



105 YEARS

PUBLIC MANAGEMENT



The Comprehensive
Guide to Succession
Planning **10**

Moving from
Department Head
to City Manager **22**

Trending Issues
that Resonate
Worldwide **36**

LOCAL GOVERNMENT CAREERS AND WORKFORCE

Patrick Ibarra

Former City Manager
Co-founder and Partner,
The Mejorando Group
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JANUARY 2024
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International City/County Management Association

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Driving Toward a Global Local Government Profession

South African conference reflects common worldwide challenges

BY MARC A. OTT

While each and every year is special in its own way, I believe 2024 will be the year that we begin to realize our global potential as an organization and as a profession. With the ICMA Executive Board's approval of the Global Engagement Strategy and the global operating model, our vision of becoming the home for local government professionals worldwide is becoming real.

To provide support for this important journey, the recently appointed Governance Task Force will recommend the ideal governance structure to achieve our goals; a staff-led initiative is reimagining relationships with current and prospective partners around the world; and we have begun a series of programs focused on helping ICMA build a global mindset, communicate our global value proposition, identify potential global markets for ICMA products, programs, and services, and assess our current portfolio through a global lens.

In this month's issue of *PM*, Jeanette Gass, ICMA's senior program manager of global engagement, looks at the topics covered at the Institute of Local Government Management (iLGM) Conference held in South Africa.



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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 13,000 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.

Jeanette's article on page 36 points out that although local government has only officially been part of the South African constitution for 25 years, the issues that leaders face parallel those of countries that have had formal municipal governments for centuries. Infrastructure, technology, employee retention, and unfunded mandates, to name a few, have vexed local government managers in every corner of the world. I was asked to speak about the ICMA Code of Ethics. Our South African colleagues shared that although they have a code of conduct, there is no enforcement mechanism. They stressed that corruption threatened to overshadow the many accomplishments that local governments have managed to achieve since the country became a democracy when apartheid collapsed in 1994.

Attending the conference was a life-changing experience for me in many ways. As always, I appreciated learning how others have addressed challenges and found success in local governance. These best practices can be helpful globally. On another level, visiting communities where the many vestiges of apartheid remain if not visible then just beneath the surface struck me deeply as a Black man. When reading news articles about South Africa, I had always wondered what the actual experience of living bound by such a system would be like. We had the opportunity, thanks to our hosts, to find out. We toured through Johannesburg's Soweto neighborhood, which had been a separate, segregated city created so people of color could service the white population of Johannesburg. We were able to hear stories firsthand about the treatment of non-white people. Today there remain churches, hospitals, and schools meant only for people of color.

Perhaps the thing that left the deepest impression on me was our visit to Robben Island where Nelson Mandela had been held for 18 of his 27 years in prison. It was difficult to hear about the horrific treatment of political leaders including Ghandi, and the tour guides were remarkable storytellers. In fact, we learned that they themselves were former inmates. At one point, I stepped into a cell similar to the one that Mandela had been held in and felt for an instant what it would have been like to be physically contained in such a space for so much of one's life. The power of that moment remains with me to this day.

In traveling through Cape Town, a thriving city with a healthy tourist industry, I was often overlooked or outright ignored by people, including Blacks who worked in the service sector. The challenges our colleagues face became clear to me—although the nation has made great strides since apartheid was dismantled, it would most likely take generations to erase the cultural and social barriers that stand in the way of true equality, and until a city or town can avail itself of the potential in all of its residents, it cannot truly thrive.

The longstanding partnership between iLGMA and ICMA demonstrates the kinds of exchanges that can only grow the profession of local government leadership and management. By engaging with one another, we can accelerate innovation and drive true and lasting change in our cities, counties, and towns. We can ultimately achieve our desired outcome of making ICMA an effective, diverse, inclusive, and global organization. **PM**

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ICMA

The ICMA Code of Ethics *Turns 100!*

100
YEARS
ICMA CODE OF ETHICS
Established 1924

Celebrating this milestone and reflections on the year ahead

BY JESSICA COWLES

2024 Marks 100 Years of Ethical Conduct in the Profession

At the ICMA annual conference in Montreal held in 1924, the membership voted to adopt ICMA's Code of Ethics, originally conceived as 13 articles. The Code, then as well as now, is the foundation of local government management reflecting our profession's values. It's available at icma.org/page/icma-code-ethics.

This first Code laid out a set of commonly held core principles that continue to anchor and guide this profession. Those principles create a set of expectations we adhere to, and it forms a bond with other professionals and the larger society in which we serve. The Code directs local government practitioners to act with integrity in conducting both their personal and professional lives to merit the trust placed in the public position.

The principles outlined in the Code 100 years ago remain timeless. Today, we remain committed to the following, which all come from the first version of Code: integrity, public service, seeking no favor from a public position, exemplary conduct in both personal and professional matters, respecting the role and contributions of elected officials, exercising the independence to do what is right, political neutrality, serving the public equitably and governing body members equally, keeping the community informed about local government matters, and supporting and leading our employees.

The Code Reflected Changes in Society and Emerging Challenges for the Profession

From the Code's inception, the membership has voted by ballot to amend the Code. Here are the highlights of those changes:

1938. In the first amendment, a preamble was added to better explain the council-manager structure

and ICMA's mission. A statement of the profession's commitment to merit-based hiring—noting “political, religious, and racial considerations” carry no weight in personnel decisions—was also added. Interestingly, the reference to the manager's duty to stay out of politics disappeared from the Code. Article 3, while the language has been updated over the years, remains intact today with local government professionals governed by the highest ideals of honor and integrity in all public and personal relationships to merit respect and inspire confidence in the organization and the public.

1952. The ongoing debate over the manager's precise role in the policy arena was reflected in modifications to the policy-related articles. Sagely, the Code advised managers to avoid public conflict with the council on controversial issues. The first reference to the responsibility for continuous professional development also appeared in 1952.

1969. Changes to the ICMA Constitution resulted in membership expansion so the Code stopped using the term “city manager” in favor of the more inclusive reference to “member.”

1972. The profession's commitment to political neutrality, dropped in the 1938 revision, reappeared in more direct language in a new Tenet 7 that stressed refraining from participation in the member's employing legislative body, as well as from all partisan political activities that would impair the member's performance as a professional administrator. The ICMA Executive Board added guidelines to give members practical advice on investments, gifts, job commitment expectations, and election activities. In addition, the board adopted the formal Rules of Procedure for Enforcing the Code of Ethics.

1976. As ultimately unsuccessful efforts were underway to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the Code was made gender neutral in recognition of the fact that women were a part of the profession.



JESSICA COWLES
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at ICMA
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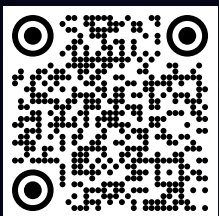
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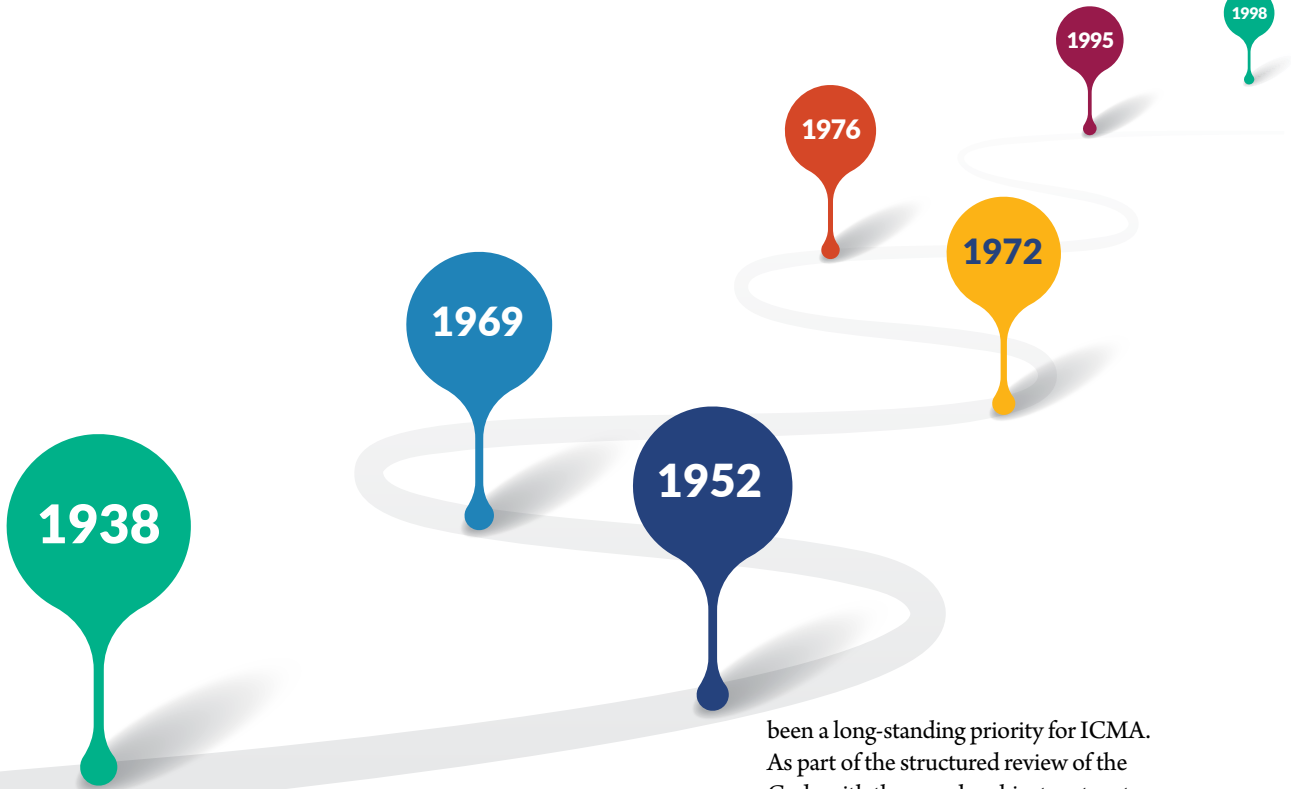
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1938

1995. The term “municipal” was replaced with “local government.”

1998. An increase in members’ political activity led to an amendment designed to clarify the profession’s commitment to political neutrality in Tenet 7 by emphasizing the broader principle. The new version stated: “Refrain from all political activities which undermine public confidence in professional administrators. Refrain from participation in the election of the members of the employing legislative body.”

2014. The structured review of the Code with membership began first with Tenet 12. In conversations with the membership, the overwhelming feedback was that Tenet 12, as written, used archaic language and seemed to present two disconnected principles. The prior version (“Seek no favor; believe that personal aggrandizement or profit secured by confidential information or by misuse of public time is dishonest”) was replaced with “Public office is a public trust. A member shall not leverage his or her position for personal gain or benefit.”

2017. Tenet 3, last amended in 1976, is one of the two tenets that applies to all members. (The other is Tenet 1). The revised language strengthened the profession’s commitment to integrity in Tenet 3 and included guidance on workplace relationships.

1969

2018. Tenet 4 was revised to include new guidelines on equity and inclusion with the commitment to serve the best interests of all.

2019. Conduct unbecoming of professionals was addressed in a new guideline. The language to Tenets 1 and 2 was updated to emphasize the profession’s commitment to democratic principles and the value of local government services.

2020. Tenet 5 was revised to reinforce the value of providing technical and professional advice in policy recommendations and collaboration to set goals. Also, the guideline on serving in conflicting roles was revised. Tenet 6 was changed to reinforce that elected officials are accountable to the people for policy decisions.

2023. As part of the comprehensive review of the Code through the lens of diversity, equity, and inclusion, 84% of members casting a ballot voted to approve amendments to Tenets 1, 4, 9 and 11 and the board approved changes to associated guidelines in June 2023. The three-year effort involved feedback sessions with over 600 members, and more than 2,000 members provided a survey response with 2,800 written comments that the board reviewed.

The Plan for 2024 and Beyond

Based on the revisions made in the last 100 years, ensuring that the language reflects the values of the profession has

1952

1976

1972

1995

1998

been a long-standing priority for ICMA. As part of the structured review of the Code with the membership, two tenets remain in this effort: Tenet 8 (professional development) and Tenet 10 (encroachment of professional responsibilities). This review will follow what has been done in years past and will be launched at state association conferences in early 2024. The dialogue will help the Executive Board’s Committee on Professional Conduct (CPC) draft language and then survey members on proposed revisions. Ultimately, the membership will vote on any proposed changes by ballot.

As background, guidelines are included for tenets to help members better understand their ethical obligations. Based on recent ethics complaints and numerous member questions, the CPC determined it would revisit Tenet 3’s guideline on professional respect to broaden its scope since it primarily addresses conduct during a recruitment process. The CPC is also reviewing the guideline on conduct unbecoming within today’s landscape since this language is now five years old.

As we start the year anew, let us all take a moment to appreciate how the Code guides our ethical conduct as professionals working in local government. I look forward to celebrating this milestone in the year ahead! **PM**

Correction

In the December issue, the author of “Ethics Matter!” was incorrectly listed. The article was written by Martha Perego, ICMA-CM.

An AI Chatbot's View of What Municipal Leaders Should Know About AI

An article by **AI chatbot Claude**, along with the human author's edits.

BY MARC PFEIFFER

"Author's" Note: This month's column is Part 1 of focusing on AI in local government. The following article is based on the human author's prompt to the generative AI application, Claude.ai, to write a "750-word plain language article explaining what a municipal government elected official should know about AI and generative AI." Claude wrote 747 words.

As is appropriate for many AI outputs, the author subsequently edited the text to add context, accuracy, and style. The edits are shown in red underlines and ~~struck-out~~ text.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming how organizations local governments operate and provide services. As a municipal leader, it's important to have a basic understanding of AI, including the newer generative AI models, to effectively leverage these technologies for your city.

AI refers to computer systems that can perform tasks normally requiring human intelligence, such as visual perception, speech recognition, and decision-making. AI encompasses a variety of techniques that allow software algorithms (formulas) to learn from data to make predictions, recommendations or take actions.

AI systems "learn" through machine learning. ML is a commonly used technique where algorithms are trained on large sets of example sample data. This data can include the content of the publicly available internet or an organization's own stored data. The training teaches the AI program to recognize patterns, make connections, and make decisions. The training creates what are known as "neural networks."

For instance, AI can analyze photos to identify signs of infrastructure damage or review documents to route them to the correct department. AI is also used in chatbots that understand natural language questions from residents.

Generative AI takes things a step further. Models like DALL-E and GPT-3 can generate brand new

content like images, text, audio, and video based on short text prompts. This ability to autonomously create original, realistic artifacts content has enormous potential—and risks.

Claude.ai is the generative AI chatbot that wrote this article in response to the question (aka a prompt). The more well-known ChatGPT is a competing chatbot system.

Human Author's Comment:

Claude missed or ignored a key point. An element of how generative AI works is that the program uses its knowledge to predict the next word in responding to a prompt. This is the way the human brain works. But there is a catch.

Chatbot outputs have been known to invent information or "hallucinate" that it knows an answer but really doesn't. When this happens it is choosing words that it thinks make sense but may not reflect reality. This effect initially surprised developers. They are now working on ways to minimize hallucinations. Thus, use of chatbot output must be carefully considered and reviewed by a human before it is used.

Back to Claude.

How can municipal officials harness AI safely and effectively? Here are key considerations:

- 1. Start small.** Look for focused ways to improve specific processes vs. jumping into major AI deployments right away. Pilot projects in areas like service requests, inspections and document processing can demonstrate benefits and build trust.
- 2. Focus on augmenting staff.** Position AI as assisting rather than replacing staff. For instance, chatbots handle common questions to let staff focus on higher-value interactions. AI should empower employees to do their jobs better.
- 3. Assess risks.** AI bias can lead to unfair or dangerous outcomes. Rigorously test for impacts on different populations and mitigate risks before deployment. Document processes to ensure transparency.
- 4. Control generative AI.** While creative, generative models also carry significant risks around misinformation, security, intellectual property, etc. Set strict governance policies on how and when generative AI can be used.



MARC PFEIFFER, an ICMA Life Member, is a marginally retired New Jersey town administrator and state agency manager. He is currently a senior policy fellow and assistant director at Bloustein Local, a unit of the Center for Urban Policy Research at Rutgers University. (marc.pfeiffer@rutgers.edu)



- 5. Acquire cautiously.** Be wary of vendor hype and don't assume AI is the solution. Carefully validate capabilities and start with a limited pilot. Watch for exploitative or unethical business practices.
- 6. Plan for change management.** Adopting AI changes processes and job roles can meet resistance. Involve staff early in evaluating AI. Invest in retraining and upskilling employees to work alongside AI.
- 7. Build smart data practices.** Quality data is essential for effective AI. Audit existing data for biases and gaps. Improve data collection going forward to better reflect the full community to reflect the full community accurately. It is also critical that any use of generative AI safeguards confidential information or data with personal identifiers. That information should never be uploaded to the cloud unless precautions are taken to ensure they are not ingested into the chatbot's system.
- 8. Focus on public benefit.** Apply AI to improve life for all residents fairly. Make decisions transparent. Protect privacy and security. AI offers great potential but make sure it aligns with public sector values.
- 9. Stay engaged.** Monitor AI legislation and regulation which will likely expand. Participate in

policy discussions to advocate for municipal needs and ethical AI standards.

Agencies with robust in-house technology skills can directly engage with vendors such as Microsoft, Google, and Amazon Web Services to support AI interests. For smaller organizations there is a wide range of dedicated municipal application providers. Many of them are integrating generative AI and other AI applications into their existing products. Thus, Claude's item #5 above has added importance.

The public sector will lag behind adopting AI day-to-day use. But by understanding capabilities, limitations, and responsible use, municipal leaders can tap AI's power to enhance services, efficiency, and equity across their cities. **PM**

The idea for this article was itself prompted by the author's recent Op-Ed in NJ Spotlight, "What State and Local Governments Should Do About Generative AI," found at go.rutgers.edu/Pfeiffer_Adopting_AI_in_NJ_Government.

An earlier version of this article appeared in New Jersey Municipalities, the magazine of the New Jersey State League of Municipalities.



THE COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO

LOCAL GOVERNMENT SUCCESSION PLANNING

**The time for succession
planning in your organization
is now, like right now!**

BY PATRICK IBARRA

Many forward-looking organizations are pursuing comprehensive and systematic succession planning to ensure that they can lose seasoned, knowledgeable employees without experiencing a disruption in service delivery. More than just training employees, succession planning is about both developing talent inside the organization and implementing ways to recruit more qualified candidates to join the organization. Furthermore, succession planning is not simply replacing positions that become vacant; it's a dynamic process (and not an event) of aligning employee aspirations and talents with the constantly evolving needs of the organization and providing employees with the resources and support they need to grow into new roles.



In its most impactful form, succession planning influences how people across the organization think about performance, potential, job assignments, career paths, staffing decisions, and employee development. In short, it ensures the continued effective performance of your organization by establishing a process to identify, select and manage talent and build bench strength.

I prepared many of the previous paragraphs for my article, “Succession Planning: An Idea Whose Time Has Come,” published in the January 2005 edition of *PM*. Nineteen years later, here we are, and succession planning is as mission critical as ever. The most significant changes since 2005 are the composition and size of the workforce. In 2005, succession planning became popular because it was a way to effectively mitigate the pending retirement of baby boomers that was beginning to occur. Nowadays, that retirement

wave continues but the kicker is that young(er) employees have different motivations than previous generations and the size of the workforce is declining.

The decrease of Americans’ labor force participation is nothing new—fewer and fewer Americans have been participating in the labor force for decades, resulting in a smaller workforce that is expected to continue shrinking for years to come. The U.S. unemployment rate in January 2005 was 5.3%. In November 2023, it was 3.9% and trends show the competition for attracting, retaining, and developing talent will become even more fierce. The U.S. economy has shifted from more people than jobs to more jobs than people which, based on the numbers, will continue into the foreseeable future.

The role of local government is to serve as the facilitator, or advocate, for an improved quality of life for residents who volunteer to live in your

community. Maintaining a well-prepared, modern workforce is vital to ensuring your agency’s continuity of operations. In principle, succession planning is similar to a risk management strategy because what delivers services is qualified, mission-oriented people motivated to build a stronger community.

Identifying and developing the best people for key leadership/management/supervisory roles is basic to future organizational success. To ensure that success is indeed continued, organizational leaders like yourself:

- Need the excellent performance in their organizations preserved, if not enhanced.
- Need to identify important high-level positions.
- Want to strengthen individual advancement.
- Want to have the right leaders and managers prepared for the right positions at the needed time.

Your organization currently has an approach to succession

planning, but it is likely not systematic and replicable, thereby the results are not sustainable. Improving (or simply maintaining) workforce productivity requires you and your leaders to accept that the work environment has changed, and your approach to succession planning must change as well.

Today, succession planning requires more than just a chart that shows who holds what job within your organization. Gold standard organizations use succession planning to develop and maintain strong leadership and to ensure that they address all the capabilities required for today’s and tomorrow’s work environment.

I fully recognize that there is an endless series of often-conflicting priorities that you have to navigate to keep your community vibrant. Over the years, I’ve had the good fortune of traveling across the United States and Canada partnering with numerous local governments on succession

planning, speaking about it at scores of conferences, authoring several articles, and presenting webinars (which, by the way, I'll be presenting an ICMA-sponsored webinar on succession planning on March 12— learn more via the QR code on the opposite page). Yet I continue to discover those leaders who still are talking about it but not acting on it. My question is when does having a capable, mission-oriented workforce become and stay a top priority despite the other forces pushing and pulling the agenda? Remember: it's not equipment, facilities, and computers that deliver your services, but capable, mission-oriented employees who choose every day to make a difference.

Investing in succession planning isn't about you creating a new line item in your budget or for that matter, even about spending more dollars on it. It is about making sure the capabilities of your workforce are a top priority and sustaining that commitment despite other forces.

In this article, I implore you that the time for talk about succession planning is over. Now is the time to adopt and implement a systematic and comprehensive approach to building a strong, capable bench of potential successors.

The Ever-So-Clear Crystal Ball

According to the 2022-23 SHRM State of the Workplace Report,¹ there was consensus among human resources professionals in their rankings of the four most serious issues facing their organization:

1. Lack of qualified candidates.
2. Uncompetitive compensation.

3. Limited workplace flexibility.
4. Lack of paths to career advancement.

The survey also asked U.S. employees what they believed their organizations should prioritize in 2023, which is a different question than the one asked of HR professionals and executives. The good news is that organizations are prioritizing the issues of greatest concern to employees. Specifically, talent recruitment, talent retention, and employee morale and engagement are top of mind for both. Ask yourself what your employees believe your organization should prioritize in 2024?

Additionally, there are a number of trends occurring from the rapidly changing workforce and workplace:

Technological Change

- The explosion of artificial intelligence and its many uses that are becoming more evident.
- New technologies that replace human labor, threatening employment (such as driverless trucks).
- New technologies that augment or supplement human labor (e.g., robots in health care).
- Sudden technology-based shifts in customer needs result in new business models, new ways of working, or faster product innovation.
- Technology-enabled opportunities to monetize free services (such as Amazon web services) or underutilized assets (such as personal consumption data).

Growing Demand for Skills

- General increase in the skills, technical knowledge, and

formal education required to perform work.

- Growing shortage of workers with the skills for rapidly evolving jobs.

Changing Employee Expectations

- Increased popularity of flexible, self-directed forms of work that allow better work-life balance, or as some people refer to it, life-work balance.
- A more widespread desire for work with a purpose and opportunities to influence the way it is delivered (e.g., greater team autonomy).

Shifting Labor Demographics

- Globally, more people are over the age of 65 than under five for the first time; in the United States, more people are older than 60 than under 18.
- Each day, 10,000 people turn 65 years of age. According to the Pew Research Center, for the first time, millennials now outnumber baby boomers in the workplace 76 million to 75 million. Millennials comprise one-third of the current workforce at 53.5 million; and by 2025, they will make up 75% of the workforce.
- The millennial generation has different work motivations and expectations for greater work/life balance.
- Only 8% of government employees are under the age of 30 (referred to as Gen Z) and, with an aging government workforce looking toward retirement or transitioning to the private sector, that number needs to go up fast to meet increasing demands.
- Younger adults who work

in government care about their communities. Gen Z, similar to millennials, are a generation that gets loud about political issues and those issues motivate them in everything, from what they buy, where they go to school, and what career they ultimately aim for.² Working in the public sector is often driven by the belief in an agency's given mission or the chance to become a part of something bigger than themselves.

Transitioning Work Models

- Even before the pandemic, remote work was increasing. Full remote or hybrid arrangements will continue and be a difference maker for a burgeoning segment of the workforce.

Change isn't the dangerous thing, stability is.

- Growth of contingent forms of work (such as on-call workers, temp workers, and contractors).
- Freelancing and labor-sharing platforms that provide access to talent.
- Delivery of work through complex partner ecosystems (involving multiple industries, geographies, and organizations of different sizes) rather than within a single organization.

**What got
you here
won't get
you there.**

Evolving Business Environment

- New regulation aimed at controlling technology use (e.g., “robot taxes”).
- Regulatory changes that affect wage levels, either directly (such as minimum wages or Social Security entitlements) or indirectly (such as more public income assistance or universal basic income).
- Regulatory shifts affecting cross-border flow of goods, services, and capital.
- Greater economic and political volatility as members of society feel left behind.

Organizations face a profoundly changing framework for the workforce, the workplace, and the world of work. These shifts have changed the procedures for practically every organizational people practice, from recruiting to learning to the definition of work itself. As the portfolio of your organization's services evolves along with accompanying delivery methods, the jobs and skills of your employees will need to change, so attracting and developing the right people becomes more crucial than ever.

The questions you should be asking yourself:

- How will we succeed with talent?
- How strong is our “bench” to fill unexpected, or even anticipated, vacancies in key positions?
- What services and support are we providing those currently serving in supervisory, management, and leadership roles to help them successfully cope with the seemingly ever-shifting

demands they have to contend with?

- How modern is our approach to attracting, retaining, and developing our talent?
- When a vacancy occurs, do we have a proven approach to select a successor?
- How will we develop the type of leaders and talent we need?

More than ever before, human resource challenges are strategic. The most important organizational needs for leaders to address are focused on future workforce development and growth, which are critical to near- and long-term organizational effectiveness. They must be able to provide answers to this key strategic question: how can we attract, develop, and retain the top talent we need to meet organizational goals?

The What of Succession Planning

Succession planning is about a lot more than just increasing employee training. Nor should it be the exclusive responsibility of the human resources department. Effective succession planning requires advocacy and visible support

from all members of the executive leadership team.

A well-designed succession planning program will enable your organization to:

- Align workforce requirements directly to strategic and operational plans.
- Recognize that succession planning includes all supervisory/management/leadership positions and not just department directors.
- Determine “at-risk” positions that are the focal point for building talent pools of potential successors.
- Improve recruitment and selection practices to “hire in” top talent.
- Identify and implement gap closing/reduction strategies (e.g., training/learning, mentoring, coaching, etc.).
- Implement a purposeful and practical approach to knowledge transfer to repurpose tacit knowledge prior to employees departing the organization.
- Build an internal succession planning capability to continually shape the workforce in response to emerging trends, shifting priorities, and technological progress.

All of this adds to the fact that in order to create a modern workforce you need a modern approach. Maintaining a contemporary workforce must be an organization-wide imperative.

Employees leave jobs for a number of reasons and not just because of retirement. These reasons can include lifestyle, unhealthy work culture/environment, few promotional opportunities, lack of investment by their employer in their capabilities, below-market compensation,

ineffective managers, and poor leaders. The end result of all this is for you to revise your point of view, recognizing that succession planning is beyond simply dealing with the retirement of your workforce, and realize that your employees leave due to a range of factors. I encourage you to review your turnover data for the last year or so and obtain the average age of those employees who left. My estimate, based on my consulting work with a number of government agencies, is it's likely somewhere in the low 40s.

Small organizations are particularly challenged when an employee departs, since a natural successor may not already be within the workforce. That problem may not be as much of an issue for mid-sized and large organizations, but a wave of departures can still disrupt service delivery. And even in larger organizations, it's a challenge to replace a sole incumbent who handles a breadth of responsibilities or possesses extensive specialized knowledge.

Succession planning can be a sensitive issue in that it includes some people and excludes others. Challenging the assumption that “seniority translates to competence,” succession planning is not about preselecting employees or playing favorites when it comes to promoting employees. What it is, in

**Change
before you
have to
rather than
because
you have to.**



fact, is an effort to increase the likelihood that current members of your workforce will be competitive when promotional opportunities occur and to ensure the pipeline of talent is abundant with qualified candidates. After all, the overall purpose is for your organization to (continue to) execute its mission, so consider succession planning as a tool to ensure the continuity of service delivery.

A wider definition of succession planning should also include the following:

- Ensuring that the people who join the organization are compatible with the fit required to be successful. While not all may be interested in pursuing a promotion at some point, a sufficient number should be willing to invest their time, effort, and energy to position themselves for those opportunities.
- Making sure that there are enough suitable people to

step into any significant role as it becomes vacant or is created.

- Motivating and developing them to adapt to the new role as fast as possible with minimum disruption.
- Recognizing that roles and their incumbents are constantly evolving.

Establishing systematic succession planning can entail a culture change. It can be a major shift in an organization where decision-makers may have been accustomed to filling one vacancy at a time (i.e., replacement planning). It requires commitment to a longer-term strategic view of talent needs. There are a number of valuable benefits, such as the following:

1. Having your identified bench strength in place will help the organization meet both long-term and emergency leadership, management, and non-supervisory needs at all levels.

2. Your organization maintains continuity of operations with minimal disruption from departing seasoned employees who take with them high-value tacit knowledge.
3. It allows the organization to create a standard for the qualifications and competencies that future leaders and managers need to have if they are going to lead the organization into the future. It also offers senior management a structured way to review and guide the potential leadership talent in the organization.
4. Succession planning benefits the employee by improving his or her understanding of the potential career paths available and the development he or she needs to move along those paths. This leads to improved retention, morale, and commitment of the workforce.
5. The caliber of the talent pipeline joining the

organization is consistent with the “fit” of your preferred workplace culture.

6. Gold standard organizations do not designate the responsibility for developing people as strictly the purview of human resources. They spread that responsibility across all departments and share it with department directors and line managers.
7. Growing your own sends a positive message throughout your workforce. People will want to join and stay with your organization since it develops its own people. And promoting from within is consistent with an empowerment philosophy that encourages people to take on responsibility, assume risk, and grow through their achievements.
8. The organization will have a clearer sense of an internal candidate's strengths and opportunities for improvement, as well as access to more and better data on that person's performance, than you would with outside candidates. Therefore, you will be able to make more informed and accurate selection decisions.
9. It allows your organization to move away from the reactive/replacement practice of hiring and toward a proactive approach of developing a talent pool through succession planning. Most public-sector organizations practice what is known as replacement hiring instead of succession planning. Replacement hiring is a reactive process to fill an immediate need, whereas succession planning is proactive and works to address the need before it exists. Figure 1 demonstrates

Figure 1. The Difference Between Replacement Hiring and Succession Planning

REPLACEMENT HIRING	SUCCESSION PLANNING
A narrow approach and usually focused on trying to quickly avoid a crisis by filling a position in a short time.	Takes the additional time needed to ensure that the decision aligns with the organization's strategic plan and goals.
More restrictive, sometimes forcing an organization to select the best person available at that moment.	More flexible and allows you to focus on selecting the best candidate for the position.
Often a quick fix.	Exhibits a long-term commitment to the organization and to developing individuals in the organization.
Usually based on the current job description and with limited time for additional input.	Allows you the time to further develop the job description to include new directions, expanded responsibilities, or adjustments to the position.
Often uses only input from the incumbent and his or her immediate supervisor.	Uses feedback from multiple perspectives and resources.
May offer advancement as a reward or because of seniority with the organization.	Doesn't just consider whether a person has been in his or her position for a period of time long enough to merit an advancement, but rather looks at the person's abilities to ensure that he or she has the competencies needed to be successful in the new role.

the reasons that support pursuing a succession planning approach. And that's just a sampling of the reasons why succession planning is a good idea. The major focus is that replacements are prepared to fill key vacancies on short notice and that individuals have the development capacity to assume greater responsibilities and expanded management roles.

The How of Succession Planning

In this article, I am not just sharing the ingredients or the cookbook, I'm offering you the recipe! I am providing my proven prescription on how to

implement organization-wide succession planning that will result in a more qualified bench of potential successors. Now you might say, well, I don't want my employees to get their hopes up for a potential promotion. The fact is that ambitious employees already want their reach to exceed their grasp, so their expectations are high. What they want is for you to invest in their capabilities (and not just their technical skills) so when a promotional opportunity opens, they feel competitive. Does that mean that some of those ambitious employees might have to depart your organization because there are not a lot of opportunities

for upward mobility? Yes, it does. Understandably, it's inconvenient when those employees you invest in sometimes leave, but what if you don't and they stay? Key principles to incorporate in your approach to succession planning include:

- Transition from succession planning as something the organization *does to employees* and toward something *you do with them*, so a much wider range of possibilities open up.
- Incorporate succession planning as a significant component of the retention strategy to ensure the organization is being

proactive about retaining its top performers.

- Realize that employee performance is what you achieve from what you do; potential is what you might achieve with further experience and opportunity to develop.
- Succession planning reaches further down into the organization, from the supervisory level down to those who are potential supervisors.
- High performers at one level will not necessarily become high performers at the next level, nor does it mean he or she automatically has high potential.
- Instead of talent identified for legacy roles and past realities, the organization should create a diversified portfolio of future talent, identified for future needs and equipped with highly adaptive skills.

Concerns about being perceived as a pre-selection approach are alleviated by the succession planning design using basic elements and proven practices:

- Focus on preparing broad pools of candidates (not hand-picked staff) for higher-level leadership responsibilities, not specific positions.
- Aim to help all interested employees improve their leadership skills and other skills to give them a competitive edge for positions that open.
- Do not guarantee promotions, pay raises, or other specific benefits for participating in succession planning programs.
- Provide wide and open access to all employees who seek career development opportunities.

A successful succession planning process will help prepare and transition front-line workers to take on the role of supervisor—and supervisors to managers. However, what often happens is that employees who are not prepared to be supervisors are moved into a role before they are ready. While they may have knowledge regarding their job and be a qualified practitioner, they may not be equipped with the skills or training necessary to be a good supervisor. Remember: an employee's technical proficiency doesn't always translate well to supervisory effectiveness. Developing a succession planning process and the appropriate support and training programs can help your agency prepare and equip employees to be both good practitioners and supervisors.

As seen in Figure 2, here are the eight steps of an effective succession planning methodology.

1. Identify future service needs.

A strategic plan identifies current and future priorities that are the essence of building

a succession planning process. Frequently, organizations concentrate their short- and long-term planning processes on capital improvements, and occasionally on operations, without fully integrating the impacts on the development needs of the employees responsible for delivering the services. A strategic plan, when adopted, is powerful, as it outlines how the organization will reach the measurable goals and objectives that support its mission and vision, both of which should be driving forces in the succession planning process.

2. Determine critical positions/jobs/roles.

Effective organizations do not passively wait for the future; they create it by investing their time, thoughts, and planning to ensure the continuity of their talent, their leaders, and their front-line employees. An excellent step toward the adoption of a succession planning process—and a method that will truly reveal your own organization's situation with respect to the

aging of the workforce—is to collect data.

Critical positions are those that are essential for the organization, department, division, work unit, or team to achieve the necessary work results. A high-potential employee is someone who has the capability to advance to one of the following: a critical position, a higher level of responsibility, or a higher level of technical proficiency. This identification step should be completed at the department level by senior management and by the executive management team for the entire organization.

Use Figure 3 as a worksheet in which to enter the number of employees in each of the categories listed. You may want to consider adding another column for the age group of 45–49, especially for police and fire personnel, since many of these employees may be eligible for retirement at 50 years of age.

Gathering and analyzing these types of data (a process often referred to as workforce analytics) will permit your jurisdiction to grasp the current situation and begin to recognize

its significance. You may want to take the analysis one step further to a more “micro” level, by job classification, for example. These types of solid data can be used to convince others, like senior executives and policymakers, not only of the gravity of the situation but also, more important, of the fact that resources must be provided to address it.

The interpretation of the workforce analytics needs to be viewed and considered in light of factors such as strategic priorities, challenges, and trends. In general, the following interpretations can be made about at-risk/critical positions:

Single Incumbent: Only one person can perform unique positions and duties in the office or the field. What are the unique duties and why did you identify them as such? Can anyone else complete these functions if the incumbent is absent?

Critical Task: Any position that would stop critical action taking place if it were left vacant. If this function did not happen, the organization would suffer.

Specialized Knowledge and Expertise: Incumbent has specialized knowledge and/or experience that is only acquired over time or through specialized education and training. Does the agency have the capacity to provide the required training or development to grow the specialized knowledge? Is there limited bench strength of individuals that can perform the function(s) that utilize this expertise?

Difficult to Replace from Inside or Outside of the Agency: Position or classification for which the agency has difficulty finding qualified candidates, despite

Figure 2. Approach to Succession Planning and Management

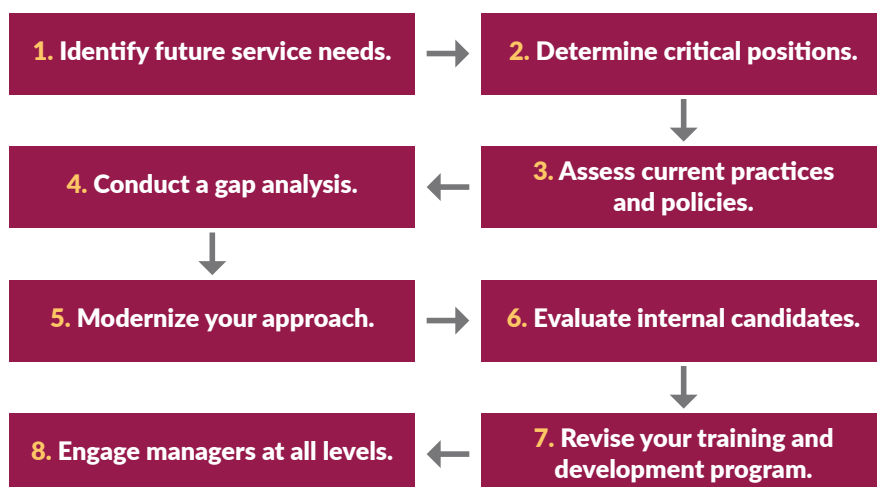


Figure 3.

Attrition Data and Retirement Projections: A Worksheet					
Department	Total Number of Employees	Age 50–54	Age 55–59	Age 60	Total for Ages 50–60+
Administration					
Clerk					
Community Services					
Finance					
Fire					
Human Resources					
Human Services					
Police					
Public Utilities					
Public Works Department					
Other					
Totals					

recruitment efforts. Is a skill set needed that can only be gained by working within the agency? Has it historically been difficult to attract a qualified applicant pool?

Difficult to Retain: Position or classification for which it's difficult to retain employees due to factors such as environment, position stressors, wage issues, shift issues, etc. Is there a high amount of turnover in the position? Is the position entry level and used to get a "foot in the door"? Is this position used as a "feeder pool" for other positions?

Risk of Attrition: Individuals that are at risk of leaving the agency due to a lack of developmental and/or promotional opportunities. Are there high performers with critical functions that are at risk of leaving due to role

dissatisfaction or because they have high-demand skill sets? Are there retirement-vulnerable individuals who have expressed intent to retire?

Retirement Vulnerable: Employees who are or will become eligible to retire within five years. Has the employee started the retirement process or provided notice of retirement?

Typically, effective succession planning programs are not designed for every position in an organization's workforce to be involved unless—and this is highly unlikely—every position is considered critical. Because this is a needs-based approach there may be some detractors who assert the principle, "if you can't do for it everybody, you shouldn't do it for anybody."

This egalitarian notion is acceptable if conditions are stable, but they are not, and it is recommended that you confront and respond to present conditions with respect to where your organization is most vulnerable.

Unfortunately, planning for succession is often overlooked or occurs when it is too late, after key people have left the organization and no internal candidates remain to fill the leadership positions. If your organization executes succession planning correctly, it will have a fully prepared front-line and management staff to step into positions left vacant because of retirement and general attrition.

3. Assess current practices and policies.

Before moving forward, you

need a performance baseline of current practices and policies. For instance, you may want to evaluate the effectiveness of the following:

- Existing learning and development programs and services (formal training offerings to equip employees with non-technical/people skills).
 - Performance management/appraisal practices.
 - Career planning/career ladders.
 - Mentoring efforts.
 - Knowledge transfer practices.
 - Promotional processes.
- There is tremendous value from also evaluating current approaches to recruitment and selection activities with the primary focus on how well you are bringing candidates into your organization.



Concerning human resource policies, if your agency is competing for employees seeking a lateral transfer of sorts (i.e., leaving their agency for yours), vacation accrual policies that allow them to continue at their current accrual rate with your agency are much more lucrative than asking employees to start entirely over. Modern policies that reflect the current reality are much more appealing to prospective job seekers than those from the past which, if still in place, will deter top candidates from even considering your agency. Other policies equally as important include issues related to work-life balance, outdated job classifications, rigid compensation rules, portability of pension

balances, relaxing of residency requirements, and revising outdated provisions of the civil service system (if applicable).

4. Conduct a gap analysis.

So, now you have a good understanding of the strategic direction your agency is pursuing and how that might alter the service portfolio and accordingly the capabilities of your staff. You've also identified the at-risk/critical positions on which the succession planning should focus.

Current policies and practices by your organization related to developing talent likely provide an opportunity for significant improvement. Similar to many organizations, you may not have adapted your succession planning

practices to match the pace at which you must execute your organizational strategy.

Essentially, a gap analysis has been established. The gap is the difference between the succession planning efforts you currently have and the succession planning efforts you need. Consequently, effective succession planning requires a comprehensive strategy of multiple tactics. The next step is to implement specific gap-closing strategies and tactics with laser-like precision.

5. Make adjustments to the dimensions related to building a qualified bench of potential successors.

There exists the belief in some organizations that succession planning is less formal than recommended here and thus unplanned. However, when

that describes an organization's preferred approach, there is a tendency for job incumbents to identify and groom successors who are remarkably like themselves in appearance, background, and values—a type of "bureaucratic kinship."

At the same time, there is another belief that succession planning implies that internal employees are entitled to promotions simply because of job tenure. In fact, succession planning is the direct opposite, and when it is systematic, transparent, and comprehensive as is recommended here, it rewards the meritorious and fosters a high-performance work culture.

Based on the gap analysis that was completed, move forward with:

- Various HR policies related to retaining and developing talent.
- Designing program components, including a candidate selection process for leadership, management, and supervisory training and development programs.
- Improvements to recruitment, selection, and promotional practices and processes.
- Facilitating the process to adopt competencies for front-line employees, mid-managers, and executives.
- Modernizing the performance appraisal process, including the requirement that annual individual development and training plans be funded and completed.
- Designing and implementing knowledge transfer programs.

The desired outcome is to modernize your approach and synchronize the succession planning strategy.

6. Select internal succession candidates based on objective, job-related assessments, and ratings of promotability or readiness for future positions.

Organizations historically have relied on anecdotal assessments of candidates, and as a result, management often fails to identify all the best candidates, and those considered for advancement or developmental placements are simply those who have become visible to management or possess seniority. Keep in mind that seniority does not always translate to competence, and technical proficiency doesn't always convert to supervisory effectiveness. In addition, when relying on subjective assessments, management personnel tend to focus on potential successors similar to themselves rather than identifying candidates with skills and experiences needed to succeed in the future. Objective and job-relevant assessment data can help effectively identify succession candidates, while also providing essential information regarding the developmental needs of the candidates. A number of off-the-shelf assessments are available—just make sure you don't use personality inventories. Whichever you use, communicate to employees participating that the assessments will not involve possible increases in compensation for the employee as this is strictly about evaluating one's potential. Remember that a high performer doesn't necessarily mean that he or she has high potential.

Factors when considering which employees should be

eligible to participate in a succession planning talent pool are if they demonstrate:

- A significant continued investment in their own development.
- A track record of assisting in the development of others (example.g., through coaching or mentoring).
- Ambition to achieve greater responsibilities.
- A high motivation to learn.

Without these basic competencies, an employee is unlikely to develop the competencies needed for supervisory/management roles. Instead of viewing role- or managerial-level competencies as fixed and generic, you might do better to seek to fill roles with people who have the ability to work out of the competencies that are currently and specifically needed and to adapt themselves accordingly.

7. Revise your training and development program.

Given that succession planning has at its core the process of identifying individuals' abilities and providing educational programming designed to enhance their knowledge and develop their leadership expertise, it stands to reason that the learning function would play a significant role. With so much at stake for the entire organization with respect to equipping employees with the needed skills and capabilities to tackle today's and tomorrow's challenges, a more comprehensive, planned approach is necessary.

Developing your employees' skills at a rate equivalent to the rate of change is the key to sustaining high performance. You need people who have the latest and most modern skills along with the ability to



build new ones quickly. That's learning agility. Critical going forward is for you to adopt and implement a contemporary approach to developing your workforce.

Beyond technical and compliance training, the essence of this training is that it's about non-technical capabilities. Let's agree right now to stop referring to these as soft skills. Soft skills go by many names—people skills, human capabilities, “real” skills. In short, they are the intrapersonal (within yourself) and interpersonal (between yourself and others) abilities at the core of how you do what you do to work effectively and productively, interact with others, and build relationships. They are distinct from what are known

as hard skills, or the technical knowledge a person needs to perform a role.

Most public-sector organizations invest a majority of their training budget in employees' technical performance. However, the ability to be an outstanding technical performer does not always translate into the ability to be an effective manager. The performance of managers today in organizations is rated as much on people skills as on measurable output. In addition, the ability to solve problems, resolve conflict, participate on teams, and make decisions are performance needs that frontline staff requires. Although people differ in their baseline abilities, the research shows that skills training can result in better results for most

people who want to improve their effectiveness.

The key for public-sector jurisdictions is to transition away from the practice of offering training to those employees who may or may not want to participate, which is akin to a random approach of ensuring capacity within your agency, and instead take a more targeted approach. Focus on merging employee desire with organizational need, which when blended constitutes a formidable combination. The capabilities being provided through the training are those the agency is seeking as necessary for members of their workforce.

To deepen the capabilities of your workforce members, you should offer a bottom-to-top leadership and management development program with the following recommended objectives:

- **Develop leaders** to cultivate strong leadership to meet the evolving opportunities of a growing organization.
- **Build the critical skills and capabilities** of supervisors, managers and executives required in a rapidly

changing environment, both internal and external.

- **Ease and expedite the transition** that employees' experience as they move from a front-line role to a supervisory role.
- **Improve performance** for increased organizational productivity and effectiveness.
- **Enhance the organization's capacity** to handle strategic, complex, and critical issues in the future.
- **Expand knowledge**, maximizing employee abilities to grow talent from within.
- **Ready the organization for succession planning** through strengthened organizational leadership (i.e., assemble a stronger and more qualified internal bench of potential "successors").

Formats for the delivery of the training material can include both in-person and online. Seek out in-person training to allow for more opportunity for your employees to interact face to face with the trainer and their coworkers, specifically for skills that are

contextual and people centric. Beyond training/learning, your strategic planning strategy should emphasize development. Effective succession planning initiatives emphasize employee development techniques as a means to grow capabilities among your workforce members. Figure 4 shows the most common (and when utilized, most impactful) techniques for strategies for employee development.

Providing a menu of employee development strategies can increase awareness among managers and supervisors that growing the capabilities of their staff is a combination of learning/training and non-training techniques. Offering a specific plan for employees ensures that his or her capabilities are being developed in the direction that benefits them and your organization.

8. Engage managers at all levels of the organization.

HR definitely has a visible and influential role in helping steer succession planning efforts, which also happens to coincide with the trend toward a business partner approach

by many HR departments in how they partner with their customers. At the same time, to be successful, "horsepower" from all departments is needed for an effective succession planning program.

To reap the rewards of a stronger focus on succession planning and thus, organizational performance, it needs to be owned by senior management, driven by every single manager, and treated as a high priority. In other words, when senior leaders are actively involved in all things succession planning—revising relevant policies and practices and focus on non-technical learning and development—the quality is much higher. Senior management has a critical perspective in identifying the leaders that the organization needs in the future, but they also have the influence needed to put development at the top of the priority list.

I guarantee that by following these eight steps you will have a stronger bench of potential successors than you know what to do with and won't that be a good problem to have. You will also feel more confident about being proactive and responsive to developing your workforce and ensuring continuity of operations. **PM**

Figure 4. Employee Development Strategies



ENDNOTES AND RESOURCES

¹ <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/research-and-surveys/Documents/2022-2023%20State%20of%20the%20Workplace%20Report.pdf>

² <https://pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/01/17/generation-z-looks-a-lot-like-millennials-on-key-social-and-political-issues/>

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Moving from Department Head to Acting (or Permanent) City Manager



Are You Ready?

BY JAN PERKINS, ICMA-CM & ROD GOULD, ICMA-CM

What to consider when faced with this big decision

Your boss, the city manager, just announced that she's taking a job in a neighboring city. You've been the finance director for five years and have attended many council meetings, watched councilmembers come and go, and seen staff change. A couple of councilmembers have approached you about serving as the acting city manager when your boss departs. It feels good to be asked. You think the staff would welcome having a "known" quantity at the helm, and you would get a bit more money. Should you say yes?

Key Questions

The chance to serve as acting city manager is an honor and an opportunity for greater service and professional growth. However, it should only be undertaken with forethought and knowledge—and with eyes wide open. Here are a few questions to ask yourself before jumping into the deep end.

- Would you have sought it out if you had not been asked? Has taking on the top job been a career aspiration?

- Does the council respect the council-manager form of government? Do they respect the city managers role as well as the lines between policy and administration?
- Do you expect the council to respect your advice, including tough issues like setting priorities to match staff capacity? Or do you feel they are looking for someone who will say “yes” to them, regardless of the impacts on staff?
- Is the council expecting you to continue to run your department while serving as the acting city manager?
- Will you be free to return to your previous position if you are not selected to become the permanent city manager or if you choose not to compete for the top job?
- Are you clear that you are working for the entire council and not just a few of them, and take direction only from the council as a body?
- Are you familiar with the ICMA Code of Ethics and what behaviors are expected? Can you live with those expectations?
- Do you have a “clear north” about what lines you will not cross, and what lines you will not allow the council to cross?
- Are you ready to give up your peer status with department heads and become their supervisor?
- Are you ready to forego managing what will be your former department?
- Are you comfortable with negotiating and facilitating?
- Are you ready to be held accountable for the performance of all the departments under your purview as city manager?
- Are you ready to give up

time with your family? And can you set boundaries with the council as to when you will and will not be available to them?

- Are you comfortable with conflict and making decisions, especially with imperfect information?
- Can you envision life in the fishbowl, where your every move, and even that of your family, may be posted on social media?
- Will the job give you some measure of additional joy?

Local government needs talented city managers. ICMA has long focused on preparing and mentoring professionals for top jobs. It is critical work. The city manager is the lynchpin and the hub in city government. He or she is the one who gets things done by working through a motivated and skilled staff and by giving practical policy advice to council. The city manager is the one person who can provide leadership and direction in a way that brings the disparate parts of the local government together.

The city manager can have great influence on the safety, quality of life, and sustainability of the whole community. He or she can be essential to the effective, efficient, and equitable working of local representative democracy. It’s a big job!

If you move from your department head seat to city manager, you will need to become skilled in facilitation and understanding a variety of interests, negotiating solutions, learning about all city operations, listening to what is said and not said, making decisions that may be unpopular, and being humble enough to recognize when something is going down

the wrong path and course correction is needed.

Some Food for Thought

Your department head colleagues are no longer just colleagues, as you will now be the boss. You will need to be comfortable overseeing people who had been your peers. You will also need to rapidly learn much about all of the city operations, even though you do have subject matter experts as your department heads. It will be important to know enough so that you can ask the right questions.

You will need to be clear that you work for the entire council, and not do the work of individual councilmembers. It is not uncommon for an acting city manager (or a new city manager) to be approached by an individual councilmember with a pet project in the hopes that you will get it done for him or her, even if it is not something the entire council has adopted as part of their priorities.

You will need to have a clear set of principles that guide your decisions.

There are some things that you should know you *will* do and *will not* do. The ICMA Code of Ethics will provide excellent guidance, as well ICMA’s ethics advisor. But fundamentally, you will need to determine what you stand for and how you will navigate political and ethical issues. For instance, will you tolerate councilmembers bullying your staff? Will you allow a department head to go around you to the council? Will you communicate equally with all councilmembers? Will you implement adopted council policy and priorities,

and not the will of an individual member?

Be prepared for the learning curve involved in moving from department head to city manager. Many people have done it successfully. It takes a willingness to invest time in reading articles in ICMA’s *PM Magazine*, attending conferences, and most importantly, learning from colleagues. Having multiple mentors can be helpful. There are many ways to be a successful city manager, so having a variety of people you can go to with your questions and conundrums is a way to test your theories and get some perspective on how to deal with issues. Ask your council to pay for an executive coach for you during your first few months or so. It will pay off for the city in the long run.

Set expectations early with the council as to when you will and will not be available to them. If you really want them to call you at any hour, then fine. But if you cherish your time with family and friends, you should let them know that you’ll respect their time and contact them during business hours and would ask them to do the same (except for true emergencies, of course).

Establish from day one how you wish the council to communicate their requests for information to staff. If you start out by letting councilmembers contact any staff in any department, it will be nearly impossible to get that back. Your staff are not accountable to the council—only you are. You should determine before your first day on the job how you want those communications to land. If councilmembers should

direct requests to you only, then fine. If it is to you and your assistant city manager or another one or two senior-level people, then that will be your practice. Whatever it is, make clear to everyone involved—the council and your staff—what your expectations are, including what you expect of your staff if they have contact with councilmembers. If you don't know about those conversations, you could be blindsided, even if the conversation is benign.

Be sure that you have a thick enough skin. In the city manager role, you will be criticized by people who do not know you or fully understand your role. Do not pay attention to social media if you don't have to. Focus on doing the job with the community's interest first.

Be wary of an acting city manager role where the council is expecting you to serve dually in your old job. If that happens, you will not be able to do either job well. The one that is likely to suffer is the acting city manager role.

Don't want the acting job so badly that you compromise yourself. If you don't honestly feel that you can make the hard decisions or stand up to councilmembers that may be pushing boundaries, or if you'll be so worried about criticism that it colors your advice, then best to stay in your department head role. Cities need and rely on skilled department heads.

Serving our communities as city manager can be a fulfilling career. It can bring great joy and satisfaction. It is a wonderful way to make contributions to good government. It is an



honorable profession. But it's not for everyone.

Enhancing Your Success and Minimizing the Risk

If you decide to embark upon the acting city manager adventure, then there are a few things you can do to aid in your success and reduce risk.

Establish a few goals for the period of your acting city manager service. What do you intend to focus on during that time? Meet with the council to enlist their concurrence and support.

Get agreement with your department heads about how you will be communicating with them and your expectations of them. This can include some simple protocols, meeting schedules, when to email versus when to pick up the phone, and how to alert you to when you might be going down the wrong path. Invite them to be partners in your leadership, but always be mindful that you are alone in the top job.

Be willing to admit what you don't know and enlist mentors and coaches to assist you as you experience and learn the new role. Reach out to them and seek advice.

Develop protocols for council in communicating with department heads and staff. The council may view your acting status as a

way to go around the city manager and directly to staff. Creating clear protocols before day one will help you, your staff, and the council work most effectively together. If the council is communicating with your staff and not you, you will not really understand the nuances of their thinking, and it will confuse your staff.

Don't change who you are or how you treat people because of this new position. Trust that what got you to this point will serve you well if you are open to learning about a much wider range of issues, operations, and community needs and services.

Establish a clear understanding with council that you work for all of them, not only a few. If some councilmembers think that now they have an acting (or new) city manager who can get the things done that the prior one didn't, even if it means going against council direction, then that will be a set-up for problems for you. Let them know you will be equally communicating with them and carrying out established council policy direction.

Discern whether the council expects you to be an administrative overseer or a "fix-it" person. Go into it with your eyes wide open and be clear with the council what you will and will not do.

Establish that you can return to your previous position in house if you decide the city manager role is not for you. Put this in writing. Have a written employment agreement specifying not only compensation but other key matters that are important to your success.

Having Considered All This, You're Ready to Say Yes!

You enjoy your current department head position. You have mastered the job, are well-compensated for your efforts, and are respected by staff and outside stakeholders. And now you feel the need to further challenge yourself and make an even bigger contribution. In the end, take the job if you think you'll enjoy it! Talented city managers are needed who understand the council-manager form of government and can foster transparent, professional government for the benefit of our communities.

You will find various resources available to help you, among which are:

- ICMA Senior Advisors.
- ICMA conferences, other regional and subject matter conferences.
- City managers in neighboring cities.
- The ICMA Coaching Program coaches – select from the Coach Connect online registry.
- Institute for Local Government. **RM**

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Six Local Government Workforce Trends *You Can't Ignore*

These waves of change are too big to ignore or resist. Local governments need to embrace these new realities and help their organizations adapt.

BY FRANK BENEST,
ICMA-CM (RETIRED)

I am the assistant city manager of a large Midwestern city. In the post-pandemic, we are struggling to maintain services to the public much less respond to city council priorities.

There is a lot of staff churn; many older, seasoned employees have retired; we have significant vacancies that are hard to fill; and our employees seem exhausted and less engaged. Due to these workforce challenges, we are dealing with customer service and productivity problems across all departments. Our police and paramedic response times have worsened; we don't have the staff to reopen our libraries full time; and the processing of key development projects lags.

To attract new employees, we have raised salaries, begun to offer hiring bonuses for certain hard-to-fill positions (police and engineers), and provide employee referral incentives. The better compensation, bonuses, and referral incentives haven't made much of a dent in our vacancy rates. We in top management seem to be at a loss. How do we turn this workforce situation around?

Local governments are facing a number of workforce trends and challenges that imperil our

mission of providing effective services to the public. It used to be that addressing workforce and talent issues was a nice, discretionary activity for top management. Now, addressing workforce challenges is a key business imperative.

These workforce trends do not just affect the public sector. In a survey of CEOs, the top three issues that “kept CEOs up at night” were:

1. Attracting and retaining top talent.
2. Developing the next generation of leaders.
3. Maintaining an engaged workforce.

The Talent Crisis

Like many sectors in the economy, local government is facing a talent crisis. We are in a war for talent ... and we are losing the war. The talent challenge has many dimensions:

First, given the anti-government sentiment in much of the country, as well as attacks on government from our own elected officials, we are not attracting high-potential young people into the talent pipeline. In addition, hyper-critical comments from the public and elected officials drive talent away.

Second, local governments can no longer rely on poaching talent from other agencies. We have to prioritize growing our own talent at all levels of the organization.

Third, talent is mobile. It can go anywhere, anytime. “A” players are “free exiters.” They can freely exit. Our organizations are not sufficiently “sticky” to retain high-performing staff.

Finally, many local government employees feel exhausted, undervalued, and

disconnected. “Quiet quitting” (feeling unengaged and just doing the minimum) is a growing phenomenon.

Recognizing this multifaceted talent dilemma, I believe that local government leaders must acknowledge and act upon certain workforce trends. Given my work with local government agencies and much research investigating current workforce realities, I suggest that we local government leaders confront six workforce trends.

1 Byzantine recruiting and hiring processes put local government at a competitive disadvantage.

In many cities and counties, it takes six months to recruit and hire someone. As one example, the recruitment and hiring process in San Francisco takes an average of 255 days. No professional or talented young person is going to wait six months for us to make up our minds.

Exacerbating bureaucratic hiring processes, our job announcements are unappealing and jargon-laden, and focus on job duties, not the difference that people can make in the position. In addition, our insistence on “minimal qualifications” and formal education attainment eliminates many applicants and limits our ability to diversify the workforce.

Some Things to Do:

- Reengineer recruitment and hiring processes. In most of our agencies, we need to reengineer and eliminate the many steps in the processes to recruit and hire talent.
- Eliminate “minimal qualifications.” In many

cases, minimal qualifications (including educational attainment) are not critical to actually doing the job.

Given the ever-changing nature of local government jobs, we need to move from “pedigree” to “potential” and learning agility.

- Enhance job announcements. Job announcements issued by local governments are typically boring and unexciting. They need to trumpet the “why” of the job and the opportunity to make a difference (“help save the planet,” “care for our children”).

2 Remote/hybrid work is not going away.

Prior to the pandemic, local government agencies, like many public and private organizations, resisted telework. Of course, our experience during the COVID pandemic radically changed what was acceptable. Much research demonstrates that remote work is as productive if not more productive, than in-office work.

Moreover, now that employees have experienced the ample benefits of remote or hybrid work (less costly and time-consuming commutes, more flexibility to care for children and elders, more work autonomy and flexibility, better work-life balance), employees will strongly resist any “one-size-fits-all” edicts from top management to fully return to the office. Onsites are the new offsites.

Some Things to Do:

- Provide autonomy and flexibility. For those employees who can do their work fully or partially at home, allow managers

and their team members to figure out how many days and/or which days team members work in the office. The team knows best what is required of them. Autonomy and flexibility are key to maintaining engaged employees and retaining talent.

- Treat onsite work as the new offsite. Leaders should not insist that employees commute to the office to do work that can easily be done at home. Just like our previous offsite retreats, onsite work should focus on consensus decision-making, collaboration, and relationship-building.
- Redefine productivity. Pre-COVID, managers could directly supervise employees in-person. Productivity was often defined by “bottoms in the seat” with an emphasis on completing certain tasks. With remote or hybrid work, productivity must be redefined to focus on outcomes and results, allowing employees the autonomy within certain guide rails to “figure it out” and produce the desired results.

3 Learning and career development have become key drivers for employee engagement and retention.

In the past, providing learning and career development opportunities were not typically high leadership priorities. Now learning and career development are key to retaining talent as well as increasing adaptability amid all the uncertainty facing local government. In fact, learning is the new “social glue” that helps us retain talent. As long

as employees are learning and growing, they tend to stay with us.

Recognizing that it is increasingly difficult to “steal” professionals or those with critical technical skills from other organizations, local government agencies must make it clear that there are opportunities to grow and develop within the organization and/or the organization will get you ready for career advancement with another agency.

Some Things to Do:

- Commit to learning and career development as key organizational values. Just as “providing excellent customer service” or “promoting community partnerships” may be organizational values, ongoing learning and development must be an organizational imperative and leaders must then demonstrate a commitment to it.
- Teach all managers how to conduct development conversations. All managers can be trained to conduct and guide a simple development conversation with their direct reports, inquiring about their career hopes and dreams, options to achieve those hopes, obstacles to overcome, and support needed. Not only will these conversations support career development but they also demonstrate that the manager and organization care about them.
- Engage the executive team in talent discussions. To promote learning and career development, the chief executive and

department heads must have scheduled and structured discussions about the development of emerging leaders in each department and suggested learning activities to accelerate their development.

- Provide a menu of development activities for all. Employees want choices in how and when they engage in learning and development. Therefore, top management must ensure that the organization provides a menu of development activities, such as stretch assignments, team leadership opportunities, interim assignments, lunch and learns, book clubs, career development classes, job shadowing or rotations, internal or multi-agency talent exchanges, in-house or regional leadership academies, and one-to-one coaching match-ups. In comparison with other investments (for example, capital projects, IT improvements), learning and talent development are some of the cheapest investments by local government.
- Further develop career ladders. If employees see structured opportunities to grow and advance with their organizations, they are more likely to stay.

4 Employees desire an enhanced “employee experience.”

In the face of growing demands on their agencies yet with constrained resources, top management is being called upon to counter the lack of employee engagement and the “quiet quitting” phenomenon in order to increase productivity. The problem is that many

front-line employees who can’t work from home, as well as remote/hybrid workers, feel overwhelmed, frustrated, distressed, and unappreciated. According to MissionSquare Institute research, 69% of local and state employees felt negative about their jobs, 49% said they were stressed, and 47% said they were actually burned out.

Stay interviews are a powerful way to ‘recruit’ talent. In dealing with employee morale, leaders have often taken a “transactional” approach (more compensation, better benefits). While employees value salary increases in times of high inflation and better family benefits, they most desire a “relational” approach. Employees want an enhanced employee experience featuring:

- A sense of purpose and meaning.
- Autonomy.
- Learning and growth.
- Belonging and community (“someone cares for me,” “my opinion counts,” “I feel connected to others”).
- Culture of gratitude.

If employees experience an organizational culture exhibiting some if not all of these traits, they will tend to be actively engaged and, therefore, more productive and certainly more likely to stay. In fact, local governments that create a positive employee experience are five times more likely to engage and retain talent.

Some Things to Do:

- Constantly talk about the “why” of our work. We tend to immediately talk about “what” we need to do and “how” we need to do it. Purpose and meaning are about the “why” of our work.



entice the employee to leave you. These conversations are a powerful way to connect with employees and “re-recruit” talent.

5 DEI is not a fad that will disappear.

In response to demands from employees, governing boards and community groups, local governments have begun to address diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) issues inside and outside the organization. Some of us may believe that DEI initiatives are a fad that will disappear as more important challenges emerge; however, I believe that this is a workforce challenge that is here to stay.

While DEI initiatives may be based on social justice values, DEI has in fact a compelling business rationale. Local government faces many adaptive (not technical) challenges, such as homelessness, affordable housing, traffic congestion, climate change, and police reform. These adaptive challenges do not have any right or wrong solutions and require the diverse perspectives and ideas of many employees and stakeholders. DEI efforts help create this diversity of thinking and problem-solving.

In addition, employees want to work for an organization that prioritizes diversity and desire to serve on diverse teams. In a study by Citrix, 86% of employees and 66% of HR directors believe that a diverse workforce will continue to be important as roles, skills, and organizational requirements change over time.

As we face talent shortages, DEI efforts will also help agencies attract nontraditional candidates and expand talent pipelines. Inclusion is

To help employees perceive meaning, leaders may ask in one-to-one conversations and team meetings “why is this project important to you?”

- Resist reinstituting controls. By necessity during the pandemic, organizations streamlined approval processes to get things done, and managers gave employees more autonomy in how to do their work. Let’s not now reinstitute deadly controls.
- Autonomy is a great self-motivator. Instead of “telling” employees what to do and then “testing” them to see if they did it according to your instructions, ask employees:
 - What are your key priorities or projects?
 - Why are your efforts important to you?
 - What does “success” look like?
 - In the next week or two, what are one or two important steps forward in accordance with those priorities?
 - How can I support you?
- Promote learning and development. See discussion above.
- Focus on creating connection. People are experiencing an epidemic of loneliness that is only exacerbated by the isolation of remote work. For in-person as well in virtual teams, leaders must help people build social bonds. Research by The Gallup Organization indicated that a key to actively engaged employees is that “At work, someone cares about me.” In one-to-one conversations or team meetings, leaders can foster connection and caring by asking team members about their families, hobbies, sports or other non-work activities. Some organizations promote social bonding by using the ritual of “taking 5” minutes at the beginning of meetings to talk about non-work interests, having potluck opportunities, or conducting group walking meetings. Research indicates that high-performing teams spend 25% more time on non-work topics than lesser-performing teams.
- Demonstrate appreciation. Gallup identifies recognition as another key driver of employee engagement (“In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work”). Even in the face of budget cuts, there are many simple and inexpensive ways to recognize people. For example, start each staff meeting with a “team accomplishment” segment when anyone can give a shout out, recognizing a team member’s contribution. While attending a city council or commission meeting, write personal thank you notes to the team members. It is also important to encourage governing board members to express appreciation of staff’s efforts.
- Conduct “stay interviews.” Instead of conducting an exit interview after a talented employee has already decided to leave, conduct a stay interview. A stay interview is a one-on-one interview between a manager and a valued employee. The purpose of the interview is to learn what will keep the employee working with you and elicit what would

a key element of a positive employee experience.

Finally, DEI efforts in our local government organizations will help us create a greater sense of community and belonging. Employees at all levels and all backgrounds need to feel that their voice is heard, their opinion counts, people care about them, and they have opportunities to develop themselves and advance. Inclusion is a key element of a positive employee experience.

Some Things to Do:

- Articulate a compelling business rationale for DEI efforts. While DEI for many may be a moral imperative, leaders must articulate and promote the business reasons for DEI.
- Conduct a series of in-person and online conversations with employees and community members. Focus groups, coffee sessions with the city manager, and surveys can help assess the experiences of employees and community members and generate their thoughts, concerns, and ideas about a more diverse and inclusive environment.
- Engage top management leaders in DEI initiatives. Like most organizational change efforts, DEI requires active (not just passive) support from the top.
- Find and engage some DEI champions and form a multi-department team with members from all levels of the organization. The team can identify initial action steps, priorities, training required, and resources.
- Don't go it alone. This is a tough issue and you need help. Get resources and identify best practices from

other local government agencies and national organizations. Two national groups providing support are the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE) and ICMA.

6 The new world of work requires upskilling/reskilling middle managers.

As indicated by all the Gallup research on employee engagement and retention, the key relationship is the relationship between the employee and one's direct supervisor or manager. Employees join an organization for greater responsibility and expanded roles, as well as better compensation. They tend to leave an organization because of a poor relationship with their direct supervisor.

The roles of mid-managers are shifting. Mid-managers have typically seen their role as "pushing out the work" of team members and demanding accountability. That traditional role is changing as we recognize the need for managers to create relationship and connection with team members, promote learning and development, and generally support their efforts. As the world of work is transformed, bosses are becoming coaches.

As automation and AI begin to reconfigure work, mid-managers are on the ground

and can help team members sort it out.

As Gallup has documented, 70% of the variance in team engagement and performance is due to the manager.

The problem is we have not trained managers for these new roles and have not eliminated their individual work assignments or all their administrative work. Mid-managers are simply overwhelmed. In fact, they are the most stressed and depressed category of worker in most organizations.

Some Things to Do:

- Articulate the importance of the new roles for managers. Given the needs of the organization and employees, publicly discuss the compelling rationale in the role shift of managers and the support that the organization will provide.
- Provide training, coaching and other resources. Invest in the training and development of managers that emphasizes enhancing their human interaction skills, promoting employee engagement, and building a positive team culture. San Mateo County, California, developed an upskilling development program that included coaching for its managers. Each new manager is provided with the opportunity to select an internal coach to work with them for six months.

Additionally, all supervisors and managers can access an SOS (supervisors online support) intranet site offering videos, development opportunities, and other resources to support their success.

- Evaluate, reward, and celebrate mid-managers based on their new role definition. Instead of solely evaluating and rewarding managers on the amount of work they and their team push out, evaluation and reward metrics must be aligned with the people skills and behaviors that are now needed by employees and the organization. As a best practice, organizations should celebrate those managers who are exemplars.

Shape the Change

These workforce challenges represent waves of change. These waves of change are too big to ignore or resist. They can easily overwhelm you and your organization. The best approach is to recognize the waves of change and navigate them for the benefit of your organization. In other words, embrace the change and shape it as it occurs. **PM**

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Sponsored by the ICMA Coaching Program, ICMA Career Compass (icma.org/career-compass) is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff. Subscribe to the Career Compass columns and receive each new column in your inbox at icma.org/career-compass-archives.



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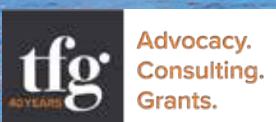
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NEW CITY/COUNTY MANAGER? FOCUS ON THE FUNDAMENTALS!

In the face of community stresses, actively lead and manage for the 90% of your local government's services that are largely invisible but that people count on most.

BY JAN PERKINS, ICMA-CM
& ROD GOULD, ICMA-CM

Roberto Garcia turns on the tap and clean, fresh water comes out. Emiline Nguyen dials 911 for a medical emergency and paramedics and firefighters arrive promptly to treat and transport her. The Elm neighborhood is happy with their new street paving project. The city just received a clean audit for the twentieth year in a row.

These things don't "just" happen. They are basics in local government that our residents and businesses expect. It is only when the water from the tap is brown, or the response time for an emergency is poor, or the streets become unsafe that community members wonder, "what is the city/county doing?"

Local governments today are challenged in so many new and different ways, ranging from climate change to community engagement listening sessions, political polarization and social unrest, homelessness and affordable housing, attacks on local democracy and deep distrust of law enforcement. Of course, a new chief administrative officer (CAO) must help his or her council to address these societal issues. Yet as a new city/county manager takes the helm, it's essential to



pay strict attention to the 90% of the city's fundamental work that is largely invisible.

Some of the signs of ignoring the fundamentals in local government include the following:

- Going many years without a water rate increase, requiring deferrals of needed infrastructure repairs and replacement.
- An embezzlement by a highly regarded city employee who was allowed to perpetrate his crime due to lack of internal controls that slipped when staffing was eliminated.
- Lack of a long-term capital improvement program or funding plan that would allow the county to maintain and replace its infrastructure, resulting in waste water main breaks and flooding.
- Poor human resources hiring practices and oversight at community centers that allow sex offenders to interact with children.
- A development project that gets approved without significant aspects being fully analyzed, resulting in unanticipated environmental degradation and social conflict.
- A pattern of excessive force claims and lawsuits against the police department.

A CAO and his or her executive team need to be paying serious attention to the basics of service delivery and sound management practices. First, they need to know what those fundamentals are. As people get appointed into top positions from non-traditional roles, they may not have had the grounding in the

basics of good government administration and what constitutes established best practices in the traditional array of municipal services: public safety, planning and development, infrastructure maintenance, and community services.

Professional management provides true value to communities worldwide. The CAO and his or her assistants must provide active oversight of basic services to ensure that they are provided effectively, equitably, and efficiently. They must know what to look for in operations and administration and what questions to ask. Otherwise, fundamental services go on auto pilot and can trend to mediocrity or worse and the value addition of professional management is forfeited.

What can a CAO do to help their local government protect the basics of its services and its assets?

Your Path to Success **Understand what those basics are.**

For instance, learn the principles of fund accounting and internal controls in the finance arena and how fraud can happen. Understand why public works professionals recommend a pavement management plan with prioritization of streets and a paving cycle. Become knowledgeable about labor relations—what is involved in productive negotiations, positive relationships with bargaining groups, and the difference between them and employees at large. Understand the principles and practices of true community policing, techniques for de-escalation, and community

trust building. Know how to efficiently staff, deploy, and triage calls for medical services. Have a solid grasp of planning and environmental law to ensure that the land-use approval process is objective and complete, yet not overly burdensome, and not unduly influenced by developers/applicants or community groups/activists.

Advocate for the basics.

Don't get lost in the issues of the moment. While those issues are important and may well be on the council's list of priorities, a solid foundation of city services is what the community expects, even if residents and businesses do not articulate it. Be the advocate for spending time and money on the fundamentals of infrastructure, organization systems, and public safety. Remind policy makers that when things break, they are often highly expensive to fix, plus the community's goodwill and trust are impaired. It is best to plan and prioritize keeping the community's basic services and city government operating well.

Pay attention.

While a city/county manager has expert department heads and may also have assistant managers or deputy managers to handle day-to-day operations, it is also important that the manager not delegate everything. Sometimes to check the weather you need to just step outside and see what is actually happening. This has been called management by walking around. A city manager should fully understand what is going on, know where the weak points

are within a city's services, and be the voice for continual improvement. Ask questions, always with an eye toward, "what don't we know that we should, and how will we be better in the future?"

Avoid distractions.

In discussions with the city council, the city manager must urge continued focus on big picture priorities, effective service delivery, and organizational development over pet projects, shiny objects, and darting squirrels. This requires backbone, communication skills, and patience.

The CAO's job is a big one. Competing demands from the council, staff, different parts of the community, and others mean he or she must be grounded in the basic purposes of local government. The city/county manager cannot be an expert on everything, but he or she can know the questions to ask to help the organization deliver valued, equitable, and quality services that protect the well-being of the people who live and work in the community. He or she can be the voice for the 90% of the organization's work that can go unnoticed and unappreciated until something goes wrong. Then finger pointing, rationalizations, and loss of public trust can result. The community depends on professionals paying attention and adapting in a way that preserves the community's safety, quality of life, and sustainability.

But How?

A newly appointed manager can be forgiven for wondering



when learning the tenets of quality service delivery and best practices fits in while serving five or seven engaged councilmembers and a community demanding change and improvement, all while addressing mega issues like housing imbalance and homelessness, mandated emissions reductions, lethal drug deaths, racial and ethnic divisions, and declining trust in government.

The answer is unfortunately that the new manager cannot afford not to provide quality control over basic services. Otherwise, he or she simply becomes a conduit between the political actors/policy makers and the staff. Not knowing what to look for and what to probe leaves the CAO vulnerable to unqualified or low-performing department directors—and to becoming an easy scapegoat when things inevitably go very wrong.

Hence, a new manager must conduct an honest inventory of what he or she knows well and what areas are less familiar and set about filling in the gaps. Such a self-

assessment should be done in conjunction with the assistant and/or deputy manager. This means explaining to the city council why the manager and assistant need to attend training and conferences to augment their skills and stay current. Some may balk at admitting to their new bosses what they have not mastered, but such an open discussion actually builds credibility as no manager knows everything that is needed to oversee all city services, programs, and activities.

Resources for Help

ICMA and many state associations offer training resources to help city managers fill in any gaps they may have about any specific service areas of city government. For instance, get a coach through ICMA at CoachConnect. Check out the professional organizations representing the various municipal service specialties for excellent online and in-person training as well. Continuous learning is a way to keep up with approaches

proven to be effective in other cities.

Enlist a mentor or coach to help you sort through your professional development needs and prioritize your instructional activities. Retired or encore managers can also help you to discover the right questions to ask and what solid answers should be forthcoming from your department directors and assistants. Spend time with your department heads one on one and as a team to get to know their strengths and their thoughts on the overall organization that you lead.

Be active in ICMA and your state and local managers groups to learn from your peers and to be reminded that you are part of a noble profession. Give yourself time. This breadth of knowledge and expertise is not easily achieved. It will take time in your role and attention to your professional development goals. It is never ending as the best thinking and techniques in local government management are always evolving.

Bottom Line

Get the basics of municipal service right to best serve your community, despite the myriad of demands for action on a host of large and small issues that can easily overwhelm your day. Provide active management and oversight with your team and constantly widen and deepen your knowledge base to ensure your city the biggest return on professional management. Focus on the forest. **PM**

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Trending Issues that Resonate Worldwide:

A LOOK INTO SOUTH AFRICAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT



BY JEANETTE GASS

Takeaways from the Institute of Local Government Management Conference that will resonate with local government professionals across the globe.

During the 2023 Institute of Local Government Management (iLGM) Conference (ilgm.co.za) in Franschhoek, South Africa, ICMA representatives participated in knowledge exchange with local government professionals from all regions of South Africa.¹ Serving as the professional body in South Africa and one of ICMA's International Affiliates, iLGM hosted an eye-opening conference that highlighted the similarity of issues faced by local governments around the world. While local government has only been part of the national constitution since the enactment of the Municipal Structures Act in 1998,² there are many parallels to be drawn between the workings of government in South Africa, the United States, and around the world.

As a local government professional, do any of these questions sound familiar to you?

- Are you recruiting the right professionals or are you succumbing to outside pressures?
- How do we keep talent in local government?



Franschhoek Town Hall in Franschhoek, Western Cape, South Africa



iLGM Deputy President and Chairperson of International Affairs Eunice Segatlhe-Lesejane thanks ICMA CEO/Executive Director Marc Ott for his presentation on ethics and codes of conduct in the United States at the 2023 iLGM Conference.

amount about all the different aspects of local government operations to effectively serve the needs of the community. Couple this with low pay, in comparison to private sector jobs, and the result is a recruitment problem. Much of the country's top talent does not consider a career in public service. If they do, they often leave for the private sector due to higher pay and better benefits. This rings true in many countries throughout the world. In the session, "New and Better Hiring Practices for Local Government," discussions revolved around not only finding the right people but also convincing them to stay. Some suggestions included revisiting hiring practices to ensure a diverse candidate pool, creating opportunities for promotion from within, and working toward better pay.

Although better pay was acknowledged as the primary way to retain local government professionals, some other suggestions included deemphasizing titles and focusing on attitudes, ethics, and skills when considering staff members to take on various projects in the municipality. While some tasks may need to be reserved for specific roles, there are often opportunities for local government professionals to take on projects of interest and grow as leaders in the field, regardless of their position. This serves two purposes. First, the project is completed by staff members who are interested in the issue at hand and have the capacity to see it through. Second, the employee benefits through gaining new skills. This helps the employee

- How can local government use technology to ensure data-driven decision making?
- How do we keep political interference out of local government management and behave in an ethical manner?
- How do we manage infrastructure

challenges to create a thriving community? These are just a few of the questions that local government professionals in South Africa are continually asking. Below are some observations from discussions held during the iLGM Conference that will resonate with local government

professionals and their staff around the world.

Hire Well and Provide Opportunities for Growth

In South Africa, like in most places, public service is a very demanding job. It comes with long hours and a need to understand a fair

feel more engaged in their work and increases their likelihood of remaining in local government. These ideas can be applied to municipalities all over the world as local governments in many countries face issues of low pay and difficulties with recruitment and retention.

Making Technology and Data Work for You

Technological advances are occurring at lightning speed and local governments need to keep up in order to be able to effectively manage their municipalities and meet their goals of excellence in service delivery. Dr. Silma Koekemoer, director, Ayema Xpertix Consulting and presenter at the iLGM Conference, noted, “Data is the currency of the future.”

However, many municipal officials and staff in South Africa, as in other parts of the world, do not even know what data is being gathered. To make effective, data-driven decisions, municipalities need to look at the data they have and learn how to correctly interpret it to best serve community needs. Better data analysis can also have secondary benefits such as improved financial management and more effective allocation of staff resources.

Dr. Koekemoer proposed the “triangle of IT” made up of data, technology, and processes. Once you have the data, you need to have the processes in place to interpret it and the technology available to store and manipulate it, as well as act on its results. On top of the triangle, local



ICMA CEO/Executive Director Marc Ott, iLGM Deputy President Eunice Segathle-Lesejane, and iLGM Member Professor Dumisani

governments need strategies and policies that help to inform the data, technology, and processes. After reviewing all of this, the question to consider is, “Are these processes helping or hurting your community?”

This triangle of IT can be applied to municipalities all over the globe, not just in South Africa, as technology, data, processes, strategies, and policies are universal aspects of local government management regardless of location, form of government, or other factors.

Solving Infrastructure Challenges to Allow for Economic Development

Local government professionals can agree that economic development is

central to the vitality and sustainability of a community. So, what do you do when infrastructure challenges deter community investment and development? This is the question facing municipal managers in South Africa and around the world. Attendees generally agreed that many municipalities had to “go back to the basics” and provide potable water and stable electricity to residents while also ensuring roads were properly built and maintained to facilitate transportation. Without this, businesses will be unlikely to see the community as a desirable place and economic development will suffer. They noted that sometimes, as local government professionals, they find themselves so caught



ilGGM members and staff pose for a photo with the ICMA delegation at the conclusion of the 2023 ilGGM Conference.

up in politics or mandates from the national government that they can forget about the basics of providing excellent service delivery. Ultimately, this makes the municipality less financially stable and more difficult to manage. Remembering that the core function of local government is serving the community will ensure that residents have a good quality of life.

Developing Accountable Leaders to Improve Municipal Stability

To face all of these challenges, participants emphasized the need for responsible leadership and consequence management. They defined responsible leadership as including ethics, morals, consultation, and consideration for serving all members of a community. This

means that leaders may have to take unpopular stances, stand up to political pressure, and work together to reach a compromise. When it comes to consequence management, participants noted that there are often no consequences for poor actions. For example, a grant is given but the funds are misused, or someone violates the code of conduct, but nothing is done about it, so this encourages poor processes to continue. To create thriving and sustainable municipalities, leaders need to be held responsible for their actions and behave in ways aligned with responsible leadership.

Policies and structures need to be established and training needs to be provided on these established practices to create an overall system of accountability and professionalization.

The welcome remarks challenged local government professionals to work hard to change the direction of their municipalities. It is the leadership that will set the tone for how municipalities are managed, leading to better planning, budgeting, staffing models, and ultimately, create better communities.

While political or environmental constraints may make for different local contexts, the issues facing local governments in South Africa are not all that much different from issues facing local governments in the United States. Many communities in the United States are faced with political infighting, infrastructure issues, challenges around advances in technology, and a continued need for professional development. Local

government professionals around the world can benefit from building relationships and working together to solve common challenges while continuing to develop good local governance practices.

For more information, or to be connected with ilGGM, please contact global@icma.org to get in touch with ICMA's global engagement team. **PM**

ENDNOTES AND RESOURCES

¹ <https://icma.org/blog-posts/icma-and-ilgm-foster-connections-franschhoek>

² <https://www.gov.za/documents/local-government-municipal-structures-act>

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THE RETENTION REVOLUTION

How to Create a Culture by Design with Your Upper Arrows

BY SYDNE JACQUES
AND LINDSAY
JACQUES

**Adapting to
the changing
workforce
to create a
culture where
people are not
only satisfied,
but loyal.**

“You will never make it as a consultant. You don’t have what it takes. And when you want a job, don’t come back here. This door is closed.” These were the final words of my supervisor before I left my civil engineering job to begin my own consulting company. After thanking him for the opportunity, I quickly left his office and literally did a happy dance down the hall. I wasn’t leaving a job; I was leaving a supervisor who was not a good leader, and a culture that I could not stand to work in for one more day.

Since then, I’ve found through working with hundreds of clients that we are in need of a retention revolution. For local governments, shrinking workforces, costly recruitments, and strapped budgets have created a desperate need to reevaluate our retention strategies. Retention can no longer be an “HR issue,” and must be the responsibility of all employees, beginning at the top.

In my own small workforce of 10 employees to companies I’ve helped with over 2,000 employees, I have noticed three essential components required to pull off a retention revolution:

1. Changing our mindset from “the way it’s always been done.” People have more

options than ever before. An employee can find hundreds of new opportunities during their lunch break. We have to get past the idea that employees must adapt to us and the traditional way of doing things. Instead, we need to ask ourselves how we can adapt to the changing workforce to create a culture where people are not only satisfied, but loyal.

2. Utilizing a tool set to begin creating a culture where people want to be.

You probably already know there is an industry-wide problem with retaining good employees, but what are we supposed to do about it? Tools like the Upper Arrow, which we’ll describe, can help us frame discussions, begin designing new solutions, and

implement these strategies to create a culture by design, and not by default.

3. Honing our skills to be a leader that people choose to follow. To create a culture where people want to be, it must begin at the top. Learning to be 100% present with our employees, focusing on being a cheerleader who celebrates wins, and identifying a personal brand will help you become a better leader for your team.

As practitioners, we are quick to want to get to the “how.” I’ll spend the remainder of this article focusing on describing and utilizing the Upper Arrow tool to help begin your own retention revolution.

What is the relationship between quality and customer

satisfaction? I’ve come to understand that there is a law of diminishing returns between the quality of service and customer satisfaction, represented by the gold arrow in Figure 1. Customers expect quality service, and if they do not receive it, then they will not work with you in the future. After reaching a certain quality, it’s what I call your “Upper Arrows” (the blue arrow in Figure 1) that jumps above the point of diminishing returns to set you apart and make customers not only satisfied, but loyal.

For example, we expect an airline to get us to our destination safely, but it doesn’t really matter if we arrive within one minute or 10 of

Figure 1

Finding Your Upper Arrow: The Model of Differentiation





our designated arrival time. So airlines have found different Upper Arrows beyond an on-time and safe arrival to make customers loyal to their brand, such as creating frequent flier mile programs, offering free baggage, free Wi-Fi, or allowing free itinerary changes.

It's easy to replace customers with employees in this model. We must offer a quality employee experience through competitive pay and benefits, but how do you go beyond that baseline and what are your Upper Arrows that differentiate you from other organizations?

Frequently, employees I've worked with describe the perfect workplace as one that "feels safe" or is "fun." Culture is the number-one Upper Arrow that leads to retaining your best employees, but it can be hard to pin down what creates a great culture. As a starting point, I've identified a few Upper Arrows that contribute to a great culture—the Six F's: financial, flexibility, fulfillment, food, future opportunities, and fun.

1. Financial: Are you providing competitive financial compensation? Employees

must feel like they are compensated fairly as a baseline to stay. If you are unable to increase wages, look to see what creative benefits you can tweak to help bridge any gaps between your competitors' rates. Make sure you market these benefits—like excellent retirement packages, extra vacation time, and wellness programs that help maintain a work/life balance—in job advertisements, like the city of Orem, Utah.¹

2. Flexibility: How are you being flexible with your employees? Do you allow flexible time off or hybrid work schedules when possible? Are you flexible with your employee's priorities? Flexibility in both work hours and structure has become one of the biggest differentiators in today's market. The town of Little Elm, Texas, has every Friday afternoon off and allows for flexible schedules.²

3. Fulfillment: Do your employees connect with their work on a personal level? Are they proud of what they do and understand the difference it makes? As local governments,

this can help set you apart from private competitors, but you need to be intentional about connecting an employee's day-to-day work with the value of public service. The city of Southlake, Texas has clearly defined city-wide values and connects each employee's job goals with these values.³

4. Food: How are you organizing around food? Do you have free food or potluck events for employees? I know it may sound silly, but this has repeatedly come up as a differentiator when speaking with employees. A little free food can go a surprisingly long way to make employees feel recognized. In the city of Eagle Mountain, Utah, the employees often hold themed food contests throughout the year. I have been able to experience the salsa contest in the summer, the chili cookoff in the fall, and the Dutch oven cookoff in the summer.⁴

5. Future Opportunities: Can your employees envision what a future looks like for them in your organization? Do they know what steps to take to get a promotion or

raise? Learning and career development have become a key factor in employee satisfaction. Workforce planning helps foster employees and helps them see that if they invest in you, you will return in kind. Washoe County in Nevada has an organizational effectiveness team that oversees employee training and leadership development.⁵

6. Fun: How do you facilitate a culture of fun in your workplace? Do employees feel like they can celebrate wins and great work? Making time to appreciate employees contributes to a sense of pride and belonging. Give your employees the power to create their own traditions that are meaningful to them, and intentionally celebrate wins through formal acknowledgments such as organization-wide communication or events. At Kaysville City, Utah, they make sure to have fun with their employees, including escape rooms at leadership retreats, a pickleball round robin tournament in the spring, and a golf tournament in the summer.⁶

Next Steps: Evaluate and Take Action

Take a moment to honestly evaluate how your organization is performing on the Six F's. Using the table in Figure 2, rate your organization on a scale of one to 10 on the Upper Arrows and take stock of a few things you're currently doing and ideas for improvement.

I challenge you to take some time at your next leadership meeting to introduce the Upper Arrow model and ask your

team what your organization's Upper Arrows are. Create the common language and begin the discussion. After you've identified some of the Upper Arrows you already have, look for gaps in the Six F's and brainstorm how you can begin to improve.

To successfully have a retention revolution, we must start candid conversations at the top about what we do well and where we need to do some work. As leaders, you have the

power to create cultures by design and not by default. **PM**

To learn more about the retention revolution, visit sydnespeaks.com.

ENDNOTES AND RESOURCES

¹ <https://orem.org/hr/>

² <https://littleelm.org/105/Human-Resources>

³ <https://www.cityofsouthlake.com/892/Southlake-Values>

⁴ <https://eaglemountaincity.com/>

⁵ <https://www.washoecounty.gov/humanresources/OrganizationalEffectiveness/index.php>

⁶ <https://www.kaysville.gov/>

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Figure 2

	Rating (1–10)	What we're doing well	Ideas for improvement
Financial			
Flexibility			
Fulfillment			
Food			
Future Opportunities			
Fun			

PROFILES OF LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT IN ACTION



"Being a Credentialed Manager is an important reminder that just as the work in our communities is never complete, neither is the work we do to learn, grow and be better versions of ourselves. Reflecting on my training and development and having to plan the year ahead is a great annual practice and the credential gives me a unique opportunity to do just that."

Tony Mazzucco

Town Manager

Norwood, MA

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Becoming and Remaining a High-Performing Organization

BY PENNY
POSTOAK
FERGUSON,
ICMA-CM

**Committing to employee engagement, innovation, leadership,
and making a difference in Johnson County, Kansas**



The first words of Johnson County Government's vision statement are as follows: "We choose to be a different kind of government." What do we mean by that? Our organization has always valued public leadership and the pursuit of the highest levels of performance. To remain consistent with those values, our organization has pursued a challenging, multi-decade journey to follow the principles of a high-performing organization (HPO), committing to educating our workforce on its concepts and building them into our daily work lives.

Our History of High Performance

We started following University of Virginia's HPO model in 1993, and made significant

inroads in educating employees and transforming to an HPO culture for five or six years. In the late 1990s, the model was no longer supported by leadership and elected officials. However, the spirit of HPO culture—as well as its method of interaction, commitment to collaboration, values, and shared beliefs—lived on among many staff, many of whom became deputy and department directors.

In 2010, leadership had a renewed interest in pursuing the HPO model as a way to advance the organization. The organization's leaders and human resources department collaborated on an exploration of multiple institutions who offered government leadership educational programs. The team recommended re-engaging with UVA and its HPO model. HPO principles have been championed for more than 35 years by UVA's Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service through its Leading, Educating, and Developing (LEAD) and Senior Executive Institute (SEI) programs.

In August 2011, the county's management team and directors of our departments, agencies, and offices came together as the executive leadership team to learn and implement HPO principles into our organization's culture. Over the next two years, this team met monthly to study and practice the key concepts of high-performing organizations. All of our executives went through LEAD, with senior executives also attending SEI. More recently, we have also sent our leaders to the College of Charleston Leading EDGE program.

The first words of Johnson County Government's vision statement are as follows: "We choose to be a different kind of government."

Developing our Pillars of Performance

I began this article with a reference to our vision, which is one piece of what we refer to as Johnson County Government's Pillars of Performance. Crafted in an intensive, collaborative effort by our executive leadership team, with input from front line staff, the Pillars of Performance include our leadership philosophy, vision, mission, core values, behavioral values, and operational values. Our leadership philosophy is our first pillar, and we believe is one of the most important components that helps define us as "a different kind of government."

Leadership is a responsibility shared by all. We trust and empower each other to do the right thing for the right reason for the public good. Committed to our shared values, we provide excellent public service, seeking always to improve our organization and ourselves. Together, we leave our community better than we found it.

HPO in Action

Having been part of Johnson County Government's senior executive team since 2010, I helped create and implement—and have witnessed the evolution of—our quest to be a

high-performing organization. While too numerous to include them all, I can highlight some of the ways I have seen HPO come to life during my tenure here.

LEAPing into HPO Training for All Employees:

Having been trained on the LEAD principles, Johnson County Government developed our own training program, aptly called LEAP (Leadership Empowers All People). Launched in 2012 to teach high-performance concepts to employees throughout the organization, LEAP continues on more than a decade later. The LEAP program was initially presented in a full five-day course only, then a three-day version was added. All sessions are taught exclusively by Johnson County Government directors and employees. Thousands of county employees have completed the program and apply the concepts every day in their jobs.

LEAP training has allowed us to share concepts and philosophies with all levels of the organization, creating common language and expectations. The benefits of this program are far reaching. Employees are more vocal in sharing ideas for process improvement, they speak up more quickly when they see behaviors that are not consistent with our



Innovation Summit, July 2019

expectations, and engagement has increased.

Pillars of Performance and Development (PPD):

Very early on in our HPO efforts, we worked on realigning our employee performance management system with our Pillars of Performance. A human resources manager led a cross-functional team to study best practices, discuss how to optimize alignment, and make recommendations on changing how we evaluate performance. The result of this process was a complete departure from traditional appraisal systems that include scores and focus on the past. Since 2018, our PPD program has been based on a coaching model and focuses on the future, including employee goals and development, not merely on past performance.

Leadership in Action:

While we have a traditional program of rewarding merit increases and discretionary project and spot bonuses to our staff, we added a reward program in 2018 called Leadership in Action. This was a new way to



Innovation team members attend a Transforming Local Government conference.

recognize employees who had distinguished themselves over the past year by demonstrating exceptional performance, showing outstanding leadership, making a significant contribution toward process improvements, or being above-and-beyond stewards of taxpayer dollars. Employees are nominated by their department head, and the executive leadership

team reviews and selects the nominees. Leadership in Action recipients (typically within the top one-percent of our workforce) receive a \$2,500 bonus, are invited to the annual employee recognition event that celebrates our milestone employees and recent retirees, and have their stories shared with our board of county commissioners and the public throughout the following year.

Innovation: A culture of innovation is vital for Johnson County as it cultivates an environment where creativity, adaptability, and continuous improvement are valued and encouraged. If you explore our Pillars of Performance, you will find the concepts of “improvement” and “continuous improvement” mentioned more than once, as well as an emphasis on leadership coming from all levels and a commitment to being a learning organization.

All of these priority areas come to life with our Innovation Team. This team includes three employees who work with a steering committee made up of five executive leadership team members serving in an advisory capacity. Known as the I-Team, these experts in innovation partner with our various departments, agencies, and offices to create solutions that improve county services for the benefit of the community. They do so using data, creativity, diversity, and risk-taking.

An emphasis has been placed on engaging as many of the approximately 4,000 Johnson County employees as possible. Employees who express interest become part of the Johnson County Sparks, who are called upon to assist with research, analysis, and recommendations for projects generally not related to their current job or department.

“Being a high-performing organization, we understand innovation is not just a one-time effort, but a continuous process that requires commitment and strategic focus. We work closely with county employees in several key areas, including data-driven decision-making, research

Our most recent employee engagement survey showed that 90.5% of employees like the work they do and 81.3% said they were satisfied to work at Johnson County.

and development, strategic planning, and user-friendly design,” said Grace Hanne, principal analyst supervisor for the I-Team. “Innovation is already happening in every pocket of our organization, so to harness and build upon it, we partner with others to

offer training and resources, assist with projects, and share innovation success stories.”

The team also runs an Innovation Spotlight series for the county employee’s intranet and LinkedIn. The Spotlight’s stories of innovation showcase and bring awareness to creative, cutting-edge projects led by county employees working at all levels.

Is HPO Working?

I am proud of the stories I see and hear every day of employees from all levels displaying leadership skills, being innovative, contributing to cross-organizational teams, solving problems, and meeting our community’s needs. Our most recent employee engagement survey showed that 90.5% of employees like the work they do and 81.3% said they were satisfied to work at Johnson County. We will conduct this survey again in 2024, and I look forward to new measurements of the impact of being a high-performing organization on our workforce.

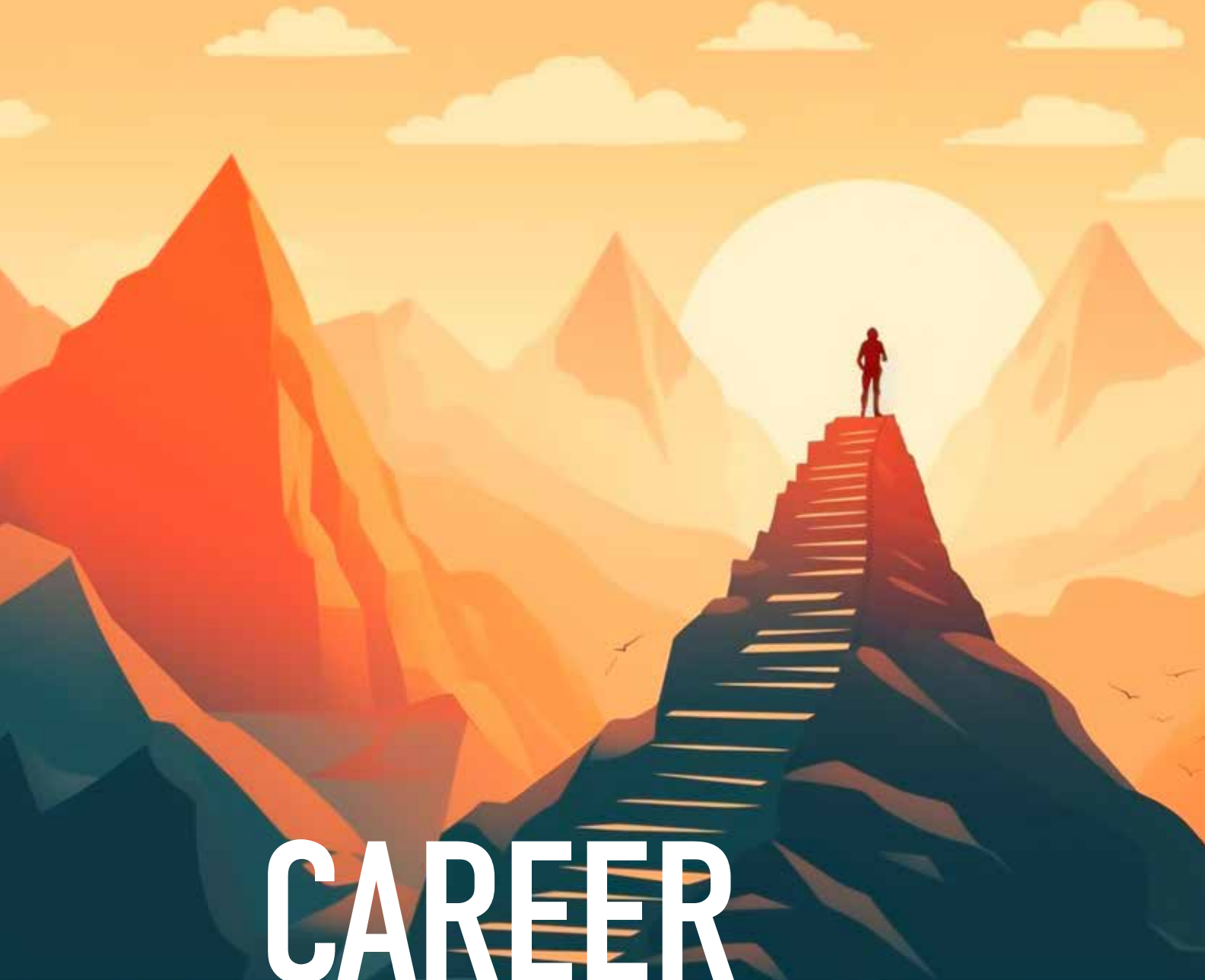
Looking outward, we receive extremely positive feedback in our annual community survey. I have to believe that the HPO philosophies and how they empower our employees to be innovative and creative leaders impacts the results that consistently put us above and beyond our peer organizations. **PM**

Written in collaboration with Joe Connor, Grace Hanne, Jody Hanson, and Tiffany Hentschel

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Johnson County Government employees from across the organization celebrate their graduation from LEAP training.



CAREER PATHWAYS

to Local Government Leadership

How to navigate
your way up the local
government ladder

BY BENJAMIN EFFINGER,
MONICA SPELLS, ICMA-CM & KATHLEEN GUNN



Have you ever contemplated the path to becoming a city or county chief administrative officer or assistant chief administrative officer (CAO/ACAO)? Contrary to what you might assume, the journey is not as daunting as it may seem. Professionals in local government careers hail from diverse backgrounds, yet they share a common thread of high motivation and dedication to both their profession and the communities they serve.

Back in the early 1900s when the field first emerged, individuals were often recruited from the ranks of

civil engineers, specializing in the construction and maintenance of vital community infrastructure such as bridges, roads, and water systems. In the contemporary landscape, aspiring local government managers come from a myriad of academic disciplines. Given the demand for analytical thinking, creativity, and robust communication skills, undergraduate degrees in humanities and social sciences, such as English, philosophy, history, economics, and political science, provide a solid foundation. While a master's degree in public

administration enhances competitiveness, it is not mandatory. Relevant coursework includes public finance, microeconomics, statistics, planning, conflict resolution, organizational behavior, and program evaluation. Beyond academic pursuits, honing leadership and public speaking skills proves invaluable in the quest to become a local government leader. While some communities may not mandate a degree, the majority stipulate at least a bachelor's degree, with an increasing number favoring a master's degree in public administration/policy (MPA/MPP).

The traditional route to becoming a CAO/ACAO looks something like this:

- Attend college and get a bachelor's degree, then begin a career as a local government analyst, budget analyst, or policy analyst.
- Alternatively, serve as a police officer or fire fighter.

From this juncture, several paths open up:

1. Move laterally to an assistant to the manager position.
2. Assume a role as a clerk. This role may differ from city to county, and may be appointed or elected. Regardless, the position offers insights into different departments and the dynamics with elected officials.
3. Become a city/county planner.
4. Ascend to the position of department director or police/fire chief.

Professionals in local government hail from diverse backgrounds, yet they share a common thread of dedication to the profession and the community they serve.

5. Progress to an assistant chief administrative officer (ACAO) position prior to becoming the chief administrative officer.
6. Pursue a MPA/MPP degree to bolster competitiveness. Many do this while still working full time.

These examples are meant to be general in nature. Every town, city, county, borough, or parish is different, and as a result, the requirements to become the CAO vary widely. A rural community with a population of 2,000 and a staff of three people may choose to appoint a recent college graduate with very little experience. A community of 500,000 and a staff of 4,000 most likely will require several years of experience and an advanced degree. The pathways to becoming a CAO in local government are diverse; some are nontraditional, such as serving in the military and then making the career change to local government.

From Military Service to Local Government

For military veterans, the local government profession is a continuation of a call to service that started when they first put on their military uniform. After transitioning out of the military, veterans have to translate their skillsets into a functional civilian career, which can be a daunting task. Veterans are uniquely positioned with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to be effective leaders in local government, which is why most veterans that discover a post-military career in local government become successful and respected community leaders.

The challenge that many military members face, especially ranking commissioned and non-commissioned officers, is that their previous rank does not equate directly to a commensurate leadership position in local government. This is perfectly acceptable, as beginning at a lower-level position within an organization allows individuals to immerse themselves in the culture and operational pace of the government agency. This allows them to showcase their value through applied knowledge, skills, and abilities, effectively accomplishing the mission despite challenges related to staffing, resources, and budget constraints. Those that find their way into local government are uniquely situated to be the future leaders of communities around the world.

In addition to a post-military career in local government, these individuals know and understand the



importance of training and succession planning within their organizations. This is an invaluable skillset that many local governments struggle with in the current economic and workplace environments. The ability to teach, train, and mentor the next generation of local government professionals sets military veterans apart from their civilian colleagues because of their specific experience with military operations.

Fellowships

Various opportunities exist for veterans and other career transitioners to enter the profession. Many communities offer internships, fellowships, and programs such as ICMA's Veterans Local Government Management Fellowship (icma.org/vlgmf), which allows veterans to onboard with a local government agency and work toward a permanent appointed position without having to apply and compete against hundreds or thousands of

other individuals. ICMA also offers the Local Government Management Fellowship (icma.org/lgmf), a career development opportunity for MPA/MPP or related program graduates that places them in a full-time management-track local government position.

There are fellowships and scholarships in the field of water treatment and wastewater management, such as the National Rural Water Apprenticeship Program,¹ and the American Planning Association² offers fellowships for future city/county planners.

These programs provide unique opportunities to onboard, while learning on the job, proving that the individual is a value-add to the organization. Think of it as an extended job interview, with the opportunity for a permanent appointment at any point. It's a chance to show off the skillsets that are applicable to all CAO and ACAO positions.

Skillsets and Attributes

Which specific skillsets distinguish an effective CAO/ACAO? Dr. Frank Benest's Career Compass article, "What Skills Are Most Important for a Manager (And How Do I Develop Them,)"³ provides valuable insights into the skills essential for ascending the local government career ladder. Additionally, ICMA's Practices for Effective Local Government Management and Leadership⁴ serves as a comprehensive guide. Focusing on these skillsets and cultivating them through direct assignments, training, and education is paramount.

Beyond skills, successful local government leaders share common personal attributes crucial for effective and harmonious interactions with others—a pivotal aspect of the position. These attributes encompass adaptability, creativity, deliberateness, flexibility, and resilience. Two additional attributes, juggling and balancing, are equally significant. And no, this doesn't refer to a circus act, although on certain days, the role may resemble that of a ringmaster. Below are some specific examples:

1. A proficient CAO/ACAO adeptly manages multiple tasks, ensuring continuous progress by engaging with them as needed and leveraging momentum to maintain organized activities—ideally without dropping any.
2. One has to embrace versatility, forward-thinking, and a solution-oriented mindset, wearing various hats as needed, while remaining adaptable and fluid.

3. CAO/CAOs must cultivate the capacity to drive department directors, coordinating seamless service delivery to meet community needs, all while ensuring the realization of elected officials' objectives.
4. Municipalities typically grapple with limited budgets and staff resources, posing challenges to council aspirations. The ability to think innovatively and explore unconventional avenues for resources becomes imperative.

Training and Guidance

What's the best way to develop these skills and attributes? Practice! Volunteer to take on a project either within the organization or with a nonprofit or professional association. Tap into as many ICMA professional development opportunities as possible, such as the ICMA High Performance Leadership Academy⁵ or the Gettysburg Leadership Institute.⁶ Other great resources are city/county management state associations⁷ and local government affiliate groups, such as Engaging Local Government Leaders, the National Forum for Black Public Administrators, Local Government Hispanic Network, and Government Alliance on Race and Equity, just to name a few. And don't forget to look for ICMA's volunteer opportunities and lift others as you climb the career ladder.⁸

The notion of "climbing the career ladder" is undeniably challenging, and as a result, it is a path not readily traversed by everyone. Attaining the role of chief administrative officer or assistant chief

Beyond skills, successful local government leaders share common personal attributes crucial for effective and harmonious interactions with others.

administrative officer offers the unique opportunity to make a profound impact on lives and enhance community well-being. However, this responsibility comes with its share of challenges, including responding to emergencies during nights and weekends, collaborating with community members and leaders with diverse needs and goals, and the imperative to prioritize the community and elected officials' objectives, even when personal opinions may differ. Successful CAOs/CAOs must possess a clear understanding of their purpose and values, coupled with the ability to establish boundaries. They should navigate conflict adeptly and be comfortable in the spotlight, as their role demands a poised and decisive presence. ICMA has several resources to help overcome roadblocks along the way, such as the Coaching Program, which offers:

- The CoachConnect platform (icma.org/coachconnect), connecting you with free local government coaches.
- More than 100 Career Compass articles (icma.org/career-compass) that provide advice on every local government issue

from responding to public criticism to generating creative ideas and many others on leadership development.

- Free webinars on the topics of ethics, leadership, workplace development.

Reach out to ICMA's Regional Directors⁹ and Senior Advisors¹⁰ for guidance from experienced local professionals who have walked through the forest and made it to the other side. CAOs often find themselves in a situation where they lose their job for reasons that have nothing to do with performance. ICMA's Member in Transition program provides an array of personal and financial support for local government leaders who find themselves in a job separation. When the road gets rocky, remember that public service is a vocation. Self-awareness and personal leadership are key for fulfillment.

Conclusion

The journey to local government leadership unfolds through various avenues, and the opportunities aren't confined solely to manager or administrator roles. Numerous accomplished CAOs trace their origins back

to roles as finance directors or planners. Within local government, numerous department heads harbor aspirations of assuming managerial roles. They accept these positions not only to amass valuable experience but also to develop cross-functional skill sets, cultivating the indispensable "generalist" qualities inherent in a local government manager's toolkit. Although the path entails steep inclines and unexpected curves, it is undeniably the most gratifying professional role one can undertake. **PM**

ENDNOTES AND RESOURCES

¹ <https://apprenticeship.nrw.org/pub/index.htm>

² <https://www.planning.org/scholarships/divisions/>

³ <https://icma.org/articles/article/career-compass-no-1-what-skills-are-most-important-manager-and-how-do-i-develop-them>

⁴ <https://icma.org/page/practices-effective-local-government-management-and-leadership>

⁵ <https://icma.org/page/icma-high-performance-leadership-academy>

⁶ <https://icma.org/page/gettysburg-leadership-institute>

⁷ <https://members.icma.org/eweb/DynamicPage.aspx?WebCode=stateassoc>

⁸ <https://icma.org/committees-task-forces>

⁹ <https://icma.org/page/icma-regions-usa-and-international>

¹⁰ <https://icma.org/icma-senior-advisor-program>

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Embracing Vulnerability

A personal journey of ego reflection and professional growth | BY SCOTT TRUJILLO

In the web of our professional journeys,

there often comes a defining moment, an encounter that serves as a turning point. Mine was a candid conversation with a colleague at a previous job. Picture this: I was approached by someone whose opinion I valued, and their words cut through the professional facade straight to the core of my character. “Scott, one day you’re going to be a great city manager, but there’s one thing you’ve got to get under control—your ego,” they said. Ouch. It stung, and it cut deep.

Receiving such unfiltered feedback isn’t a stroll in the park. It’s more like navigating a maze of discomfort, but ironically, I found solace in the discomfort. This colleague handed me a stack of papers detailing the traits of an egotist and the pitfalls of egocentrism. The reading material alone was a wake-up call, signaling the depth of self-reflection that lay ahead.

What unfolded next was a journey of humility, openness, and raw introspection. I did not recoil from the critique; instead, I embraced it. In a move that might seem unconventional, I gathered the courage to confront my blind spots head-on. I initiated meetings with 13 coworkers and a councilmember, inviting them to share their honest perspectives on my weaknesses and deficiencies. I braced myself for the hard truths.

The sessions were a mixed bag. Some colleagues kept it real, offering unfiltered insights, while others opted for the diplomatic route, choosing only to highlight my positive attributes. Two chose silence, and I respected their decision not to participate. It was a humbling experience that left me with a mountain of self-discovery to climb.

Now, what does one do with such invaluable insights? The easy path would have been to sweep it under the rug, never to be discussed again. Instead, I chose transparency and accountability. I shared the entire experience with as many people as I could, turning my vulnerability into a tool for transformation. This was not just about acknowledging my flaws; it was about committing to change.

Changing, however, is no easy feat. It’s not a switch that flips overnight. I embarked on a continuous journey, adjusting my perspective, recalibrating my attitude, reshaping my interactions with others, and even refining my body language. Each step was a deliberate move toward



personal evolution, a testament to the fact that growth is a gradual process.

The truth is we encounter trials, challenges, and difficult people daily. It is an inescapable part of the professional landscape. But within these challenges lies the opportunity for growth. My

journey taught me some invaluable lessons:

1. Not everyone has your best interests at heart (and that’s okay). Embracing vulnerability means acknowledging that not everyone in your professional circle is a cheerleader. Some will challenge you, and that’s where growth happens.

2. Don’t let any of the harsh critiques define you. Criticism, when constructive, is a pathway to improvement. It is not a label but a stepping stone to a better version of yourself.

3. Embrace the unpleasant conversations. Growth is often uncomfortable. Embracing difficult conversations is a testament to your commitment to personal and professional development.

4. Be humble. Humility is not a weakness but a strength. It opens doors to learning, understanding, and genuine connection.

5. All that matters is what you do next. The past is an anchor only if you allow it to be. Your actions in the present and the future define your trajectory. The choices we make in the aftermath of self-discovery determine the course of our journey.

So, in the end, how do we grow? We expose ourselves to vulnerability, confront the hard truths, take risks, and embrace change. Growth is not a destination but a continuous process fueled by intentional self-improvement. I am, and always will be, a work in progress, but each step I take is a testament to my commitment to becoming the best version of myself. Let this be an invitation for you to embark on your own journey of self-discovery and professional growth, one humbling step at a time!

Oh, and in the event our paths intersect, I welcome your thoughtful insights into my personal journey of ongoing self-reflection and professional development. I am all ears when you speak because the more people I can hear from the better, leaving no stone unturned. Embracing accountability and malleability as cornerstones, I am wholly dedicated to continuous improvement, with your help, of course! **PM**



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is assistant city manager of Calabasas, California.



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Senior Advisors Program

[ICMA.ORG/SENIOR-ADVISORS](https://www.icma.org/senior-advisors)

Gain the experience, advice, and support of respected, retired managers of the profession.

ICMA Local Government Excellence Awards

[ICMA.ORG/AWARDS](https://www.icma.org/awards)

ICMA recognizes members through this program, highlighting their extraordinary accomplishments and dedicated service to the profession.

Voluntary Credentialling Program

[ICMA.ORG/CREDENTIALING](https://www.icma.org/credentialing)

A self-directed program where ICMA members may earn the designation of ICMA Credentialed Manager (ICMA-CM) granted by the ICMA Executive Board.

ICMA Connect

[CONNECT.ICMA.ORG](https://connect.icma.org)

ICMA member's only online community where you can connect, share, and network.

ICMA Coaching Program

[ICMA.ORG/COACHING](https://www.icma.org/coaching)

ICMA offers a suite of services to help participants grow, make decisions that benefit their career, gain perspective from others, and achieve their goals. Including coaching and mentoring support. Personal guidance in your local government career from local government professionals.

ICMA Job Center

[ICMA.ORG/JOBS](https://www.icma.org/jobs)

Your one-stop-shop to help you find your first or your next position in local government.

ICMA Coach Connect

[ICMA.ORG/COACHCONNECT](https://www.icma.org/coachconnect)

An online platform that enables one-to-one connections with coaches and learners.

Veterans Program

[ICMA.ORG/VETERANS](https://www.icma.org/veterans)

ICMA recognizes the contributions veterans bring to local government and offers a resource hub to transitioning veterans interested in a career in local government.

Internships, Fellowships and Scholarships

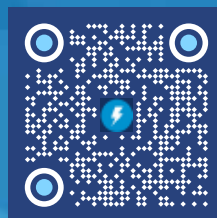
[ICMA.ORG/INTERNSHIPS-FELLOWSHIPS](https://www.icma.org/internships-fellowships)

Internships and fellowship opportunities for those who will be the local government leaders of tomorrow.

Volunteer

[ICMA.ORG/VOLUNTEER](https://www.icma.org/volunteer)

Serve on ICMA Committees and Task Forces is open, providing members with an opportunity to make a valuable contribution to the profession.



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Cynthia Seelhammer, AICMA-CM

Professor of Practice
Arizona State University

All of our communities are becoming more multicultural. Some cities have strong ethnic identities, some are home to new immigrants, others are tourism locations with visitors from around the world. From my international experiences, I have come to see that it can be important to be aware of the perceptions through the eyes of people of another culture.

To me, the success of building and nurturing a sense of community comes from knowing other people and building trust. I like to think of positive interactions as threads that connect people. Having international visitors meant I was able to connect to people and organizations in my community that I might not have otherwise connected with.

The communities where I was manager benefited from the experience [of hosting international fellows] because it helped educate, inform, and build trust. Some of my department heads were able to make return exchanges or participate in fellowship programs. Some visitors presented to school classes, others connected with people from their religious institutions, and all of them made useful professional contacts with people from other cultures.

If your community has ethnic or cultural social groups, get to know the people involved. Go to the festivals. These groups are part of the history and fabric of your community. If there is an employer or factory with roots in another country, get to know more about that country and it can help with getting to know the management and what will make success in your city easier.



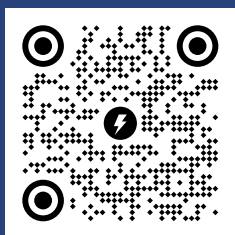
ICMA is recognizing professionals who have one-of-a-kind local government experience through engaging in global knowledge exchange and fellowship programs. Cynthia Seelhammer, ICMA-CM, professor of practice at Arizona State University, joined us to speak about the benefits she has gleaned through her various global experiences. Throughout her career, Cynthia has participated in an ICMA manager exchange to Slovakia, been selected as a CLAIR and McCloy Fellow, hosted several YSEALI fellows, served on ICMA's International Committee, and hosted U.S. State Department visitors.



Learn more about ICMA's global journey by viewing the ICMA Global playlist on YouTube.

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