
Moving Up

Dear eCoach:

I was assigned to Acting Director for the Community Services Department by my City Manager when the previous Department Head left in December. I have been serving in this role for over 3 months. I feel I have accomplished a lot and performed well. I am also confident that the CM is considering me for permanent assignment to the position but he is unable to commit due to overwhelming budget considerations and the need for direction from our Council. What more can I do to make myself irreplaceable in order to make this job permanent?

Acting Forever

Dear "Acting Forever":

First let me say 3 months is not forever. If you are doing a great job, one approach is to be patient. A more proactive approach is to come up with a plan for the City Manager to show how she or he can save money by appointing you and not filling your old position or at least how your department can provide the same level of service with one less person. I just don't understand the comment about "need for direction from the council." He or she should be telling the council how he will fill this vitally important department head position and still meet budget constraints (hence your plan that you will provide).

How to make yourself irreplaceable? You might try getting pictures of your city manager in compromising positions.....No, just kidding and seeing if you were reading my sterling advice.

The Kodak Kid

Ed Everett, City Manager, Redwood City

Dear eCoach:

I've been at one City more than 20 years. I moved up through the organization (promoted every few years) while obtaining higher education. I'm at a point where I'm very interested in moving to another City to broaden my experience. But I'm concerned at how my long term at one location might be perceived. I'm a valued executive team member at my current City. Any suggestions on how to counteract negative perceptions from being one place for so long?

Been There for 20 Years

Dear "Been There for 20 Years":

Why do you assume that working in one organization will be viewed negatively? There is an advantage to me for someone who has worked for several organizations but it is not a major advantage. It sounds like you continually moved up and during this time pursued your education.

Be very clear to point that out and to stress your varied experience. Don't forget to mention any leadership roles or experiences you may have in non-profit or other non-work organizations. While you are waiting for the ideal job to open up in a surrounding city you might think about asking your city manager to let you swap jobs with your counterpart in a neighboring city for 3 to 6 months.

P.S. Worrying is not helpful unless it makes you feel better.

Dr. Ed

Ed Everett, City Manager, Redwood City

Dear “Been There for 20 Years”:

Don't assume that working for one city for 20 years will be perceived negatively. Since your resume shows career progression within your organization, it's more likely that potential employers will perceive you to be loyal, hard working, and worthy of promotion. Additionally, long-time employees often have a depth of knowledge that can be desirable, depending on the needs of the organization doing the hiring.

I made the jump to a new city after 13 years of working for another one. In fact, my resume showed only two employers after 20 years of experience, but regular career progression within both of them. During the job interview, my track record of loyalty and dependability resonated with a City Council who had watched City Managers leave for new opportunities every four to five years.

You should be prepared, however, to articulate why you want to leave an employer who has clearly invested so much in you. For example, what new things do you want to learn that are impossible to learn where you are? What challenges are you looking for that you are not getting in your current position?

Ultimately, how prospective employers perceive you will depend more on your ability to communicate the skills, experience, and character traits that you've developed during your career—and their applicability to the new position you're interested in. Loyalty, stability, and reliability can be magnetic to potential employers, and a long tenure with one organization can be “proof” that you possess all of those traits, and more.

Good luck making the leap!

Cathy Standiford, City Manager, La Palma

Dear eCoach:

Could the panel give some input on how much experience a candidate should have (and at what levels) before realistically expecting to be considered as for a department head position?

Ready or Not?

Dear “Ready or Not?”:

Unfortunately, there is no one principle that holds true for every department head position, except that “it depends.” It depends on the size and complexity of the organization, challenges that exist, organizational culture, and hiring practices just to name a few factors that come into play. For instance, a mid-size agency would frequently require 10 years of experience that demonstrate increasing responsibility, with a good percentage of those years involving management roles. I would be equally concerned with the quality and depth of the experience in addition to the duration. You also want to make certain that your experience is relevant and transferable to the next job for which you are striving.

Personally, I always find it illuminating to learn about the interesting and varying career paths of department heads (or any executive level manager for that matter!). Don't hesitate to reach out and request “informational interviews” or talk informally with a few department heads at a professional gathering. You will appreciate the broad range of diverse, interesting and successful career tracks some people have chosen, and it just may shed some new light on the value of your own professional path!

Teri Black Brann, Executive Recruiter

Dear eCoach:

How can one best assess organizational fit during the selection process - which may consist of one or two brief interviews?

Is It a Marriage, or Just a Date?

Dear “Is It a Marriage, or Just a Date?”:

It's sometimes helpful to think of “organizational fit” as a professional marriage. After all, where do most of us spend the majority of our time? You have to take ownership for assessing such a partnership. So, good for you for asking such an important question!

Once you are offered the job, talk to as many people as you can, including the person who held the job before if that is possible. Can you visualize yourself working in the internal environment and with the community on a day-to-day basis? How will your style work with the culture and values of the organization? How can you grow and learn from this job and the people you will interact with? What will you be able to contribute?

If your interviews and comprehensive research leave you intrigued and excited, with a tinge of healthy anxiety, it may very well be the right time for you to walk down the aisle. If the experience and information you gathered does not inspire or energize you, makes you ambivalent, or makes you reach for the Alka Seltzer . . . consider it a nice date, thank those responsible for the courtship, learn from the adventure and move on.

Teri Black Brann, CPS Executive Search

Dear “Is It a Marriage, or Just a Date?”:

Don't even think you will get at this issue in your 2 or so employment interviews. First do your homework on the city by calling friends who work in or near the city and know its culture. Read newspapers articles over a period of time, and you will learn a little. Once you have been offered a job it is acceptable (at least for me) for the applicant to ask to interview several people in the organization to learn more about the organization. You will also learn a lot by having a long informal interview with your boss outside of the interview process and once the job has been offered.

Remember, the city is or should be doing two things in the whole process: 1) selecting the best person they can and 2) selling that person on the organization. There are some managers who feel that if you have any questions or concerns before saying YES then they don't want you. That is very short sighted and I wouldn't work for someone like that. I expect to hire STARS but also expect that I will have to sell them on the organization as they will have lots of options.

Good Luck,

Ed Everett, City Manager, Redwood City

Creating a Healthy Workplace

Dear eCoach:

How do you define a “healthy” vs. “unhealthy” organization?

Seeking to Thrive

Dear "Seeking to Thrive":

In my experience, “healthy” organizations have certain characteristics that make them exciting, fun and rewarding places to work. These include:

- An atmosphere of mutual respect, consideration, kindness and civility;
- A strong, mutually supportive partnership between the City’s elected officials, the City Manager, and the Department Heads, that trickles down throughout the organization;
- A clearly defined and articulated mission and values that are understood and embraced at all levels of the organization;
- A collaborative, team-oriented, highly communicative work environment where great ideas come from a healthy respect for different perspectives;
- An environment where people feel valued for their contributions, and are eager to go “the extra mile” for a customer or co-worker; and
- A commitment to “growing leadership” through mentoring, coaching, and continuous learning at all levels of the organization.

Although healthy organizations may not exhibit all of these characteristics, they possess enough of them to be highly desirable places to work. As a result, healthy organizations have less of a problem with employee recruitment and retention—people really want to be there!

As for “unhealthy” organizations, well, let’s just say they have little or none of the above.

Cathy Standiford, City Manager, City of La Palma

Strategic Job Hopper

Dear eCoach:

Is there a pervasive bias against people who change jobs on a regular basis? If each of the moves is strategic, shouldn't that be viewed as positive?

Strategic Job Hopper

Dear "Strategic Job Hopper":

It is understandable to want to advance in your career—and to want to do so as quickly as possible. But I’ve seen too many employees get so focused on making their next “strategic” move that they neglect to take advantage of the learning and opportunities offered by their current position. It takes most people at least 12 months to learn the nuances of their job and start adding value to an organization. For an entry or lower level employee, where there may be a limit to what can be learned, moving to a new job after only two or three years may be acceptable. But the more advanced you are in your career, and the higher up you are in my organization, the longer I’m going to expect you to stick around.

I’ll be honest. The reason for the pervasive bias against people who change jobs on a regular basis is not because senior managers think you shouldn’t be “strategic” about your career choices. It’s because we are concerned about your ability to be loyal, dedicated, and committed to us if we hire you. If I see too much job-hopping on your resume, I’ll want to know why. Did you have trouble fitting in, getting along with other people, or have discipline issues I’m going to have to deal with? Are you really interested in contributing to my organization, or are you just interested in what the title and salary will do for your career?

As a City Manager, it costs me time, energy, and organizational disruption every time I have to replace a good employee. If you have a history of switching jobs every two years, isn't it reasonable for me to assume that two years from now I'll be facing that same cost in time, energy and organizational disruption again? When I invest in training and developing someone new, I expect a reasonable return on my investment. And I'm more likely to get that from the "tortoise" whose career path is slower and steadier than from the "hare" who has hopped around.

Cathy Standiford, City Manager, City of La Palma

Dear "Strategic Job Hopper":

Your question really seems to be a statement that you think moving/jumping/changing jobs every 2 to 3 years is a good thing for you.

Let me ask you this question: Do you think it is a good thing for the organizations you have left? Your question implies that the answer should be based on how it affects the individual vs. the organization. I will assume your emphasis is more on the individual than the organization and will respond as to why I don't think it is good for the individual.

First, I will assume that we are not talking about changing jobs because you find yourself in a negative organization or working for an intolerable supervisor. I will also assume that we are not talking about your first or second job in the profession. Two or three years in your first job is fine and expected my most. Two or three years in your second job can be explained but beyond that you are missing something.

I assume you want to develop skills to move up in your profession. Yes, you can learn technical skills at a quick pace but what you should really be trying to build are skills in managing and leading. This involves getting things done and changing the work unit to make it better. It means motivating and coaching people you supervise. It means learning how to deal with tough employees and how to affect change without setting up resistance. It means developing trust and credibility as a supervisor. It means wanting to make the organization you are in a better place. All of these things require time, energy and commitment. It is very difficult to learn these things if you are changing jobs every 2 to 3 years.

The biggest mistake I see in some young managers/supervisors is that they moved up too fast and they didn't learn what they should have. I see folks getting in over their head and managing from fear and a lack of true self confidence. If you become a department head, assistant city manager or city manager and you haven't had a lot of experience and try to fake it, you are history with your employees as they will see right through you.

Lastly, good leaders/managers/supervisors are committed first to their organization and not to their own advancement. Your employees will know very quickly if you are mainly concerned about yourself and not them or the organization. You should always be thinking about where you want to end up and how to get there, but the best way accomplish your career objectives is to be a great manager/leader where you are.

It is in your best interest to stay on jobs long enough to learn all that is possible and to have as many experiences as possible and worry about your folks and the organization. The rest will take care of itself.

Ed Everett, City Manager, Redwood City

Hopefully New Assistant City Manager

Dear eCoach:

City managers emerge from various career paths. What government positions/experiences are most attractive when recruiting an assistant city manager? It seems that some common backgrounds are work in economic development, budget, and departmental leadership. Also, how important is private industry experience?

Hopefully New Assistant City Manager

Dear "Hopefully New Assistant City Manager":

First, let me say I am not a big fan of having an Assistant City Manager.

Redwood City is a city of about 80,000 and I rotate my department heads into the assistant city manager position each year. They keep their existing department head job and get 10% additional pay because they are my assistant. My experience is that many Assistant City Managers are significantly under utilized. That being said, what would I look for in an Assistant?

I would not be focused on folks only coming from a particular position or technical skill set unless I was narrowly defining the job of the Assistant. I would like my assistant to have been a department head as they must deal with department heads all the time and there is nothing like knowing what the pressures and stresses of that job are. I would be more interested in someone with a variety of experiences vs. someone who had many years of experience but only in one area. At the assistant level, I am more interested in someone who has emotional intelligence, lots of initiative, creative problem solver, works collaboratively, communicates well, and motivates folks than someone who has specific experience in economic development, budget, etc. Those are skills that a sharp person can quickly learn if they have the above mentioned attributes. Experience in the private sector I always find interesting and is part of someone having a variety of experiences.

Good Luck in your job hunting.

Ed Everett, City Manager, Redwood City

Getting Your Just Desserts

Dear eCoach:

I work for a manager (supervisor) that will not give me credit for the work that I complete. He takes the information I produce and uses it to impress the City Manager and Council without any recognition of my work. When I ask him to at least acknowledge the staff's role in the work product he tells me that I am paid to work and that should be reward enough. He further tells me that he is the one who is responsible for the end product and will therefore take the credit since he will have to take the blame if we mess up. He then gently reminds me that he had my job for 10 years and it was the same way before and he sees no reason to change. I enjoy my job here in the City and want to continue working here, but I need to find some way to be recognized for the hard work I do so I can advance in my career. Can you help me?

Robbed of Recognition

Dear "Robbed of Recognition":

First let's be clear that the supervisor you describe exhibits serious insecurities and control issues. So, what to do about this? The basic truth is people don't change significantly. Thus, don't waste you time thinking of ways to get your supervisor to change. It sounds like you feel good about the organization so you should spend your time figuring out how to move within the organization. You need to find a good manager in the city who you know and respect and ask him/her to be your

mentor or coach. Work with this person to develop a plan for moving within the city and don't waste a minute on figuring out how to overcome your supervisor's major shortcomings.

Ed Everett, City Manager, Redwood City

Dear "Robbed of Recognition":

Assuming that you are truly being objective about your supervisor's habit of taking credit for your work, I agree that this must be frustrating. You may have visions of taking a ceremonial bow during Council meetings when your reports are presented; however, we all know that this is not a mature or effective way of handling the problem. Nor is it advisable or professional to circumvent your supervisor by advising the City Manager/Council that it was actually your work. Remember, they know that your supervisor has staff and that he can't possibly do all the work himself.

Clearly, you have attempted to talk to your supervisor in order to convince him that sharing the glory is a wise practice for a manager. I would also assume that you have attempted to remind him of how he felt years ago when he was in a similar position. I would suggest if you really enjoy your job and want to continue working there, that you continue to work in a supportive manner to your supervisor. I would also suggest that you find other special project areas or committees within the organization where you can exhibit your abilities in order to be recognized. Most importantly, learn from this experience and don't make the same mistake with your subordinates years from now.

Bobbi Peckham, Peckham & McKenney

Building Your Career

Dear eCoach:

Which is the better to get an MBA or an MPA?

To MBA or MPA?

Dear "To MBA or MPA?":

Whether or not a MBA or MPA is "better" to obtain depends on the kind of position you are looking for. Traditionally City Managers and many Department Heads have MPAs. But as the talent pool of professionals continues to shrink (due to demographics and a variety of other factors), City Councils and City Managers have become more open to hiring professionals with MBAs—or even other types of graduate degrees—as long as they have good experience that directly pertains to local government. According to a survey of executive recruiters I did a few years ago, it matters less what kind of advanced degree you have, and more that you actually have one.

What degree do I have, you ask? Well, I took the less traditional path and got an MBPA, basically an MPA and MBA rolled into one. My degree isn't necessarily any better, but it sure is a good conversation starter.

Cathy Standiford, City Manager, La Palma

Dear "To MBA or MPA?":

To MPA or MBA That is the Question: The short answer is MBA. There are two crucially important skills that most of us city managers didn't get in MPA and they are Marketing and Private Finance. Too many MPA programs spend time on budgeting, HR, and other skills that are better learned on the job and differ a lot in different organizations. MBA programs spend more time on critical analytical skills, and some very hard core skills like learning private finance. As a city manager you had better be able to read a pro forma that a developer provides you or you will have to hire a

consultant to do it. We in the public sector have never learned how to Market our programs or ideas and, hence, good ideas die.

Bluntly put most MBA programs are more intellectually rigorous than MPA programs. Now that I have angered a lot of folks, I will shut up.

Ed Everett, City Manager, Redwood City

Masters in Urban Affairs

Dear Degree Conflicted:

Whether or not a MBA or MPA is "better" to obtain depends on the kind of position you are looking for. Traditionally City Managers and many Department Heads have MPA's. But as the talent pool of professionals continues to shrink (due to demographics and a variety of other factors), City Councils and City Managers have become more open to hiring professionals with MBAs—or even other types of graduate degrees—as long as they have good experience that directly pertains to local government. According to a survey of executive recruiters I did a few years ago, it matters less what kind of advanced degree you have, and more that you actually have one.

What degree do I have, you ask? Well, I took the less traditional path and got an MBPA, basically an MPA and MBA rolled into one. My degree isn't necessarily any better, but it sure is a good conversation starter.

Cathy Standiford, City Manager of La Palma

Dear eCoach:

I have heard a lot about professional development for younger folks, and about the preparing the next generation movement. However, I work for a city manager who really doesn't value professional development and who thinks that to move up in my career, I have to "pay my dues." Should I start looking for another job? If so, how do I find out about organizations that do support next generation activities? I have heard my friends in the profession talk about the "best city managers." How do I find out who those managers are?

In Need of Help

Dear "In Need of Help":

You'll find that "boomers" are true believers of paying dues. Supposedly, younger generations prefer and, at times, expect instant gratification. Although I'm a younger baby-boomer, I believe that there are few professions where you don't have to "pay your dues" before you can get ahead. Paying those dues is how we all learn, and as we learn, we mature professionally. It would be helpful to me to know how long you have been in your current position. Not to draw a line in the sand, but most people haven't learned a great deal if they've been in their job for less than two years. You may think you've got it covered after six months, but I think that most of us would agree we were not able to accomplish much until a year or so into the job. Conversely, I think that after five years in a certain position, the learning curve begins to decline. Don't be too anxious to move up. Instead, learn as much as you possibly can where you are.

Now, let's assume that you're ready for a move up. Your City Manager still insists that you "pay your dues," and he discourages professional development. There could be a variety of reasons for this -- the City doesn't have the finances to support employee development, your City Manager doesn't want to lose you to another organization, or he/she has his/her head in the sand. Consider paying professional dues out of your own pocket and attending annual conferences using personal

leave. Network with other professionals on your own time in the evening from your home computer. And the one thing that your City Manager has absolutely no control over is what you choose to read. Read books in your chosen profession as well as outside your career scope. Read professional magazines and publications. By reading, sharing and networking with others, you will find that you grow tremendously. This is also a great way to learn about the culture of other organizations, if they promote professional development, and the philosophy of the City Manager. By doing all of these things, you will be able to take an objective view of your current situation and determine whether it is time to move on.

Bobbi Peckham, Peckham & McKenney

Dear "In Need of Help":

It can be challenging to work with people who have different values and opinions than you do on what it takes to build a successful career. "Professional development" is a nice buzzword that can take many shapes and forms. Some people think of "professional development" only as formal training, preferably at the city's expense. To others, "professional development" means time with a mentor or coach, or the availability of challenging assignments to develop their skills and experience. I'm not entirely sure how you are defining "professional development," in your question, but I must confess that I think "paying dues" by staying in a job long enough to learn everything you can from it is an important part of professional development too. I have come across numerous young managers who are so focused on what their next career move should be that they may not be getting everything they can out of their current job. I challenge you to not "throw in the towel" on your current position until you are absolutely sure you have stopped learning and growing from it.

Honestly, there may be plenty of professional development opportunities right under your nose. For example, to be a good City Manager requires some basic knowledge about all city departments. When I was an Administrative Analyst in a City Manager's Office, I asked my City Manager if he would mind if I spent some time in Public Works learning more about that department's functions--as long as I could get my regular assignments done. I "pitched" the idea that I could be of more help to him on certain projects involving Public Works, if I had a better understanding of the Department and its issues. He agreed, and I started spending a few hours every other week with the Public Works Director and other key staff learning about things like pavement management programs, the water utility, tree trimming schedules, capital improvement project planning, etc. I worked extra hours on my own time when necessary to meet my normal work responsibilities, and discovered that by being a little more efficient with my time, I didn't have to stay late very often. By the end of three months, I felt I had a better understanding of Public Works--and because it hadn't affected my work, my City Manager was open to letting me pursue similar learning experiences with several other departments. Sometimes the key to getting support for your "professional development" is to help your City Manager see what's in it for him or her.

If your frustration level with your city manager has grown to the point where it's affecting your relationship, it may be time to start looking for another position. The best way to find out about organizations that support "next generation" activities is to ask people about them. If you're a member of MMASC, MMANC, or ICMA you've already got a network of peers you can tap into. The Coaches Corner of the Cal-ICMA website (www.cal-icma.org) also has a listing of City Managers, Assistant CMs and Department Heads who have offered to be volunteer coaches. Chances are that these leaders are working for organizations with a variety of "next generation" activities. Finally, read professional publications to learn more about what different cities are doing. Good programs get bragged about!

Best of luck in your pursuit of professional development, whatever form it takes.

Cathy Standiford, City Manager, La Palma

Looking to Innovate

Dear eCoach:

I love the local government profession and believe in the ability of local government to make a difference. However, my city manager doesn't seem to want to try anything innovative or new. In fact, he seems very content to operate our city as an organization stuck back in the stone ages. I have suggested a number of small improvements that I have heard of other cities doing that make local government organization more responsive and more effective and more efficient. But every time I suggest something new, I get put down. I'm getting depressed and am starting to lose my faith in the ability of government to respond to a changing world. What can I do?

Losing Faith

Dear "Losing Faith":

I am indeed sorry you are stuck with a status quo defender but all is not lost. Making a difference is why many of us are in this profession and moving on to another city is a very easy way to fulfill that feeling. But maybe for circumstances I don't understand that would be very difficult and then the question becomes what can you do about your situation. First you have to understand why some people are stuck in the status quo. It usually has to do with being insecure in one's job and or being very risk adverse (i.e. a huge fear of failing or making a mistake). It is not likely you will be able to change either of these attributes.

What you will have to do is take some risks yourself. Stop thinking you always have to ask for permission. I have a saying in my organization: "It is easier to ask forgiveness than to ask for permission". No I am not suggesting you do something radical without asking for permission but you can take one of your ideas and do a very small "pilot test". Take one of your ideas that has a very high likelihood of success and get with several other folks and just try it. The risk is if it doesn't work your manager will be unhappy but since it is a pilot and small the impact won't be to great. However, let's assume it works and people like it than it is really easy to sell it organization wide. Give your manager credit for the test and he/she might be more willing to accept the next time you try other small "pilot tests" without "permission".

Making a difference takes courage and entails risk taking so that is exactly what you have to do with your manager. If you believe you must ask "permission" it suggests to me you are not willing to take a risk yourself. Get rid of the "permission" barrier and try small changes and build from there. Good Luck

Ed Everett, City Manager, Redwood City

Dear "Losing Faith":

First of all, make sure your ideas are supported by solid data and information that conveys results and success in other jurisdictions. Try approaching a department head or someone "closer" to the city manager who may be able to sell your idea better than you can at this point. (Remember, you are actually more interested in making a difference than getting the credit for now). Another strategy would be to collaborate on your ideas so that you are proposing change as a group.

Regardless, don't let your manager's resistance to innovation impact you encouraging and rewarding innovation among your subordinates. If working through others doesn't get your ideas sold and your ideas are fully substantiated and supported by others, keep your faith and set out for greener pastures. There are plenty of organizations hungry for energetic and creative talent who are eager to make a difference.

Teri Black-Brann, CPS Executive Search (formerly Shannon Executive Search)

Fretting Over the Future

Dear eCoach:

I've really enjoyed working in the local government profession, and have appreciated the next generation activities. However, I've realized over the past couple of years that I do not want to be a city manager in the future. I think I do a much better job working behind the scene and would like the opportunity to work as an assistant city manager or a department head. However, I've run into two problems. First, it seems to me that a lot of assistant city managers get into that position and never leave, which blocks a lot of professional development opportunity for folks such as myself. How can I get the experience I need to reach that level if there are so many "#2's" that never move? Secondly, I get the feeling from many programs that because I don't want to be a city manager, there must be something wrong with me. Is that the case?

Feeling Inadequate

Dear "Feeling Inadequate":

Yes there is something wrong with you and it is a new disease called "Yikesphobia". The symptoms are: heart palpitations, sweaty palms, and a constant need to duck one's head. The good news is that this affliction is not fatal or permanent. It is not yet a pandemic but is spreading rapidly. There is a cure but the patented drug is owned by one of our big drug companies and not covered by your medical plan.

So let's talk about your circumstance since you can't take the drug.

First off, I would suggest you not make a decision at this time whether you want to be a city manager or not. You really need to be a department head and or an assistant city manager for 4 to 5 years or more and then decide whether you would want to be a city manager. I can assure you that as you get more experience and as you age and your personal life changes you might (not necessarily) see this decision in a different light. Making a decision at this later time is more realistic and you will make a better decision at that time.

Now let's address whether you become an assistant or department head.

My personal belief is it is better to become a department head and then assistant or if you were to be cured of "Yikesphobia" jump directly to city manager. I believe a department head position is a more interesting position than an assistant city manager position and it is a better training ground for city manager than being an assistant city manager.

So how do you become a department head? A large number of department heads (probably assistant city managers as well) will be retiring in the next 5 to 7 years. You need to position yourself as a division head with 3 to 4 years experience ready to step up to a department head. It is probably easiest to do this within your existing city as you are well known and I hope a real star. Talk to a department head you respect and know well and use him/her as a mentor/coach to obtain a division head position and ultimately department head position.

Let me provide you with one more piece of advice. Wait until you are older, more experienced more mature and more self-confident to even think about being a city manager. Many of my generation become a city manager at a fairly young age and hence have been city managers for a long time. In retrospect I am not sure that is the best approach. If we had spent more time being div/dept heads and or assistants we would have known more when we became managers and wouldn't have been managers for such a long time which over time can burn you out.

Good luck on your journey. An old guy,

Ed Everett, City Manager, Redwood City

Dear "Feeling Inadequate":

Congratulations! You have accomplished more than the majority of professionals in determining what you love and where your proficiencies reside. What's wrong with that? You'd only be setting yourself up for disappointment and failure otherwise! While it may seem like #2 positions are locked up, we have seen an increasing number become vacant over the past year. In addition, we have never experienced as many department head openings as we have in recent past. The statistics tell us that this will continue to be the case for the foreseeable future. While ACM positions remain highly coveted, I would encourage you to keep your options open. Don't rule out becoming a city manager prematurely. Secondly, consider a #2 position in a county or perhaps in a department of a significantly larger organization. There will be plenty of opportunities from which to choose. The bottom line is . . . don't feel inadequate. There's nothing wrong with having a clear sense of purpose and passion.

Teri Black-Brann, CPS Executive Search (formerly Shannon Executive Search)

Finding a Way from MPA to City Manager

Dear eCoach:

What kind of career track should a recent MPA graduate (with no management experience) take to ultimately obtain a city manager position?

Looking for a Path

Dear "Looking for a Path":

There is no singular career track--City Managers often move up from different paths. There are certain skills, which are critical to be considered a viable City Manager candidate. But there are lots of different ways to obtain those critical skills. While some people have had success spending their entire career in a City Manager's Office, others report challenges in getting enough line authority (i.e., direct supervision) experience in taking that path. I believe that having direct experience in several different City departments has made me a more rounded City Manager. So, here are some suggestions, based upon my own personal experience.

Try to get a job as a Management Analyst in a City. This is an entry-level, professional position that may be either within a specific City Department or the City Manager's Office. It will allow you to get some experience and exposure to how cities operate--and ultimately may provide you with opportunities to do projects with/for other departments as well. Seeking out (or volunteering for) projects that allow you to work with people from other departments and perhaps even direct their work, will help you prepare for a supervisory position, which should be your next step. The personnel side of leadership is an important critical skill, as is being able to understand and manage a budget. Supervisor and Division Manager positions offer opportunities to work on both of those skill sets. When you've mastered that, begin looking at Department Director positions, based upon your personal interests, i.e. Human Resources or Public Works or Community Development, etc. The next step from there is to pursue an Assistant or Deputy City Manager title, which could involve retaining the responsibilities of the Department Director. And then, once you've learned all you can at that level, the final step is to pursue City Manager opportunities, seeking out communities that need your set of skills and strengths.

Throughout your career, I would encourage you to seek out mentors and coaches to assist you in your professional development. I know that they've been invaluable to me and my career. I would

also encourage you to try to work in the best possible city you can. It's important to learn good practices and habits, not bad ones!

For more specific information on critical skill competencies, what kinds of experience Councils tend to look for, and possible career paths, you may want to check out Chapter 6 of the Preparing the Next Generation Resource Guide, entitled "Getting Past the Paper Cut: How to Land your First City Manager or Assistant City Manager Job." It contains information, which may be of help regardless of where you are in your career, and it's downloadable for free from the Cal-ICMA website (www.cal-icma.org).

Best of luck!

Cathy Standiford, City Manager, La Palma

Connecting with Recruiters

Dear eCoach:

What's the best way to set up appointments to review my resume with recruiters?

Seeking Feedback

Dear "Seeking Feedback":

The most effective way to get resume review time with a recruiter is to send them an e-mail with your resume attached requesting assistance and 15-20 minute phone appointment for a feedback discussion. You are far more likely to get a response from a resume, rather than a "blind" phone call. Most recruiters are extremely busy and travel quite extensively, so sending your resume and request via e-mail provides us with valuable information and allows us some flexibility in being able to respond to potential candidates.

Teri Black-Brann, CPS Executive Search (formerly Shannon Executive Search)