



Leaders at the Core of Better Communities

# ICMA Management Perspective

January 2009

## Community Matters

*Community building speaks to the very heart of what motivates and inspires people to choose a career in local government: a desire to serve, a desire to be a part of the solution, a desire to make a difference. But too often the passion, energy, and idealism that draw people into government careers in the first place become lost amid the all-too-real daily duties and responsibilities of city and county managers. Remembering community reconnects us with our original purpose and multiplies the value and impact of our work.*

*In our increasingly complex 21st century world, local government managers are not only in an ideal position to take the lead in ensuring that strong, cohesive communities are a part of our future, they must do so. If they don't make it a priority, then it will probably not be a priority of their government.*

This is the assessment of an ICMA working committee that convened over the summer to discuss why community building is important to cities and counties and what can be done to foster leadership, accountability, and participation in this critical endeavor. "When you distance yourself from community, you distance yourself from everything," noted Ed Everett, former city manager of Redwood City, California, and a member of the working committee. "We are social beings who thrive on relatedness, but too often we have lost the connection and feeling of community."

The committee agreed that most of the social problems governments struggle with—such as poverty, crime, blighted neighborhoods, preventable illnesses, and high drop-out and pregnancy rates among teens—are all interrelated. These problems are exacerbated when government managers fail to pierce insular mindsets within various city or county departments or when they fail to engage all stakeholders whose lives are affected by government policies and actions. Everyone needs to feel that they belong and their voice is valued. "Nothing can be solved, nothing can be addressed, nothing can

be healed without bringing the community to the table," said Jim Keene Jr., outgoing ICMA Western Director and now the city manager of Palo Alto, California.

Some people may suggest that creating community is easier in jurisdictions with small populations, but all managers need to be adept at, and comfortable with, nurturing community, "whether you are a manager with responsibility to hundreds of people or a million," noted Cheryl Hilvert, city manager of Montgomery, Ohio, whose insights reflect the working committee's breadth of career experience in city and county management positions.

### What Exactly Is Community Building?

We've heard the term tossed around for so long, most of us barely give it a second thought and are numb to its essence. What does it really mean?

On its simplest level, community building is the bringing together of people within a shared region, such as a neighborhood, city, or county, around a shared interest, such as education, health care, or housing. Community building is a process that, when done well, creates and culminates in a keen sense of relatedness, reminding everyone that "we are all in this together."

And doing it well requires leadership, strategies, and actions that are aimed at improving the well-being of groups of individuals in ways that encourage engagement and a sense of belonging by each member of the group. In his visionary book *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2008), management consultant Peter Block suggests that the central challenge for community builders is to “transform the isolation and self-interest within our communities into connectedness and caring for the whole.”

*The city is a partnership for living well. The city comes into existence out of the bare necessities of life, but continues in existence for the sake of a good life.*

Aristotle

The immediate and constant challenge for local government managers is finding the *time* to devote to nurturing their communities. Professional public management is driven by a rigorous attention to technical competence. Preparing and managing budgets, developing long-range plans, designing effective systems, and constructing and maintaining infrastructure are the daily fare of local government managers—and, all of this while being responsive to the elected body of the community.

The ICMA working committee acknowledged that nearly all city and county managers say that community building is extremely important to them, yet the day-

Jim Ley, county manager of Sarasota County, Florida, offers this observation: “Telling the truth is critical. Not all problems are resolved as all residents want them to be, but by telling the truth about the financial, environmental, or other barriers to achieving the exact desired outcome, the manager shows respect for community members. In turn, when residents have a sense of belonging, of having their contributions valued, they respect the decisions and actions of the local government because they contributed to them.”

to-day *management* demands of their position diminish their ability to use their *leadership* skills to nurture community. Further, the committee recognized the challenge of not only owning community building as a core leadership responsibility but also exercising the right behaviors for empowering others.

## Small Changes, Big Results

For many managers, the first step toward creating community is as simple as a shift in focus. Management guru Stephen Covey stresses the wisdom of making room for long-term goals and not spending all of your time on tasks that appear to be urgent but ultimately are not as important. In other words, if you do nothing but put out fires, you’ll never have time to plant new forests or nurture the saplings.

City and county managers will always have more to do than can realistically be done in the course of a given day. They can’t build communities alone (nor would that be a good goal to even contemplate), and they must take the time to reach out to employees as well as citizens and inspire them to invest themselves in the community. And managers must take the time to figure out how to truly collaborate with relevant

organizations and institutions (in the private and public sectors) and individuals for meaningful outcomes.

For Peggy Merriss, city manager of Decatur, Georgia, and a member of the working committee, this is hard work, but time well spent, because the results are better when you involve the community up front. “Community building is *always* the first thing I have to do. If I want to rebuild my downtown, I won’t be successful without first building community.”

## The Manager’s Role

There is a great deal of power and opportunity in the way managers shape a community-focused agenda and also in how they implement one. Elected council or board members and mayors and board chairs are directly responsive to the public. Managers serve as *translators* with the city and county staff—helping share the decisions, values, and intentions of the elected officials and community members, which creates understanding across the organization and on the front line.

Managers *champion* the public decision-making process and democracy itself, which is critical in building staff and citizen commitment to community building. To be sure, democracy is often seen as a messy process, and

managers are uniquely positioned to develop understanding about its core value.

“Community building is an investment, not appeasement,” says Decatur’s manager Peggy Merriss. Managers embrace the discomfort of democracy and become its steward. Managers are committed to community building as a valued process and vigilant in allegiance to it, recognizing that in a diverse society, it is the only way for reaching solutions true to democratic ideals.

By the very nature of the job, managers see the entire organization, and so *serve as integrators* marshalling resources across government departments—and sometimes outside organizations—for the community. The manager’s leadership in developing and nurturing capacity both inside and outside the local government organization is a critical skill for creating and sustaining community.

Further, the manager’s role in community building is one of *convener, facilitator*, and perhaps *provocateur*. The manager masters the ability to convene: to compose the right invitation, one that is compelling and worthy of people’s response, and to structure the space, time, and process correctly. The manager helps shape the conversation and its productive unfolding by framing and asking the right questions, telling the truth, establishing

*If we don’t know how to listen to ourselves and to each other, we are not going to go very far. It is clear that you have to listen to yourself, your own suffering, your own aspirations . . . and to the people in the communities, to their deepest desires, their suffering. That kind of deep looking will bring about more understanding of self and of the community. Understanding will make acceptance and tolerance and compassion possible . . . [and] the quality of life in the community will improve.*

Thich Nhat Hanh, Vietnamese Buddhist monk and social activist.

Interview excerpt from *In Motion Magazine*,  
January 25, 2004

boundaries and deadlines, and celebrating successes and mourning losses.

Being an effective leader entails talents and skills that come easier for some than others. But any manager, no matter what his or her level of expertise and experience, can improve the chances for successful community outcomes by becoming a better listener and being willing to take risks. “We need to step into environments where we’re really not in charge,” said Keene, recalling a challenging yet positive experience he had as city manager of Berkeley, California, working with business owners, radical groups and street activists to bring them together during a tumultuous period of

street protests and civil disobedience. “Managers need to be willing to let go of some of their control, to be willing to show up in unexpected places in unexpected roles. After all, the heart of community building is the *co-creation* of an alternative future.”

Just about any relationship can be improved by being a strong *listener*. Relationships between managers and their communities are no different. Peter Block suggests that the future is created “one room at a time, one gathering at a time” and that transformations take place in small groups. “To build community, we seek conversations where people show up by invitation rather than mandate, and experience an intimate and authentic relatedness.” He believes in the power of conversations built around questions, not answers, and in structuring these conversations “so that diversity of thinking and dissent are given space, commitments are made without barter, and the gifts of each person and our community are acknowledged and valued.”

In commenting on Peter Block’s book *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, Michael Butler, chief of police in Longmont, Colorado, notes that Block’s approach to working in a community “has become the cornerstone of how our police department has developed over the years. What we have pleasantly discovered is that the more our capacity grows to work in partnership with each other, the more our capacity to serve our community is enhanced.”

ICMA's working committee also identified **ownership and responsibility** as critical elements in community-building leadership. Randy Reid, manager of Alachua County, Florida, observed, "If a young person can't read, he or she will not graduate from high school. And if you don't graduate, the probability of being involved in a crime increases, and then that young person is in our jail system." Reid used this scenario to illustrate the need for managers to reach out beyond the county administration building to those in all sectors, emphasizing that someone who fails to graduate is not alone with owning the problem. The entire community owns and pays for the problem.

We are all in this together, Block agrees. "Choosing

to be accountable for the whole, creating a context of hospitality and collective possibility, acting to bring the gifts of those on the margin into the center—these are some of the ways we begin to create a community of others."

*Community is the unit of change. The only way we get through difficult times together.*

Margaret Wheatley

ICMA and its working committee will continue to explore the importance of community building and the manager's leadership role in this endeavor. As our cities and counties continue to evolve in the 21st century, it is ICMA's intent to provide the knowledge resources and tools that will enable managers to serve as leaders within their jurisdictions.

## Next Steps

### About ICMA

ICMA is the premier local government leadership and management organization. Its mission is to create excellence in local governance by developing and advancing professional management of local government worldwide. ICMA provides member support; publications, data, and information; peer and results-oriented assistance; and training and professional development to nearly 9,000 city, town, and county experts and other individuals and organizations throughout the world.

### About the Annie E. Casey Foundation

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. It was established in 1948 by Jim Casey, one of the founders of UPS, and his siblings, who named the foundation in honor of their mother. The primary mission of the foundation is to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families. In pursuit of this goal, the foundation makes grants that help states, cities, and neighborhoods fashion more innovative, cost-effective responses to these needs. For more information, visit the foundation's website at [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org).

### Community Building Initiative

Many local government managers recognize that what sets one city or county apart from others is not just the efficiency of its services, but the vitality and engagement of its citizens. But what is the leadership role of the city and county manager in engaging citizens and building community? ICMA and the Annie E. Casey Foundation have launched an initiative to explore the manager's role, and to provide support to managers and their organizations for community building.

This *Management Perspective* is a synthesis of a conversation convened in the summer of 2008 with ten ICMA managers around the topic of community building. It was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. ICMA thanks the foundation for its support and acknowledges that the observations and conclusions presented in the report are those of ICMA alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the foundation.



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