

# When the Council Is Unhappy With the Manager

*R. William Mathis, Ph.D.*

At a recent conference for elected officials, the question was raised: “Are you unhappy with your manager?” While the attendees’ response didn’t indicate the severity of the displeasure, the large number of hands raised sent chills down my spine. I wanted to take names and addresses so I could rush to the phone to warn the managers in these communities to be on the lookout or to resolve the displeasure before it ruined the relationship.

While elected officials’ unhappiness with local government managers doesn’t spell disaster, unresolved unhappiness often begins a negative cycle ending in dysfunction . . . or separation.

The relationship between a manager and council is like a marriage that is often viewed by electors with a bizarre sense of humor. The relationship is always in the moment: “How are we today?”

Some mature and goal-directed councils don’t test the “marriage” often, but more often at least one elected official finds it necessary to question the relationship, or the intentions of the manager, and/or the functionality of the match.

From several hundred reasons why members of a council might be dissatisfied with their managers, one thought looms larger than others: The quality and the whole of the relationship with the manager are the biggest predictors of success or failure. (Editor’s note: The term council is used throughout this article to denote any type of governing body.)

## **Three Levels of Relationships Exist**

**Personal.** The manager and any given elected official hit it off with each other on both a personal and a chemistry level. Insights and agreements are reached with ease, direction is understood, and the roles rarely need clarification. “Being in sync” is energy-driven and fulfilling for both, and these personal commitments are seen by all.

**Professional.** The commitment is to do the business, develop the relationship as necessary, and keep each other apprised of progress. Roles almost always need defining, with rules of civility and governance agreed upon, and a great deal of maturity and trust needs to be developed. This conditional relationship often works well for elected stewards and managers—if the above conditions are met.

**Tolerational.** The elected official and manager agree to move forward without the “sync” or a professional agreement. This “toleration agreement” usually is owned and manipulated by the elected official to obtain what is needed from the manager. Usually, an attitude of toleration

deteriorates rapidly at the first intersection with conflict, and it often clarifies the initial seeds of dissatisfaction with the manager.

Once the toleration attitude has escaped its cocoon, the toxic energy escapes, too, and becomes part of the group dynamic. Unhappiness by this one elected official with the manager is open for all to see. Seldom does the toleration relationship with the manager improve without some consultation (counseling) to establish agreements and direction. Both mayor/council and manager need to act quickly and early in the relationship before it causes an impasse, goes stagnant, or falls into a rut and ends up becoming a dysfunctional relationship.

Professional managers bear a strong responsibility to move the toleration attitude of elected officials toward a productive resolution and to manage their own attitudes. Managers would be wise to monitor their own biases and moving past their baggage and egos to prevent the possible fostering or enabling of their toleration agenda, which can become toxic with the elected officials. Peer discussion and team building often help in steering the relationship to a positive and healthy position.

Some managers cannot function well without a strong personal and professional relationship with elected officials. In this case, one might question what needs are being met and whether the manager is setting himself or herself up for rejection.

### **Why Relationships Are Important**

Here are reasons why a manager and the governing body should have a good working relationship.

**Improve goal setting and achievement.** The manager and governing body develop a personal and/or professional relationship to accomplish goals of maintaining quality of life and improvements in citizens' lives. Without the development of these relationships, agreements of conduct, and role definition, the partnership between manager and council has little chance of success.

**Align staff in same direction.** The positive clarity of the manager-council relationship enhances the direction and alignment of staff to move in the same direction and to read from the same script. Poor relationships contribute to chaos, mixed messages, miscommunications, and unfinished projects.

**Community wants harmony.** Despite "showtime" at the council meetings, the community wants enough harmony and integrity between elected officials and the manager to ensure proper decisions for the public's good. Constant conflict and unresolved personal agendas make for a good show but for low public trust in government.

Managers and governing bodies have a clear responsibility to manage their relationships for the public interest.

## **Common Areas of Unhappiness**

Here is why discontent can exist between the manager and the governing body.

**Lack of personal fit/negative chemistry.** Some personalities, with their agendas, find that immediate negative sparks exist between manager and councilmembers. These negative and fractious tendencies usually are explained by past unhappy experiences with government in which the manager served as a looming and preferred target. Through focused efforts, managers can sometimes work through these initial conflicts and prejudices, as a comfortable and genuine relationship is being built. Sometimes, however, the toxicity grows, and the relationships become roadblocks to building trust in the whole team.

**Disagreement with the role of the manager.** Elected officials may have clearly envisioned roles they want the manager to adopt and may be disappointed at the prescribed functions found. Some want to manage staff, serve as occasional chief executive officer, direct finances, and personally select community boards. The role of the manager should be quickly discussed with all elected team members in early goal-setting sessions to eliminate this concern.

**Jealousy.** A councilmember gets elected, then decides the manager's role is more fun and becomes resentfully desirous of the manager's advantages and role. Often, ownership of power becomes the ingredient coveted both by unhappy council and manager; sometimes, the councilmembers become jealous of the publicity or the newsworthy style of the manager. The desire to exchange roles is sometimes at the root of dissatisfaction, not merely the sharing of power.

**Dissatisfaction with department heads.** The control and evaluation of key departments can be a major frustration for activist or "hands-on" councilmembers. Frustrations arise with slowness to act or to complete major projects. Lack of timelines is a burden for many elected officials. There is only a finite time to get their work done, and they often feel frustrated or blocked from their goals. "Attacking" both the manager and the department directors may be their only avenue.

**Frustrated position within the council.** Being minority opinion, or "rebels" can be frustrating for councilmembers. The manager often counsels elected officials to "work for votes to obtain their goals." It is sometimes the case that the manager is held responsible for not achieving an atmosphere of acceptance or facilitation for their goals. Councilmembers hate to hear "I move at the direction of the majority." Sometimes, unhappiness with the manager is directly related to a lack of position with colleagues, and sometimes the manager should examine his or her attitude toward minority opinions. Managers often can facilitate harmonious review and examination of diverse viewpoints. Elected officials can see intolerance and prejudice by the manager as a major obstacle, preventing views from being accepted.

**Feeling disrespected or discounted.** Elected officials can be sensitive and cautious in their viewpoints and perspectives. Some may be sensitive to criticism or "being manipulated" by the manager. These perceptions can contribute to negative impressions of the manager or to unhappiness with his or her methods. When a councilmember feels disrespected or discounted, trust in the manager is the first trust to disappear from the relationship. Miscommunication at this level is difficult to repair, and it can become necessary that the elected official and manager

communicate with a third, knowledgeable party—an objective party who understands the system.

### **Strategies the Elected Officials Hate to See**

Councilmembers have identified strategies used by managers that they hate to see. Their disdain and displeasure with managers becomes clear or is bottled up inside. In any event, the manager will sooner or later become unhappy with their behavior.

**Strategy 1. Placation or Pandering.** When the manager responds by trying to control the elected officials by artful or indirect manipulation, this creates instant suspicion and displeasure. When the manager goes overboard in soliciting the affection, attention, or approval of the elected official, it's only a matter of time till both the elected official and his or her colleagues catch up to this unhealthy approach. Seldom will the manager get the job done with respect intact.

**Strategy 2. Taking the Moral High Ground/Doing Nothing.** Occasionally, when managers are not predisposed to an action or simply don't want to do something, they will institute a "higher moral" or ethical reason for not being of assistance. Statements like these might be used: "It's against the ICMA Code of Ethics" or "not within the nature of my contract" or "not in the ordinance." Sometimes, elected officials feel devalued, "put off, and put down" by such tactics, especially if they feel picked on.

**Strategy 3. Repackaging Ideas/ Lying.** Oftentimes, councils hear the manager share "repackaged" or "reframed" issues in a way not heard before. These revelations may cause a sense of deception whereby a manager's integrity is questioned. This perception is perhaps the most elevated concern of any public manager. Promises made and kept are essential to any goal for good council-manager relationships.

**Strategy 4. Diverting the Issue.** When a councilmember feels that the manager has diverted his or her issue to the "black hole," off the table, or doesn't acknowledge that the issue has merit, there is generally dissatisfaction created. Depending on its importance, councilmembers want an issue addressed forthwith and not diverted.

**Strategy 5. Sending Issues to Staff Forever.** This strategy is seen by the elected official as sending his or her issue to Never-Never Land. Managers might gain the reputation of sending council items to an early grave or letting an idea die without nourishment.

### **Five Council Initiatives That Work**

Recognizing the complexity and the necessity of good manager-council relationships is the number-one necessity for all concerned. The recognition by the council of the importance of establishing and maintaining the relationship is vital to working through unhappiness with the manager. These five initiatives will facilitate and extend councilmembers' opportunities to enjoy, respect, and be productive with their managers.

**Initiative 1. Clear and Measurable Goals Workshop.** Mayors and councils should take the leadership to set their goals and measurable objectives (biannually) for the manager. Fluffy goals with neither projects nor budgets for implementation create disharmony in manager-council

partnerships. The Information Age and changing face of economics necessitate reviewing the goals and relationship routinely. Each party needs to ask the other the tough questions.

**Initiative 2. Marriage Counseling a Necessity!** Relationships and progress are intrinsically interwoven and require constant monitoring for changes, miscommunication, and reevaluating agreements. Having an ongoing consulting relationship for council and manager is important for a healthy contract, evaluation, and for the general health of the organization. No manager or council in our complex society is immune to the toxic intrusion of a poor relationship.

**Initiative 3. Contract Spelling Out the Relationship.** A contract between manager and council is necessary, even after a new election. No one should take this relationship for granted. And this, “Every new council needs to rehire its manager and reestablish the agreement contract” spells out the “prenuptial agreement,” when to evaluate, how to leave, and all of the expectations (via the goals and objectives).

**Initiative 4. Goals with Workplans.** Today’s councils want to touch and feel their goals, at least in the planning stage. Once goals and objectives are set forth, it is important that the executive staff and manager provide a workplan of those goals for officials’ review, change, and reprioritization. Dates should be set for staff updates, reports, and decision points.

**Initiative 5. Manager Evaluation Facilitated.** The manager’s evaluation by elected officials should be done annually, with clear goal setting measured to include all councilmembers’ participation. Evaluation and feedback to the manager is a high responsibility of the council and can be done expertly and completely on a semiannual basis.

## **Final Goal**

Most elected officials want a successful relationship with their communities, boards, commissions, and constituents. The key to their success is to work out unhappiness with their manager. Managing this relationship is akin to working through a good marriage and unfortunately, we know that some fail. There are initiatives, however, that are preventative and worth practicing.

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### **Look to ICMA**

For related information offered by ICMA on the topic of council-manager relationships, visit ICMA’s Bookstore & More at [bookstore.icma.org](http://bookstore.icma.org) for this workbook: *Working Together: A Guide for Elected and*

*Appointed Officials* (item number 42442). Free preview packages for the training materials can be viewed online at ICMA's Bookstore & More.

A new publication also available at the online bookstore is the IQ Report titled "The Retreat as Management Tool" (item number 42636).

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