



# PM

PUBLIC MANAGEMENT



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and Beyond **10**

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## ELEVATING OUR PROFESSION

**Jim Schutz**  
City Manager  
San Rafael, California

MAY 2022  
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# ICMA

International City/County  
Management Association

# Right, Wrong, or *Just Blurry?*

Tales from the field with **advice** on achieving ethical outcomes

BY MARTHA PEREGO, ICMA-CM

**In this lightning-paced world,** premium is placed on the leader who quickly and astutely assesses the lay of the land, sees beyond this terrain, and makes that decisive call. Acting independently of their team, they have a certainty, perhaps mixed with a tinge of hope, that they made the right call.

Leading a class focused on developing high-performing leaders, a sage teacher once reminded students that “hope is not a strategy.” The decisions that produce the best outcomes are based not on the hope of one person’s prowess or intellect. The best outcomes are based on values, data, an organizational culture that encourages and hears all points of view, and a clear objective understanding of the problem to be solved. Plowing forward solely based on your intuition, intellect, or experience is not sufficient.

How does this relate to ethics? The same principles that you use to lead a high-performing organization should be applied to resolving the ethical issues you face daily. Begin first with values. What are your personal values? What are the organization’s values? What are the values of this profession? How and when do they align? How and when do they conflict? What will you do when faced with

**Seeking an outside opinion when dealing with an ethical dilemma is critical to reaching a good outcome.**

a situation where your personal values conflict with the profession’s standards or your employer’s?

Trained up in a profession with a culture that espouses “good leaders have all the answers,” you may be very reluctant to reach out for advice. That culture is pervasive with leaders at all levels of local government. Seeking an outside opinion though when dealing with an ethical dilemma is critical to reaching a good outcome. In the middle of a vortex of values, those all-too-common factors of emotion, self-interest,

or bias may “deep six” your objective thinking.

This is why ICMA offers confidential ethics advice to members. At times, we are a sounding board to vet a well-thought-out approach. At other times, the situation is so new to the landscape, we work the problem with the member, peeling back the onion so to speak to identify all the layered ethical issues. That happens more often than you would imagine. Consider that even seasoned individuals were dealing with their first global pandemic and the thorny ethical challenges it presented.

Here are situations where members sought advice on applying the values of this profession to their daily life.



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# ICMA

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**ICMA**  
**Creating and Supporting Thriving Communities**

ICMA’s vision is to be the leading association of local government professionals dedicated to creating and supporting thriving communities throughout the world. It does this by working with its more than 12,000 members to identify and speed the adoption of leading local government practices and improve the lives of residents. ICMA offers membership, professional development programs, research, publications, data and information, technical assistance, and training to thousands of city, town, and county chief administrative officers, their staffs, and other organizations throughout the world.

**Public Management (PM)** aims to inspire innovation, inform decision making, connect leading-edge thinking to everyday challenges, and serve ICMA members and local governments in creating and sustaining thriving communities throughout the world.



All the inquiries we field are confidential. Some small details may be changed to preserve that confidentiality. If you read this and think, “wow, they are talking about my situation,” please know that for every scenario described here, it’s not the first time that someone asked the question.

### Vouching for a Former Elected Official

A former commissioner who still lives in the county reached out to the current county manager to ask for a professional reference. The manager had a productive and friendly relationship working with the commissioner over a span of two terms in office. She was impressed with the commissioner’s work ethic and ability to park the politics to meet the community’s needs. The commissioner is applying for an

administrative position with a university (not located in the county) and feels like his policy and community engagement work as an elected official would be relevant. Before saying yes, the county manager wanted to explore the ethical implications.

Since this is coming from a former elected official, the manager will dodge the hazard of doing something for one elected official that creates the appearance of preferential treatment. A manager who is viewed as aligned with a subset of the governing body or too friendly with an elected official runs the risk of having that perception damage an effective working relationship with the body. Again, not an issue here since this is a former elected official making the request.

Next, the manager needs to evaluate whether they can be truthful and accurate in describing the individual’s work on the commission. That should be the standard for all reference letters, but even more important for a manager commenting on the work of a former commissioner. If the manager is confident that this endeavor will not stray into a work of fiction, then it is fine from an ethics perspective to write the letter. While the letter will describe the nature of how they came to work together, the manager should not leverage his or her office or the influence of the county in doing so. Use personal stationary (or email) making it clear that you offer these comments as a private individual.

While this scenario may clearly land on the “right” side of the ethical spectrum, consider where a slight change in the letter’s purpose may leave you. The former commissioner needs a character reference for his next appearance before the parole board. An extreme lapse in judgment managing his personal business resulted in a criminal conviction for racketeering and tax evasion. Would you stake your reputation on an individual who is professing remorse and seeking redemption? What steps would you take to ensure that is the case? Does the circumstance of the letter even matter if you can be truthful in your comments?

### My Spouse: Candidate for Elected Office

After decades of volunteer service to the community, the city manager’s spouse is considering a run for the state legislature. The spouse is very well known in the city and broader region. Her resume of service includes school committees, Rotary, and regional library board. She is a perennial volunteer for other worthy causes. Service is in her DNA.

While she feels very effective in her service, she never really considered whether she would be more so serving as an elected official. The question is front of mind with the recent announcement that the longtime incumbent for the state district is retiring. As a political novice, she would

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**In the coming months, this column will continue to explore the real-world scenarios that members pose, along with our best advice to ensure an ethical outcome.**

never enter the race against an incumbent with a track record and funding. But now, the field will be wide open.

The ICMA Code of Ethics only applies to members. That said, if she decides to run, this will have an impact on her spouse, his role as city manager, and his ethical obligation to be nonpartisan and disengaged from electoral politics. What steps should he take?

Not overwhelming in numbers, but there are city and county managers, along

with other local government staff, whose spouses serve in elected roles as judges and state representatives. They also serve on city councils and county commissions. The latter is okay from an ethics perspective if they do not serve on the governing body that employs their spouse as manager or the organization where their spouse works. That scenario presents a conflict of interest that cannot be overcome.

To ensure that they stay on the right side of the ethical line, it's incumbent on the ICMA member to carefully consider their engagement in the campaign and, if successful, how they will continue to fulfill their role at work.

As a first step, once the decision is made to enter the campaign, the member should inform their supervisors. For a manager, that notice goes in writing to their entire governing body. For all others, it's the immediate supervisor. That notice should remind all that the member has made a commitment to avoid political activity that undermines public confidence in their work. It is critically important that members working in a local government be nonpartisan so that they can represent the diverse interests of the community, both in characteristics and diversity of thought on issues. Being nonpartisan requires members to stay out of all activity on behalf of candidates for elected office and that includes family members. You can offer moral support in private, but you should not play any public role in your spouse's campaign.

Should the spouse be successful in her campaign, this manager needs to think through the strategy for how the city will engage at the state level with their new representative. It may be that the manager will have other staff take the lead, create a team that includes more than just the manager, and/or engage the city elected officials to be the point of contact. All of those are just suggested approaches for consideration.

Over the next months, this column will continue to explore the real-world scenarios that members pose along with our best advice to ensure an ethical outcome. **PM**



## UPCOMING ICMA EVENTS

[icma.org/events](https://icma.org/events)

**May 11:** Leadership Development Program: 2022 Gettysburg Leadership Institute

**May 12:** Webinar: Beyond Pretty to Powerhouse: A Digital City Hall Revolution via Information Architecture

**May 18:** Free Coaching Webinar: Managing Council/Staff Relationships in an Election Year

**May 19:** Workshop: Leading with Inspiration and Influence

**May 26:** Workshop: Leading Through Change

**May 31:** Webinar: Asking Police Chiefs the Right Questions

## ICMA FREE COACHING WEBINAR SERIES

Complimentary ICMA Coaching Program webinars give local government professionals of all career stages the opportunity to bolster their skills and learn about new and leading practices, strategies, tactics, developing issues, and trends in the profession of local government management.

Participation in free coaching webinars also qualifies for ICMA-CM (Voluntary Credentialing Program) credit. Sign up your team, watch the event, and use our resources provided in the program handouts to have a post webinar professional development discussion.

Can't make a webinar? Register anyway and we'll email you a link to the recording. Join the complimentary Coaching Program email list to receive program news and information by sending an email to [coaching@icma.org](mailto:coaching@icma.org).

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Real talks providing insight about the experiences of marginalized and underrepresented persons in local government leadership.

[Access Recordings at icma.org/living-history](https://icma.org/living-history).

## VOICES IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT PODCAST

ICMA's Voices in Local Government podcast tells stories, inspires ideas, celebrates progress, and acknowledges challenges faced by local government managers and staff in serving the public. Upcoming episodes include regional check-ins, long-term investment initiatives, citizen and employee engagement, cybersecurity, sustainability, and more.

[icma.org/podcasts](https://icma.org/podcasts)

## WANT TO BE SPOTLIGHTED BY ICMA?

If you are an ICMA member, we want to hear what's new in your career or organization. All members are welcome to submit—from CAOs to students. Please complete the form at [icma.org/spotlight-members](https://icma.org/spotlight-members). Check out the May Member Spotlight with Ben Effinger, operations chief for the Public Service Division of the Los Angeles County Treasurer and Tax Collector, on the inside back cover of this issue.

**JUST RELEASED!**

**THE MEMBER'S  
GUIDE TO A  
CAREER THAT  
HAS UPS, DOWNS,  
AND DETOURS:**

**An ICMA Member  
in Transition Guide**

Task Force on Members in Transition  
2020–2021

**What's Inside**

- Preparation and Prevention
- Navigating the Transition
- Terms of a Typical Employment Agreement
- Warning Signs

Download the report  
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**NEW  
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**DETOUR  
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**ICMA Members in Transition Program**

Going into “transition” is a very difficult situation that all too many members face at some point in their local government careers. ICMA provides personal and financial support for members who have been fired, forced to resign or otherwise involuntarily separated. Remember that You are Not Alone. For more information about ICMA's Members in Transition program, visit [icma.org/mit](https://icma.org/mit) or contact [membership@icma.org](mailto:membership@icma.org).



# Regardless of Title or Form, Professional Local Government Management *Works*

BY MARC A. OTT

The role of the **professional manager** transcends politics and focuses on getting the job done.

**Reading the article,** “Authority Versus Power,” by Jason Grant, ICMA’s director of advocacy, sparked a memory for me. There was a time in my career when, after serving for several years as city manager and in other roles in council manager jurisdictions, I was offered a city administrator position in a community with a strong mayor form of government. I would be lying if I didn’t say I approached the position with trepidation.

From my first experience as an intern in the city manager’s office in Southfield, Michigan, I could see how the work that I was doing affected the everyday lives of people in powerful ways. As I completed

**Most of us have been faced with situations in our careers that are less than ideal. Those are the times when our profession sustains us.**

my education and continued on with my career in local government, I came to understand the differences between the forms of local government and ultimately became a strong advocate for the council-manager form.

As a number of studies have demonstrated, council-manager jurisdictions are less likely to engage in corruption,<sup>1</sup> are more creditworthy,<sup>2</sup> and are more innovative. So, in some ways, I felt like taking on the role of city administrator in a strong mayor city was like walking into the lion’s den. But this town happened to be the home of my alma mater and I felt a strong connection to it. The mayor was a popular and charismatic man. But I explained to him that I would be doing the job as I had always done it—by applying my professional knowledge and experience to the challenges in front of us. In addition, I explained I

would continue to subscribe to the tenets of the ICMA Code of Ethics, as well as the fundamental ideals of our profession. The mayor was fine with that and together with the council and staff we went on to accomplish important goals for the community.

The story does not end there. In the next election cycle, the mayor faced a formidable competitor who had served on the council. She soundly defeated “my boss” and I prepared for what I thought would be my inevitable termination, since I might have been seen as the former mayor’s appointee. However, that was not the case. The new mayor asked me to stay on, saying she admired my professionalism and objectivity in carrying out the responsibilities of the position, even though she disagreed with her predecessor on almost everything.

In the course of my career and especially in my role as executive director at ICMA, I have met many colleagues who have been in similar situations. We talk about how by conducting ourselves according to our professional training and in accordance with our Code of Ethics, we have been able to navigate some stormy career experiences. Most of us have been faced with situations that are less than ideal, where we might find ourselves somewhere in the middle, where perhaps the role isn’t as precisely defined as it can be in the council-manager form. Those are the times when our profession sustains us.

A few years ago, an ICMA member task force refined the core practices of professional local government managers. We are excited by the results of a recent survey that determined that those 14 core leadership and management practices resonate all over the world—even in places where local government is a relatively new concept.<sup>3</sup> They form the foundation of ICMA’s professional development programs and are integrated into everything we do, from the annual conference to our publications, and we intend to share this work more purposefully on a global scale.

Ultimately, what we all care about is quality of life in our communities. As Jason points out in his article, under the C-M form, all people, regardless of political affiliations, have equitable access to the programs and services offered by their local government. They are assured that professionals with the knowledge, skills, and abilities are running operations, working toward goals set by the community and elected officials. The role of the professional manager, regardless of the form, transcends politics and focuses on getting the job done. **PM**

#### ENDNOTES AND RESOURCES

<sup>1</sup> <https://icma.org/blog-posts/study-confirms-council-manager-governments-are-more-ethical>

<sup>2</sup> <https://icma.org/articles/article/professional-management-drives-local-government-efficiency-and-effectiveness>

<sup>3</sup> <https://icma.org/practices-effective-local-government-management-and-leadership>



**MARC OTT**

is CEO/executive director of ICMA, Washington, D.C.

## IS EVERYONE AT YOUR ORGANIZATION USING THE SAME PLAYBOOK?

The ICMA Ethics Center provides training and technical assistance services for creating and maintaining an ethical work environment for staff, leadership, elected officials, boards and commissions.

**Contact** Martha Perego,  
Director of Member Services and Ethics,  
at [mperego@icma.org](mailto:mperego@icma.org), 202.962.3668.



**ICMA** | ethics

ICMA Ethics Center  
[icma.org/ethics](https://icma.org/ethics)

# Equitable Economic Development

BY FRANKIE CLOGSTON, PhD

The CARES Act and ARPA present an **opportunity** for economic developers to catalyze growth and revitalization for businesses and communities of color.

**Economic developers are instrumental** in driving economic opportunities and in the distribution of wealth in our society, which makes them key to any progress toward equity. Those who work in economic development—at the local, regional, and state level in government and nonprofit capacities—deal with policy and practice that have real consequences and outcomes.

At their best, economic developers can help business owners and entrepreneurs of color gain access to capital, expand their markets, and weather short-term disruptions, better enabling them to build wealth.

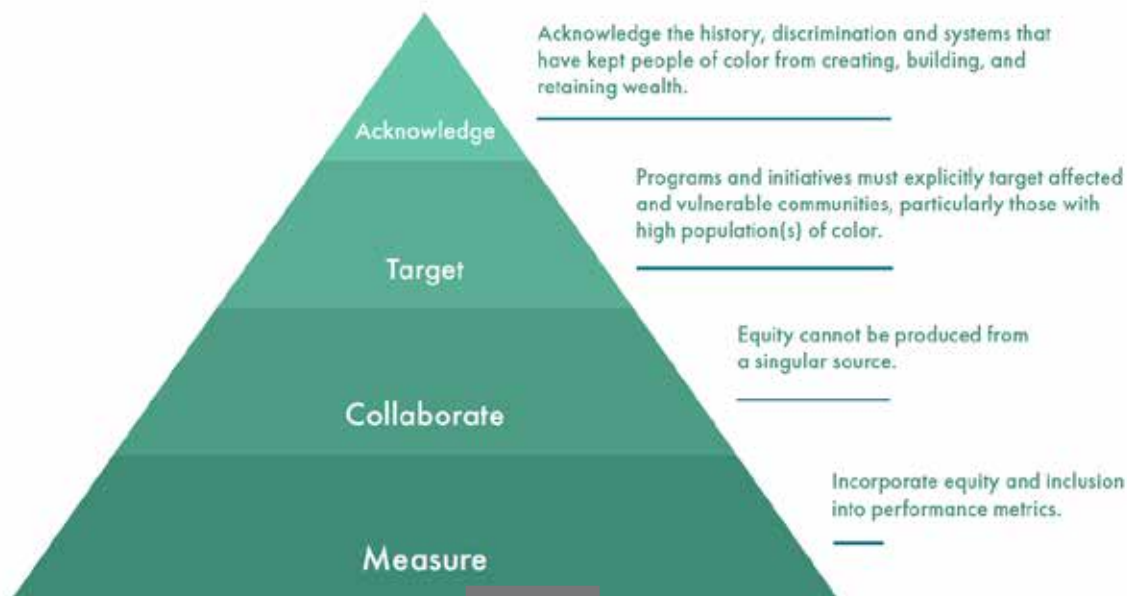
Yet as an industry, we also must recognize that economic development, practiced unfettered, has been associated with disparate outcomes for people of color. For example, business attraction and site selection practices

**Economic developers and their affiliates have the chance to use their same powerful levers of business and workforce investment to create more equitable outcomes.**

have fostered employment centers that are located far from communities of color and inaccessible by public transportation. Workforce and entrepreneurship training programs have not been effective in helping people of color thrive in high-growth fields. Business owners of color have less intergenerational wealth and more difficulty accessing capital, all of which has made success harder, especially in a time of crisis.

Now is the moment to act with intentionality and make a difference. Economic developers and their affiliates have the chance to use their same powerful levers of business and workforce investment to create more equitable outcomes. The federal government's historic investment of funding through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security

Prisms: Acknowledge, Target, Collaborate, Measure



**FRANKIE CLOGSTON, PhD**, is vice president of knowledge, management, and development at the International Economic Development Council (IEDC).

## As the country becomes more diverse, helping more people realize their full potential will benefit all Americans.

(CARES) Act and American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) presents an opportunity for economic developers to catalyze growth and revitalization for businesses and communities of color.

The International Economic Development Council (IEDC) recently published *A Playbook for Equitable Economic Development*, a research and technical assistance initiative that examines structural racism in economic development and promotes equitable practices and standards, both in the post-pandemic recovery and over the long term.<sup>1</sup> The playbook is a project of the Racism, Equity, and Economic Development initiative at IEDC, which has been made possible by The Rockefeller Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, the Surdna Foundation, and PNC Bank. The playbook exhorts economic developers to adopt equitable economic development strategies using four prisms: acknowledge, target, collaborate, measure. Examples of programs and practices operating in the sphere of equity are discussed below through these prisms.

**Acknowledge**—In 2017, **Prosper Portland** changed its name from Portland Development Commission to reflect its shift in priorities and goals. The aim has been to center equitable economic development after acknowledging the harm that past “development” projects imposed on communities of color. Under the rubric of blight elimination, some thriving neighborhoods that included people of color and immigrant populations were torn down, leading to greater disparities in employment, income, and wealth compared to white communities. Prosper Portland has gone on the record through a public equity statement to acknowledge past mistakes. Now, it incorporates more equitable hiring and training practices internally, and has committed to manage all external programs and investments in a manner that explicitly considers equitable outcomes.

**Acknowledge, Target**—In **Evanston, Illinois**, the city created the Local Reparations Fund to compensate Black residents for decades of codified discrimination. In 2021, the city’s aldermen voted to spend \$400,000 on a housing grants program that will issue \$25,000 grants to help with mortgage costs, down payments, and home improvements. Eligible for those grants are Black people who were residents of Evanston between 1919 and 1969, their direct descendants, or those who experienced housing discrimination due to the city’s policies or practices after 1969.

**Collaborate**—In **Philadelphia**, the Economy League, in partnership with the city of Philadelphia, developed a program to leverage the purchasing power of local anchor

institutions. Led by Philadelphia’s large education and medical institutions, the goals of the Philadelphia Anchors for Growth and Equity (PAGE) program are to create jobs and growth for local Black- and Brown-owned small businesses. By analyzing the purchase data of anchor institutions, PAGE identifies supply chain opportunities, reduces barriers by working with institutional procurement professionals, increases capacity by providing tailored consulting services, and collaborates with partners to provide access to growth capital.

**Target, Measure**—In **San Antonio, Texas**, Project QUEST promotes workforce opportunities in growth fields that focus on family-wage jobs and that are less subject to automation (such as health care and technology), with an intentional focus on Hispanic women. QUEST is a great example of an organization that knows how to measure its baseline and its return. From the 2019 to 2020 school year, gross annual wage for QUEST participants increased 200 percent to \$43,088. In 2020, it served 981 students, placing 272 of QUEST’s 285 graduates in jobs in their sector. In 2019, an Economic Mobility Corporation impact study found that for every dollar invested in Project QUEST, \$19.32 returned to the local economy. Over a 25-year period, QUEST’s total economic impact was \$1.67 billion.

**Measure**—The **Minneapolis Saint Paul** Regional Economic Development Partnership (Greater MSP) publishes a regional indicators dashboard each year, tracking the region’s economic, environmental, and social outcomes and incorporating metrics that measure diversity, equity, and inclusion. The dashboard presents the traditional metrics for economic development success (categorized by economy, business vitality, talent, education, infrastructure, environment, and livability), and adds a layer of demographic indicators that can inform equitable economic and workforce development strategies. In addition to publishing this dashboard, Greater MSP partners with the Center for Economic Inclusion to evaluate inclusive economic development, human capital, and transportation access indicators.

The COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing racial reckoning have led many Americans to feel greater urgency to address these persistent inequities. There is a growing awareness that closing the wealth and opportunity gaps makes economic sense, on top of the moral rationale. As the country becomes more diverse, helping more people realize their full potential will benefit all Americans. By addressing the barriers that people of color encounter, economic developers can encourage entrepreneurship, spur job creation, and build intergenerational wealth in a more equitable manner, with greater overall results for everyone. **PM**

### ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.iedonline.org/store/publication/a-playbook-for-equitable-economic-development/>

# Talkin' 'Bout My Generation: CITY MANAGEMENT IN THE PANDEMIC YEARS

BY JIM SCHUTZ

In the last few steps before reaching the podium, I wondered if each one of the several hundred attendees in the ballroom could hear the jackhammering of my heart. Could the kitchen staff also hear it, the lobby clerks, or even the hotel concierge out front?

A look at the challenges we continue to face, how we can cope, and where we go from here



As an introvert, I have to psych myself up in order to speak confidently to a large crowd and so I had convinced myself that I would be speaking on behalf of all Gen Xers about my generation's future as city managers. In fact, the song "My Generation" was on heavy repeat in my head that morning. And before Baby Boomers start getting too excited, it wasn't Roger Daltrey stuttering in my brain, but rather Gen Xer Billie Joe Armstrong of Green Day doing their punk cover of The Who's famous song.

It was 2013, and I was fortunate enough to be receiving the John H. Nail Memorial Award for California's assistant city manager of the year. In my acceptance speech, I had two intentions. The first was to heap praise on the city managers who came before me, and the second was to wonder aloud how my generation of future city managers could ever possibly live up to the accomplishments of prior eras.

I half-jokingly asked, "Will my generation's greatest

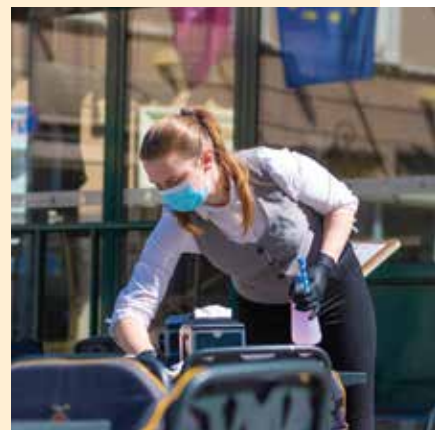
**This era of city managers likely felt the weight of so many seemingly intractable issues all demanding and deserving attention simultaneously.**

accomplishment be making a small dent in an enormous unfunded pension liability?" I look back at that speech now and think, "Oh, how quaint, how exquisitely precious that I was worried there would be nothing overly remarkable in store for the city managers of

my time." A few years later, it would be my turn as city manager, and it wouldn't be long after that before things really got interesting.

#### **The Pandemic Years**

No one has summarized the past couple years better than



pop superstar Olivia Rodrigo in her four-word refrain: “it’s brutal out here.” Granted, she was talking about life as a 17 year old, but the phrase generally rang true for her over 42 million monthly Spotify listeners, and likely most of the planet Earth. A few examples:

- The pandemic with its deaths, hospitalizations, social distancing, disproportionate impact based on race and income, vaccination and mask debates, isolation, and quarantine—*brutal*.
- The United States political polarization, being entitled to one’s own “facts,” extremism, conspiracy theories, the January 6 Capitol attacks, the backsliding of democracy—*brutal*.
- Climate change, weather extremes, pollution, sea-level rise, natural disasters. The seasons of winter, spring, summer, and fall being officially replaced with flood, drought, wildfire, repeat, sometimes all in the same month—*brutal*.

As city managers during these years, no matter which generation we hail from, we have all been profoundly affected by these brutal circumstances. This is a shared experience worthy of reflection. How many of you did one or more of these during the pandemic?

- Directed your emergency operations center.
- Projected huge financial deficits.
- Cut costs.
- Subsequently found some financial relief.
- Enforced controversial public health orders.

**“Don’t be afraid to pause and recognize that our roles are not to just shoulder 100% of the burden [but] to show up for our residents, lead our teams to come up with solutions, and execute on those solutions.”**

— CLARENCE ANTHONY, CEO, NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES

- Created remote work and new sick leave policies.
- Had good employees leave as a part of the Great Resignation.
- Took steps to support small businesses.
- Increased public communications to try to counter the spread of misinformation.

The shared list goes on and on.

At the same time, America was and is experiencing a racial reckoning. The murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and so many others brought Black Lives Matter and racial equity to the forefront of the country. The books on my nightstand rotated through *White Fragility*, *How to Be an Anti-Racist*, *The Color of Law*, *Between the World and Me*, *The New Jim Crow*, *The Sum of Us*, and more—all bestsellers. It was becoming clear to more and more people that systemic racism was woven through unequal access to housing; employment; education; social services; law and criminality; wealth accumulation; and financial, health care, and other resources.

Counties and municipalities responded by revamping policing policies and

procedures, creating equity audits and racial equity plans, conducting equity trainings, forming social and racial equity committees, reviewing roles like school resource officers and mental health liaisons, changing policies to increase housing affordability, joining the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE), and other actions.

I raise the above examples (pandemic, political polarization, equity, etc.) as an incomplete attempt to capture the “feeling” of the challenges and opportunities of the past couple of years. Local governments can be counted on to manage a global public health crisis, to respond to natural and human-made disasters, to do our part on enormous social and cultural issues, to solve budget deficits, to deliver and reimagine municipal services, to focus on cybersecurity and the digital divide, to reduce greenhouse gasses and adapt to sea level rise—just typically not all at exactly the same time.

And while community input is the heart of local government, that has sometimes felt different, too. At the 2022 Cal Cities City Managers Conference, there was a session called

“Defending Institutions: Promoting Civic Debate and Rejecting Personal Attacks.” The panel called for meaningful civic debate as opposed to what often passes for discourse in the comments of an online news story or on social media. Sacramento City Manager Howard Chan told of personal attacks at his home. Encinitas City Manager Pam Antil described many jurisdictions’ city council meetings as, “More often than not, people are coming in hot. Before we’ve even heard the staff report, overturned an appeal, or taken any action. They are coming in ready to fight someone.”

This era of city managers likely felt the weight of so many seemingly intractable issues all demanding and deserving attention simultaneously in an overall national context that was increasingly polarized and showing signs of “collective trauma.”

## Collective Trauma and Mental Health

*Collective trauma* is the psychological impact of a traumatic event or stressful experience that affects a group of people or a whole society. One example is the COVID-19 pandemic and its approximately six million deaths worldwide.

Not being a mental health expert, I can’t say what should or should not be considered trauma from a medical and psychological standpoint. However, looking at various approaches to healing in response to trauma seems applicable and even necessary as we think about the years after the pandemic.

One approach that speaks to me is from Dr. Shawn Ginwright in his article, “The Future of Healing: Shifting from Trauma Informed Care to Healing Centered Engagement.” While trauma-informed care focuses on the individual and their “problems,” healing-centered engagement deals with collective trauma, treats the root causes, and fosters well-being. He writes, “A healing centered approach is holistic involving culture, spirituality, civic action, and collective healing.” In other words, it is not enough to focus on oneself, but instead on the systems that need to be changed in order to allow everyone to heal.

Another way to understand the national psychological context is to look at stress. The American Psychological Association (APA) recently released its report, “Stress in America 2021,” and said Americans “remain in limbo between lives once lived and whatever the post-pandemic future holds.” Their research finds U.S. adults (particularly younger adults, parents, and people of color) have higher levels of stress than pre-pandemic times and are struggling with daily decisions.

The APA states, “As a result of stress, nearly three-quarters of U.S. adults (74%) have experienced various impacts in the last month, such as headaches (34%), feeling overwhelmed (34%), fatigue (32%), or changes in sleeping habits (32%). Millennials reported impacts of stress 86% of the time, closely followed by Gen Z adults (84%), Gen Xers (77%), with only 59% of Baby Boomers, and 57% of older adults reporting impacts.

So how does all this play out for city managers of this era? You (and your family and loved ones) are experiencing the traumatic impacts of the pandemic, while also being responsible for addressing the impacts on the entire community. The APA, in 2020’s “Stress Management for Leaders Responding to a Crisis,” warns stress can take a toll on executive managers in many ways, including:

- Decision making—reduced concentration, limited creativity, missed opportunities.
- Over control—becoming rigid, over-controlling, taking on impossible demands.
- Isolation—feeling isolated, a narrowed perspective.
- Sleep deprivation—reduces cooperation and awareness, increases selfishness.
- Negative mood—displays of negative emotion that reduces confidence and trust.
- Physical symptoms—negative health impacts from minor to extremely serious.

As one example of how this “feels” for city managers, this is an actual text I received in summer 2021, from a city manager who had previously been a police chief:

I’ve been shot at in my life and people tried to kill me a few times, but this is the most complex issue I have ever faced, and I’ve never been so stressed and under such intense public scrutiny. Literally everyone is mad at me right now. Just trying to keep swimming.

Clearly, today’s city managers have found ourselves at times in fight, flight, or freeze mode, but it is important to have better approaches in order to stay healthy and thrive.

### Coping and Thriving

National League of Cities CEO Clarence Anthony reminds city executives that they are on the frontlines of the pandemic, but they can’t neglect their own mental health. He says, “Don’t be afraid to pause and recognize that our roles are not to just shoulder 100% of the burden [but] to show up for our residents, lead our teams to come up with solutions, and execute on those solutions.”

In its “Stress in America 2021” survey, the APA calls out 10 steps that can help people face life’s uncertainties:

- Be kind to yourself.
- Reflect on past successes.
- Develop new skills.
- Limit exposure to the news.
- Avoid dwelling on things you can’t control.
- Take the advice you would give to someone else.
- Engage in self-care to increase happiness and equanimity.
- Seek support from those you trust.
- Focus on things that are within your control.
- Ask for professional help.

It’s impressive how much growth and healing can result from each of these steps. For example, regarding “limit exposure to the news,” University of California, Irvine, psychologist Dr. Roxane Cohen Silver notes too much media of any kind can undermine mental health



**Local government must be the accessible, trusted middle ground and a safe place for people to come together and find commonalities.**

and amplify distress. In one staggering example, she and her colleagues studied the Boston Marathon bombings in 2013 and found that people with the most hours of media exposure of the event had higher acute stress than people who were directly exposed to the bombings.

I'd add to the APA's 10 steps some of my own thoughts from the past couple of years on how to cope and thrive. First, in the office:

- Be aware that the pressure you put on yourself is usually the heaviest of all.
- Remember to celebrate small victories.
- Tackle important but previously unfunded community projects using the American Rescue Plan Act and other stimulus funds.
- Take on new community challenges that would not have been possible before if not for the increased focus on social and racial equity issues.
- Enjoy your colleagues and peers as human beings who are doing their best during difficult times.
- Be less emotionally attached to events you can't control.
- Focus more on maximizing your effort than how it will all turn out.
- Don't be emotionally pulled into the chaos or the antagonist of the moment.

- Check out ICMA's Equilibrium program ([icma.org/balance](https://icma.org/balance)), which offers free access to restoration tools and well-being resources.
- Consider a mini-sabbatical to model self-care and give permission for your employees to do the same.

And at home:

- Make a list of things that bring you joy and intentionally make time for those things.
- Make regular contact with your healthy touchstones, such as catching up with a friend or visiting a place special to you.
- Cut down on or eliminate social media.
- Read a novel.
- Spend time in nature and just breathe.
- Remember the constant interplay between gratitude and joy.

While many of the above relate to personal resiliency, city managers also need to foster the resiliency of the municipal workforce. Kaiser Permanente's advice is to prioritize a psychologically healthy workforce, be aware of mental health stigma and create wellness tools and trainings, and let your employees know it is okay to ask for help and then guide them to the right resources.



Photo by Clay Banks on Unsplash

To build community-wide resiliency, it is important to remember that while polarization and division seem omnipresent across communities, most people are not at the extremes and are interested in rational dialogue and learning. Local government must be the accessible, trusted middle ground and a safe place for people to come together and find commonalities.

After all, your local residents aren't likely to drop in for a visit with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi or Republican Leader Mitch McConnell any time soon, but their local elected official or city staff person is usually as available and easy to meet with as a teacher on back-to-school night, or as a t-shirt vendor at Lollapalooza, or as a bartender on a slow night, or, well, you get the idea. Local government is accessible.

Dr. Roxanne Cohen Silver recommends building community resilience by always being accurate and reliable, enlisting community support via strong social institutions, promoting shared values and community solidarity, bolstering confidence in trustworthy authorities, and encouraging positive community outcomes (e.g., altruistic behavior, social cohesion, volunteerism). Lastly, when noting the uncertainty and helplessness stemming from the pandemic, she says to "recognize that anxiety is contagious, but so is compassion."

### **The Soaring 20s?**

Is the pandemic—not to mention all the things I called "brutal" earlier—signaling a world spiraling out of control? We tend to think of civilization as almost on the



verge of collapse, says Harvard psychologist Dr. Steven Pinker, but people have been thinking that for centuries. “The world has been coming to an end for a long time indeed,” he says.

Pinker warns of getting sucked into negativity bias. In *Enlightenment Now*, he refers to economist Max Roser’s assertion that a newspaper could report that yesterday, and every day for the last 25 years, 137,000 people escaped from extreme poverty. However, it did not happen suddenly enough to make a news story. “Bad is psychologically stronger than good,” Pinker says, and things that happen suddenly are more often bad things than good things. Conventional journalism has been getting more negative over time and is “a non-random sample of the worst things that happened in the last day,” not an accurate view of the world.

Conversely, he shows the “objective state of the world has been improving” over the centuries and uses historical data to show such factors as global poverty, literacy, happiness, life expectancy, and work hours are all improving while war, famine, and autocracies are declining. He says, “the world, for all its troubles, gets better over time.” But don’t expect it to be a linear improvement. Pinker says, “Real historical curves have wiggles, upticks, spikes, and sometimes sickening lurches,” but progress endures.

But what about the today’s state of tribal political ideology and polarization? Pinker feels the tools of rationality can be taught and modeled to create new norms from the local opinion page to academic and political debates. He suggests the following: listen to contrary beliefs,

acknowledge uncertainty and not winning at all costs, have a problem-solving mindset and don’t begin by looking at who to blame, don’t base your argument on anecdotes, don’t confuse causation and correlation, stop politicizing science, and maintain a rational confidence in the world.

Cities and city managers have important roles to play in this new age. There are so many things getting better and moving in the right direction and we can rally around that.

What can this generation of city managers do to make a “Soaring 20s” follow the pandemic? It is time to double down on working with our communities to bring about

this period in time. Multiple generations are represented in the ranks of today’s city managers. But just for fun, is there something about Gen Xers that make us particularly well-suited for the challenges of these times? Did our “fend-for-ourselves” childhoods and propensity to be the overachieving underdog outfit us with great resilience and perspective to address almost impossible problems? Perhaps everyone born between 1965 and 1980 would agree.

One thing I do know is I could not have been more clueless about what was ahead for me when I warily approached that podium back in 2013. What’s in store for

## City managers of all generations are uniquely positioned to ignite change and build stronger communities.

more social and racial equity and justice, find the common ground, build trust, and make democracy work where it has always worked best—at the local government level.

The past couple years provide an unprecedented opportunity to create the new normal for local governments that discards the bureaucracy and frustrating systems of roadblocks and instead embraces taking risks and trying innovative things that would not have been possible only a few years ago.

### Next Generation

Though I’m a Gen Xer, I’ve primarily used the term “generation” loosely throughout this article to mean the cohort of municipal executives at

the next generation of city managers after this one? It is anybody’s guess, but one thing I can assure them though, there’s nothing they can’t handle together.

Oh, I was right about one thing at that fateful podium: San Rafael’s pension liability was only 64% funded in 2013 and is 96% funded today. But something tells me that is not going to be my lasting memory of my city manager generation. **PM**

### JIM SCHUTZ

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# Authority Versus Power

BY JASON GRANT

A KEY DISTINCTION  
IN THE COUNCIL-  
MANAGER FORM  
OF GOVERNMENT



**Professional management** in the operation and administration of government has shown to reduce the likelihood of corruption, improve efficiencies within the organization, and increase the likelihood of achieving strategic goals and outcomes. That is why ICMA advocates for professional management in all aspects of local government.

While professional management can be implemented in any form of government, the council-manager (C-M) form is a system of government that strategically limits undue political influence in the operation and administration of government while strengthening the power of the elected body who represent the interests of the people.

One issue that is often raised by those advocating against the C-M form and instead vying for elected politicians to serve as the chief executive of government (typically in the form of a mayor or county executive) is the notion that “city/county managers are unelected officials with the power to operate independently from the will of the people.” However, in a C-M system, the manager/administrator is appointed by the council (who are the elected representatives of the people) and is beholden to achieving their goals and outcomes.

If we understand “power” as the capacity to control government action, then the power of the manager/administrator is rather limited and the power

of the elected council/commission is significant under the C-M form of government. Specifically, the manager/administrator can be terminated at any time by the elected body if they believe the manager/administrator is ineffective or acting outside of the policies they have adopted. Contrast this to a mayor-council form of government where the elected mayor has the power to operate independently from the council, can choose which goals and priorities to pursue regardless of the will of the people’s elected council, and even has authority to veto a majority council decision. These are powers that a manager simply does not hold.

What is imperative to ensuring effective and efficient government operation then is not the question of power, but rather the question of authority. If we understand “authority” to mean the responsibilities given to individuals in order to achieve the objectives of government, then managers/administrators have significant authority within the constraints placed upon them by the elected body, though their power is rather limited.

In the C-M form, the elected body has the ultimate authority to adopt policies and establish outcomes to which the manager/administrator is beholden. The manager/administrator has no authority in establishing policies. Certainly, the manager/administrator offers professional guidance and recommendations to the elected body, but the ultimate authority rests solely with the elected body.

Similarly, the manager/administrator has ultimate authority to determine how government operates in order to achieve the outcomes within the designated policies and budget adopted by the elected body. Yet, the power of the council to hire and fire the manager ensures that

**The C-M form strategically limits undue political influence in the operation and administration of government while strengthening the power of the elected body.**





the manager/administrator is held accountable for achieving the goals and outcomes established by the elected body. This separation of authority *requires* collaboration between managers/administrators and the elected body.

Despite not having authority in determining policy decisions, managers/administrators have professional knowledge and experience in how policies might impact the community. Councilmembers rely upon that expertise to help shape, strengthen, and inform their decisions from the dais.

## Policy and administration are not separate functions of government with hard lines between elected leaders and professional managers.

Likewise, elected officials have unique perspectives and a clear understanding of the needs of their constituents. They serve on local and regional commissions and committees and have insights into the types of policy decisions that may be effective. They have their own professional backgrounds and are a valuable resource to help inform operational and administrative activities.

And so, professional managers and elected officials work together to identify the needs of the people, set goals, and develop strategies to address those needs. In this way, policy and administration are not separate functions of government with hard lines between elected leaders and professional managers. Nor is administration and policy a separation of powers. Rather, the council-manager form of government recognizes the power of the people rests in the hands of their elected representatives and should not be divided if government is to best serve the needs and interests of all people. Instead, the final *decision-making authority* is divided between administration and policy to ensure that government is effective, efficient, and equitable for all.

Generally, the manager/administrator and the elected

body work collaboratively and are in agreement in the path forward. However, there are times when the professional recommendation of the manager/administrator and the elected officials' recommendations or preferences are in conflict. These moments of conflict are why the delineation of authority is imperative.

Because the goals of government must align with the political will of the people, the elected body must have final say on what the policy and outcomes will be. Yet, the administration of government is about achieving those outcomes, and the manager/administrator is evaluated based on the ability to achieve the goals and outcomes of the elected body. They are hired to perform the duties set forth by the elected body, and they can be fired at any time if they fail to achieve the expected results. And so, the manager/administrator must have authority to determine how to operate government so that they can be held accountable for the outcomes.

In the end, the C-M form of government ensures a strong representative democracy where all people, regardless of political affiliations, have equitable access to the programs and services offered by their

local government. They are assured that a professional with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to achieve desired outcomes is responsible for the day-to-day operations.

At times, there will be disagreement between the elected body and the manager/administrator. In those moments, the *authority* granted to the manager/administrator and the elected body respectively allows a more efficient and effective operation of government. Ultimately, the power remains with the council as they must make certain that the manager/administrator achieves the goals and outcomes the people expect from their government. **PM**

*This article originally appeared in the October 2021 issue of PM magazine.*

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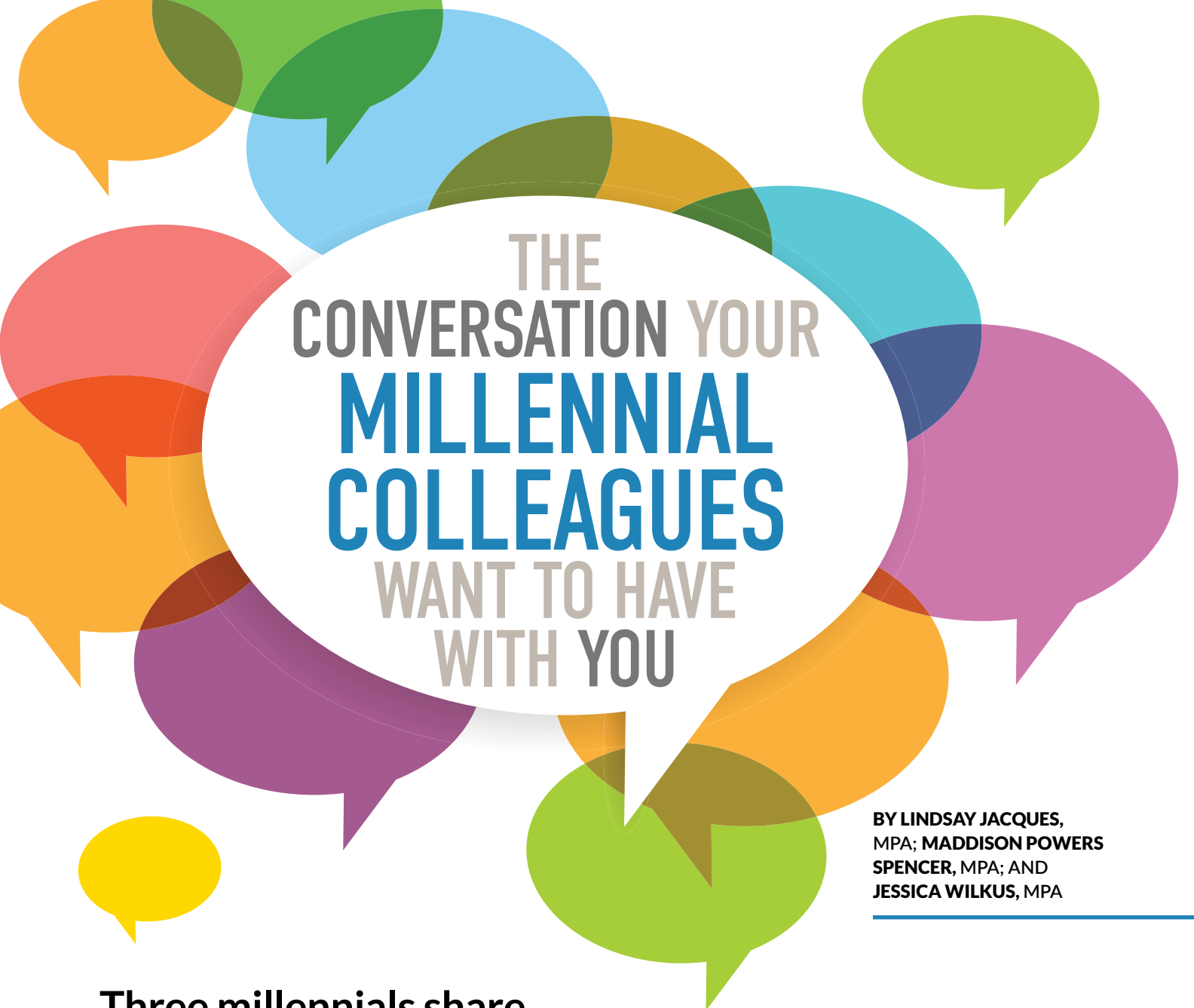
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# THE CONVERSATION YOUR MILLENNIAL COLLEAGUES WANT TO HAVE WITH YOU

BY LINDSAY JACQUES,  
MPA; MADDISON POWERS  
SPENCER, MPA; AND  
JESSICA WILKUS, MPA

## Three millennials share lessons learned on how you can recruit and retain to help fill the employment gap

We, three millennials, facilitated a session at ICMA's 2021 Annual Conference on how millennials are changing local government, expecting maybe 20 or so people to show if we got lucky. It was standing room only. The local government professionals in the room were painfully aware

of the great "silver tsunami" hitting the profession. As older generations of employees retire at high rates, local governments are not adequately prepared to fill the gap in essential knowledge and experience they are leaving behind.<sup>1</sup> To help fill the gap, we are increasingly having

to turn to the millennial generation to fill vacant management roles, but there remains a need to increase focus and bolster efforts to prepare them for success.

Participants at the session spanned multiple generations and spent the hour commiserating on common issues and collecting new ideas to help foster and develop talent in their organization. Here are some of the topics discussed and examples of how some of our colleagues are creating solutions to this generational transition.

### Getting Them in the Door: Recruiting Millennial Talent

A common theme of the conversation was the struggle to attract younger generations into the profession. Especially for smaller organizations, issues reaching these potential applicants seemed universal. Millennials have access to millions of job listings online affording them the ability to shop around for opportunities that fit their values and career goals. Several participants shared insight on what strategies they've seen or used

to successfully attract millennial interest in their organization:

**Lead recruitment with value propositions.** Much like generations that have come before, what draws millennials to public service is their desire to make a positive impact on their community. A Deloitte survey found that in the past two years, 44 percent of responding millennials made choices over the type of work they are prepared to do or organizations they would work for based on personal ethics.<sup>2</sup> Southlake, Texas, heavily emphasizes the organization's values in recruitment materials and promotion and includes quotes from current employees on what sets the city apart from other employers. Consider leading recruitment with storytelling that highlights how their decisions as a local government professional today will have impacts on the community for years to come.

**Promote diversity in your workforce.** Local governments have long

struggled with their workforce accurately reflecting the communities they serve. A recent Glassdoor survey revealed that 76 percent of employees and job seekers reported a diverse workforce as an important factor when evaluating companies and job offers.<sup>3</sup> Tacoma, Washington, openly advertises its efforts to promote diversity among their workforce in their *Handbook for Recruitment and Hiring*, website, and job listings. They are using this generational transition to focus on increasing the diversity of their workforce. Be as transparent as possible with what actions your organization is taking to promote diversity and equity in the workplace and reiterate these actions throughout hiring materials and interview processes.

**Invest in apprenticeship or fellowship opportunities.** Understanding the role many industries and passions can play in local government is key to attracting and retaining a young workforce. Many students

**Millennials want to know that when they put in the work and do the job well there will be a place for their advancement within the organization.**

and young professionals need help finding the relationship between their interests and local government, and apprenticeships or fellowships can create that connection. Hillsboro, Oregon, starts early by holding an annual “youth invasion” event where over 300 high school students rotate through city departments like public works, IT, and risk management to inspire new career options. They continue to foster youth involvement by offering apprenticeship and internship opportunities for high school through graduate students.

**Offer flexibility and other “fringe” benefits.** Millennials are prioritizing work-life balance and permanent full-time or hybrid telework positions and “fringe” benefits, such as paid volunteer time, paternal leave, and pet insurance, have cropped up as interesting incentives to draw young employees in. These approaches have grown more commonplace in local government since February 2020, heightening the availability of these options as top considerations for millennials when looking for new work. Covington, Georgia, utilizes four-day, ten-hour work weeks for its electric operations where a few crews work either Monday-Thursday or Tuesday-Friday. Continuing practices that initially began during the pandemic, office staff have the opportunity to work from home on certain days or hours.

**Keeping Them in Their Seat: Retaining Star Talent**  
For the millennial generation, many are considered to be in



A group discussion during a session at the 2021 ICMA Annual Conference on how millennials are changing local government.

the early to mid-career stage, either getting established in a new career or feeling relatively stable and seeking additional responsibility. At this stage, professional development is of the highest priority to retaining your best talent and several ideas were shared on how to approach it in your organization:

**Offer new opportunities to learn and grow.** One of the most important things younger generations are looking for in an employer is opportunities for them to develop their skills and grow. While investing in training or membership in professional associations is great, these offerings can often be limited by budget. Cross training or staff sharing has been an effective way to provide “vertical” growth for an employee while also bolstering organizational capacity.<sup>4</sup> The Management Talent Exchange Program (MTEP) of Santa Clara and San Mateo County, California, allows participating jurisdictions to exchange employees for three months to help build capacity and develop employees at a low cost.<sup>5</sup> These programs can be implemented internally by creating an exchange program between departments.

While younger participants in the roundtable asked for these new opportunities, they cautioned against pigeonholing younger staff as the “token millennial.” This is when the one younger person in the room is seen as the only one who can connect with the younger residents, troubleshoot with technology, or tweet.

**Create a roadmap.** Saint George, Utah, creates a roadmap for younger employees as another tool for retention. By looking

at the future needs of the organization and pairing them with the professional goals of millennial staff, they create a vision of a long and rewarding future within the organization. As a manager you can start with having a conversation, either as part of the regular performance review process or in coordination with succession planning. Millennials want to know that when they put in the work and do the job well there will be a place for their advancement within the organization.

**Treat mentorship as a critical need.** Call it imposter syndrome or a generic lack of confidence, mentorship is often needed to encourage the younger generation to stick with local government or move on to the next step. Whether it is a formally structured program or something that happens organically, mentorship is critical for retaining talent. Several of the session’s participants were ICMA local government management fellows (LGMF), recent MPA or MPP graduates being

fostered and developed by cities across the United States to become the profession’s next leaders.

As a requirement to host, LGMF’s are paired with a mentor whom they meet with on a regular basis. One LGMF at the session was recently hired full-time in their organization and said, “If it were not for the advice provided by the multiple mentors I had within the city, I would not have felt the same level of confidence to apply for my most recent promotion.” One manager mentioned using a group mentorship approach where he meets with five employees at a time to help minimize the strain on his schedule and provide opportunities for them to co-mentor with each other.

## Conclusion

While it can seem daunting to add one more issue to the laundry list of tasks undoubtedly already on your desk, taking some time this next week or month to review your organization’s approach to recruiting and retaining

millennials is essential to the long-term health of your organization. Now more than ever, we must be willing to adapt our working environments, benefits, and management styles to attract quality talent in our organizations. Some of the strategies shared here have proven successful. Two of the authors of this article were attracted to their current organization through the ICMA Local Government Management Fellowship and they both accepted permanent positions to stay on with their host community immediately following their fellowship. **PM**

## ENDNOTES AND RESOURCES

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-10-22/covid-early-retirees-top-3-million-in-u-s-fed-research-show>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/2021-deloitte-global-millennial-survey-report.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.glassdoor.com/employers/blog/diversity/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.slge.org/assets/uploads/2018/02/2017-Public-Health-Shared-Staffing-Approaches.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://discovermtep.org/>

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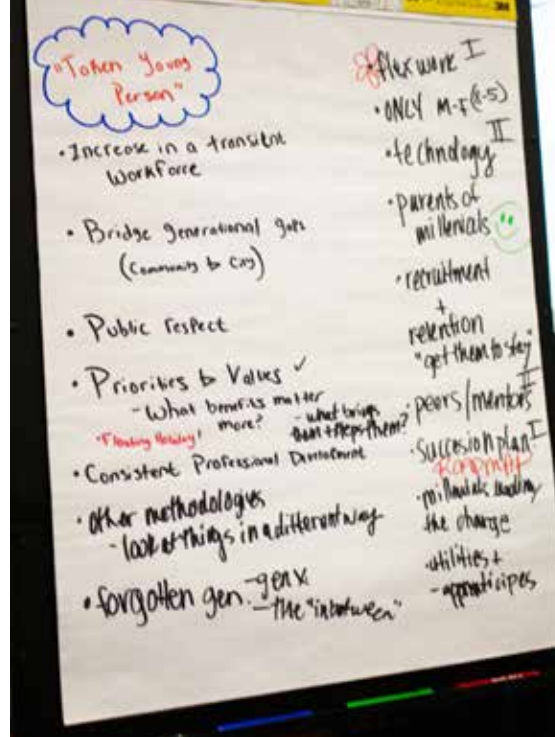
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Notes from the 2021 ICMA Annual Conference session on how millennials are changing local government.



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# GLOBAL SHIFTS, Local Implications

BY PAUL GRIMES, ICMA-CM

## An opinion piece contemplating the potential end of *Pax Americana* (and what it means for local government in the United States)

For several generations, our experience in local government management has occurred under the context of economic globalization. *Globalization* is generally understood to be a more integrated world in which trading and economic relationships, along with communications, travel and tourism, and entertainment and media, have flourished. The economies of nation states, from supply chains to international technical standards, are reliant upon the continued exchange of goods, services, and ideas.

According to data from the World Bank, world trade as a percentage of total GDP has steadily increased from 26.5 percent in 1970 to nearly 59 percent in 2019. Most trade and economic activity occur in cities or metropolitan areas, and it is no overstatement that this global integration has informed our entire economic development strategy for generations.

The hallmark of U.S. influence, however, did not occur merely through military power. Rather, it has been mostly through “soft power” of American cultural influence around the world. Think Facebook, Apple’s iPhone, Hollywood, and Nike. Those are just some highly visible

manifestations of American cultural influence. But there are many more subtle influences, particularly in the R&D sectors (the United States is by far the world leader in patents, a key measure of innovativeness); university education (attraction of students from around the world); international trading sectors (dollar-denominated everything and accounting standards); and information and communications technologies (e.g., TCP/IP protocols and internet governance), particularly with the adoption of international technical standards.

It is important to note that much of this globalization grew from the security and economic system established at the end of World War II. That system was led primarily by the United States, as the economic system (Bretton Woods, G.A.T.T. and later the WTO, UN, World Bank, etc.) and security arrangements (NATO) ensured that economic growth would prosper under a Westernized system of liberal trade in a secure global system. The primary instrument of this security arrangement was the U.S. military, particularly the U.S. Navy, which maintained open access to sea lanes. This post-war arrangement is sometimes referred to as *Pax Americana*. Note that even illiberal regimes were invited to trade in this system, and the U.S.-led system ensured that sea lanes (and air routes) would remain open for virtually all. China’s cheap consumer goods and manufactures and Russian energy made it to markets far and wide under this system.

This is not a commentary on the projection of U.S. power, *per se*; rather, it is a recognition that *Pax Americana* has been the lead organizing system of international affairs over the past 80 years. And that organization of international affairs, as an institution, may be unraveling. Some geopolitical thought leaders have argued that it has ended and probably did so with the election of President Obama and has been furthered by Presidents Trump and Biden. Others cling to a view that U.S. power, while certainly under stress, continues to be a significant force in global relations, but that force is less influential in a more multipolar world. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February only punctuates the assertion of a changing world order.

What does all this mean for local government? I would argue that a major shift in the institutions that have shaped global affairs—namely, the withdrawal or weakening of *Pax Americana*—for something else will have major implications for local government, particularly in the economic development and innovation arenas.

Whatever the future holds for *Pax Americana*, or some coherent replacement, it will be one of the significant challenges we face in the next decade. The perception among rivals to the Western economic and political system (namely, the developing “axis” of illiberal regimes like Russia, China, Iran, et al) will likely see the 2020s as a decade of opportunity, one in which a withdrawn and nativist United States is

Whatever the future holds for *Pax Americana*, or some coherent replacement, it will be one of the significant challenges we face in the next decade.

distracted and taciturn with internal division and external disillusionment. Thus, the Axis countries see opportunity to deflect attention from their own demographic crises and moribund socio-political structures—and growing discontent within their own boundaries—by appealing to nationalist, revanchist policies. To wit: the Russian opportunistic invasion of Ukraine.

Another likely result from this rearrangement in the global order will be that regional conflicts will likely increase, with great uncertainty added to international trade and shipping. Those who advance this view might argue that a great decoupling will occur

between the U.S. and China, with tremendous implications for consumer goods, product sourcing across the supply chain, and even access to rare earth minerals. It is not necessarily bad news, but it will be disruptive in the near term. Peter Zeihan, for example, points to China's much bigger and more precarious challenge of maintaining access to energy markets in the Middle East with some suspicious neighbors standing in the way. He points to several countries along the transit route from the Persian Gulf to China's coastal areas, any of which could fairly easily disrupt China's energy supply in the absence of American naval assurances. Thus, the

celebrations in some quarters over the withdrawal of *Pax Americana* may be short-lived as they contend with newly unleashed regional rivalries.

**Another likely result from this rearrangement in the global order will be that regional conflicts will likely increase, with great uncertainty added to international trade and shipping.**

In the longer term, we will likely see regional trading alliances among Western countries strengthened. Moreover, the United States, Mexico, and Canada will have to further integrate its North American trading system to make up for some of the lost trans-Pacific trade with China. A couple of very visible examples of this shift may be the two major chip fabrication plants to be located in Texas, and it is likely a sign of more to come. With the future of Taiwan uncertain with a more belligerent China promising a reunification with Taiwan—by force, if necessary—it is less likely that Western companies will be eager to invest huge sums of money for chip fabrication or other advanced

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**For the United States to maintain its advantage in innovation, an essential part of global leadership in the coming decades, we will need to ensure that housing (including affordable housing) is available in proximity to urbanized areas in which innovation and the exchange of ideas and complex information occur.**

manufacturing plants there. They will more likely reshore many of these strategically important and incredibly expensive assets to the relative safety of North America.

For state and local economic development, this will be a relative boon. The United States, Mexico, and Canada will look attractive once this risk quotient is factored in. Site developers for high-tech manufacturing will look to the U.S. and Canada, and middle-to-low tech will look to Mexico. It will likely usher in an era of strong symbiotic economic relationships across the NAFTA zone. Prices for land and development will go up, however, and states that have punishing taxes and obsolete regulations will continue to lose to those that are more competitive.

Labor will be another challenge for our time. Labor shortages will

only be exacerbated with reshoring certain skilled manufacturing. The days of high unemployment, save for a major economic shock or a disruptive global event, are over for our generation.

Labor shortages, which we are all experiencing now, will continue for the foreseeable future.

According to the *Economist*, the U.S.

has three million fewer workers today than before the pandemic, and immigration numbers (typically America's advantage in filling the labor gaps) have declined by another two million from the pre-pandemic rate. Demand for skilled workforces who can work in these high-skilled plants will accelerate. Fortunately for the United

States, immigration is still part of our psyche—and for which we have a relatively high tolerance—and we will still need it to fill jobs and maintain relative youth and dynamism in our economic activities.

Creative risk taking is a hallmark of youthful population, and the U.S. is much better positioned for this than our European and Asian counterparts. For the U.S. to maintain its advantage in innovation, an essential part of global leadership in the coming decades, we will need to ensure that housing (including affordable housing) is available in proximity to urbanized areas in which innovation and the exchange of ideas and complex information occur. Those regions that can create the conditions for knowledge spillovers, capital formation, synergy, and risk taking

will surge ahead of those that don't. Anachronistic economic development grants (e.g., "job creation") will need to give way to assistance with workforce and skills development, robust infrastructure (including ICT infrastructure), and R&D acceleration.

What will the new global order look like? Perhaps a form of *Pax Westernica* or similar order that draws on liberal Western values supplants the American version. Those of us who cherish Western values can only hope so. Perhaps Americans will awake and realize that the U.S.-led world order still offers the best hope for the world, and a *Pax Americana 2.0* arises. Or will a *Hobbesian* world order take hold in which zero-sum competition and regional hegemonies arise?

In any event, a sort of strange drumbeat of a distant music draws nearer; and whatever the future may hold, the next decade will be a fascinating, uncertain, and a sometimes-terrifying journey of discovery of a newly shaped world order. But there will be opportunities for local governments to adjust to this order, and those that recognize it and best adapt will have the advantage. **PM**



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# Wisdom

## A Powerful Force for Good in the Local Government Profession

BY ED EVERETT, ICMA-CM

GREAT LEADERS  
ARE DRIVEN TO DO  
THE RIGHT THING  
FOR THE COMMON  
GOOD. WISDOM  
HELPS THEM FIND  
THAT PATH.





**I am wise enough to realize that this brief article will not do justice to the topic of wisdom. My hope is that it will encourage the reader and those in our profession to begin thinking about this forgotten and powerful trait. Wisdom and effective leadership are badly needed and in short supply in federal, state, and local government, as well as our society in general.**

This article will attempt to shed some light on this valuable asset by asking the following questions:

- What is wisdom and how is it defined?
- How does one develop wisdom?
- How important is wisdom in our profession?
- Are wisdom and leadership related and, if so, how?

There is scant discussion or written information on the topic of wisdom, either in our profession or in the private sector. Wisdom is not unlike the topic of “fear” in that both have a significant impact, either positive or negative, on one’s potential and leadership effectiveness.<sup>1</sup> Yet, we don’t talk about fear or wisdom.

### Definition of Wisdom

Wisdom is from the root “wis” (to see) and “dom” (good judgement or decisions). Wisdom can be defined as the ability to think and act with humility and compassion using:

- Experience with knowledge.
- Introspection with insight.
- Reflection with learning.

Wisdom is seen by both scientists and philosophers as morally grounded. Wise people don’t focus on what they need or deserve, but rather on what they can contribute. Interestingly, three wise thinkers describe wisdom as being possessed by those who understand and acknowledge that they do not and cannot know everything. This humble understanding allows them to consider many different points of views and solutions.

- Socrates: “The only true wisdom is knowing you know nothing.”
- Confucius: “Real knowledge is to know the extent of your ignorance.”
- Buddha: “The fool who recognizes his or her own ignorance is thereby a wise person.”

### The Wisdom Continuum

Wisdom is not a point in time nor is it an “on/off” switch. It exists on a continuum, like many complex concepts and powerful behaviors, as illustrated below:

| Unwise        | Developing     | Wise        |
|---------------|----------------|-------------|
| Closed-Minded | Inward-Looking | Enlightened |
| Stuck         | Seeking        | Humble      |

Movement along this continuum is a personal journey that one decides to make, just as developing one’s leadership talents is also a personal journey.<sup>2</sup> There is no end point or finish line, only a continuous pursuit toward broader wisdom.

For example, I always demanded that my city organization strive for excellence; however, I was honest that we may never achieve that goal. As we moved closer to our previously defined goal of excellence, the organization would realize that there was a new and higher level of excellence we should strive to achieve. Wisdom has the same continuous pursuit to it, but is not an end in itself. The purpose of wisdom is to help one become more effective by making better decisions for the greater good.

## Being afraid of failing or making mistakes will prevent you from becoming wiser and thus a more effective leader.

### The Wisdom Formula

I became more curious about wisdom as I aged and thought more about what role, if any, aging plays.

- Why were the elders in indigenous societies seen as wise and sought out for their wisdom?
- Why does our society see older people as over the hill or irrelevant vs. wise?
- Does someone become wise just by aging?
- What makes a person wise?
- Can someone learn to become wiser and, if so, how?
- Are there wise people in our profession?

My curiosity led me to develop a formula to help clarify my understanding of wisdom and make it more concrete:

**Wisdom = Experience +  
Introspection + Reflection  
(with Humility and  
Compassion)**

### Experience with

**Knowledge.** Wisdom is grounded in having many and varied experiences, which are essential in order to develop wisdom. As we age, we tend to have more and varied experiences; however, repeating the same experiences many times over is not the path to wisdom. Aging provides the opportunity for more experiences, but by no means guarantees it. If you are risk averse, fearful or playing it safe, you will not have many and varied experiences and, as a result, not move very far on the Wisdom Continuum.

The road to wisdom often runs through hardships. Wisdom is given a big boost by our mistakes, failures, hardships, and tragedies as long as we allow ourselves to learn from them.

Being afraid of failing or making mistakes will prevent you from becoming wiser and thus a more effective leader.

Like most professions, our profession emphasizes knowledge and, to some degree, intelligence. We reward seniority, thinking it equates to experience; however, many individuals with years of seniority have learned little from their years of experience. Scientists and philosophers agree that intelligence and wisdom are quite different things. That said, wise people are often quite intelligent; however, intelligence does not equal wisdom.

Knowledge is important and needed in our profession. It is defined as “information, understanding, and skills gained through education or experience.” Knowing lots of information, facts and data does not mean that someone is wise; however, knowledge can help one better understand a problem, issue or solution, a step towards wisdom. Simply having knowledge doesn’t give someone the big picture. A very wise person said: “Knowledge speaks while Wisdom listens and reflects.”

Having many and varied experiences and acquiring

knowledge is the beginning. We have to push ourselves to learn from them and confront our failings. This brings us to my next component.

### Introspection with Insight.

Wise individuals and wise leaders have the curiosity, drive, and courage to be introspective and learn from their mistakes and failures. Honest introspection is essential to understanding who you are and what you can become. Understanding yourself means having confidence in your skills as well as being aware of your weaknesses, biases, and dark side. Introspection also allows us to understand that (a) we don’t always have the best solutions, and (b) the importance of listening to others.

Introspection starts with looking inward and acknowledging your role in any situation, be it a success or failure. Looking inward is always more effective when combined with quality counseling, therapy, and/or coaching. We all need help in seeing ourselves honestly, especially in understanding our dark side and how it affects our behavior.

Unfortunately, there is a general fear and bias about seeking counseling or therapy. It takes courage, curiosity, and confidence to get counseling and coaching. Without deeply understanding yourself, you can neither be wise nor an effective leader.

### Reflection with Learning.

Experience and introspection must be coupled with reflection and learning. Quality reflection requires time to think about, understand, and learn from past events and actions.

Our entire society moves fast and jumps from one fad, hot idea, or crisis to another without much thought or little to no reflection. Our news cycles focus on the next shiny object. We demand fast food, fast service, fast reply, and fast action.

Time to reflect has been shoved aside by our addiction to instant communication, the perceived time crunch of technology, and the fear of missing out. These are excuses to dodge the difficult process of devoting serious thought and consideration to reflect on an event, understand our role in that event, and learn from the event. As we age, we usually have more opportunity to reflect; however, as stated earlier, aging does not guarantee reflecting and learning. Without taking the time to reflect and learn, we will develop limited insights from our many and varied experiences and will not move far on the Wisdom Continuum.

### Humility and Compassion.

Inherent in the Wisdom Formula are the traits of humility and compassion. Humility is important in that it helps us understand that we don’t always know the best answer or solution. Humility helps us listen to diverse points of view from employees, residents, civic organizations, and others, which adds wisdom to the ultimate decision.

Compassion is an emotion that allows us to humanize a problem and not just look at data. Compassion creates a desire to help and take action. Humility allows us to consider many diverse options. Wisdom gives us the ability to make the right decision for the greater good. Effective leaders understand this and have developed compassion and

humility, essential components of wisdom.

## Learning to Be Wiser

What practical steps can you take to move along the Wisdom Continuum? Anyone can learn to be wise. You don't need a specific title or be at a high level in the organization to become wiser.

### 1. Be willing to take smart risks and have many and varied experiences, including failures and hardships.

- Ask for an assignment to take on a tough issue for your department head or city manager.
- Initiate a talent exchange program where you and another person switch jobs for three or four months within your city or between a neighboring city or county. I became the first civilian fire chief of Palo Alto, California, because I asked my city manager for the opportunity.
- Explore teaching a course at your local school district or college.
- Write an article that challenges our profession to think differently about something.
- Go out and seek different experiences. Don't wait for them to come to you.

### 2. Understand yourself better through coaching and/or counseling.

- Have the courage to begin counseling to understand yourself better.
- Get a coach to help you understand the role you played in specific situations so you can learn from your successes or failures. No one can give you wisdom, but someone else's wisdom

might help you better understand yourself.

- Take the Enneagram assessment or other self-assessment instruments to learn about your personality style.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Spend time reflecting on your experiences to learn from them.

- Schedule unstructured time. As a city manager, I scheduled reflection time weekly at the library. I read interesting articles, wrote down possible future ideas, and reflected on past actions. I thought about what my city was not doing versus how we could do something better. I did not allow myself to think about existing issues or projects. And I did not bring my cell phone.
- Debrief with a trusted friend or advisor on past successes and mistakes.
- Read biographies or autobiographies to understand how others used reflection time.

## Wisdom and Our Profession

Our organizations, politics, and fragile democracy desperately

Local government would function better, provide improved services, and gain more trust if we focused on developing wisdom.

need more wise people. Local government would function better, provide improved services, and gain more trust if we focused on developing wisdom. Our profession needs to:

1. Emphasize the importance of wisdom and not just train for skills and knowledge.
2. Devote more time during the hiring process to look at a candidate's wisdom potential. Ask more questions about experiences and what a candidate learned from her or his experiences through introspection and reflection.
3. Listen and learn from the community and take action for the common good. In this way, we will earn the trust of the community.

## Wisdom and Leadership

Wisdom and leadership are interconnected. All effective leaders develop wisdom. Wise employees, whether they are in a leadership position or not, are important informal leaders. Quality leaders are able to recognize the wise people within their organization and seek them out for help.

## Closing Thoughts

Wisdom, like leadership, has an aspirational aspect to it. Wisdom helps you figure out the right thing to do in a complex or difficult situation to promote the common good. Wise people and effective leaders don't focus on what they need or deserve but rather on what they can contribute. Great leaders are driven to do the right thing for the common good. Wisdom helps them find that path. Wisdom will:

- Humble us as we begin to understand that our ideas, solutions, and actions are not always the best.

- Help us understand our faults and weaknesses so they don't manipulate us.
- Become more open and compassionate while listening to others.
- Rethink what being a leader means, certainly something other than the stereotypic male qualities of dominance and authority.
- Help us appreciate and recognize the diverse and talented qualities and contributions of women and minorities.

Wisdom is powerful and positive. It is time for you to become wiser and claim your power. As a coach, I will use what wisdom I have attained to help you become a wiser and more effective person. All my coaching is pro bono as my way of giving back to the profession. Good luck! **PM**

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> "Leadership in Local Government, Part 4: Fear and Courage—The Leadership Duality," *PM* magazine, April 2021, <https://icma.org/articles/pm-magazine/leadership-local-government-part-4-fear-and-courage-leadership-duality>

<sup>2</sup> "Leadership in Local Government, Part 6: The Leadership Journey," *PM* magazine, June 2021, <https://icma.org/articles/pm-magazine/leadership-local-government-part-6-leadership-journey>

<sup>3</sup> "Leadership in Local Government, Part 2: Leaders Know Themselves," *PM* magazine, February 2021, <https://icma.org/articles/pm-magazine/leadership-local-government-part-2-leaders-know-themselves>

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# RETURNING TO THE POLITICS VERSUS ADMINISTRATION DEBATE

Defining the “political” role of managers and their role in the policy process

Since the early history of public administration practice and research, the question of the appropriate political and administrative roles of managers has been debated. Since then, although there is now widespread recognition that a true politics-administration dichotomy is impossible in practice, there remains a lack of consensus about what the “political” role of the manager looks like.

Local government managers, perhaps more than any other

public managers, have a broad array of responsibilities and engage with a broad set of stakeholders. As such, this question is of particular importance to local government managers. This article will provide some historical context for this debate and will discuss the importance of the manager’s role in the policy process.

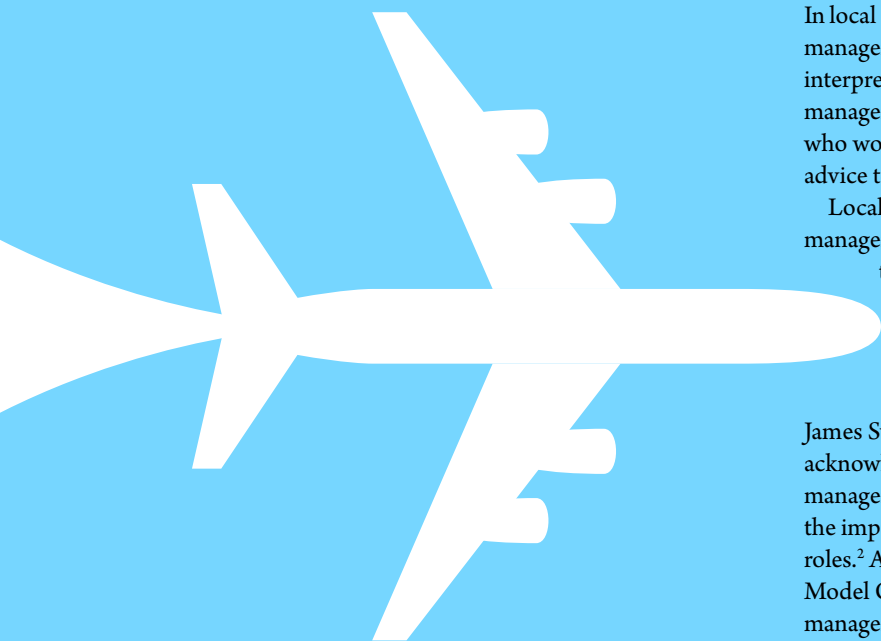
## **Brief Historical Background**

Nearly everyone who has a degree in public administration has learned about the politics vs. administration dichotomy. Woodrow Wilson, who earned a Ph.D. in political science long before he would be elected president of the

United States, wrote a seminal work on this topic, “The Study of Administration.”<sup>1</sup> In this article, Wilson argued for a separation of politics and administration, but he also stressed that administrators should have “large powers and unhampered discretion.” He asserted that “the ideal for us is a civil service cultured and self-sufficient enough to act

**BY KIMBERLY NELSON, PHD**





**Local governments exist in a system that is awash in politics and drawing distinctions between appropriate and inappropriate activities may be challenging at times.**

---

with sense and vigor, and yet so intimately connected with the popular thought, by means of elections and constant public counsel, as to find arbitrariness of class spirit quite out of the question.” Still, later scholars interpreted Wilson’s argument as advocating for a complete removal of public managers from the policy process; and this philosophy influenced the education of practitioners. In local government management, this was interpreted to mean that the manager was a neutral expert who would not provide policy advice to the elected body.

Local government managers have always known this was unrealistic. In our historical analysis of the policy and administrative roles of managers, James Svava and I found acknowledgements by city managers in the early 1900s of the importance of these policy roles.<sup>2</sup> As stated in the Second Model City Charter, the manager should “show himself a leader, formulating policies and urging their adoption by council.”<sup>3</sup> While the visibility of the manager in the policy process has changed over time and the manager’s role in the community has expanded, the expectation that the manager should be involved in the policy process has been a constant since the birth of the profession.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Why has the Dichotomy Persisted?**

Recently, I heard a seasoned manager, who was speaking to a group of new and aspiring

managers, tell the audience that he never provides policy advice to his council. This is a simple example of how the conception of a dichotomy between politics and administration persists in local government management practice.

Wilson’s article has been interpreted without considering the context of the time in which he was writing. He was arguing for a “science of administration”; that public administration was as worthy a field of study as any other. He did advocate for a separation of politics and administration; however, Wilson’s concern was with the encroachment of partisan politics in the administrative process rather than administrators encroaching on policy. In his 1885 book, *Congressional Government*, Wilson was concerned with both the corrupting and politicizing interference of party organizations in administrative affairs and also the excessive attention by Congress to administrative matters. Congress, Wilson wrote, “set itself . . . to administer government.”<sup>5</sup>

Even during the period that followed, when some scholars advocated for a pure separation, others argued that would not be feasible or advisable.<sup>6</sup> And yet, there are still practicing managers who have been taught to stay out of the policy process even though doing so would violate the ICMA Code of Ethics, Tenet 5:

One of the arguments for the council-manager form of government is the expert, nonpartisan policy advice that the manager provides to the council.

Submit policy proposals to elected officials; provide them with facts, and technical and professional advice about policy options; and collaborate with them in setting goals for the community and organization.

James Svara has written extensively on how and why the myth of a dichotomy persisted.<sup>7</sup> He states that it “is convenient to explain the division of roles in terms of total separation because it is easier to explain than a model based on sharing roles.”<sup>8</sup> Svara also argues that accepting the idea of a separation of policy and administration allows elected officials to blame administrators for unpopular decisions. Despite the persistence of the dichotomy, the manager’s role in the policy process is a legitimate one.

**The Role of the Local Government Manager in Policymaking**

The values of the local government management profession, as codified in the ICMA Code of Ethics, prohibit managers from engaging in activities that are political in nature, particularly those related to partisan politics. Local governments exist in a system that is awash in politics and drawing distinctions between appropriate and inappropriate activities may be challenging at times. Complicating this reality is the fact that local

government managers come to their positions from different educations, regions, and mentoring experiences that shape their belief system and manner of practice. Managers must also take on roles that are consistent with the expectations of their elected officials.

In practice, the policy and administrative roles of local government should be shared between the elected officials and the manager. James Svara suggested a model called “complementarity” to explain this relationship.<sup>9</sup> In order for local governments to function well, elected officials need to receive high-quality policy advice from the manager and staff. Managers tend to have a longer time horizon for policy consideration, they are familiar with effective policies used in other local governments, and they possess expertise that

can inform the assessment of policy choices. Likewise, while elected officials should not be engaged in the day-to-day operations of government, their oversight responsibilities and their role in establishing the vision for the community, are critical for the success of the local government. The balance may shift somewhat depending on the preferences, skills, and personality traits of those holding office.

A few years ago, *Public Management* published a short article that explained the “Flight Analogy” graphic designed by Mike Baker in Downer’s Grove, Illinois.<sup>10</sup> Mr. Baker created the graphic to help his council understand the shared policy and administrative roles of elected officials and staff. It is an excellent illustration of the concepts discussed in this article. See Figure 1.

Managers and elected officials should work together to find the appropriate balance of administrative political roles for their organizations and communities. One of the arguments for the council-manager form of government is

the expert, nonpartisan policy advice that the manager provides to the council. This expert advice is necessary for a high-performing local government organization. **PM**

**ENDNOTES AND RESOURCES**

<sup>1</sup> Wilson, Woodrow. 1887. The Study of Administration. *Political Science Quarterly* 2(2): 197-222.

<sup>2</sup> Nelson, Kimberly L. and James H. Svara. 2014. The Roles of Local Government Managers in Theory and Practice: A Centennial Perspective. *Public Administration Review* 75(1): 49-61.

<sup>3</sup> Woodruff, Clinton R. 1919. *A New Municipal Program*. New York: D. Appleton and Co.

<sup>4</sup> Nelson and Svara 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Wilson, Woodrow. 1885. *Congressional Government: A Study in American Politics*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

<sup>6</sup> Svara, James H. 2001. The Myth of the Dichotomy: Complementarity of Politics and Administration in the Past and Future of Public Administration. *Public Administration Review* 61(2): 176-183.

<sup>7</sup> Svara 1998; Svara 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Svara 2001: 177.

<sup>9</sup> Svara 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Conduff, Mike. 2018. The Flight Analogy: Graphic Captures the Interplay between Politics and Administration. *Public Management*, May: 24-26.

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Figure 1





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illness in their lifetime.

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to do about it?



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# We Long for a City Where We Go Hard on the Issues and Easy on the People

A crowd-sourced  
poem from  
those in local  
government  
about the  
communities we  
**aspire** to have.

BY KATE P. FITZPATRICK, ICMA-CM



**KATE P.  
FITZPATRICK,  
ICMA-CM,**

is town manager  
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**I am often inspired** by stories on NPR. It's a family joke, as I start virtually every conversation with the phrase, "I heard on NPR today..." Last year, *Morning Edition* resident poet Kwame Alexander and host Rachel Martin proposed writing their way out of the unprecedented events of the past year to imagine a better future. Their crowdsourced poem, "This Is Our Dream," was created from 2,500 listener responses.<sup>1</sup>

My favorite line from the poem goes like this: "I dream a world where a bridge is arching over troubled waters, built on a foundation of truth. Where children grow up learning only one kind of division, the long kind." A poem about hope and promise, and yet also a joke about math. Perfect.

This gave me the idea to create a crowdsourced poem about our cities and towns. Heaven knows we could use some hope for the future. My goal was to create an aspirational poem—not one about what we like, or what we wish for, but what we long for.

The choice of the verb "long" is intentional and is defined as feeling "a strong desire or craving, especially for something not likely to be attained" (Merriam Webster). Not likely, but still possible. A sense of longing conjures a more aspirational lens.

I put the call out through my personal blog, my state association, various ICMA committees that I belong to, ICMA Connect, LinkedIn, Twitter, our regional chamber of commerce, and people I have met over the years. I was thrilled by the variety of thoughtful responses that I received.

This poem is the start of a conversation, not the end. Now that we know what we long for, we need to get busy building it.

## We Long for a City Where We Go Hard on the Issues and Easy on the People

### *We long for civility.*

We long for a city where people focus more on what we have accomplished, with pride and amazement, and focus less on what remains to be done, with frustration and criticism.

Where people come together to meet real challenges with resolve and good humor, and a willingness to work collaboratively.

Where finding a reasonable compromise is considered a win.

Where we can disagree, without being disagreeable, and people are civil, respectful, and supportive, even in the face of disagreement.

Where broad generalities and stereotypes are not raised over differences of opinion.

Where there is an appetite for increased listening to others, and where opinions are allowed to evolve and change.

Where we worry more about the common good than a single agenda.

We long for a city where residents take the time to go past the headlines, learn about the issues, and ask questions.

Where civility and common courtesy prevail, and dialogue builds us up without breaking us down.

Where we can leave the past behind us, and grasp the opportunities that await us.

Where we no longer assume the worst in others, that secret agendas disappear, and that honesty and civility are not considered slanderous and outdated.

We long for that city.

### *We long for welcoming.*

We long for a city where everyone feels respected and safe.

Where we are as happy to greet our neighbors as we are to cheer for the home team.

Where cancel culture is discredited.

Where working toward a vision of an equitable future and shaping economic development are not construed a conflict of interest.

Where we make space in our thinking to accept different points of view, not just the fashionable ones, and where we live is in line with our values.

Where neighbors from all parts of our city can prosper.

Where our city is a place welcome to all who enter, and compassion rules the day.

Where the only class that matters is the life-long learning one.

This is the city that we long to see.

### *We long for a sense of place.*

We long for a city where people stop looking at all the bad, and start looking at what an amazing city we live in.

Where our cities keep building beautiful spaces, and nature and sustainability are at the forefront of our lives.

Where people smile when they wave to you, and the roads are in such good shape that you can look beyond them while driving.

Where the city brings out the best in us, and our dreams can become reality.

Where animals roam free, and we take the time to slow down and enjoy the view.

We long for that city.

### *We long for local government to be valued.*

Where public service is appreciated and respect for public employees is the norm.

Where local government creates as much customer satisfaction as the most successful private business.

Where residents who have questions about their community reach out for answers before turning to social media.

Where city management is an honorable profession, and elected officials are respected for their commitment.

Where the way we always did it is not is the standard.

We long for that city.

### *We long for collaboration.*

We long for a city where problems are seen as opportunities, where success and failure are shared, and credit and blame are of less consequence.

Where people are inspired by empathy, coming together to meet challenges with resolve and good humor and a willingness to work collaboratively.

Where residents are resilient, positive, and display a wicked sense of humor.

Where people take their responsibilities seriously, without taking themselves too seriously.

Where people focus on what unites us and use our commonalities to achieve shared goals.

Where we achieve our goals because everyone recognizes we are on the same team, whether or not we all agree on the same game plan, and where our leaders foster and encourage this environment, rising above discord.

Where residents understand the impact of local government on their daily lives and are willing to collaborate to make their community exceptional.

Where people take satisfaction and pride in all that we have accomplished together as a community, extending the benefit of the doubt that what remains to be done will get done by the good people, both elected and professionals, to whom we entrust the task.

We long to build that city. Where we go hard on the issues, and easy on the people. **PM**

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*Grateful thanks to the following contributors (if I have left anyone off, I apologize): Katherine Warden, Heather Harper, Jamie Hellen, John Mangiaratti, Christopher Coleman, Andrea Llamas, Christopher Ketchen, Denise Baker, Tim Higgins, Colin F. Loisele, William G. Keegan Jr., Bob LeLacheur, Mark Lauzier, Richard Downey, John Mulder, Sam Gaston, Daniel Blumberg, John Rufo, Jay Hedges, Daniel Blumberg, Jay Feyler, Pat Scheidel, Henry L. Hayes Jr., Opal Mauldin-Jones, Ed Broussard, Richard Brown, Gerald Young, James Fisher, Mike Land, Alan Ours, Chris Senior, Eileen Stein, Maurice Handel, Bob Jarvis, Kevin Tackett, Paul Buckley, Denise Casey, Weston Davis, Abby Serino, Adam Chapdelaine, Donna VanderClock, Alissa Farrell, Libby Gibson, Kim Donovan, Anne Nydam, Julie Traub, and Andy Sheehan.*

### ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/28/960688815/this-is-our-dream-a-crowdsourced-poem-to-inspire-hope>

# When the ACAO Serves as Acting CAO or Other Key Roles

Whether you're "riding up" (serving as the acting CAO) or "riding down" (filling in for a key employee), the ACAO should keep these things in mind.

| BY JEFF WECKBACH

At times, it may feel as though the "A" in ACAO stands for "adaptable."

**"Riding up" is a common turn of phrase** for most individuals in the Fire Service. This expression is used to designate the individual who is acting as the supervisor for the day and is ultimately responsible for the unit's actions and incident response.

The person riding up could be a firefighter/paramedic serving as a lieutenant, a captain serving as a battalion chief, or some other designation. While it is easy to think about riding up in a paramilitary style organization, assistant chief administrative officers (ACAOs) are often asked to "ride up" into the chief administrative officer (CAO) role for their local government.

There are really two forms of riding up as an ACAO, formal and informal. The informal riding up happens frequently, usually when the CAO is caught up in a meeting and department directors, elected officials, or other staff may come to the ACAO for guidance or to make a decision. Formal riding up occurs when the CAO

sends out a memo or email to the governing body and staff to designate the ACAO as the "acting" CAO in their absence. This usually occurs when the CAO is going to be on extended leave or a planned vacation.

"When the cat is away, the mice will play." This phrase, with the image shown below, was placed on my door the first time that I was formally designated to ride up as the CAO. While it was put there as a joke by staff, little did I realize the hidden messages that it held for an acting CAO:

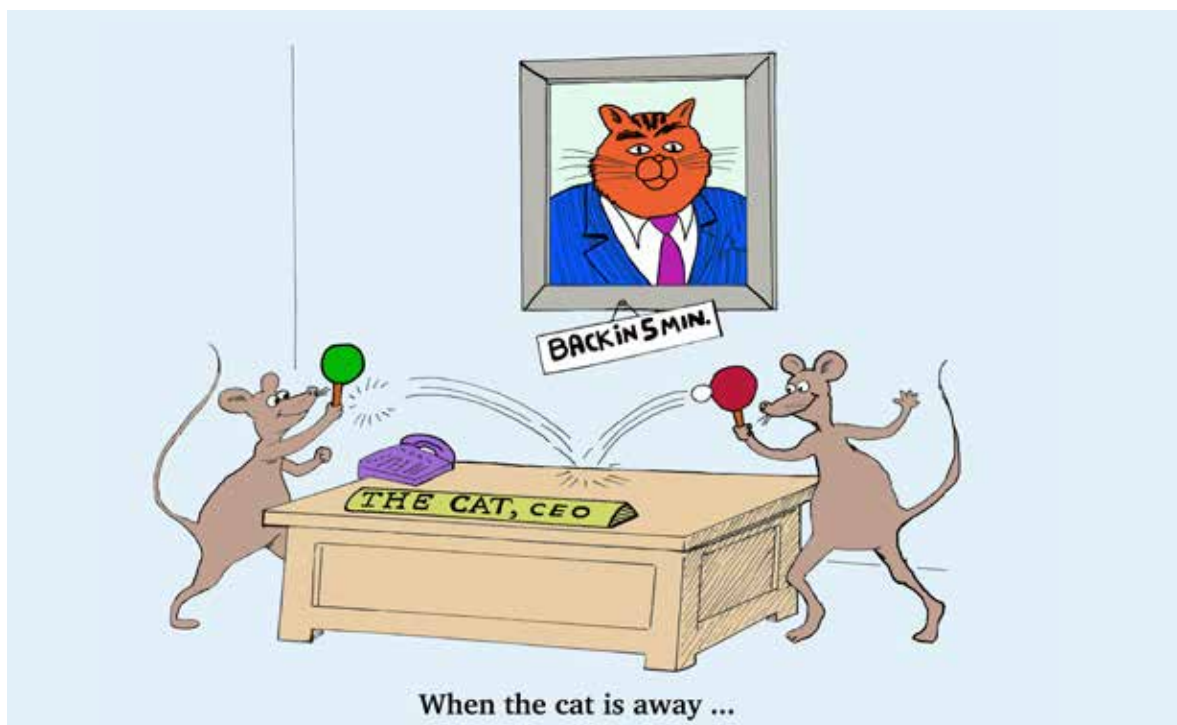
## 1 Talk to the CAO Before the Departure.

Set ground rules with the CAO and make sure that you understand the CAO's expectations. Are you authorized to sign purchase orders or contracts? Does the CAO wish to be notified of any particular issues (crime, personnel issues, fires)? What cadence of communication is expected with the elected body? While you cannot



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possibly think of every scenario, having an open dialogue sometime before the formal riding-up designation can be extremely valuable.

## 2 Testing the Waters.

Elected officials, employees, and the general public will push boundaries in the absence of the CAO. I've seen purchase requests placed on my desk that were previously denied by the CAO. I've had an elected official suggest that the CAO verbally "approved" a permit before they left. While not ideal, it is perfectly okay to ask if the issue is urgent or if it can wait. Usually, the answer to that question provides the insight you need to know if the request is genuine.

## 3 Make a List.

Inevitably, there will be one or two items that you will want to follow up with the CAO on when they return. Keep a running list of those interactions for reference. When operating as the acting CAO, you will see an uptick in your interactions with staff and the elected board, and the days will fly by. A list will help keep you grounded in your decisions, provide you with something to reflect on, and give you a tool to help update the CAO on everything that happened in his or her absence.

## 4 Provide Space.

Most CAOs want to feel like they can disconnect, but rarely are able to. Following the previous three suggestions will help to allow the CAO to feel comfortable in their time away from the office and provide them an opportunity to disconnect. It also provides you, as an ACAO, with a taste of what it is like to be the CAO to help inform you if you might be ready to take the next step in your career progression.

## Riding Down

While we have spent a good deal of time focusing on what it means to ride up, probably more important to organizational congruency is the ability of an ACAO to "ride down." Far too often, a department director or key staff position will become vacant for some reason or another. As the ACAO, we are often tapped to take on the extra responsibility in the interim while a replacement is found for the position. As

**Focusing your organization on constant succession planning will create a more resilient organization and ensure that the culture of your organization is able to survive from manager to manager.**

the ACAO, we are provided a luxury in these moments to learn more about the day-to-day of the organization and provided insights into opportunities for needed training, coaching, and employee growth.

In my experience, I have had to ride down on a few different occasions and learned something unique from each experience. In fact, as I write this article, I am currently riding down in the public services director's seat. Below are some key takeaways from my time riding down:

**Succession Planning:** I've quickly learned that succession planning needs to be integral to your organization. With the Silver Tsunami rising high above our heads, we must do everything we can to grow internal talent. Far too often, while riding down, I've realized that we have talented employees that have not been included in succession planning, making them a year or so away from being prepared to take the next step. Focusing your organization on constant succession planning will create a more resilient organization and ensure that the culture of your organization is able to survive from manager to manager. It will also help to shorten the length of time that you ride down.

**Opportunity for Change:** A transition at any level of the organization is an opportunity for change and a newly hired department director or employee is going to inherently want to make changes when they are hired. While riding down, you may also feel compelled to make changes. You are presented with a unique opening in those moments to try to new things and implement incremental change that might have been subject to prior roadblocks. The benefit of making changes in these moments is that your newly hired employee will get candid feedback from the rest of the employees about the changes that were not effective. And for the changes that were effective? They will become "the way we've done it" for employees and survive the transition period.

**Take Care of Yourself:** Taking on the added responsibility of an additional role is a large task and one that can quickly overburden you. In my experience, I have struggled with ensuring that I maintain the proper work-life balance in these moments. I've learned that I may need to leave a task or two unfinished, especially if it can wait. While these moments are difficult because I, like many of you, have a passion for moving the organization forward, it is important to realize that if you do not take care of yourself then you will not be able to take care of your organization.

At times, it may feel as though the "A" in ACAO stands for "adaptable" as the ACAO is often tapped to ride up or ride down. These experiences help to ensure that communities across the globe are able to function in the absence of key employees and ensure that all of the community is able to receive the same level of service they desire of their government. **PM**



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- Strategic Planning
- Town-Gown Relations
- Working with Unions

Roger Kemp's background and professional skills are highlighted on his website. Dr. Kemp was a city manager in politically, economically, socially, and ethnically diverse communities.

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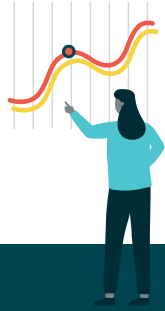
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**The Highlight of My Career**

The highlight was being accepted into Los Angeles County's Management Fellow program, which was essentially my foot in the door to local government. Up to that point, I had my eight years in the military and a couple years working in higher education law enforcement, but those were kind of building blocks to get me to my ultimate goal of working in public service at the local government level.

**My Path Wasn't from "Point A" to "Point B"**

I knew that I wanted to continue to be of service, but I didn't exactly know at what capacity when I separated from the military, and that's how I ended up in higher education law enforcement. It wasn't a straight transition out of the military and right into local government. It took some extra steps to get where I wanted to go, which actually afforded me the opportunity to gain some experience in budgeting, working with unionized labor forces, and other things that helped round out my resume.

**ICMA Veterans Advisory Committee**

I became a part of the committee early on and one of our biggest challenges has been getting exposure and recognition of what the veteran population brings to the table in the local government space. There are a lot of military members with roles and responsibilities that happen within city/county government. You could have 20 years of working in civil engineering or a public works field in the military, but not know how to translate those skills to being a director of public works for a city or something of that nature.

**A Community of Like-Minded Individuals**

Aside from my veteran identity, ICMA allows me to connect with the greater population of county administrators at the national level. A lot of the things we face as local government administrators are problems that we're facing in every single jurisdiction. Just being able to pick the brains of like-minded individuals is fantastic, and ICMA creates a vehicle to be able to do that because we already have this common bond of being members of this great organization.

**The Opportunity to be of Service and Give Back to the Profession**

With the start of the Veterans Advisory Committee, I have been able to lean in and give back to a career field that has given a lot to me. ICMA has done a great job with a lot of the committees and work that they do to connect these local government agencies both nationally and internationally. We wear that public service hat all day long in our communities, but it's also great to give back to the profession as a whole.

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