

Award for Career Development in Memory of L.P. Cookingham



S. Wesley McAllister

Each year, ICMA presents the Award for Career Development to a corporate member who has made a significant contribution to the development of new talent in professional local government management. The award commemorates former ICMA President L. P. (Perry) Cookingham, who is credited with creating the local government internship. This year, ICMA presents the Career Development Award to S. Wesley McAllister, Jr., retired city manager of Eastpointe, Michigan.

S. Wesley McAllister, Jr.'s service to city management has spanned four decades, but his influence will live far beyond this impressive decade. He has served as a mentor to 10 individuals, 12 of whom have become top administrators in their municipalities—adding up to more than 60 years in local government leadership. The four other employees have prospered within their areas of expertise, rising to positions of more responsibility, accountability, and status.

Mr. McAllister has conveyed with strength and conviction a strong moral fiber, a clear sense of right and wrong, and selfless attention to the needs of the community. He has instilled these principles in his "students." Each of the people who have come in contact with Mr. McAllister has been touched in a unique way, yet all agree they left his tutelage having learned some valuable lessons:

The high road may be steeper. Mr. McAllister expected the same high degree of personal integrity, morality, and ethics from his staff that he held for himself. His simple but powerful advice: If it feels wrong, it probably is. "I learned from Wes that turning the other cheek, no matter how painful or awful, will indeed set you free," explains one of his former assistants who is now a city manager.

Hill for average, not for home runs. Whether arbitrating a union dispute or facing public criticism at the council podium, Mr. McAllister always displayed the utmost patience and control. He taught his students that no issue was so complex that it couldn't be deliberated, dissected, and decided in a rational way.

Baptism by fire. Mr. McAllister showed that the best way to learn is through first-hand experience. He placed even the greenest of assistants in situations of authority and showed the utmost confidence in them to succeed. This trust, combined with his high standards, motivated his charges to be firm, fair, and decisive. He also taught that the final responsibility for decisions rests with the chief administrator. As one former assistant puts it, "The lesson? It's your decision. Make it, then move on."

This hurts me more than it hurts you. Mr. McAllister firmly believed that on-the-job feedback and constructive criticism, training seminars, and conferences are key to continuous improvement. He shared his own personal experiences, battle scars, and lessons learned to convey new learning. Despite the fact that it would leave him with a vacancy to fill, he constantly encouraged his assistants to apply for higher-level positions and gave them the skills to succeed in obtaining these positions.

Without vision, the people perish. Mr. McAllister had this verse from *Proverbs* cast on the public buildings constructed during his tenure in Eastpointe, Michigan. He firmly believed that "greasing the squeaky wheel" without focusing on the long-term quality of the would lead to deterioration of the community's infrastructure, character, and livelihood. During some of the most intolerant times in American history, he hired as assistants seven women and four persons of color, as well as countless minorities as department heads and staff—testimony not only to his innate sense of talent but to his courage and resolve.

The scales should be balanced (as often as possible). Mr. McAllister also taught his students that there is a place for humor and compassion. Says one former department director, "It's not beneath him to slide down the water slide at an employee picnic, or to spend a couple of miles for season football tickets, or to spend a couple of hours in church each week."

"He clearly is a good influence on whomever may have the good fortune to encounter him," sums up one former assistant. "I thank God that I had him to influence me early in my career." Another says, "Without equal, I can honestly say that Wes has so strongly influenced my professional conduct as a city manager that I pray that I never forget the life lessons he taught me. Without his connoisseurship, caring, and patience, I would not have succeeded to where I am today." *