

# Building a Working Relationship With Your Elected Officials

**T**he people who are your bosses, primarily elected officials, in most cases have no formal training for their jobs. They are, however, chosen by the voters to be in the position of making policy and supervising the city's chief administrative officer. You, a professional educated and experienced in municipal government, may become frustrated at the various levels of intelligence, loyalty, and ability of your bosses. It is your charge to facilitate a means of building a working relationship with the elected governing body and the time and effort you expend will, in most cases, pay big dividends.

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**John Marshall**

## **Orientation—Narrowing the Gap**

The diverse backgrounds of elected officials always will be a source of conflict. An initial way to enhance the process of narrowing the gap between the wide range of backgrounds and knowledge is to conduct an orientation for councilmembers—both new and experienced. Effective orientation does not mean giving members an eight-inch stack of documents to take home and read. It does mean making a true effort to encourage all members to attend the orientation and being well prepared to discuss the overall activities of the community. Appropriate presentations will include information on everything from local government facilities to current capital improvement items planned or under way, to the problems currently identified and those being addressed in various areas. A frank and open discussion of the local government's

strengths and weaknesses can provide a foundation for building the trust and commitment necessary for the governing team to function effectively.

As the "paid professional" you must realize that councilmembers often are elected with personal agendas and single issues of interest. Many local candidates run for office because they are upset about something. They may want to be on the governing body so they can have an effect on a zoning issue, a tax rate, or an employee with whom they do not agree. When their issue is resolved or, with the realization that they can not effect a change, they may develop into a councilmember that contributes to all issues. The challenge for you, as a professional, is to learn how to turn that person, as best possible, into a part of the community's policy-making team.

There may be on occasion an elected official that refuses to become part of the team, adhere to the rules, or show cooperative spirit in discussions and decision making, no matter what your efforts. A professional administrator must continue striving to make the best happen and not give up on the remaining members or the process itself. If the job was always easy, anyone could do it.

### **Elected and Appointed Officials Formulate Policies**

The council-manager team is not, contrary to what is sometimes taught in graduate school, separated clearly into policy makers and administrators. For the team to function smoothly and make decisions that are best for the local government they serve, there must be effective participation by both elected and appointed officials in formulating the policies to be carried out by the staff. Some might say that all policy ideas and issues should originate at the elected level. This, however, would prohibit people who may have their

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finger on the pulse of what needs to be done in a community from making policy recommendations. Elected officials ultimately must be the ones to vote their conscience and adopt suggested policies no matter what their origin, but to limit policy-making ideas and suggestions only to elected officials would not be in the community's best interest.

The mayor plays an important role in the effort to build a cooperative team. The mayor sets the tone for a council meeting, is the closest contact with the administrator, and has high visibility in the community. His or her leadership as a mediator is vitally important to giving direction to the team.

Effective cooperation between elected and appointed officials can occur only if there is a mutual respect between team members coupled with a desire to work for the betterment of the community. Working toward mutual respect requires removing emotions from decisions and discussions. Every person is entitled to a viewpoint. If there is an ability to "disagree without being disagree-

able," the group is well on its way to forming a team.

### **Define Expectations**

Defining the expectations of the councilmembers and the local government administrator must be done early in the team-building process. Elected officials may have expectations of the manager that are not permitted by ordinances or laws. Open and honest discussions about the guidelines and expectations that elected officials have of the administrator often can be a critical element in building teamwork. The manager can benefit from these discussions by gaining a clear definition of what is expected from him or her.

Clear role definition allows for another important function of elected officials: an evaluation by the governing body of the chief administrative officer. Some managers fear evaluations because they might be used to begin the process of removal by giving merit to weak areas; elected officials also may resist the evaluation process. It is dangerous, however, to allow unexpressed concerns to escalate into a confrontation that could have been avoided. An administrator's frequent evaluation (at least annually) can lead to increased understanding of the administrator's role and performance. The evaluation should include areas required by the charter or other adopted laws and ordinances of the city.

Elected officials, likewise, need to know what is expected of them and what their duties are. This is a sensitive area for an administrator and, if possible, this task is most effectively addressed by experienced councilmembers, the state municipal league, or a similar organization of elected officials. Such organizations sometimes offer seminars for newly elected officials. The chief administrative officer may, however, be the only available and qualified person to assist elected officials in defining

their roles. It must be stressed that the appointed official should take great care to treat everyone equally and to provide truly professional guidance. This is a time when distributing printed materials from competent sources for later reading by councilmembers could be worthwhile.

Regular goal-setting meetings can assist in team-building efforts while achieving their main purpose of establishing important goals for the community. The way both elected and appointed officers identify and deal with problems can enhance the continued development of the team.

The team-building effort and the annual budget, goal setting, and planning session can take place at the same time. When these sessions are held away from the regular council meeting time, there often is enhancement of interaction and room for getting to know each other. It is common for councils and key staff members to attend a retreat in an informal setting away from the municipal office. These sessions can facilitate an understanding of one another's personal agendas and each member's motivation for being on the governing body. If an out-of-town retreat is not possible, weekend or nonregular evening meetings can be used to achieve the desired planning or budget discussions and also reap the benefits of getting the members of the team on the same track.

### **The Regular Council Meeting**

The regular council meeting itself is critical to enhancing cooperative efforts as team members make decisions, identify problems, discuss solutions, and seek input from not only the paid staff and elected councilmembers, but the public as well. Well-planned council sessions yield the best results; establishing meeting policies and procedures will ensure more productive outcomes. Meeting procedures should cover what is included on the agenda, who can

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speak and for how long, and how personnel issues are discussed. It is important for the administrator and all elected officials to take part in the discussion about council meeting guidelines, reach a consensus, individually adhere to the agree-upon policies, and encourage all members to do the same.

One of the most important rules for enhancing the team concept is to refrain from embarrassing or surprising other team members. It is far too common for a member to try and play "gotcha" for personal or political reasons. Asking questions and seeking relevant information before the meeting, studying the agenda,

and having respect for personal feelings can go a long way in building the ability to get along. While the administrator is not in a position to require that no surprises occur, he or she should encourage and facilitate this level of respect. An important role the administrator can play is keeping the council well informed so that they are not confronted by citizens who are better informed on local government issues than they are.

Both the elected and appointed officials should seek to continue their learning process and enhance their knowledge of how to make the local government work better through teamwork. Administrators should encourage the governing body to attend educational sessions and conferences designed to both broaden the knowledge base and allow members to interact with other elected officials who may share similar problems. It is good for officials to find that others have problems similar to those in their own community. Members may even find that solutions to local problems already have been discovered by someone else who is glad to share with a fellow elected official.

Administrators also must continue to learn, so that they can seek new ways of making the relationship between the members of the governing body, the staff, and the citizens even better. While you have the education, training, and experience that elected officials may lack, it is critical that you listen to their points of view and not always be the one with all the answers. It is important to remember that new ideas are occurring all around, and that no matter what your length or breadth of experience, you can still learn and grow. **PM**

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