

You Are Acting, But Not on Broadway

The phone rings. It's 6:30 in the morning after a late-night council meeting. "Dad, are you here?" asks your six-year-old daughter in a stage whisper. "It's the mayor," she adds.

Your immediate reaction is, "Hmm. Council never calls this early. Something must be up."

As you wipe the sleep from your eyes and try to sound as if you always are bright and cheery in the morning, the mayor says, "City council and the manager have reached an agreement that is in the best interest of the city. I've been directed by council to ask you to serve as acting manager until a replacement is hired for the newly removed manager."

Be Ready

For the

Curtain

Call

**Robert Roby
And
Jim Zelinski**

If you have found yourself in this situation, or if you ever expect this "acting" scenario to happen, this article is for you. Take a moment to think about how you might handle such an opportunity and use it to enhance your professional life. But realize beforehand that this "acting" job will change you and your family forever. Making this opportunity a positive influence on your life is up to you and only you.

How to keep a local government running is only one of a thousand questions you will find going through your mind. What role or style of management should you use? What legacy do you want to leave? Should you just hold things until the new person arrives? Or should you seize the day and try to change things to the way you always thought they could have been "if only you were in charge"? Are you interested in the permanent position of local government manager?

There is no time to think. Everyone will be watching to see what goes down in your first few days in office.

First Things First

Never assume that you, the mayor, and the council are thinking the same thing when it comes to compensation. It is important to remember that other issues exist beyond simply agreeing on a temporary salary. Do not forget the benefits, of which the mayor and council may not be aware. Managers know what these benefits are: transportation allowance, deferred compensation contribution, and so forth. The authors recommend getting an employment agreement to cover your tenure as acting manager. Consider the following provisions:

Ask that you be given the opportunity to return to your old job without retaliation upon the appointment of the new manager, assuming that you have performed at a reasonable level. At least, make sure to request that the mayor and council put in a good word on your behalf to the manager who eventually is hired. This will help ensure that, once you return to your original position, you will have a fair chance to prove yourself.

Negotiate a reasonable salary adjustment and benefits, including accrual of vacation time, deferred compensation, and car allowance. Do not forget to account for the long hours involved in doing two jobs.

Determine the appropriate course of action if the mayor and council should decide during your appointment that you are not meeting their needs. Do you return to your old job? Is the acting agreement null and void? If you are a candidate for the permanent position, do not forget to establish an option to renegotiate a contract if you are selected.

Communicate clearly that as acting manager you expect to assume all the authority and responsibilities of a permanent manager. This is an important point because it often takes nine months to a year for elected officials to decide on a new appointment. During that time, there will be hundreds of major decisions that will need to be made while you are the acting manager. For example, it's not uncommon to find yourself in an acting capacity but having to make a permanent personnel decision. So be prepared: it can and does happen!

You've Reached an Agreement with the Council. What Next?

Conduct an inventory of yourself and the situation. Meet individually with the mayor and with each councilmember in an informal setting, such as over lunch or breakfast. Bring a note pad because you will need to listen more than talk at these meetings. You will want to hear about and understand the issues of which, as the top assistant or deputy, you may not have been aware. Appreciate what the councilmembers have to share with you, and take the opportunity to tell them about those administrative or personnel matters that require confidentiality. Open lines of communication will be critical throughout your acting appointment.

Meet with key management and staff members. Listen to them, too, and seek their advice. Find out what they know and what you ought to know. Pay attention, and be aware of your top issues, trends, projects, and concerns. Request information in writing. Explain what your priorities and expectations are during your tenure as acting manager. Make sure that you consider the information gleaned from council in determining an appropriate match or balance between staff's expectations and council's. Few councils tolerate a "maintenance status quo mode" during an

interim manager's tenure. Be honest. If you don't have an answer, say so; don't make one up.

Write a memo to the mayor and council informing them of the actions and issues you plan to make your top priorities during your interim appointment. Make sure to follow up and to allow them a chance to give you immediate feedback. Work together to establish and meet expectations. Clearly communicate your expectations to the elected officials, to top managers, and to the entire organization. Communicate, communicate, communicate!

Recognize that employees will be nervous and uncertain during times of change. Information will help them understand and accept the situation. Tell as many people as possible what you honestly hope to accomplish. Share your vision with employees and with the public. Most important, be realistic and honest.

Decide what issues you personally need to be involved in and what issues others can handle for you successfully. Skills in time management and organization can go a long way toward making you successful. Establish yourself as a leader early on, and lead by example. Don't ask or expect more of others than you ask or expect of yourself. Be fair.

Don't Forget Your Employees

Employees are your lifeline to surviving the acting job. Say "thank you" a thousand times. Never assume, even for one moment, that you can do the job alone. Employees will support an appreciative executive, one they can trust and believe. Set aside the time each day to write a personal thank-you note or to make phone calls to a few employees. They will realize quickly that you are doing the jobs of two people, and you will find that a little acknowledgment on your part will go a long way toward gaining their support.

Morale will be a significant factor and will need to be enhanced during any transition period. Whether or not it was a priority before you became the acting manager, make it a priority by holding "no-agenda" employee meetings. This means that you'll go without a list of things to tell people; you'll go to listen.

Visiting employee work areas during regular work schedules can be effective. Visits might occur during police roll calls or the work hours of maintenance crews and recreation center employees, for instance. Keep to a simple question-and-answer format. This little bit of effort will go a long way toward keeping rumors to a minimum.

For those who have the resources, an effective addition to these meetings is the use of a video recorder to relay some of your messages. A simple videotaped message from the manager on specific topics can be beneficial in sharing information. Seeing the manager, even on television, gives the message a personal touch that does not come across in a written memorandum or an e-mail message to employees.

A tenure as acting manager is a good time to make some temporary assignments to others in the manager's office. Remember, employees in the manager's office have just undergone major surgery on their everyday office life. Use this chance to relieve the pressure on the manager's office while providing new career opportunities to promising individuals. Share the wealth. You may have to "let go" of some of your former assignments, but empowered employees will perform for you. Don't forget to reward those who successfully embrace the opportunity to join the "acting" team and broaden their horizons. A lunch with the boss or even bonus pay certainly will be appreciated when an employee has gone above and beyond the call of duty.

The Citizen Customer

Remember the people for whom you work—the citizens. Write at least one letter to or column for the community newspaper or the staff newsletter, introducing yourself and your plans while acting manager. If you have a government-access cable channel, consider doing a program for it. Possible themes include continuity, high service standards, and progressive management. Give citizens enough information for them to feel confident that the locality is in good hands and under strong leadership. This will help elected officials to see the evidence of professional management within the existing organization while they search for a manager. It also will give you positive exposure that can enhance your later effectiveness.

Also, reach out into the community by addressing civic groups. Civic organizations always need good speakers and are generally interested in the community. Contact the schools, and see if you can get time on the PTA's or other school groups' agendas. Such talks can convey that public management is indeed a noble profession, while at the same time giving the public a sense that everything is under control.

You Are the Chosen One

Do not forget that you were cast in this acting role for a reason. No, it was not a set-up. The governing body selected you to manage the organization while it recruited a new manager. They chose you because they believed in your abilities or because you had proven that you could handle tough situations. It is important that you do *not* set out to be all things to all people. Do not try to become someone other than who you already are; above all, be true to yourself, your values, and your professionalism. Nobody will buy your act if they are always wondering which "you" they will deal with next. If people do

not believe in you, surely you can expect failure.

Throughout your acting ordeal, your family will be the most important support group you have. Keep a balance between work and home. Talk with your partner, and decide how, together, you will keep your sense of humor. If you have kids, don't forget them; it's important that you find time for their needs. Don't let this period in your work life remove you from an important time in your children's growing up—you don't want to miss anything and regret it later.

Discuss with your family how you will handle those unexpected phone calls from the mayor, or how you will deal with something that appears in the paper about you or a decision you made. Explain what "acting" means and what your family can expect from you in the coming months. As with all your audiences, communicate daily with your family about your experiences in dealing with this latest challenge.

To Be or Not to Be—a Candidate for the Job

If you are not a candidate for the position, then it is reasonable for you to offer assistance to the council in its hiring process. As a top assistant or deputy, you can provide to the elected officials a valuable opinion on in-state candidates. Support the council in whatever way you can during this process.

If you are a candidate, focus first on doing a good job. In reality, you are undergoing a job interview each day that you serve as acting manager. Councilmembers, employees, and the community will be evaluating you constantly.

They Hired a New Manager. So What?

If you find yourself working for a new boss, treat your situation as if it were

a new job (only you don't have to move your stuff!). In one of your earliest meetings with the new manager, offer your services in whatever capacity or capacities are needed. Even the most seasoned local government manager has good reason to wonder if a former acting manager will have problems with loyalty under a new regime.

The best way to answer this unspoken question is to make sure that your actions support your words. It's your job to demonstrate your continuing worth to the organization and to the new manager. Be open and honest, and listen on each occasion when you interact with him or her. You were a professional before the council appointed you, and you still are one. Hold your head high, and remember that everything happens for a reason.

Life Goes On

Keep a sense of humor and perspective on the entire situation. Begin today preparing for that possible moment when you are asked to serve as acting manager. Mentally and emotionally, visualize yourself in the position; see yourself responding to any number of unexpected situations. Keep a focus on your basic principles, values, and personal strengths.

Whatever the outcome, the experience will affect you and your family. It may call for an unforeseen adjustment in your career path, but, most important, you can grow and learn from this experience how better to meet that next opportunity in your life.

Nine months later, the phone rings. Your seven-year old daughter shouts, "Daddy, it's the mayor. He says he has a new thing for you to do. He wants to know, 'are you interested?'" 

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ASC Conducts First On-Line Meeting

The door was closed and the shades were drawn, but that proved to be no deterrent to my tenacious boss. "Good morning," he said. "You busy?"

"Actually, I'm in the middle of a national committee meeting with 12 people representing 10 different states," I said.

"Oh, well, this won't take but a minute," he replied. And he walked in, sat down, and began the morning dialogue on the city's hot topics and current issues.

Now, one of two things was going on here. Either my comment about being in a big meeting was taken as totally sarcastic (after all, I was alone in my office), or my boss is an incredibly rude person.

Actually, there now was a third possibility. I really was in a national committee meeting being conducted on-line through the new Access Local Government (ALG) forum available as a joint project between ICMA, the National League of Cities, and Public Technology, Inc., on CompuServe. As chair of ICMA's Assistants Steering Committee (ASC), I was participating in the first fully electronic ICMA national committee meeting. Although we were spread across four time zones, all of us communicated by computer from the comfort of our offices, all for the cost of a local phone call.

One of the realities of this new method of conducting long-distance business is that the pace is slow. Slow enough for me to carry on simultaneously an interoffice coordinating meeting with my boss. He, by the way, while not shy about poking his head in the door, does fall somewhat short of being incredibly rude.

On-line meetings, however, do call for some different meeting skills and approaches. There is a weird, disconnected feel to it, until some interaction takes place and the content of the meeting becomes intriguing enough to overshadow the new methods. Here are a few

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