informed decisions, and also he or she should understand the direction the council wants the local government to go toward. It is your job to make sure that the council feels comfortable with what is going on in the community.

### **There Are Skills**

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My next questions were: What makes a good manager? Why are some managers getting in trouble with their councils? Foremost on my list of

managerial assets were such soft skills as speaking ability, listening, capacity to manage relationships, and patience. At this point, we had a quick discussion on whether these skills are inherent in a person or are learned.

The consensus was that they are inherent in a person but that they can be refined through training. Soft skills can also be called people skills. First, you should be able to identify who has them and who does not. Look around your office, and you can see those people who can stand up and make a presentation and those people who would rather do anything but speak in public. A manager has to be able to speak in public.

As far as preparing myself to be ready in the future, their answers were clear: I should take on more responsibility with each move and gain experience wherever I could.

A second skill is to be able to simplify situations and terminology for the council. A manager should realize that all people are not engineers or accountants; he or she should be able to take a technical report and put it into words that nonspecialist councilmembers can understand.

Third, a good manager must also have sound character. This is a position of honor, and managers should be ethical, have integrity, and be comfortable in being themselves with the council. If you have to "act" to be a manager, you are probably not going to enjoy the experience and could quickly end up in trouble with elected leaders.

Finally, a good manager is decisive. The wise men and I discussed decisionmakers versus advisers. Advisers are valuable people, such as department directors or assistant managers. They develop alternatives and can master a situation but may feel uncomfortable making a decision and living with the consequences. A manager must be a decisionmaker who will live with the consequences.

## Looking for a Place

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Next on my list was: What factors should I address when considering local governments or specific jobs? This question brought by far the most length of all the responses by the wise men, but the clear key was finding a good match,

or "fit." A good match is a community where you and your family are going to feel comfortable.

You must include your spouse (partner or significant other) and family in your decision. Together, you all need to enjoy the recreational opportunities, the proximity to other family members, the school system, and all aspects of the community that will allow your home life to remain healthy and happy.

You need to know what type of manager the locality is looking for. Do elected leaders want a people person, someone analytical, someone with previous city or county management experience, or someone with specific experience, as in public works or finance?

When considering a local government, choose one that is looking for someone with your strengths. If you go to a community that is looking for something that is a weakness in you, your weakness will be exposed. But if you feel you can work with the council, and communication flows easily, it's probably a good fit.

You should also look for a place with a good council-manager tradition. You want to see longevity in the previous managers, and you should definitely contact these previous managers to get their input on the community. You want to see if they left on good terms with the council, and what the major issues are for the community.

You should do as much, if not more, research or homework on the community as it does on you. Spend the time to get a feel for the place and for the stakeholders. Whom do you need to know in the community? Visit the barbershop, the drugstore, the local diner, a chamber meeting, the mall, a football booster club, or the hardware store. If you've looked at a community and don't feel that it is a good fit for you, applying for a manager's position there is a bad idea.

What size of community should I consider: a big city, a medium-sized county, or a small village? This was another key question for me because the vast majority of communities in Texas have a population of 15,000 or less. For the purposes of our discussion, I assumed that a big city has more than 50,000 in population; a medium-sized jurisdiction has 15,000 to 50,000 in population; and a small town has less than 15,000 in population.

The wise men again referred to the fit on this issue. Do you want to be in a big city? If you do, is it mathematically possible to start in a small city and work your way up to a big one by changing to a bigger city every couple of years? Yes, but I think it is improbable.

How many changes would you have to make to go from a town of 5,000 to a city of 50,000, assuming a jump of 20 percent in population at each move, but also recalling that you must adhere to the ICMA Code of Ethics and stay a minimum of two years in each position? It would take you 13 moves. Considering a minimum of two years in each position, you would have spent 26 years and moved 13 times to get to a large city.

In addition, most large places either groom someone for the manager's position from within or go outside to another organization of similar size to fill the position. Working in a big locality means working on a different scale from the smaller ones. The problems may be the same, but the scale has changed.

You have to consider that many of the department directors for larger localities have more employees and larger budgets than a manager in a small to mid-sized locality. This being said, there is no departmental or assistant manager experience that equals that of being the manager.

## **Last Question**

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My last question to the wise men had two parts: How do I know if I am ready? And, if I am not ready now, what do I do to become ready in the future, if this is my career aspiration? I know that people shouldn't answer a question with a question, but the response I received from the wise men was: Are you ready?

In other words, you'll know when you are ready, when you start applying for and pursuing manager positions. They told me that the experience I have, as well as my education (a master's degree in public administration), qualifies me to be a city or county manager right now.

But I still had to answer the question for myself: Am I ready? As far as preparing myself to be ready in the future, their answers were clear: I should take on more responsibility with each move and gain experience wherever I could. I asked about moving out of a city manager's office, only to try to return to it.

They replied that it is the responsibility, not the title or department, that matters in trying to move up. Getting front-line experience and addressing the shortcomings you might have in your professional experience are keys to being a well-rounded candidate for the next level.

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Did you notice that in all my questions, I never asked about compensation? But it did come up. Obviously, you don't want to take a significant pay cut from your current position. But you might consider a small cut to get the city or county management experience. It would be nice to have a great pay raise; however, do you really expect a small to mid-sized community to give a huge salary to a young professional with little or no managerial experience? It's probably not going to happen.

As crucial as salary is, you should note that an employment contract can be just as important. One wise man stated that an employment contract should be nonnegotiable. A contract will give you and your family security if you happen to be on the losing end of a 4-to-3 vote after a locality's next election.

They also suggested becoming financially stable. I know this is an issue for my generation, as we have two incomes, and, quite frankly, we spend two incomes. If it's possible, they suggested trying to live on one income so you have the option to be more mobile in your career.

The lasting impression I took away was of these five wise men, men who have all been in this profession for a long time, most since before I was born-and they all still love it. They were willing to take the time to meet me, a person with far too many questions, and then patiently tell me the answers I was desperate to have and the things I needed to learn.

As I returned to my office, I felt like I had been lent a moment of clarity, and I had a little more direction and control over my future. It was this empowered feeling that led me to write this article, hopefully for the benefit of at least one other assistant.

In the weeks following my conversation, I was able to answer many of my own questions about my career: Do I still want to be a manager; if so, what size of community would I want to be in; and would I be ready?

Want to know what I've decided? My choice is to become a city manager of a big city. I hope readers will find this article useful in setting their career goals.

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