Improving Local Government Decision Making: Insights from Local Government Officials

by Joe Ohren

Most people view local government as the level of government most likely to directly impact their daily lives. While budget and policy decisions at the national level garner most of the media attention, it is the operations of local governments that affect us day in and day out. Are the roads plowed, are the streets safe, is the garbage picked up, does the water come out of the tap, does the fire department respond in an emergency? These are the services often taken for granted but critical to the quality of our lives.

Although professionals deliver services, elected or appointed officials on city councils or on boards make the budget and policy decisions. How effective are these governing bodies? What gets in the way of effective decision making? What are the barriers officials face as they make collective decisions, and how should the barriers be addressed?

During the past decade, I have worked with dozens of local governing bodies across Michigan in workshops designed to improve local government decision making. Often the workshops are motivated by changes in the makeup of councils or boards, significant challenges (financial or development issues, for example) facing the community, or severe conflicts between and among board members that get in the way of effective decisions.

This article describes the insights of hundreds of local government officials expressed during these workshops, as they have discussed collective decision-making problems and identified what they perceived as the most effective approaches to improving decision making.

PROCESS

The approach is straightforward. My role as facilitator is to structure a process that allows participants, often including elected officials as well as key administrators such as the manager, clerk, and attorney, to identify and discuss what are perceived as barriers to effective collective decision making. When a set of priority problems is determined, strategies and approaches are developed for overcoming the most important problems.

The facilitator often calls on the experiences of other communities to identify opportunities, but the facilitator's job is not to tell local officials what their problems are or how to solve them. That is their job. Once officials have gone through the problem-solving process, they are more likely to embrace the changes they have identified.

In Michigan, as in most states, such work sessions are public meetings and hence must be posted and open to the public. To overcome the chilling effect of the open meetings requirements—it is often difficult to air dirty laundry in public—the workshop process briefly surveys officials in advance of the first session to get things out in the open. Participants are asked to respond anonymously and confidentially to three questions from the facilitator:

1. Based on your experience with this and other decision-making bodies, identify three characteristics of good or "effective" decision-making groups. You can probably think of more than three, but what three do you think are most important?
2. Identify three barriers that you perceive are getting in the way of effective working relationships and decision making here in (community name). Again, limit your response to the three most important barriers.
3. Identify three strategies for improving our effectiveness as a governing body and a leadership team. Pick three that you would recommend be implemented in the coming weeks.

Individual responses are transcribed and assembled into worksheets that form the basis of the

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agenda for what usually becomes two separate work sessions: the first addresses responses to questions 1 and 2, and the second focuses on strategies for overcoming the barriers deemed most important by those who participated in the first session. When responses are on paper—in the worksheets—participants are much more likely to discuss them, even in the presence of reporters and members of the public.

Because typical work sessions are designed to allow local officials to discuss issues, no opportunity for public participation is provided although members of the public may observe.

EFFECTIVE GROUP ACTION

Question 1 is essentially an icebreaker designed to warm participants up to the discussion process, get them comfortable with the idea of talking to each other about group decision making, and explore their personal notions of an ideal decision-making body.

The discussion also is designed to emphasize the point that governing requires collective action—no one individual member of the body acts on behalf of the local government. This question often opens up discussion about the roles of the participants—the manager or administrator as different from local legislators or other elected administrative officials.

This article uses collective responses to questions 2 and 3 to explore what local officials have identified as the most important barriers to effective decision making and the strategies recommended to address them. No claim is made that this is a rigorous scientific approach to assessing barriers and identifying strategies; the local government officials involved have not been selected randomly, nor has any effort been made to identify frequency of responses.

The data represent responses of local officials working in intact groups—that is, members of the governing body and other leaders in a local unit—who have sought assistance in improving local decision-making processes. This suggests a bias toward problems or barriers because those officials involved usually have sought help precisely because they were experiencing problems. The narrative is designed to identify what are perceived to be common problems facing local officials and how to resolve them, in the views of local officials themselves.

The units represented include villages, cities, townships (in Michigan, townships are general purpose municipal units), and counties. In villages and cities, elected officials are usually called councilmembers; in townships, they are called board members or trustees; and in counties, they are called commissioners. To simplify the nomenclature and recognize that at times the participants have included other leaders, the term "local officials" is used in this analysis.

The units involved have been mostly small local communities, ranging in population from 1,000 upwards to 40,000. The several counties involved have been larger population units, ranging from 100,000 to 350,000. The size of governing bodies ranged from 5 to 15, although participation in the work sessions often has included other officials such as managers and department heads.

BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE DECISION MAKING

The participant responses reported below have been organized into categories representing issues or barriers that are common to most public organizations. They may, therefore, be useful as general concepts or as frameworks for analyzing specific local situations.

Mission problems. One clear and consistent response of local officials regarding barriers to effective decision making has centered on the concept of goals and a belief that their community lacks:

- A clear focus for the local government.
- Consensus on a common vision or purpose for the community.
- Clearly defined goals set by local officials.

Workshop participants have been aware that related to the lack of clear goals is the resulting reactive response to problems and the urge to continually redefine priorities. Citizens are likely to become distracted by the priority of the moment and go off in all directions if the community is without focus, vision, and goals.

Time problems. A second set of barriers relates to what might be termed time problems. Concerns cut both ways—too many meetings and too few meetings or perhaps more precisely, not using the time effectively:

- Exhausting schedule of meetings.
- Too many required board and commission meetings.

- Insufficient time in policy development for detailed discussion of problems or fordepth of administrative analysis and recommendations.
- Lack of closure in public debate— "We talk too much."

Local officials also recognize that time problems can be exacerbated by turnover among members of the governing body and by the short tenure in office of many local elected officials; two-year terms of office are common at the local level. Turnover also affects identifying a mission and clarifying communication and roles.

Communication and information sharing. A third set of barriers, encompassing several different facets of governing, relates to information sharing and communication between and among local officials as well as with others.

These are critical problems that appear in almost every community; they include the amount of information available, the timing of access to information, the potential for rumors to substitute when good information is not available, and insufficient information:

- Not enough openness and sharing of views.
- Not securing information in a timely fashion.
- Incomplete reports, agenda materials, or background information.
- Too many rumors.
- Politics getting in the way.
- Selective listening.
- Last-minute surprises.

Withholding information may be a strategic move designed to provide advantage to an individual official. Placing items on the meeting agenda at the last minute, for example, is in part an information-sharing problem; local officials often try to accommodate pleas for action at the last minute despite the complications it creates for access to good and timely information.

Late agenda changes can also be an effort to gain tactical advantage on the part of the official moving an item for action. Other similar personal or political concerns can affect decision making.

In almost every community comments about barriers often contain suggestions about their resolution:

- Rumors will all but disappear if more information is available.
- Information provided in a variety of ways might increase communication.
- Putting aside personal agendas often increases communication.

Communication barriers also affect sharing between local officials in one unit and those in surrounding or overlapping units. Local officials often recognize the impact of their actions on others, or vice versa, yet few local units have systematic mechanisms for communication and information across jurisdictions. Whether they take the views of other officials into account in their own actions is another issue.

Comments that reflect this gap include:

- Weak communication and collaboration with other units of government.
- Less-than-thorough understanding of responsibilities of separate multiple jurisdictions.
- Communication breakdowns between jurisdictions—no regular crossover meetings and a failure to seek and learn about each jurisdiction's issues and projects.

A final dimension of communication and information concerns the relationship between local officials and the public. Local officials, particularly in small communities that lack effective media, often struggle to communicate with residents.

Their task is complicated by diversity in communities, and, as the comments below suggest, the problems are two-way—local officials are often not able to communicate effectively with the public; neither are they able

to secure meaningful input from the public:

- Lack of public input in council decisions; too little and too late.
- Low level of trust by residents caused by poor information.
- Apathy on the part of citizens.
- Lack of knowledge of community issues on the part of citizens.
- Community diversity and polarization along racial lines.
- No local radio or print media—old news, no common medium, no in-depth coverage.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Another set of barriers relates to a lack of clarity about the roles and responsibilities of the several local officials who make up the leadership group. This is especially complicated in Michigan townships and counties because several executive officials are separately elected, including some who have both administrative and legislative duties. For example, township citizens elect a supervisor, a clerk, and a treasurer who also serve as legislators because they are voting members of the township board.

Elected and appointed officials. Participants also expressed concerns with respect to the relationship between local elected and appointed officers. Barriers are also created by a lack of understanding of the role of the governing body vis-à-vis advisory bodies and other stakeholders—the planning commission or an association such as a chamber of commerce:

- Lack of training and orientation of council, board, and commission members about their roles and responsibilities.
- Weak public understanding of roles and responsibilities within government.
- Question of whether individuals or the whole council expresses official policy.
- Lack of clarity in roles, particu-

larly with respect to the clerk and treasurer.
- Lack of clarity among committee members about what is expected and when.
- Lack of clarity about the role of the council—questions about limits of the council's authority to make policy and its role vis-à-vis the everyday operations of the city.

Personal and political concerns. Invariably, the longest list of barriers generated during discussions among members of intact leadership groups involves what might be termed personal or political concerns. The

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barriers in this category often lead to the most acrimonious and public disputes, and they also tend to be the most intractable. These sample comments reflect a variety of perspectives:

- Tendency of council and citizens to want to avoid conflict.
- Large egos of some council and commission members.
- Pursuit of personal goals or agendas.
- Lack of mutual respect among members, administrators, residents, merchants.
- Inflexibility of opinion.
- Turf building by work groups and by people.
- Personality conflicts.

- Fear of and resistance to change.
- Lack of personal relationships among members exacerbated by open meetings laws.
- Lack of cooperation among members.
- Skeletons or "old baggage" that continue to affect current relationships.

STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE DECISION MAKING

How do local officials think these barriers can be overcome? Discussion of barriers often brings to the surface ideas about strategies for addressing them. Therefore, the initial step— brainstorming—is designed to identify a wide variety of barriers.

The second step in the process, at the end of the opening workshop session, is explicitly designed to set priorities. Participants are asked to identify what barriers are perceived as the most critical, thus requiring action.

Depending on the size of the work session, small group discussions or various voting strategies are used to secure agreement. The goal is to identify a short list of what the group collectively deems its most important concerns, which then become the focus—along with initial thoughts on question 3—of a second round of discussions aimed at developing an implementation plan.

Mission problems. Although goal setting is a difficult process to implement, the direct answer to concerns about a lack of goals is to go ahead and set them through a collaborative and participative process. Participants have noted that the governing body should:

- Articulate and secure consensus on specific goals for the community in order to provide unity and direction for all key actors.
- Create a structure or process for regularly reviewing goal accomplishments and periodically refining and updating goals.

- Identify exactly what is to be accomplished.
- Emphasize collective, shared understanding.
- Develop a shared vision.

Time problems. Concern about time—too many meetings but not enough time—often leads local officials to seek a balance. One strategy may be to devote additional time to major projects or issues during work sessions rather than during regular meetings. The format, physical arrangement, and dynamics of these less formal work sessions often are better suited to addressing issues in depth.

Many local governing bodies make use of such sessions at budget time, but they are suitable for other purposes as well. Extra sessions create more meetings although regular sessions are made more productive. Participants put this recommendation succinctly:

- Consider scheduling a regular work session for councilmembers and administrative staff in order to address larger and more contentious issues coming up.
- Implement regular work sessions (for example, every other Monday or before a council meeting).
- Devote work sessions to issues that will come before the council in the coming months.

Communication and information sharing. Several strategies can improve communication with the public:

- Effective use of the public access cable channel.
- Improved public newsletter, including
  —Perspectives from council and commission members.
  —Summaries of minutes of meetings.
  —Explanations of council and commission actions.
  —Notes about upcoming events and issues within the community.
- User-friendly minutes from council and commission meetings distributed to members of council or commissions, media, and local businesses and published in the newsletter.
- Outreach at local festivals and at school and community events.
- Effective Web sites and e-mail.
- Improved public input about service needs and quality to help create a customer service–oriented organization.

Communication and cooperation between and among councilmembers and various commissions and within the local government can be improved, local officials say, through:

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- An internal newsletter to communicate information to city employees and commission members.
- Commitment to increasing communication and sharing more information.
- Council or commission members serving as liaison to other bodies, with the expectation that such ex-officio members will:
  —Improve communication between bodies.
  —Provide better understanding of different perspectives.
  —Ensure feedback on what has been done and why.
- Members of all commissions and the council urged to participate in all meetings.
- Opportunities, facilities, and activities for informal socializing to firm up the feeling of community.

Roles and responsibilities. Recommendations for roles and responsibilities cover a variety of concerns:

- Access to training and orientation about roles, responsibilities, and relationships with other bodies as new members join the council and new commission members are appointed.
- Management by the manager; policy direction by the entire council during open session and not by individual members.
- Clear mandates for all boards and commissions along with regular meetings to facilitate information exchange and communication among all members.
  - Committee structure and process that enhances communication because it grows out of a clarity of mission and roles.

Personal or political. Personal or political barriers are often the most difficult to address because personal agendas and egos get in the way. Many people recognize other people's personal agendas but will not acknowledge their own. Adopting a set of norms—beyond *Robert's Rules of Order*—to govern the behavior of members has been successful in a number of communities. The task often consumes another session or two but often pays off in greater personal comity in decision making.

Other recommendations speak to improving personal relationships as a means for building trust, respect, and understanding of alternative perspectives:

- Agreement on norms for governing member behavior.
- Improved personal relationships through social opportunities between and among council and committee members in order to recognize and understand personal perspectives and experiences.
- Continuing dialogue among local

officials to overcome distrust and facilitate understanding.
- Improved personal relationships among staff within the local government to get to know one another and learn what everyone does and how personal actions affect others.
- No TV coverage of meetings.

The final recommendation, motivated by the concern that television cameras affect the behavior of local officials as well as the public in attendance, comes up often although TV coverage is rarely suspended. Once local officials decide to broadcast their meetings, it becomes politically difficult for them to shut off the cameras.

Reflection. Local elected and appointed officials are on the front line, facing the numerous policy and budget problems of local governments. Together they also face another challenge—how to collectively make the best decisions. This is difficult at times because of:

- Constrained prerogatives (constitutional and statutory proscriptions).
- Limited tenure in office (short terms and term limits in some cases).
- Competition against each other (election campaigns, particularly at-large races, can pit challengers against all incumbents).
- Public negotiation and decision making (open meetings and freedom-of-information requirements).
- Judicial and electoral checks (referendum and recall provisions triggered by controversial actions).

Despite continuing emphasis on performance evaluation—of managers, staff, and individual elected officials (isn't an election the ultimate performance evaluation?)—seldom does the governing body have an opportunity for self-assessment and evaluation as a collective body.

Just as important, despite our use of the language of teams and team building, elected bodies are not natural teams. They are created by periodic elections, at times pitting members against each other. Turnover is frequent, motives are diverse and often personal, criticism is often seen as personal attack, and goals are often neither clear nor shared. Divisions on governing bodies often reflect divisions within the larger community. Thus, the characteristics of effective teams described in management research often don't apply to local elected bodies.

ROLE OF THE MANAGER
The process described here provides a mechanism for collective self-appraisal by encouraging members of a governing body and other local leaders to discuss the barriers that limit effective decision making and to identify strategies for overcoming those barriers. Although these barriers and strategies were products of discussions among local leaders in individual communities, together they also represent general challenges facing governing bodies and prescriptions for improving the collective decision-making process. In that sense, they offer lessons for other local officials.

Local government managers often play a critical role in spotting decision-making problems and in encouraging governing bodies to engage in self-assessment and improvement. Many of the workshops that prompted the comments related here came about through managerial initiative, and managers often play key leadership roles during the discussions because they are in the best position to see the range of challenges facing the collective decision process. This is a critical role for managers, yet it requires a great deal of courage because highlighting problems in the governing body to which you are accountable can be a recipe for conflict. **PM**

Joe Ohren, Ph.D., is professor and MPA director, Department of Political Science, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Michigan (EMU) (johren@emich.edu). He provides technical assistance to local governments through the Institute for Community and Regional Development (ICARD) at EMU.