

The Job Can Be a Cold, Cold Mistress

Leonard Martin

Local government managers spend a lot of time working, planning, meeting, and worrying. We're in the trenches of deadlines and responsibilities, but we survive because our successes keep feeding our drive. Sometimes these successes act as smoke screens, however, blinding us. Sure, our work is important but is it knocking us off balance?

We usually don't think of busy people like ourselves as lonely, but most of us probably are. Our activities just drive it so deep we don't even notice. We may not have many close friends or free evenings to spend with our families. Sharing our thoughts, frustrations, and challenges with peers who are in the trenches with us can help.

I recall journeying 90 miles north to Columbia, Missouri, to participate in monthly meetings of the Mid-Missouri City Managers support group. Dick Gray, former Columbia city manager, had initiated the sessions, at which a group of managers and assistants joyously spent two hours over lunch comparing horror stories about the woes of our chosen profession.

Being an open person, I will share my story about what happened when I didn't look outside myself for support. Many readers might think I am writing about them.

Many years ago, I was lucky enough to be hired as an administrative assistant by Gerald Fox, who was the Wichita Falls, Texas, city manager. He was an inspiring mentor. From him, I learned about such elements of local government management as ethics, how to work with hostile councilmembers, how to delegate responsibly, and how to manage with a professional demeanor.

Jerry also taught some things by example that for some reason I chose to ignore. He tried to teach me that a manager does not have to devote 80 hours to the job, week in and week out, if the manager is organized and manages his or her time well. He attempted to show me the importance of maintaining a balance between my professional life and my personal life, and to involve my family in professional association activities. But I closed my eyes to these teachings.

His wife, Delores, devoted time to the partners and set an example of the importance of family involvement with the profession, but I closed my eyes to this lesson also. After all, I had received the "call" to lead the wandering residents of various cities in this great country down the path of great professional management. With such lofty ideals, all of my energy and attention had to be devoted to "The Cause."

After three and a half years as an assistant, my time had come to change the world. On a cold January day, my friend and mentor bid farewell to me and my wife (uh, what's her name? Oh yeah, Sharon), and my daughter, (uh, Mary, no, Michelle), as we left on a crusade to Arkansas, where I had been called to bring the good news of professional management.

Let me take you back to that time.

The Savior Arrives

When we arrive, I hurriedly settle what're-their-names into a comfortable home, while I settle into a creaking swivel chair in a tiny office beneath a condemned jail. We find that the people in Arkansas are a friendly sort and the beauty and recreational opportunities of the area are outstanding. . . but who has time for all that? I have a cause to pursue. Let the wife and daughter enjoy the people and the area.

I find a strongly supportive city council ready to improve their city with the help of a drawling Texan, who daily finds new evils of inefficiency that must be uprooted. With every council meeting, more change occurs, more efficiency is added to the organization, and more capacity is developed within the personnel. At the same time, more grumbling is heard among the old guard, because the city council and its new missionary no longer recognize the good old boys for special treatment.

By summer, the city is enjoying substantial progress toward improvements in services and management. Much of the credit for these improvements is attributed to the hard work and dedication of the city manager, who daily battles all sorts of villains and monsters that oppose total efficiency. Ever vigilant in his role, the manager never takes a day off or—heaven forbid—a vacation. Vacations are those two-week periods when uh, what're-their-names, oh yes, Sharon and Michelle, go home to Texas to visit family. This permits the boss man to become totally absorbed in the fight for justice without any needless interruptions, like a leisurely dinner with family.

Around this time, rumblings about changing the form of government are heard. The city council decides that an appointed board which “manages” the water and sewer system should be dissolved for such atrocities as keeping all funds in non-interest-bearing checking accounts and displaying total disregard for the good of the overall community in the management of the utility. Ultimately, an election is called to abolish the council-manager form of government.

A vicious campaign, fraught with lies and innuendoes, is waged against the existing form of government. Family tensions rise as my character, confidence, and ethics are openly questioned in newspaper ads. But I am too busy fighting the war to realize that an even more significant war is developing on the home front.

September brings a special election. The proposal to abolish the council-manager government and return to a mayor-council form wins by a 2 to 1 vote. The young city manager just suffered his greatest professional defeat but is too absorbed in his own life and career goals to recognize the devastation this event has had at home.

The new city rulers approach the manager with offers of employment to lead the new form of government as assistant to the mayor: “We hope there are no hard feelings. We know what you have done for the city and want you to continue, but we had to get rid of the mayor and city council to get our own people in. How about staying on? We'll even increase your salary.”

“No way,” I reply as I put stamps on the envelopes containing my resume.

The Savior Moves On

Within a couple of weeks, interview opportunities present themselves. Away the three of us go to visit Rolla, Missouri, which would soon become our new home. The spouse voices concern about the distance she is moving from her family, but the comments go unheard. “How can family even be a consideration when so much is at stake? We have a mission, or at least I do,” I think to myself.

A job offer, negotiations, and acceptance come within a few days, and the Arkansas defeat has been turned into victory with a professional promotion and the challenge of managing in a beautiful university city. Never mind the rumors that “Rolla is the fightingest city in Missouri” and “those people can’t agree on anything up there.”

Thanksgiving Day arrives, and the move is on: Never let a family-oriented holiday interfere with the profession. A couple of bologna sandwiches, and we’ll be all right.

The honeymoon in the new job is brief. Within six months, the new city administrator is stuck in the middle of heavy political infighting on the city council. To survive this situation, all my energy and even more hours are devoted to the JOB. I love it!

On the home front, guilt begins to set in. I offer to go out for dinner on Friday night at McDonald’s, but there is no interest from the woman I share a house with. When I stop by between meetings to get something to eat, a three-year-old greets me at the door saying, “Daddy, do you have another meeting tonight?” My thoughts: “Of course I have a meeting—I am the city administrator! Don’t ask dumb questions.”

I suggest to my spouse that she make friends in the community. She tells me that she does not want to make friends here because it was too traumatic leaving the close friends she made in Arkansas. Her attitude angers me. I tell myself: “She didn’t go through anything traumatic in Arkansas. I was the one who was assaulted in the newspaper and on the radio. I was the one who lost his job. She has no right to say she suffered in Arkansas.”

I notice that Sharon is becoming more irritable with our daughter. She complains of being ill a lot of the time. Friends visit from Texas, and they notice that Sharon appears somewhat withdrawn and no longer laughs. I notice all of these things, but I cannot spend energy worrying about them, because I have a battle to fight at work, which is more important than anything else.

Summer comes, and the other people in my house go home to Texas for a two-week visit. I dive headlong into work but subconsciously notice something different about this trip home. There are no calls from a homesick wife after a few days’ visit with the family. In fact, my calls to Texas go unanswered until late at night, when I find that they are having a wonderful time and needed this “vacation” badly. I am happy for them, but each time we talk on the telephone I find a more withdrawn and distant wife. By the end of the second week, I know that something is wrong.

On a hot Saturday in early August, I attempt several times (from the office, of course) to phone my family in Texas. At last the telephone is answered by a voice I recognize, but not by a person I know. In the early stages of the conversation, I realize that Sharon has not mentioned returning the next week. I ask, and she evades the question. With much anxiety, I say, “You don’t plan to come home, do you?”

After pushing the issue, the chilling answer cuts me like a knife. “No.” Her answer puzzles me. I cannot understand why she does not want to return to such a caring and lovable person. Finally, the truth comes out: “You don’t love me. You don’t love your daughter. You only love your job.”

Reality Sets In

Early the next morning, I leave for Texas. I drive all day to get there to discuss the situation with the stranger who is my wife. After a week of communicating for the first time in years, I recognize that I have become married to my job and the profession and have almost totally ignored my family. Since I am a public figure, the following Sunday’s newspaper carries a front-page article that I am in Texas and divorce is rumored to be imminent. I am soon to learn about divorce—city manager style.

We initially agree to separate, and I will move to Texas to pursue a job opportunity there. The mayor and city council are advised of my decision to resign, and a press conference is called. On August 16, our 11th wedding anniversary, Sharon and I decide that the situation is out of hand and divorce is the only answer. We are not enemies; we are simply strangers who have shared a house and finances for the past several years.

Friends and councilmembers persuade me to reconsider my resignation; I follow their wise counsel and stay in the manager position. Almost five years later, I remarry. My daughter visits me in the summers.

Lessons Learned

I am sharing my story with other professionals so that perhaps they can avoid the hard lessons I learned. I believe that my experiences are related to support systems. I could have avoided those mistakes had I kept the perspectives that Gerald Fox taught me years before. I do not blame the profession, I blame myself. My busyness filled my days but fractured my family.

Dedication to work is commendable, but it can breed extremes. Glance back over the past year and think about how much time you spent with your family and friends. Will they be with you when your career ends? Do your actions reflect your priorities?

Our profession is such that we can get so caught up in “The Cause” that we isolate ourselves. In my opinion, we too often ignore colleagues who can help us maintain a balanced life.

Through the loneliness and trauma of divorce, I learned a great deal about myself and about the profession. I came to realize that I owe a lot to the profession, but I do not owe it my soul. The profession can do more for me than I can do for the profession, but only if I keep my priorities straight and live my life with the proper perspectives.

I am an admitted workaholic and the profession is an important part of my life—but it no longer consumes me. I have learned to balance my personal and professional lives and find that I am a better manager for it. I have since enjoyed successful years in Edmond, Oklahoma, and am now serving in Carrollton, Texas. The scenery changes but the journey continues.

I get away from the job, and I share myself with my new wife, Sue (I remember her name). I also recognize the importance of her life and her business accomplishments and let her share those with me. I have learned to openly admit that her job is just as important to her and our family as mine is to me and our family. I also take advantage of the therapeutic value of sharing my frustrations and problems with other members of the profession.

I am proud of the active role Sue takes in my profession. She attends dinner functions with me and enjoys them, as do I. She is willing to devote a week of her vacation each year to attend my annual conference. Most of all, she has found the value of friendship with spouses of other local government managers.

The greatest hazard for me, and I believe for other managers, is the isolation syndrome. Subtly, we begin to believe that we are the only people with the problems of living in a fishbowl, dealing with councils, providing services without adequate resources—the problems, the problems, the problems.

I make it a point to chat frequently on the telephone with friends in the profession and attend area meetings. Their counsel gives me fresh insights and perspectives. I always come away feeling better.

When I view my situation objectively, I realize I couldn't be luckier. I have an eight-member city council that supports professional management and me. I have a good staff and am well paid. But I don't want to become complacent and forget about my friends in the profession who do not have supportive elected officials, who are poorly paid, who may be on the brink of being fired or, more commonly, may simply be professionally lonesome in an isolated town. I also don't want to forget the loneliness that new managers go through. This is especially true when they attend their first state conference and we do not make a concerted effort to bring them into the group and make them feel part of it.

Our support groups do not have to have formal meetings, but the friendships and common ties that we share in local government management are valuable. I remind myself that the weakest link in the overall support network is myself. Sharing ourselves at home and with our friends in the business can make the difference between a satisfying and rewarding experience and one that ends with frustration. The job can be truly a cold mistress. I know—I have been there.

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