



THE FIRST-TIME ASSISTANT CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER'S GUIDE

October 2025

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The First-Time Assistant Chief Administrative Officer's Guide
October 2025

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Item number: e-44240

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SECTION 1

INTRODUCTION



At some stage in your career, you may encounter the decision of whether to pursue or accept a role as an assistant chief administrative officer (ACAO) in local government. This opportunity might arise because you're looking to progress to the next level in your career, or perhaps you've been offered the position due to the resignation of the current ACAO in your organization. Alternatively, a recruiter might have identified you as a suitable candidate for the job.

The First-Time Assistant Chief Administrative Officer's Guide is for professionals like you who are stepping into—or contemplating—a first position as a local government ACAO. It offers

advice and perspectives on the transition, whether you're a recent MPA graduate, a current department head or assistant-to, or a manager in a private-sector or nonprofit organization or the military.

Through a combination of theoretical knowledge and real-world examples, this guide aims to equip ACAOs with the skills and confidence needed to succeed in their new roles. By understanding the nuances of the ACAO position and learning from the experiences of seasoned professionals, you will be better prepared to support the chief administrative officer (CAO) and make a positive impact on your organization and community.

SECTION 2

BEING THE NUMBER TWO

In local government, the ACAO is the number two person. The role of the ACAO will vary depending on many different factors, but most notably the city or county's form of government. When considering whether to take a position, local government professionals should ensure that they understand the roles and responsibilities of both elected officials and the CAO to best understand the environment in which they will be working. ACAOs are encouraged to have a conversation with the CAO so they can fully understand how the organization truly operates and whether this matches their skills and abilities as well as their career goals.

WORKING IN A TYPE OF GOVERNMENT

When you're considering serving as an ACAO in local government, one of your first "homework" assignments is to understand the city or county's form of government. This information is critical to understanding how the organization works, the organization's values, and the role of the ACAO. A key resource in understanding the form of government is a city or county charter or ordinance that establishes the form.

City or County Charter

A city or county charter is a legal document that states how the community will be governed. A charter is often compared to a federal or state constitution. It generally defines powers, identifies functions of both elected and appointed officials, and sets forth fundamental principles to guide the organization's governance.

A charter is the most important legal document of any local government. Included in many charters is a clearly defined process for periodically reviewing the charter and considering any amendments to the charter by voters.

Local government professionals should read the city or county charter carefully to best understand

the form of government and where powers reside in the organization. In particular, it's important to understand the role of elected officials and appointed staff in making decisions.

Basic Forms of Local Government

Most cities have one of five forms of government:

- Council-manager
- Mayor-council
- Commission
- Town meeting
- Representative town meeting.

Most counties have one of these forms:

- County commission
- Council-manager/administrator
- Council-elected executive.

Notable differences between forms of government include who the CAO reports to and who has the ability to oversee operations, hire and fire employees, and prepare and/or approve the budget.

Local governments can change their form of government with voter approval, often through a referendum. While such changes are rare, they can affect the responsibilities and reporting relationships of the ACAO.

TRANSFERABLE PRIVATE-SECTOR SKILLS AND EXPERIENCE

Responsible for managing daily operations and strategizing for the big picture, the ACAO position is both highly rewarding and highly challenging. It functions similarly to the role of chief operating officer (COO) in the private sector. Both serve as the backbone of any organization.

Just as a COO provides leadership and vision, operational efficiency, and managerial support

to a chief executive officer (CEO), an ACAO works closely with the CAO, who serves as the appointed manager for a local government or municipal organization. For the relationship to work for the good of the organization, it is necessary that:

- The CAO and ACAO maintain good chemistry.
- The CAO and ACAO communicate effectively.
- The CAO and ACAO work well together.
- The CAO implicitly trusts the ACAO.

In the private sector, a COO's job revolves around what the CEO wants and needs. The CEO needs to know that day-to-day operations are running smoothly, and whatever operational tasks staff need to accomplish, the COO must make sure that they are completed in a timely manner.

The COO is often the intermediary between the departments, making sure that they communicate with one another when a project requires them to work across department lines. They work with department heads, internal teams, and external entities, and are responsible for making sure these many groups coordinate to keep the operations of the organization on the right trajectory.

Local government is no different in the way the ACAO supports the needs and direction of the CAO. In addition, the ACAO in local government also works with elected officials—the members of a city or county board or council, a board of supervisors, or a similar body.

Required Skills and Experience

Let's take a deeper look at the ideal and transferable skill set of a COO. Individuals in this position bring strong academic and technical skills and years of experience to the job. But it's important to note there is no direct career path that prepares someone for this role. A successful COO should have these skills and demonstrated experience to serve as an ACAO:

Leadership. Despite being second in command, a COO may oversee people and processes in an organization. The COO interacts with much of the workforce, guides departments and their leaders,

and plans how to optimize workflows for cross-team collaboration.

A COO should be someone with strong leadership ability. The person should bring a proven leadership style to the team and understand qualities like empathy, collaboration, delegation, emotional intelligence, and influence.

Management. A COO handles everything from people to projects. He or she needs to stay one step ahead and prepare for the future. Accordingly, understanding organizational thinking and inspiring the best from every employee are necessary talents of a COO.

With so much going on each day in a vibrant organization, a COO must exhibit good organizational skills as well as understand project management, self-management, and time management.

Decision-making. Another key part of the COO's responsibilities is strategic planning. The COO offers insights and support to the CEO when making plans for the future. That requires strong problem-solving skills, self-awareness, and an understanding of the short- and long-term consequences of decisions.

Communication. A large part of the COO's job involves delegating and managing. Communication plays a key role in these responsibilities, which involve creating consensus, resolving disputes, building relationships, and fostering partnerships between teams.

Business Acumen. A COO works at the top of the organizational structure and is responsible for taking the establishment forward by leveraging his or her experience. The COO must balance managing budgets, future planning, and completing the mission.

ROLES OF THE COO

The COO must wear many hats:

Facilitator. The COO focuses on the organization's internal affairs and participates in activities that require individuals and teams to work effectively together on organizational priorities. The COO's role is to facilitate their interactions.

Mentor. When the CEO is inexperienced, the COO may act as a mentor, helping the CEO transition into the new role effectively. As a part of the management team, COOs also mentor department directors, even those who are not in their direct chain of command.

Partner. In the private sector, many companies use a co-CEO model where the COO shares responsibilities with the CEO. Sometimes the goal is a democratic model of work. Sometimes, the CEO is simply the kind of person who works best with a partner.

Performer. This involves the COO's track record. Even if someone is newly selected, their past experiences will reflect their leadership skills and intellect. The depth and breadth of experience is critical to the "partnering" with the CEO.

Successor. Often the COO is the heir apparent to the CEO as part of a succession plan designed to create a seamless transition of influence and vision.

Change Agent. The COO is often the person who spearheads initiatives that transform the organization—a role that he or she secures based on knowledge and ability.

SECTION 3

POINTERS FOR FIRST-TIME ASSISTANT/ DEPUTY ADMINISTRATORS

As a first-time ACAO you're likely to face challenges that differ from the issues you faced in your previous positions. It's important to conduct a serious self-assessment to become aware of your strengths and weaknesses as you further develop your leadership skills. Your first 100 days on the job will lay the groundwork for your success in the position and set the tone for your relationships with internal teams and the community.

A new challenge for you may be balancing the need to carry out the mission of the organization with the need to nurture and develop the people on your team. This chapter shows how taking care of people as individuals enables them (and you) to be effective in achieving the organization's priorities.

As a new ACAO, you may have a stronger voice than before in organizational decision making, particularly in situations where different constituencies have competing perspectives or interests. And you may be the point person who helps the ultimate decision makers find the best route forward.

First-person anecdotes illustrate ways in which ACAOs have met these challenges.

ASSESSING YOURSELF

The ability of an ACAO to lead well and influence the direction of local government operations depends in large part on self-awareness. Too often, however, we go through the motions with little or no self-reflection.

Leadership is tough. It's not for everyone, and growing leadership skills is hard. People seem to expect that anyone can be a leader, and they may throw the word leadership around so haphazardly that it applies to most anyone. Knowing how to act as a leader is a significant challenge, and many

people cannot or will not be leaders because it is not who they are on the inside.

Many people view leadership as a scientific pursuit: a proven process that one learns through books and repetition. Increasingly, however, we recognize that what shapes a leader are experiences and external conditions, in addition to who the person is on the inside. We increasingly recognize that there is no definitive style, characteristic, or personality trait of a great leader, especially in the context of today's dynamic local government, business, and societal environments.

The Importance of Self-Awareness

Because leadership means different things to different people, we struggle to translate and personalize leadership learning and skills. For the sake of being a good ACAO and the complexities that come with the job, let's focus on the importance of self-awareness. And let's define self-awareness as conscious knowledge of one's own character, feelings, motives, and desires. Self-awareness is key to self-control, decision-making, creativity, learning, and self-fulfillment. It creates value and helps you influence others. It's a tool that allows an ACAO to proactively manage his or her own beliefs, thoughts, emotions, decisions, and behaviors. What ACAO does not want more clarity, empowerment, motivation, and positive energy flowing in his or her daily life?

A familiar feature of ancient Greek philosophy is the Delphic maxim "know thyself." The foundation of leadership is character, which includes integrity, perseverance, and authenticity. However, leadership is a combination of character and competence. Many automatically assume that self-confidence is essential for being a leader, but it's arguable that *self-awareness* is more important. Self-awareness leads to self-confidence, but

the reverse is typically not true. As ACAOs, knowing our strengths and weakness, values, and aspirations, and how they affect our actions and the actions of others is likely to help us make better decisions and ultimately improve our ability to lead others.

Aristotle pointed out that for a person to perceive anything they must first perceive themselves. Self-awareness requires us to identify our strengths and leverage them. Very often, strength develops through experiences, both good and bad. Even if we do not know others, we tend to assume that if we can do something, then they can do it as well. This is an assumption that is neither wise nor prudent. As a result, in a short-sighted way, we know our own capabilities but do not perceive reality around us. The sequel to this point is that we must get to know our people.

Questions to Ask Yourself. As ACAOs, we should continuously ask ourselves many questions. For example:

- Am I better at starting something new or improving something that already exists?
- Do I thrive in a strict environment with clearly defined tasks, or do I prefer something more open-ended with the latitude to figure things out on my own?
- Am I generally good at delegating to others, or do I prefer to be a part of the action?
- Have I asked for feedback or input from my colleagues or subordinates?

Self-awareness is not about other factors or people. It is a leadership skill that is about being aware of our own thoughts, emotions, and values from moment to moment. It requires a separation from ego, and a true assessment of our mental state that drives our best and highest self.

An ACAO needs to reflect on personal weaknesses, which is very hard to do because we do not like to focus on something that we believe is negative. No one ever wants to dwell on a weakness, but focusing on it can help us learn to change it into a strength, or at least a lesser weakness. Imagine asking someone for honest feedback on your weaknesses. You may well not want to hear it, and most people do not like giving that kind of feedback.

When it comes to our weaknesses, we tend to have blind spots. The willingness to look at ourselves through others' eyes would help us glean invaluable insight into how our emotions and communication style affect other people. This is especially important in today's global economy, in which many local governments have residents and business relationships with individuals and organizations from diverse cultures.

Sometimes a strength can become a weakness. For example, our experiences can lead to a false sense of confidence about our capabilities. It can also make us arrogant. Knowing our strengths offers us a better understanding of how to deal with our weaknesses.

Practicing Self-Awareness. Self-awareness includes knowing how others perceive us. Whether or not we believe the perception is accurate, we need to remember that people's perception can be their reality. People who know how others see them are more skilled at showing empathy and accepting others' inputs when they make decisions.

Self-awareness can be of great value to leaders when they are intentional in their approach to their own behavior and relationships. Here are four simple steps to practice everyday self-awareness:

- **Stop.** Set aside 10 minutes in the morning to create To-Do and To-Stop lists. As an ACAO, you need to set priorities among many duties and people. In the evening, take 10 minutes to write down your observations of the day. This exercise will increase your general awareness of yourself, your environment, and the people you engaged with throughout the day.
- **Make Regular Breaks.** You may have a watch or similar device that you can set to remind yourself to get up and move. Take a deep breath, clear your mind, and observe. Do not let yourself feel guilty for taking a moment to relax. Take in your surroundings—the people, the hustle and bustle of the work environment, or the weather. Be in the moment present, and do not allow yourself to be distracted.

- **Pay Attention.** Engage with others through active listening. Gain an understanding of the situation at hand from the other's point of view. Allow the speaker to finish speaking without interruption. This usually requires a few seconds of silence. It may take some practice before you know how long to wait before responding.
- **Stay Curious.** Be open, and always question your assumptions. Research things you're not quite sure of or don't know, and ask relevant and purposeful questions. Set aside time on your calendar for this important activity, and manage your time so that you use it for that purpose.

Remember, developing leadership skills is often a process of self-discovery, and it's the single most important personal commitment an ACAO can make. Self-awareness is not about diagnosing and treating our inadequacies. It's about how to leverage our strengths and develop our own leadership style. The more we learn about ourselves, the more confident we are in being leaders. Self-awareness will guide an ACAO across the daily adventures that come with our position.

YOUR FIRST 100 DAYS

When you're appointed ACAO, you've ascended to arguably the best position in local government. You're the utility player on the team that may need to dive into a technical, tedious issue on Monday, be assigned to fill an interim department head vacancy on Tuesday, and then fill in for the CAO during a governing board meeting on Wednesday. Embrace the unknown that's coming your way, but first things first.

The first 100 days in your new ACAO position will set the foundation for your success in the role—and the core focus of that initial period should be on people. Not completing projects, not developing initiatives, not implementing all the great ideas you suggested in your interview, but the people who will make you an effective ACAO. Whether you're in the position because of an internal promotion or you're in a new community, you must intentionally establish yourself in your

new leadership role. Purposely carve out time to build relationships, set goals (for yourself and your team), and get to know your community if you don't already. You know a lot about local government and leadership (that's why you're an ACAO!), but approach these first 100 days with a concentration on digging into your organization and community to develop your local network and understanding.

Developing relationships **internally and externally** is critical to success in the ACAO position. Your understanding of issues must straddle the line between the technical details of internal operations and the broader political and strategic tides of the governing board. As the saying goes, a local government manager's knowledge base must be "a mile wide and an inch deep"! It's no more relevant than at the ACAO level. Having trusted relationships across the spectrum of stakeholders will greatly increase your ability to "connect the dots" on whatever topic may land on your desk. Relationship building starts by taking the initiative to nurture your network. Although these trusted relationships do not build overnight, starting early in your ACAO tenure will pay great dividends.

Developing Internal Relationships

Internally, it's obvious that your relationship with the CAO is paramount to your success. You should meet with the CAO frequently: use your initial meetings to dive into the strategic direction of the organization, clarify your role and what the CAO expects of you in achieving organizational objectives, and develop a robust information-sharing precedent. Ask questions and seek guidance (especially if you're new to the organization).

These meetings should be two-way conversations. Use this time to establish expectations as an engaged ACAO, such as requesting to be included in closed-session matters before the governing body (as permissible), being kept apprised of major matters that you may get asked about by a council member or department head, and identifying opportunities to step into the CAO role temporarily for training purposes. Be a strong advocate for ensuring that you get clear and consistent direction from the CAO. If you're

not getting the strategic direction, support, or input you need, don't hesitate to approach the CAO with an offer to set some time aside each week to check in, set an agenda for the meetings, and advocate in writing for what you need to be successful. Overcommunicate in the first few months. Place great emphasis on developing your ACAO/CAO relationship, as it will be crucial if you're to be an effective second in command.

You'll also be working closely with department heads and key staff to carry out projects and address issues. Show that you're invested in their success by carving out one-on-one time with these people to discuss major priorities and professional development goals and by asking how best you can assist in achieving their objectives.

Make a point to set up these "getting to know you" meetings very early in your tenure—ideally within the first 30 days. Meeting over coffee or lunch or while walking around the workplace can be very productive for these conversations. Follow these meetings up with specific operational tours for each department, such as a ride-along with a police officer and tours of the wastewater treatment plant and city or county parks. Ask specifically to hear from staff members who are closest to the operations or facility you're touring. Introduce yourself by attending department-wide meetings and by seeking out employees during the day.

Never pass up an opportunity to say hi when you see employees in the field. Make it known that your door is open. As you gain trust and develop these relationships, you'll become a valuable sounding board for the staff seeking guidance on issues and gauging how the CAO and/or governing body will view a request or issue. Nurturing these relationships requires you to demonstrate genuine and authentic interest in your team. Leave your ego in your office.

Developing External Relationships

Outside the doors of your organization are community groups, other government agencies, business owners, and neighbors that help local governments achieve broad community goals and objectives. It is equally important to cultivate

working relationships with them. The following is a sample of common stakeholders you should introduce yourself to within the first 100 days:

- Federal Representatives and Key Staff Members
- State Representatives and Key Staff Members
- Contracted Services Agencies
- Large Employers
- School District(s) Leaders
- Taxpayers Association
- Neighborhood Groups
- Chambers of Commerce
- Local Industry Trade Organizations
- Main Street Associations
- Economic Development Organizations
- Metropolitan Planning Organization
- Advisory Boards and Committees
- Leaders in Nearby Local Governments
- Destination Marketing Organization

Be sure to attend community events. These are an easy and natural way to make meaningful connections with the community—especially if you're new to the area or do not live in the jurisdiction you serve. Finally, don't ignore the built-in local government network that exists in your region. Seek out ACAOs from nearby communities for a monthly or quarterly lunch meeting to discuss issues of regional importance and ACAO happenings as well as to tap a natural support network. Immediately seek out regional, state, and national opportunities to build your external network. Some examples include the Texas Municipal League, the Georgia Municipal Association, the Colorado City County Management Association, the Cobb County (GA) Municipal Association, the Local Government Hispanic Network, and other organizations listed in the "Resources" chapter of this guide.

Clarifying Goals and Objectives

Relationships will help you achieve your goals and the goals of your team—if you know what those goals are. The governing body and CAO

have specific priorities, and you're going to play a key role in working on them. You must rely on the CAO to communicate priorities and key action steps. Additionally, your influence on achieving those goals is only as good as your team's ability to understand the objectives that are being set forth by leadership (you!).

For you and your team to be successful, any discussion of goals must include the **"SMART"** principle—goals must be **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant, and **T**ime-bound. Your team's time and yours is too valuable and your community's resources are too precious to waste on activities that are not SMART. You and the CAO must establish your goals and objectives within 100 days after you come on board. These goals should not be exclusively organizational. They should include your professional development goals, including a commitment by the CAO for you to participate in regional, state, and national organizations that support and educate local government leaders. The goals should also include a statement of your professional aspirations, adhere to the SMART goal principle, and be in writing!

Simultaneously, undertake a comprehensive review of the performance history of each of your direct reports and evaluate the goals that have been assigned to them prior to your arrival. How do these goals align with priorities set by the governing body and the CAO? Are they actually SMART goals or a regurgitation of a job description? The first 100 days are your only chance to set the tone for how you will help the CAO and your team members achieve their goals. Do not let this opportunity to redefine and align goals get lost in the waves of your transition!

Your first 100 days will go by fast. Rapidly understanding community priorities and issues at the top, bottom, and outside of the organization is most efficiently done by focusing on getting to know the people who will orbit in your new solar system. Use these first 100 days to create connections that will help you navigate the waters between the strategic priorities and operational realities of your organization. Be intentional about setting SMART goals, overcommunicate, and be excited to be appointed to the ACAO position.

PEOPLE FIRST, MISSION ALWAYS

In the military, it's common to hear the phrase "People First, Mission Always" or "Mission First, People Always." For a leader, at what point is it acceptable for either the people or the mission to take priority? Clearly, this is a complicated topic. On the surface, it is illogical, but as we think about it, we can turn the phrase into a tangible leadership strategy in local government.

In local government, the real proving ground of "People First, *Mission Always*" is the daily journey to provide services to residents and take care of staff. We need to train staff and provide leadership, which builds a cohesive team that understands their individual roles, and how each person fits into the overall local government mission.

Without question, an ACAO faces the tension of balancing mission and people. While it's hard to deny that many leaders are traditionally focused on results, the best leaders find a way to combine their focus on results with interpersonal engagement on a professional level. As local

A Perspective from the Military

From my perspective, I knew my Air Force family was there to support my family. My spouse was also in the military, and we knew the base support network very well. When I was away for an extended period, my organization was there to help take care of my family so I could focus on achieving the mission. If the people who accomplish the mission are worried about their families, they cannot focus on the mission. In principle, if there is no support network, there is no mission accomplishment.

By Marty Hughes, Assistant City Manager, Kennesaw, Georgia

government stewards of the profession, leaders should look for and promote subordinates who understand and embrace this balance.

People First

By focusing on the needs of staff, an ACAO strengthens the ability of the team to be successful. A leader must nurture people in the organization with the intention of developing a competent, highly motivated, and cohesive workforce that stands ready to tackle any challenge. It can be tough, but it should always be the goal.

Leading the workforce of today can be one of the most challenging yet rewarding tasks a person can undertake. Many younger staff members are agile decision makers and social networkers, have a deep sense of purpose and job satisfaction, and are hungry to reap the rewards of their efforts. They're eager to apply their knowledge and want nothing more than to be a part of something bigger than themselves. As present-day leaders, we must take measures to ensure that we do all we can to help them develop their full potential.

Setting the Tone. Let's further examine the term "people first." While it is not comprehensive, this principle is a good baseline for encouraging the workforce. The most important element is ensuring that staff members have a leader they can look to and depend on every day. An ACAO must set the tone for the organization. Through actions and strong character, this leader sets the example. Moreover, an ACAO must give clear guidance to ensure that all personnel understand the mission of the organization and the objectives of their jobs.

Today's expectations of local government keep an ACAO busy. Whether pressures come from elected officials, residents, or the bureaucracy of the organization, we're asked to do more and more every day, and expect more of our staff. Unfortunately, over the years job pressures have led supervisors at every level to become more and more disconnected from the people they work with.

It's time for us to reengage, reconnect, and interact with the people in our organizations. We all know that actions speak louder than

words. How you interact, communicate, and recognize people sets the foundation of your relationships. Do we recognize a staff member's accomplishments with an e-mail—or do we leave our desk, seek them out, look them in the eye, shake their hand, and thank them in front of their peers? Face-to-face interaction takes more time but creates better relationships.

On the other side of the coin, the ACAO needs to hold people accountable. Many people do not like confrontation of any type, but a leader must protect the team and protect the success of the mission by dealing with less productive staff members when necessary.

Providing Tools for Success. Another important component of taking care of people is ensuring that they are set up for success. A leader must ensure that staff have the training, resources, and information to perform well in their jobs. Having a competent workforce maximizes their effectiveness, increases morale, and decreases dissatisfaction related to poor job performance.

As supervisors, we need to train people to become independent thinkers. Instead of fostering a culture of conformity, a leader will foster a climate that allows the team to use their experience and knowledge to make decisions at appropriate levels. Who knows better how to improve a product or process—the person who does the work or the supervisor who sits at a desk?

Empowering Team Members. As a leader, one must actively look for ways to reduce the burden on staff. In other words, a leader can stop the proverbial "it's always been done that way" comment. One method is looking for ways to improve a process by asking "why." Another is asking staff what they perceive as obstacles to performing at a high level. Since we're not experts in everything, a leader must actively solicit feedback from staff to achieve this goal.

Perhaps the most difficult challenge in taking care of people is empowering them to perform their tasks to the best of their ability. To do this, leaders must trust mid-level supervisors to perform their jobs without micromanaging or questioning every decision. It requires us to

accept reasonable levels of risk. We must trust our subordinates until they give us a reason not to, and if that happens, we should replace them.

Empowering staff also helps develop leaders who can make decisions in our absence. We must constantly train future local government leaders. Good and bad ideas come from all levels, and leaders will make mistakes that are visible to their subordinates. Leaders must own up to and learn from mistakes and expect staff to do the same. There's a fine line between perpetual failure and risk-taking failure. Leaders know that with failure come knowledge and growth, whether within others or within ourselves.

A leader must provide the guidance, resources, and support to allow staff members to succeed. It means mentoring personnel when they make mistakes, rewarding them when they excel, celebrating accomplishments in public, and addressing needed improvements in private. It means treating people with respect while keeping the bar high and supporting people as they accomplish something they never thought was within their reach. It means, in the end, ensuring that staff are better if they leave the organization than they were when they came in. If local government leaders make a concerted effort to develop people this way, the team will accomplish the mission.

Enforcing Standards of Behavior. A critical element for taking care of people is setting a standard of appropriate behavior for an individual and a group. Leaders do this by enforcing standards fairly and consistently and holding individuals accountable for their actions. A leader who is fair enforces standards and holds everyone accountable. And a leader who is consistent lets staff know where they stand so they can be confident that you won't make unpredictable, "knee-jerk" decisions.

Leaders should maintain challenging, but achievable, goals. As noted earlier, many leaders like goals that are **SMART**—**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant, and **T**ime-bound. SMART goals are clear, attainable, and meaningful, and they can create buy-in and motivation.

Rewarding People. One of the best parts of taking care of people is being able to reward them. As leaders, we must appropriately reward and recognize staff and employees for their performance. It not only motivates them, but it is the right thing to do. Leaders can recognize employees by taking time to walk around and say thank you to individuals or by thanking them in public at a staff or council meeting. Rewards can also be job promotions with more responsibility and pay. The main point is ensuring that people feel appreciated for their hard work.

Finally, taking care of people involves helping them to develop as professionals. Leaders must create an environment that fosters professional development. At times, we may need to challenge staff with difficult tasks outside their comfort zone. We should understand their personal and professional goals and support them as they develop a plan to achieve them. Once again, we must cultivate knowledgeable local government leaders who are capable of mentoring their subordinates.

Mission Always

By honing our principles, leaders can strive to build a local government workforce that is capable of performing the mission. Just as important, we have an ethical and moral responsibility to have a positive impact on the people entrusted to our care.

Missions vary among local governments, but the mission is and always will be there. The hard part is ensuring that people stick around and go the distance. Leaders can help by refocusing on their supervisory relationships, respecting and empowering members of the workforce, and mentoring and grooming future leaders.

INSIDE THE DECISION-MAKING ROOM

Depending on your career path, when you become an ACAO, you may have already had the privilege of being "inside the decision-making room" as part of a project or issue specific to your area of responsibility. Other newly minted ACAOs may have experienced similar

Facilitating Decision Making

Early in my employment in one city, I attended an executive team meeting that included the city manager, assistant city managers, the city attorney, and other senior staff. When the discussion started to get stuck in one area, I took the opportunity to get up to the whiteboard and start writing down the issue being discussed, followed with the major themes that occurred earlier. This allowed the team to refocus on the issues we were trying to address and move forward with the meeting.

By Rey Arellano, Assistant City Manager (retired)

decision-making environments outside of local government. Given the sometimes (ever-present?) competing interests surrounding an issue, ACAO participation in decision making is important and can be significant.

An Approach

It's important to know the players involved in a project/initiative/issue well before a significant decision comes up. As suggested earlier, ACAOs should take time early in their tenure to do a "courtesy call" with the other leaders in their new organization and major stakeholders in the community. Starting off in a friendly, getting-to-

know-you environment is helpful when things become complicated or controversial.

Decisions in local government administration occur at different levels, from determining generally how an initiative may be advanced to making critical "go/no-go" decisions. A good approach for new ACAOs is to ask clarifying questions, summarize major points, and identify areas of consensus, areas needing follow-up, and so forth. This will demonstrate your engagement and help you understand the issues.

The most challenging conversations usually involve community constituencies, whose perspectives may align (or compete) with the interests of city or county elected officials. In these situations, ACAOs must actively listen, acknowledge the points being made as well as the passion that accompanies the issue, explore alternatives that may be acceptable, then commit to carefully considering the views of constituents in how the city or county might address the issue.

Getting Down to It

A critical decision point is usually preceded by a number of meetings with staff, community members generally, relevant community leaders specifically, and elected officials. A good approach is to consider all options, recommend the one that seems best, and develop alternatives to present to the decision-makers (e.g., the city or county's governing body).

In the best case, the groundwork laid in prior meetings with stakeholders will result in smooth agreement with the proposed solution...but sometimes not. Always be prepared for the unexpected!

SECTION 4

INTERNAL PROMOTION OR EXTERNAL HIRE?

An ACAO may be hired for the position through an internal promotion or from outside the organization. If you're an internally promoted ACAO, you have certain advantages (e.g., a track record of success and familiarity with the local government's priorities, programs, and people) and challenges (e.g., the need to redefine relationships with former peers who become your direct reports).

An ACAO hired from outside has different advantages and challenges. An advantage is that you're viewed as the ACAO from the start,

so you don't have to redefine relationships or expectations. Another is that you're likely to bring fresh perspectives based on your previous experience. The primary challenge, of course, is getting up to speed on the organizational culture, programs, and priorities and the "players" in the organization and the community.

This chapter provides tips for aspiring ACAOs who want to climb the organizational ladder and for "new kids" who need to establish their credibility. It also guides the new ACAO through the process of setting objectives and strategic goals.

Using Your "New-ness" As an Advantage

In 2016, I was the new kid on the block at my organization, and eight years later, with leaders who have 35 years of experience in the decision-making room, I am still considered the new kid. When I arrived at my new organization, it seemed a bit disheartening to be the employee with the shortest tenure and no historical data or experience from the organization, but I soon began to use it as an advantage in the decision-making room.

Let's talk about the fishbowl discussion approach. The fishbowl strategy is often used for facilitating group discussion. Some individuals are inside the "fishbowl" actively discussing a topic and others are outside the fishbowl listening carefully to the conversation. During my first few years (even now) at my organization, I found it very beneficial to be outside the fishbowl listening to others (even though physically I was at the table and not on the outside). Not only did I pick up on how decisions were made, but I had a chance to observe the multiple perspectives in the room. This also allowed me to gain an understanding of the organization and to be prepared when called on to offer my expertise. I also took this as an opportunity to learn about the community and how decision-making was addressed when constituents were at the table.

In the course of conversations, I was often called on to share my experiences from organizations I had worked at previously and my recommendation regarding the current topic/issue being discussed. I used this as a time not only to share my expertise but also to begin introducing innovations to help increase productivity and improve services the organization offered. Also, don't hesitate to ask clarifying questions as a new ACAO. You don't know what you don't know, so gaining an understanding early in your career at any organization and asking questions based on how and why certain decisions are made will help you inside the decision-making room.

By Chelsea Jackson, Deputy City Manager, Douglasville, Georgia

Finally, an ACAO (usually, but not always, one promoted from within) may find him- or herself in the position of interim CAO when the city or county manager is fired, resigns, or retires.

MOVING UP IN THE ORGANIZATION

Earning a promotion is exciting and yet scary. Obtaining a new opportunity in local government may be difficult, especially if you're not sure how to get it or if the organization is small. While we may believe that we're ready for a promotion, we may still need to strengthen our credentials, or we may need new skills or more experience. Instead of guessing what further qualifications you may need, it can be helpful to reach out to your CAO, supervisor, or mentor.

While there are several ways to land your first ACAO role, the way you adjust to the position and lead a team may be different depending on whether you're new to the organization or have risen through the ranks internally. Getting hired from outside the organization offers some benefits that an internal promotion may not. Specifically, you have an opportunity for a fresh start to establish your leadership style, influence how your staff may perceive you, and work on building new relationships from the ground up.

If you're tackling your first ACAO role as an internal hire, you may be fighting already-established opinions and preconceived notions of your knowledge, skills, and ability to do the job. When your coworkers become your employees and must view you as their manager rather than their peer, it can be difficult to establish new boundaries and gain buy-in for what you need them to accomplish. They may not immediately view you as a leader, and it may take some time to establish your position and expectations to get the job done. This can be tricky, as you're known to them, and they may already know your blind spots. If a former peer now directly reports to you, you may have to create new boundaries, and you may need to examine your overall level of professionalism and engagement with your coworkers.

Challenging Transitions

I had the opportunity to grow from a senior analyst to assistant city manager, to deputy city manager in my current organization. The transition from a senior analyst to assistant manager was particularly challenging as it happened during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Over time, there are some lessons I learned about moving up through the ranks of a local government or in any organization. I knew I wanted to be an ACAO, and later I transitioned to the CAO role!

**By Kristen Gorham, City Manager,
Chamblee, Georgia**

Despite these hurdles, moving up within the organization also has benefits. You already have a proven track record of success on projects and programs, and you know the organization and the community. You don't have to spend a significant amount of time learning new names, faces, and personalities.

Five Simple Questions to Ask Yourself

Following are some questions to ask yourself if you aspire to move up in your organization.

Are there any additional projects I can take on?

Asking for more responsibility is usually the best way to validate your interest in advancement. It shows professional maturity and willingness to do what it takes to be considered for promotion. Go to your supervisor with a concrete plan for projects you'd like to work on, demonstrating that you have a finger on the pulse of the organization. Think about analyzing a program to streamline a process, helping with the budget, or assisting with a construction or renovation project.

Asking for more responsibility shows that you're thinking proactively to find community solutions and get things done rather than being reactive.

There's always more to be done, and staff have limited bandwidth that they must use to work on the highest priorities. Yes, this might create some homework when you step up to do more, but that's the point. The bottom line is that you can show your desire to move up by taking on additional responsibilities and solving problems with additional hard work. In the process, you strengthen your resume and your working knowledge of areas that are outside your assigned duties. The effect is that you're adding value to the organization and not simply asking for something.

How do I build a network of mentors? A mentor (also known as a coach) can assist you in many ways. The person, who may or may not be in your organization or field, can help you understand organizational culture and politics, identify your strengths and weaknesses, build your skills, and introduce you to others who could assist you in moving up. Mentors may be formal or informal. But where do you find them?

Sources may include community or service organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce or a Rotary Club, and professional organizations such as local government state associations and ICMA. ICMA, for example, offers [Coach Connect](#), an online platform that arranges one-to-one connections between coaches and learners.

Coaches can help you chart a path in local government and help you answer challenging career questions in a way that is right for you. Coaching sessions can take many forms. Some are casual, informal networking and check-ins, while others can be more structured and continue over time with regular meetings. You also may choose to get perspectives from more than

just one coach. Mentoring is valuable to anyone at any career stage. It provides continuous learning and creates an opportunity for people to see their situation from a fresh perspective.

What is the most valuable attribute I bring to the team? This is a great question to ask your current ACAO or CAO. The answer will help you focus on the strengths that others see and value in you. Each of us has unique talents and capabilities, and the answer to this question will

help you start to plan and frame your future role to best play to your strengths. The answer also gives you an opportunity to address your weaknesses so that you can be a more well-rounded asset to the team. It may be difficult to get a straight answer, because people often prefer to talk positively and avoid anything negative. If you have established a practice of honest dialogue, both parties should understand that talking about a weakness is not a personal attack.

What skills should I focus on developing to make a greater impact on the short- and long-term goals of the local government? This question is a continuation of the last one. It also demonstrates your initiative and a commitment to aligning your goals with those of the organization. By seeking guidance from the current ACAO or CAO on specific areas for development, you'll position yourself as an asset. You'll improve your performance in your current role and increase the likelihood of being considered for future opportunities and promotions.

As professionals, we need to know where the organization is headed and look for opportunities to gain new skills that will add value down the line. Learning opportunities can include higher education classes, conference sessions, and/or online courses. Keep in mind that your commitment to your organization and community is valuable. We all see how tough it is to recruit and retain talent. If you're with an organization that supports your growth, you'll continue to advance in the profession. Be confident in asking what the future holds and how you can play a bigger part, then pursue opportunities to expand your knowledge.

Are there conferences I can attend? Asking your direct supervisor about opportunities to attend conferences demonstrates a proactive approach to professional development. Because professional development is usually highly encouraged yet not mandatory, this question showcases your enthusiasm for staying up to date with trends, best practices, and emerging technologies. Attending a conference allows you to gain valuable insights, learn from experts, and bring fresh perspectives back to the job. Moreover, these events provide excellent

networking opportunities where you can connect with others, exchange ideas, and potentially identify new career opportunities.

The Long and Winding Road

Our careers tend to have different stopping points and various twists that get us to where we are currently. Professional and personal social media profiles show where people have been and where they are now and at what level. Some might stay with the same employer for years and move up in that organization. Others might move from job to job, looking for the next opportunity. As ACAOs, we can share our own professional journeys with our team and help team members develop their own career paths. It's all about teamwork, communication, and preparing those who will eventually replace us.

COMING FROM OUTSIDE THE ORGANIZATION

Taking on the role of ACAO from outside the organization brings a unique set of opportunities and challenges. For example, you may have come from a neighboring jurisdiction where you were not considered part of the “management team.” This section will guide you through the considerations, strategies, and best practices to make a successful transition and thrive in your new position.

Benefits of Joining as an External ACAO

One of the benefits of joining a new organization as ACAO is that your colleagues do not see you as anything other than the ACAO. In other words, they aren't thinking, “Wasn't she in public engagement and budget?”

You're likely to be welcomed for your fresh perspectives. External hires often bring innovative ideas to the organization. Your unique experiences and insights can contribute to solving problems that the organization has been wrestling with for a while. By approaching your early days with a genuine willingness to listen and learn, you might find that your fresh ideas are welcome.

Coming in from the outside allows you to make objective assessments of existing processes,

structures, and challenges without preconceptions or biases. More important, it gives you the opportunity to go on a “listening tour,” inviting others to tell you about their work, things they're proud of, and processes or initiatives that frustrate them. Having you as a really good ear and asking the “dumb questions” can be refreshing for employees and others in the organization. It can help employees articulate for themselves where they need help without feeling threatened. Listening is also the best way to win others over, and people will likely see that your objectivity can be a valuable asset in identifying areas for improvement.

As an ACAO from outside, you probably possess a skill set gained from experiences in different fields or organizations. This versatility can bring new skills and approaches to the table, complementing the existing strengths of the team. Don't be afraid to speak up when something is new to you; asking others to help and teach you will allow them to see your vulnerability and build trust. No one likes a “know it all”! And don't be afraid to inject a new idea based on your research or experience. You're in the role for a reason, so don't hold back.

Challenges and Considerations

Every organization has its unique culture. Adapting to the culture, understanding its nuances, and aligning your leadership style with it is crucial for a smooth transition. So do your research. As suggested earlier, learn as much as you can before you start the job. Try to spend some time (even a quick virtual meeting) with the CAO and other colleagues in leadership before your first day so that you can start to get the lay of the land in advance. And again, listen and observe. Don't make snappy judgments. You're in a high position in the organization, and you need to remember that employees may not be their authentic selves around you until they get to know you better. Refrain from reading too much into anything until you have some time under your belt.

Because you've come in from the outside you may experience initial skepticism among existing staff. Building trust through open communication, active listening, and demonstrating commitment to the organization's mission is essential. While

Joining a New Organization

I live and previously worked close to the municipality where I was hired as ACAO, and I took my time joining my new organization after my appointment was announced (about eight weeks!) So I took the opportunity to meet with all my prospective direct reports over coffee prior to my first day. I spent that time getting to know them, understanding their goals, and listening to frustrations. Some came prepared with work for me (“Here’s our IT strategic plan!”) while others wanted to know all about me. In hindsight, I do believe these casual meetings helped establish me as a listener and as someone who is on the employees’ side.

By Allison Scheck, Deputy City Manager, Wheat Ridge, Colorado

your external perspective is valuable, there will be a learning curve as you understand the intricacies of the new organization, its history, and its internal dynamics. Be patient with yourself and proactive in seeking information and listen, listen, listen!

Strategies for Success

Here are suggestions for things to try as an external hire into the ACAO role:

1. Find a way to meet individually with every single employee in your chain of command. Depending on the size of organization, this might be one of the only times you truly intersect. Or at least it gives you a chance to kickstart a relationship with someone you will see in the hallway often. Ask them about themselves, their career goals, and what they love about the organization.
2. Listen, listen, listen. There’s no better way to get to know a culture than to listen to its members. Dedicate time to actively listen to team members, stakeholders, and other leaders in the organization. This will help you understand their perspectives, concerns, and aspirations.
3. Create the relationship you need with the CAO. Be up front about what support you need and then be proactive in getting it. For example, ask for a weekly check-in and come prepared with your top questions of the week. Ensure that the things you’re spending your time on align with the CAO’s expectations. Be very clear that you want honest feedback and that it won’t hurt your feelings.
4. Get out there in the community. Go to ribbon cuttings and park openings, ride along with a police officer and snowplow driver. Be everywhere. If those aren’t in your purview, just make sure your colleagues in leadership know why you’re doing these things—to learn.
5. Rely on and work collaboratively with organizational leaders to leverage their institutional knowledge. Engage in open conversations to learn about the organization’s history, challenges, and successes. Invite leadership colleagues to lunch or coffee and let them know that you want to connect with and learn from them.
6. After an appropriate amount of time, clearly articulate to employees and other stakeholders your vision for the role and the goals you aim to achieve. You might do this in an all-hands meeting after your one-on-one staff introductory meetings to discuss common themes without divulging any confidential conversations. You can seek confirmation of your findings, and work with the team to agree on a vision, mission, and action plan for the year ahead.

Conclusion

Becoming an ACAO from outside the organization is rewarding and requires a blend of humility,

adaptability, and strategic leadership. By embracing the organization's culture, building relationships, establishing trust, and leveraging your unique perspective, you can make a lasting and positive impact on the organization's success, and you will have learned a great deal about yourself in the process.

CREATING OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIC GOALS

Whether you're new in your organization as an ACAO, recently promoted into the role, or a tenured ACAO, strategic planning and goal setting are important to ensure not only that the organization is future-focused but also that as the ACAO you have clear direction in your role and the future of the city or county. How exactly are strategic planning and goal setting accomplished? There are several approaches, but a few key pieces of advice are to learn from the past, review the current budget and projects, bring everyone to the table, and create objectives and goals for the future.

Blast from the Past

Often, looking into the past can create a bitter recollection of things that were not accomplished and obsolete practices that did not work, but always remember that studying the past is a chance to change and improve current practices and operations. As the ACAO, your first step in creating new objectives and goals must come from a review of previous practices.

Looking at previous years' budgets and planning efforts can give you a better understanding of where the organization stands fiscally and what the organization has done in the past as well as an opportunity to make corrections for the future. When looking through previous budgets, look at trends and begin to learn about the organization and why certain practices are in place. Make note of budgeting decisions and create an open dialogue with the organization's finance director and CAO to ensure that you understand what the overall direction was and why certain financial decisions were made.

The budget will have its own history, but learning the history of the organization will also help

you plan for the future. It's useful to know how and why certain projects exist and the historical decision-making processes that led to their creation and implementation. Also, knowing about prior accomplishments allows you to create goals that build on past successes.

Preparing with Current Numbers

After reviewing previous budgets and prior year accomplishments, it's important to review and understand current trends and the current budget of your organization so that you can set realistic goals for the future. Be sure that you understand the revenues/expenditures, fund balance, debt service payments, capital needs, and other budget categories and that you have a grasp of the financial health of the organization. Also become familiar with any financial policies that may affect strategic planning and the staff who can provide information.

Also be sure you're aware of the status of current projects and their needs in the upcoming year. For example, if a current park project is scheduled to be completed in six months, one of the future goals for the current project would be to develop an operational plan (with costs budgeted) for the opening of the new facility. Reviewing existing projects may result in a continuation of goals from the previous year or the creation of new goals.

Bring Everyone to the Table

Besides studying past and present trends in the budget and in ongoing projects, proper planning also should include feedback from the leaders on your team. Department directors are professional staff who know how to predict future trends and align them with goals for the future as they relate to their respective departments. Recommendations from staff can help determine which goals are set for the future and set the stage for correcting outdated practices. As an ACAO, relying on staff to be the specialists in their fields allows for clear prioritizing of efforts and allows the organization to be more future focused. Cross-organizational collaboration is important to ensure that all departments/divisions in the organization are working toward the same goals and objectives.

The same goes for the elected officials, who are selected by the people in the community to promote projects that are important to them. Often, it's smart to have planning sessions with staff and elected officials to discuss major accomplishments, budgetary challenges, and future priorities to ensure that everyone is in alignment on the intended direction of the organization. The CAO will take the lead to engage the elected officials or give approval to the ACAO to connect with them.

Creating Objectives and Goal Setting

Once you've reviewed past trends and budgets, and current projects and goals, and elected officials and staff understand the current state of the organization, it's important to create clear, concise goals that properly reflect the organization and its future needs. Each goal should include objectives and/or action items, and an individual from the organization should be assigned to serve as the manager of the goal. Each goal should also have a budget and a timeline with a realistic completion date. Don't forget to check the status of each goal periodically to ensure that it's on track. And remember that not all goals have a straight path. Some may have to be paused, and others may not ever be accomplished for unforeseen reasons. Regardless of progress (or lack of progress) toward each goal, be sure to update and communicate its current status to all parties. If the goal is accomplished, allow your team to evaluate the process, identify any areas of improvement for next year's strategic planning and goal setting, and begin the process again for new goals.

SERVING AS AN INTERIM MANAGER

Sometimes you face a curveball, and you find yourself as an interim chief administrative officer.

The departure of the CAO can come after his or her planned retirement at the end of a successful tenure or can come as a surprise when the governing body decides to end the CAO's employment. As an ACAO, there's a good chance you may have the opportunity to serve as an

interim CAO during your career. Will you be ready? How will you respond?

ICMA's guide [Resources for the Interim or Acting Manager](#) is an excellent reference to assist ACAOs in determining how they might respond to the question and, if they choose to accept the assignment, how they might best position themselves for success. The first section, "The Interim Manager Role: Is it Right for You?" can be very helpful for a newly appointed interim manager.

One of the major challenges for a new interim CAO is establishing your presence as a leader. The challenge is not unlike the one discussed earlier for an ACAO who moves up within the organization. The people you work with—and even the governing body—may continue to view you as they did in your previous role.

Another challenge is absorbing and adjusting to the scope of your new job. Although you've been working with the CAO on many organizational priorities and issues, you'll face a learning curve when you're flying solo, and you'll probably need to get yourself up to speed on things the CAO was handling independently.

Finally, you'll need to pay particular attention to the governing body's priorities and reassure its members that you're up to the job and will ensure that local government operations continue under your guidance.

Because staff and employees are adjusting to the reality that the former CAO is gone, you'll need to spend time on internal communications, keeping people informed about what's going on and reassuring them that you can provide a reliable presence as the leader.

The accompanying sidebar provides lessons from one ACAO's experience in the interim role.

Surprise – I’m It!

I had been with the city for five years when my chance to serve as the interim city manager came. As deputy city manager, I had line responsibility for all departments except police, fire, and the city attorney’s office; my colleague, the assistant city manager, had responsibility for a number of programs and offices.

During a regularly scheduled Monday morning directors’ meeting, the city manager made a short, terse announcement that the city council was likely not going to renew his contract at Tuesday’s council meeting, and he wanted to give us a heads-up. We were stunned. Although we carried on with the business of the day, there was a cold chill of anxiety about what was to befall the city manager and us.

On Tuesday evening, the city council voted not to renew the city manager’s contract, and subsequently passed a motion to appoint me interim city manager.

Now what?

My initial priorities were to reassure the city council that I was up to the task. I identified and confirmed with council three main areas that I believed were their priorities in the short term. I then worked with the department directors to inform them of the three priority areas and to ensure that efforts continued to move forward on established initiatives.

Organizationally, I appointed the assistant city manager as interim deputy city manager with responsibility for all the departments except police, fire, and the city attorney’s office, which I took on. In the initial meetings with the directors, I did not feel as confident as I thought I would. What made the difference was their support and the existence of routines and procedures that worked well running city operations.

What changed most for me was going from a mostly internal focus to an outward focus. In addition to now working closely with council members, I spent a lot of time in the community. I also had to delegate to the appropriate directors tasks I might have done myself (that was an easy shift!).

In the seven months I served as interim city manager, the biggest issue I had to address was developing the proposed budget. Many local governments were experiencing budget shortfalls at the time; ours was a \$39 million general fund biennial budget gap. I had developed a two-phase approach to addressing the gap that included reductions in number of departments, including police and fire. When I made the presentation to council, you might imagine the number of speakers who testified on the proposal. The council subsequently approved the budget, and I applied for the permanent city manager position (but that’s a story for another time).

By Rey Arellano, Assistant City Manager (Retired)

SECTION 5

UNDERSTANDING YOUR POSITION

This chapter describes eight leadership styles and provides tips for developing and communicating your own style. Your approach to leadership will vary depending on whether your position is new in the organization or whether you're replacing someone. In either case, it's crucial to get to know your team and build and maintain strong professional relationships. And, of course, you'll need to be prepared to anticipate problems, avoid them if possible, and address them if necessary.

KNOWING YOUR LEADERSHIP STYLE

First, let's identify eight common leadership styles we have read about in books or discussed in the classroom.

1. **Autocratic (or authoritarian):** The autocratic style is focused on results and team efficiency. Autocratic leaders often make decisions alone or with a small and trusted group and expect staff members to do exactly what they are told without having input. Someone with an autocratic style typically has self-confidence, is self-motivated, and communicates clearly. The person is dependable, follows the rules, and values a structured environment.
2. **Bureaucratic:** The bureaucratic style is similar to the autocratic style in that the leader expects the team to follow the rules. It focuses on fixed duties within a hierarchical system, where each staff member has defined responsibilities, and there is little collaboration or creativity. The bureaucratic leader values structure and is detail-oriented, task-focused, and strong-willed.
3. **Coaching:** Leaders with the coaching style recognize the team's strengths, weaknesses, and motivations, and help everyone improve. The person often assists team members in setting goals that are SMART (**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant, and **T**ime-bound) and provides regular feedback to promote growth. He or she sets clear expectations and creates a positive, motivating environment. The "coach" can be very advantageous for an organization, but unfortunately, this style is rare because effective coaching takes time. Some behaviors include being supportive and placing value on learning as a part of professional growth. The coaching style of leadership prioritizes self-awareness and guidance over giving commands and directing.
4. **Laissez-faire:** The laissez-faire style is the opposite of the autocratic style and focuses on delegating tasks to the team. The laissez-faire leader provides little to no supervision and therefore often has more time for other priorities. The laissez-faire style is most appropriate with a team whose members are experienced and well trained and require little oversight. Productivity could suffer if staff are confused about expectations, or if some on the team require motivation and structure to work well.
5. **Participative (or democratic):** Participative leadership combines the autocratic and laissez-faire leadership styles. A participative leader asks the team for input and uses that feedback to make a decision. Team members believe their contributions matter, and the participative style can promote high levels of staff engagement and workplace satisfaction. The participative leader values group discussions and tends to "overcommunicate" information to the team as well as promoting a work environment in which shared ideas are welcome.

6. **Pacesetter:** The pacesetter style is effective for achieving fast results. A “pacesetter” focuses primarily on job performance, ambitious standards, and accountability to achieve the mission. While the pacesetting leadership style can be motivating in a challenging environment, it is not the best option for dealing with team members who need mentorship and feedback.
7. **Servant:** The “servant leader” lives by a people-first mindset and believes that when team members feel personally and professionally fulfilled, they will be more effective and more likely to produce high-quality work. Because they emphasize employee satisfaction and teamwork, servant leaders often attract high levels of respect. They motivate their teams and have excellent communication skills. Two attributes of this style are collaboration and commitment among team members.
8. **Visionary:** The visionary leader has an impressive ability to advance and direct periods of change by inspiring staff and earning their trust with new ideas. He or she is able to establish a strong organizational bond and foster confidence. A visionary leader tends to be persistent and is bold, strategic, and open to taking risks.

Through leadership behaviors, we set a standard of values that energizes our staff and residents to make our community and the “electeds” the best they can be. Our own leadership behavior or “style” has been formulated by our personality (who we are), our learned environment, and our experiences.

Where Do I Start?

Leadership is an overwhelming subject for developing leaders as well as those who lead every day. Thousands of books, models, and theories cover the subject. Add in programs, degrees, workshops, seminars, and all we can say is “Oh my! Where do I start?”

Exercising leadership in the public sector is different from exercising it in the private sector. The main difference is dealing with elected

officials and the bureaucracy of government operations. Split leadership, depending on the local government charter, and democratic accountability—especially with vocal citizens and media attention—creates a challenging environment for public sector leaders and affects their leadership style.

Developing Your Leadership Style

Leading people as an ACAO is an ever-changing challenge in our work life. Whether the changes come from within ourselves or from those we are tasked to lead, leadership is not static. Leadership style evolves as we gain experience and insight. Being an effective ACAO starts with knowing ourselves. Assessment tools such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, 360-Feedback, CliftonStrengths Assessment (formerly known as Gallup StrengthsFinder), and DISC Profile can help us gain a deeper awareness and understanding of our strengths and weaknesses.

Understanding Motivations

Motivating yourself and your team and equipping them with the resources to succeed are two of our key functions as leaders. To do that, it’s important to understand what inspires us to do our best work. As ACAOs, our motivation is more than the salary and perks. It’s also our sense of belonging to the organization, our colleagues up, down, and across the organizational chart, and our level of responsibility.

Once we know our own motives, we can unleash the potential in others and enable staff to plan and execute tasks in the face of organizational challenges.

Improving Your Leadership Skills

To strengthen your leadership skills, look to your colleagues for feedback. Be open to their perspectives on your leadership tendencies so you can identify areas for improvement and growth. Consider the following:

- **Continuous Learning.** Increase your leadership skills through continuous learning by reading, listening to speakers, and/or talking with a mentor.

- **Emotional Intelligence.** Emotional intelligence is the ability to understand and manage your own emotions and understand the emotions of others. Team members have different personalities, motivations, and skills, and a leader with emotional intelligence is sensitive to these differences and adapts his or her relationship with each person accordingly.
- **Adaptability.** As leaders, we must be able to adapt to changes in situations, people, or the environment. Others must know that they can count on us, especially when under stress, to modify our course if necessary in the face of external changes.

Communicating Your Leadership Style

When you step into a new leadership role as an ACAO, effectively communicating your leadership style is just as crucial as understanding it.

- **Be Genuine.** People will see who you are as they get to know you and your personality, quirks, and habits. Being “real” leads to trust and respect.
- **Embrace Professional “Scars.”** Professional scars are those deep-rooted marks left behind by challenges, failures, and hardships faced in a person’s career journey. Just like physical scars, they are a testament to resilience and growth. These scars often carry stories of missed opportunities, difficult decisions, and learning moments that have shaped us into being a stronger, more experienced professional. They serve as a reminder that setbacks are a natural part of any career and that overcoming them can lead to personal and professional development. Embracing these scars not only highlights perseverance and determination but also builds a foundation for future success. Each scar carries lessons that help navigate the complexities of the professional world with greater wisdom and confidence.

Professional scars significantly influence our leadership style. Leaders with such scars tend to exhibit higher levels of empathy,

understanding, and patience. They become more compassionate and approachable, having faced similar struggles themselves. These leaders often prioritize creating a supportive environment, recognizing the importance of fostering growth and resilience in their teams. The scars also instill a sense of humility, reminding leaders that perfection is not the goal but continuous learning and improvement. As a result, leaders with professional scars are more likely to inspire trust, loyalty, and motivation among their team members, guiding them through challenges with a steady, experienced hand.

- **Show Flexibility.** As suggested above, we need to highlight our adaptability in the face of new situations, team needs, or changing project requirements.

Having insight into your leadership style and the ability to articulate it is a significant professional step. As you expand your self-awareness, you’ll strengthen your leadership skills across the spectrum of operations. Of course, each style comes with strengths and weaknesses, but the single most important characteristic of successful leaders may be adaptability.

By carefully analyzing your approach, seeking feedback, and aligning with the CAO’s leadership style, you can effectively describe your own. As we grow and evolve, so should our leadership style. Continuous learning, emotional intelligence, and adaptability are essential for this advancement.

We must all remember that leadership is not about being in charge. It is about taking care of those in our charge. As ACAOs, we must remember to keep the focus on creating an environment where others are accountable, empowered, and appreciated.

NEW POSITION OR REPLACING SOMEONE?

As a new assistant chief administrative officer (ACAO) it’s important to understand the background of your position in the organization. Some organizations have had an ACAO position for many decades, and the role of the ACAO

is well established. In other organizations the ACAO role may have been newly added to the organizational structure, so the new ACAO will have more flexibility in developing his or her responsibilities and role.

New Position

A new ACAO position can be a tremendous resource not only for the CAO but also for the organization. The CAO can delegate more responsibilities and rely on a trusted confidant(e) and professional colleague to help make key decisions.

For those serving in a new ACAO position, it's essential to have a candid conversation about the position with the CAO. Understanding the CAO's expectations about your areas of responsibility, role in key projects, and decision-making authority is crucial to getting the position successfully established.

One benefit of serving in a new position is flexibility in establishing how the ACAO role will function. The role may be customized to match the needs of the organization or the expertise of the ACAO, and the ACAO needs to understand how his or her time and efforts will benefit the organization and the community.

One of the disadvantages of serving in a new position is that current employees and elected officials may be accustomed to working in an organizational structure without an ACAO. Individuals who have been reporting to or working directly with the CAO and are now asked to work with the ACAO may have difficulty accepting this change and understanding the ACAO's role. A skilled ACAO will be aware of this dynamic and spend time and effort to build strong relationships with employees and elected officials so they can see the benefit of this new working relationship.

Replacing Someone

Local government professionals often succeed a prior ACAO who has moved on. One advantage of replacing a prior ACAO is that the organization has accepted the role of the ACAO in helping manage operations. There is most likely a history and track record of the CAO and ACAO working together on

key initiatives. Ideally, leaders in the organization and the community will welcome a new ACAO and play an important role in helping a new ACAO transition into a new organization. If the previous job holder was difficult or had a negative history, one way to alleviate this issue is by being a strong listener. Be thoughtful and prudent in word and deed. Over a short period of time, people will start viewing the "replacement" on his or her own merits.

A local government professional replacing a prior ACAO can often offer a fresh perspective on the organization and key projects. A new ACAO should have the wisdom to both listen and understand how the prior ACAO viewed that role and also work with the CAO to share new insights. A new ACAO may have a different role in the organization compared with that of the prior ACAO. This new role may be appreciated by some, while others may be more cautious in their acceptance of this change.

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR TEAM

Learning about the organization and its key leaders is imperative for any local government professional. Your success as an ACAO will be directly related to your ability to build and maintain strong professional relationships.

Building Relationships

Building strong professional relationships begins with mutual respect between you and the people you work with. An ACAO sets the tone by respecting all employees in the organization. In turn, an ACAO is likely to gain credibility and earn respect from them.

As suggested in the section on your first 100 days, spend time understanding each of your team members and the role each one plays in the organization. Meet one-one-one with key team members to learn about their backgrounds and their expertise in the organization and in local government. Learn about their professional goals and ask how you can assist them in achieving these goals.

It's imperative to spend time in the field observing the day-to-day responsibilities of employees

and seeing key projects they are working on. Time spent in the field will give you a better understanding of both the employees and the community and help you be a more effective ACAO. Working in the field alongside employees at all levels also builds respect.

Reviewing current projects and upcoming projects is important. By talking with staff and stakeholders, this information helps the ACAO better understand a department's current workload as well as challenges that the ACAO can assist with. You can also learn a great deal about the work style of a team member by understanding his or her approach to projects, as well identifying strengths and weaknesses of the team member and external politics in the community. These discussions are also an important opportunity for the ACAO to communicate expectations in regard to communication and leadership style.

Maintaining Relationships

Ensuring that professional relationships remain strong requires time and dedication. Even in the midst of numerous projects and priorities, an ACAO must commit to regularly meeting with team members. These meetings should focus on sharing information but also include time for candid and open conversations about organizational and leadership issues, including any performance issues that need to be addressed. An open-door approach contributes to a strong relationship and helps keep communication flowing each day. Remember that each team member has unique attributes, so your leadership style will need to remain flexible to best meet each team member's needs.

Performance reviews should be viewed as an opportunity for dialogue between individual team members and the ACAO. The ability to have candid conversations allows for growth and clarification of expectations. Performance reviews should not be a surprise for the employee, but an opportunity to reflect on the feedback that occurs throughout the year and a time to discuss upcoming plans.

An effective ACAO also takes the time to get to know team members' priorities in their personal

lives and what is important to each of them outside of work.

SIDESTEPPING PROBLEMS

It often feels as if one of your primary responsibilities as an ACAO is helping avoid problems. An experienced ACAO can be an incredible resource for the CAO in not only identifying potential problems but also assisting in the response when problems do occur.

Anticipating Problems

Being aware of the sentiment of employees and of community members on key issues is imperative. This awareness allows the local government to prepare for potential issues so it can stay focused on strategic initiatives.

Internally, an ACAO should take the time to understand the attitudes of employees—typically by spending time with key employee groups and having an ongoing dialogue so they know that when frustrations occur they can talk through their concerns before they become significant issues. In particular, an ACAO should work diligently during budget development to understand the perspectives of employees and take them into consideration whenever possible when crafting budget recommendations.

Community concerns can also cause potential problems if they are not addressed promptly. An ACAO can help anticipate potential problems by developing strong connections in the community. This often includes building relationships with community leaders such as school officials and leaders in business, nonprofit organizations, and special interest groups. These relationships often lead to an ongoing dialogue with the local government on important topics and allow for potential problems to be solved before they become larger issues.

On a broader level, a local government can anticipate problems by having a strong emergency management plan for responding to such events as severe weather, fire, and hazardous materials accidents. Identifying potential problems allows a local government to be better prepared if it does have to respond. This preparation becomes more

robust with regular training and regular refining of emergency plans.

Addressing Problems When They Occur

Challenges will occur in any local government organization, whether driven by internal initiatives or key projects or by external factors such as statewide political issues or extreme weather.

The key to addressing problems is to identify them proactively and make communication a priority. An ACAO often plays a key role in both areas and can be a vital resource for a CAO.

An ACAO should be willing to serve as a sounding board for the CAO on the proposed response to the situation. The ACAO may also play a key

role in deploying resources when a response is underway. Resources are often needed from multiple departments, and an ACAO can play an important role in coordination.

A strong and continuous communication strategy is critical during challenging times. Community members as well as employees deserve to understand how a local government is responding and moving forward. A local government should use multiple communication methods to convey key messages and provide regular updates so residents can stay aware and informed. And it's important to provide regular updates to employees so they can help respond to inquiries in an informed manner—or refer inquiries to a designated spokesperson.

SECTION 6

BECOMING AN ACAO: FIVE JOURNEYS

Often, ACAOs come to the position through a more or less traditional route—a master’s degree in public administration or a related field, an internship or “assistant-to” role, perhaps a department head position, and progressively responsible jobs leading up to ACAO or deputy. But that’s not always the case.

In this section, five current and past ACAOs describe their background, their personal journey to the ACAO role, their aspirations, and advice for new or aspiring ACAOs.

HEAR FROM AN ASSISTANT CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER



REY ARELLANO

Assisantant City Manager (retired)

ACAO from 2002 to 2023

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About My Education

I obtained a bachelor of science degree in physics at the United States Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland, and a master of science degree in information management at Marymount University, Arlington, Virginia.

I chose physics because I was fascinated with the subject in one of my high school senior classes and did well in the course. Let's just say I was "extremely challenged" getting through the curriculum at the Naval Academy. Being at the Naval Academy was a major factor in my decision to apply for the Navy's Nuclear Power program and select the Submarine Service.

About My Journey to the ACAO Role

My journey to the ACAO role was a serendipitous one. I served 22 years in the Navy, progressing through the career pipeline, including assignments as a division officer, department head, then executive officer (a role similar to that of an ACAO). Each of these roles exposed me to increasing levels of responsibility and accountability for the people, processes, and materials needed to get the assigned mission accomplished. As it turned out, although I was qualified, I was not one of the few chosen for the next position—commanding officer of a submarine.

I completed a graduate degree in information management because of my interest in the use

of technology. My eventual goal was to become an information technology (IT) director or chief information officer (CIO). When I retired from the Navy, I was fortunate to land a job at a private-sector company managing a number of technology initiatives; however, it wasn't the IT director role I was interested in.

When and How I Learned the ACAO Role Was My Goal

In short, I didn't even know the local government ACAO role existed. After serving about two years in the private-sector company, I was actively searching for an IT director position. A friend of mine who was then serving as records officer in the clerk's office in Norfolk, Virginia, encouraged me to apply for the city's open IT director position. Although I hadn't previously considered local government, I immediately saw it as an opportunity for continued public service. I applied but didn't even make the short list for interviews.

I subsequently applied in response to another listing from the executive recruiter who had handled the Norfolk position and made it through final interviews, but I was not selected. The recruiter then made me aware that San Diego was recruiting for a CIO and asked would I be interested (of course I was!). At the end of the process, the city manager selected me as the new CIO, and the position was elevated to deputy city manager status.

I went on to serve in two other cities: Tacoma, Washington, as deputy city manager and CIO and Austin, Texas, as assistant city manager.

Advice for a New or Aspiring ACAO

For the early-career professional, I recommend becoming involved in and eventually leading large-scale, cross-departmental projects to broaden your professional experience as well as to enhance your competitiveness for promotional opportunities along the path to becoming an ACAO. I would also say that gaining some level of comfort speaking publicly, especially in contentious situations, is an important skill set.

For the mid-career and senior-level professional, I recommend that when you're engaged in planning or strategizing conversations, include a broad perspective beyond the expertise you bring from the department you represent in order to show depth and the capability to think outside your area of expertise. Start reviewing ACAO postings to see what CAOs are looking for, then evaluate how you might address any gaps in your professional portfolio. At some point, you will be faced with the question "do I stay, or go elsewhere?" in order to get the ACAO position.

You'll have to balance many important factors in making that decision.

For the new ACAO, I advise that you quickly learn how best to complement your CAO and contribute to the priorities he or she will have for you. Generally, you'll find a lot of resources and advice to help you approach the initial weeks/months at a new assignment. One of the best things I did when coming on board was to schedule what I describe as "courtesy calls" on each of my colleague ACAOs, all department heads, then community leaders relevant to the specific role I was assigned in the organization. These courtesy calls should be conducted in their offices and be a brief opportunity to introduce yourself in order to start the process of building relationships.

What's Next for Me?

Even though I'm now "retired-retired," I remain engaged in the profession through ICMA's various committees. I'm available on ICMA's CoachConnect to serve as a sounding board and trusted advisor, as many have served me in my career. I also intend to travel more!

HEAR FROM AN ASSISTANT CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER



ELISA COX
Assistant City Manager
Rancho Cucamonga, California

ACAO since 2014

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About My Education

My undergraduate degree is in recreation, parks, and tourism administration from the California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly) San Luis Obispo with an emphasis in special events. At the time, if you asked me what I was going to do with my degree, I would have told you “Plan the Super Bowl”—and I haven’t ruled that out! I earned my master’s degree in business administration with an emphasis in marketing specifically because I wanted to learn skills that would make me and the cities I serve better at communicating and connecting with the public. As a bonus, I got a glimpse into the business and logistics mindset, which has helped with serving multiple sectors of the community.

About My Journey to the ACAO Role

I started working in the public sector at age 14 as a cashier at the city pool. I was soon teaching swim lessons and lifeguarding, which eventually led to working as a swim team coach during and after college. I loved working in the field of recreation and happened upon a college degree program in recreation, parks, and tourism administration, which expanded my experience. Upon graduation, I began working as a recreation coordinator in Arcadia, California; then I was hired as a recreation supervisor in Sierra Madre. Three weeks into the job, the director went on maternity leave and I was appointed acting director—thank goodness for a supportive, mentoring city manager who helped me through those four

months! Six months later an unorthodox shift needed to be made in the organization, and the human resources functions were merged with recreation, creating the Community and Personnel Services Department, and I was appointed deputy director.

I served as deputy director for two and a half years and then director for four years. The city manager proposed an assistant city manager position, but ultimately the city council opted not to create it but to separate Community Services and Human Resources into two departments. I was appointed director of human resources, but because the city council did not also create a director of community services, I still provided support to that functional area, which ultimately expanded to include library and administrative services. Two years later, the assistant city manager role was approved, and I was fortunate to serve in that capacity for a year before I applied to Rancho Cucamonga to serve as the deputy city manager for civic and cultural services, one of three deputy city managers in the city.

I served as deputy city manager for six years, until the city manager reorganized the leadership structure to create an assistant city manager (ACM) and two deputies. After a rigorous application process, I was appointed to the ACM role in 2022. I am so grateful for all the twists and turns and bumps and bruises and professional moments of pure joy that led me to this point, to lead and serve in my dream job.

When and How I Learned the ACAO Role Was My Goal

Was becoming the assistant city manager my goal all along? Not even; remember, I wanted to plan the Super Bowl! But somewhere during the time I served as director of Community and Personnel Services I learned I loved working with all the departments, seeing how the big picture was playing out, and helping to shape the vision for the future. But once I had my eye set on ACM, it was really only ACM—I love being an awesome Number Two! Somewhere during the turmoil of 2020, being disappointed in so much of the leadership I was witnessing across sectors, I began to come to terms with the idea that if I wanted to see and experience something different, I would have to be willing to “step into the arena” and “dare greatly” (Brené Brown references). For me, this manifests in stepping out of the comfort of being a great Number Two and preparing to brave the role of city manager.

Advice for a New or Aspiring ACAO

As a person whose greatest strength is being quick to act, my greatest overused strength also happens to be quick to act (displaying as rash). Being aware of this helps me to take a beat and make sure that I’m not missing important details,

that I’m not giving the impression that I have not thought things through, and that I’m not moving faster than my team can process and inadvertently overwhelming or leaving people behind.

For any person in a leadership role, I recommend understanding your strengths and your overused strengths. I use and facilitate trainings on this through Core Strengths Relationship Intelligence (RQ). The data show that high-performing teams are built or broken on relationships, and having the RQ to navigate conflict, embrace diversity, and work through obstacles makes all the difference in creating strong communities.

What’s Next for Me?

Well, if it was up to me, I would be quite content to continue to work for my current city manager, alongside our two awesome deputy city managers, for the next decade. But alas, my city manager actually wants to retire someday (go figure!) and as previously mentioned, I am purposefully stepping into the arena to be the type of leader I want to see more of in the world. So, my current plan is to continue to learn and grow and strive to be the best candidate to serve as city manager when that inevitable time comes to pass.

HEAR FROM AN ASSISTANT CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER



MARTY HUGHES
Assistant City Manager
Kennesaw, Georgia

ACAO since 2019

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About My Education

As I completed my undergraduate degree and earned my commission into the US Air Force, I always knew I wanted to continue learning. The Air Force places a lot of emphasis on education, including leadership training. I obtained three graduate degrees—in business management, organizational leadership, and occupational safety. Furthermore, extensive technical education was available through the Air Force Institute of Technology, Air Command and Staff College, Center for Creative Leadership, and Air War College.

About My Journey to the ACAO Role

I spent 30 years in the Air Force assigned to multiple bases, two major command headquarters, and the Pentagon. I learned many things about leadership, including relationship building, time management, goals and objectives setting, and strategic thinking. As an Air Force engineer, I was taught that all projects need to be undertaken with skill and precision. My last two assignments in the military were city manager equivalents. A military base is very similar to a city. In addition to managing the base, a large part of my overall role was to make sure people received the necessary training to perform their assigned duties. This extensive experience allowed me to be better prepared to serve as an ACAO.

When and How I Learned the ACAO Role Was My Goal

Actually, I was not familiar with local government until a good friend introduced me to a CAO. After speaking with this professional, I realized that working in local government would be a great place to continue serving. In the military, it was about serving my country. In local government, it is now about serving my community. Being an ACAO was a great spot for me, and for many others exiting the military. I enjoy the many aspects of my position and believe that the skills required to run a military base fit very well with city management. Early on in my time as an ACAO, my city manager and I discussed that I would be the “chief operating officer” of the city and would manage “day-to-day” operations. By creating clear lines of authority, the city manager and I could focus on our individual responsibilities. Because we also had good cross communication, we’re aware of each other’s issues and projects and can step in for each other when one of us is away.

Advice for a New or Aspiring ACAO

The key is to be patient, listen, and learn! When I first became an ACAO, I was going from the military to local government and I felt as if I had to learn a new language, even though I did know some key words and phrases. You might find yourself in the same situation. I had great staff who answered all my questions, even when they

seemed trivial. Take time to learn the language and know that it might take time. Bring your leadership experience from former fields with you, as it is still relevant and germane to your new role. Also, as a new or aspiring ACAO, you must get out of the office and get to know staff, programs, and the community. You are the face of local government.

What's Next for Me?

I am now in my second career and enjoying my position as an ACAO. Depending on the situation and location, I might be interested in becoming a CAO. I enjoy being a mentor to anyone looking to enter local government or become an ACAO. I also like my community and seeing that I have made and can make an impact.

HEAR FROM AN ASSISTANT CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER



EMILY LEWIS
Deputy County Administrator
Charlotte County, Florida

ACAO since 2019

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About My Education

I hold a bachelor's degree in business administration from the University of Florida and a master's degree in public administration from Hodges University.

About My Journey to the ACAO Role

Prior to becoming an ACAO, I served as the legislative manager for Charlotte County. In this role, I advocated for our local government at the state and federal levels. This position gave me exposure to local government and a broad view of its operations.

I followed a nontraditional path to the ACAO position. My initial entry into the workforce was working for a fortune 500 company in corporate human resources. Once I started a family, I took a brief hiatus to stay home with my children. When I decided to return to the workforce, I joined the staff of our local state college running their continuing education programs, which was a natural nexus with my previous experience in training and development. It was then that I decided to go back to school to pursue a master's degree and was introduced to the field of public administration.

While in my master's program, I began learning more about my local government and ended up being recruited to work for county government in human services. I served in the human services department for eight years before transitioning to the administrator's office as the legislative

manager in 2015. In 2019 I was promoted to assistant county administrator and in 2020 I was promoted again to deputy county administrator.

I think I was fairly well prepared for the political side of our profession, but I thought I had to be a technical expert in every field that I supervised, and it took me a little time to realize that I had to trust my team, lean on them, and also push them to consider things from another point of view. I've learned to provide the political cover that allows them to grow and deliver exceptional service in an environment where they feel supported and safe. I've also overcome the "imposter syndrome" that I think we all deal with from time to time. It's okay not to know everything!

When and How I Learned the ACAO Role Was My Goal

Becoming an ACAO was not ever really a goal for me. In fact, in early 2008 one of the county commissioners suggested that I would be a great administrator. At the time I was working in human services, and my response was that I'm not interested in working on roads and water quality...I care about people. Turns out it's all about people (and now I do care about roads and water quality)!

Advice for a New or Aspiring ACAO

I have three pieces of advice. The first is that you were given two ears and one mouth—so listen twice as much as you speak. The second is that if you ever want to know what's going on in your

organization, ask the janitor. Janitors have the best sense of the morale of the organization and can be very valuable to you in getting ahead of issues. And finally, make sure others know that you are interested in growing and developing. Ask for stretch assignments and develop a trusted group of advisors to give you open and honest advice and mentoring.

What's Next for Me?

I am really happy in my role. I enjoy being behind the scenes making everything work seamlessly. I think for now I plan to remain a deputy and focus on developing future talent. I am not sure that I ever want to sit in the administrator chair, but I will never say never.

HEAR FROM AN ASSISTANT CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER



ALLISON SCHECK **Deputy City Manager** **Arvada, Colorado¹**

ACAO since 2019

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About My Education

My undergraduate degree is in organizational communication, which is code for “I really didn’t know what I wanted to do at the time!” After spending some time in the public sector, and having I determined that I wanted to go into city management, I earned my master’s in public administration from the University of Colorado, Denver. I had several years of private-sector and public-sector experience when I started my MPA, and I will say that the educational experience was very meaningful and practical because of that.

About My Journey to the ACAO Role

I took a bit of a winding path to get here through three municipalities in arts, events, and community resources and a decade in the private sector. I began my career in public service as the special events and volunteer coordinator in the parks and recreation department of a Denver-area municipality, Northglenn. It was a fun job, and I loved bringing joy to the city’s residents. I was pretty new to the United States at that point (I’m from the United Kingdom). I learned firsthand just how important July 4th fireworks are to a community. The city was facing budget cuts, and survey responses were clear that the city could cut right-of-way-maintenance and even some police officers, but don’t touch the fireworks budget!

From there, I went to another Denver-area suburb, Lakewood, to manage rentals and events at the cultural center. I loved that job, as I have

history with and passion for the arts. Lakewood’s 300-seat theatre and 1,000-capacity outdoor amphitheater were my pride and joy. I learned a lot about budgeting, management, and lean staffing.

I decided that venue management was my passion, and in my next role, with Kroenke Sports and Entertainment (KSE), I found myself managing events at the 20,000-seat Ball Arena (formerly Pepsi Center), home of the Colorado Avalanche, Denver Nuggets, and other indoor teams. I also managed the historic 1,800-seat Paramount Theatre in Denver’s downtown. All in all, I spent a decade managing events and venues for KSE, leaving the organization as executive director of venues in 2012. This aspect of my career was transformative and gave me a great deal of experience in business, budgeting, service delivery, and challenging environments.

In 2012, after the birth of my child, I decided it was time to get back to my calling of public service. I had maintained great relationships along the way and rejoined Lakewood as a manager of public engagement and operations for the community resources department. There, I led an amazing team of individuals to increase and deepen our engagement with the public, produce first-class educational and promotional materials, operate efficiently, and build a sound budget. I had a very supportive boss who saw me migrating into city management and encouraged me to explore an MPA degree. I followed her advice, completed my master’s degree, and in the meantime learned

as much as I could about city management, making connections with area professionals and keeping my eye open for opportunities.

In 2018, that opportunity came with a chance to interview for the administrative services director position at the city of Wheat Ridge, which is very similar to the position I occupy today. My current boss has an amazing reputation and, having met him at a university event, I decided that I was going to work for him! In 2022, my title changed to deputy city manager, and I was officially in my dream job!

When and How I Learned the ACAO Role Was My Goal

Toward the end of my time with KSE, I realized that one of the pieces of my job I loved the most was collaborating with the local jurisdictions. There is quite a bit of tension inherent in the relationship between professional sports venues and the communities in which they are located, and I found that I had some unique perspective because of my experience in the public sector. In fact, I really enjoyed collaborating with the city management team where the venues were located, and I was considered a good partner and friend (they even tried to recruit me)!

Following my time with KSE, and back in Lakewood, I worked for a wonderful director who helped me optimize my private-sector experience in the local government world and pushed me to collaborate with employees from all over the organization and across different departments. This incredible mentor first told me that I would be great in city management, and that I should think about it.

Most assistants and deputies I knew had followed a fairly “typical” path into the role and had gained experience and expertise by serving as a management analyst and assistant-to, so at the time, I wasn’t sure that I was qualified. My boss at the time challenged me to reframe my private- and public-sector experience to paint a picture of a well-rounded professional with much to offer in the city management profession.

Once I ditched the self-doubt, I realized that was exactly what I wanted to do.

Advice for a New or Aspiring ACAO

The actual job of the ACAO varies widely from organization to organization, but in general, an ACAO needs to have well-rounded experiences from which to draw, great leadership skills, and good vision. We are often generalists who need to be able to dig into a variety of subjects and tear down walls to collaborate efficiently and get things done. Those skills can be learned from experience in a variety of sectors and roles. If you’re looking to transfer skills from outside the local government management profession, get help ditching the imposter syndrome, connect your past experiences and skills to the role, and network like crazy in your geographical area to meet professionals in the local government management profession.

What’s Next for Me?

I am currently serving in my dream job, and I love it! I realized once while listening to a keynote speech that for the first time in my career, I want absolutely nothing to change. And that’s terrifying! My plan is to keep working to become the most effective deputy city manager I can be and dig deeper into new areas such as bond issuances and ways to diversify revenue streams. Do I want to be a city manager? While it’s important to “never say never,” it is not a current goal of mine. I want to be the best Number Two, which I consider to be a very important and crucial role.

1. This piece was written when Allison Scheck was Deputy City Manager, Wheat Ridge, Colorado.

SECTION 7

RESOURCES

ASSISTANTS' ASSOCIATIONS (ENTRY TO MID-LEVEL)

State assistants' associations provide opportunities for networking among entry-level and early career staff.

Illinois Association of Municipal Management Assistants ([IAMMA](#))

Municipal Management Association of Northern California ([MMANC](#))

Municipal Management Association of Southern California ([MMASC](#))

Urban Management Assistants of North Texas ([UMANT](#))

Urban Management Association of South Texas ([UMAST](#))

NATIONAL, STATE, AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATIONS

International City/County Management Association ([ICMA](#))

ICMA is the world's leading association of professional city and county managers and other employees who serve local governments; it provides a job center, a fellowship program, and numerous publications for members at all career stages.

- [ICMA Career Guides](#)
- [ICMA Job Center](#)
- [ICMA Coaching Program](#), which includes a one-to-one coaching program, [CoachConnect](#)
- [SheLeadsGov](#)
- [Veterans Resources](#)

State-based City and County Management Associations

ICMA and state associations collaborate on promoting and celebrating the highest ethical standards of professional behavior, and promotion and defense of the council-manager form of government. Joint professional development activities underscore a commitment to lifelong learning and support.

- [State Association Directory](#)

National League of Cities ([NLC](#))

NLC is an organization of city, town and village leaders who are focused on improving the quality of life for their current and future constituents.

- [Career Center](#)
- [Resource Library](#)

National Association of County Administrators ([NACA](#))

NACA encourages professional development for county administrators and provides information and resources to its members to improve the management of county government.

- Job Listings (links to the [ICMA Job Center](#))

National Forum for Black Public Administrators ([NFPBA](#))

NFPBA is the leading organization dedicated to nurturing minority leadership in local and state governments.

- [NFPBA Mentor Program](#)
- [Career Center](#)

Local Government Hispanic Network ([LGHN](#))

LGHN is a local government leaders' professional association that promotes excellence in government and cultural competency of community leaders that are Hispanic, as well as those who serve Hispanic populations.

- LGHN chapters in [Central Texas](#), [Florida](#), [Colorado](#), and [Illinois](#)
- Job Board and Student and/or Associate Memberships
- [Career Hub](#)

International Network of Asian Pacific Islander Public Administrators ([I-NAPA](#))

I-NAPA is an organization encouraging excellence among public administrators of Asian and Pacific Islander heritage.

- Job Board and Resources for Local Government Professionals (links to the ICMA Job Center)

[CivicPRIDE](#)

CivicPRIDE is the first nationally recognized LGBTQIA+ professional association and support network for local government management.

Women Leading Government ([WLG](#))

WLG Chapters help women succeed in public service and provide a platform for women in government to connect, network, and share best practices for leadership development.

- [WLG Chapters](#) in 20 states

The League of Women in Government ([LWG](#))

The League is a national group representing women in local government which serves as the umbrella organization for state and regional groups that support local and state initiatives that advance women to local government leadership.

- Resources and Articles
- [Job Board](#)

Engaging Local Government Leaders (ELGL)

ELGL is a professional association focused on all levels of local government with a mission of fostering authentic and meaningful connections grounded in practices of equity and inclusion.

- [ELGL Job Board](#)
- [Analyst Academy](#)

National Association of Counties (NACo)

NACo represents county governments in the United States.

- [Counties 101](#) website dedicated to explaining how counties work

Urban Institute

The Urban Institute is a nonprofit think tank that conducts economic and social policy research to help advance upward mobility and equity.

- [The Urban Institute Internship Program](#)

Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative

The City Leadership Institute is a yearlong program of the Bloomberg Center for Cities at Harvard University; it advances research and develops new curriculum and teaching tools to help city leaders solve real-world problems.

- [Bloomberg Harvard City Hall Fellowships](#)

Taubman Center for State and Local Government

Harvard Kennedy School's Taubman Center supports current and future public-sector leaders in improving the governance of states, counties, metropolitan regions, and cities.

- [Economic Development Post-Graduate Fellowship](#)
- [Tony Gómez-Ibáñez Summer Fellowship](#)

Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (AMPO)

AMPO is the leading transportation advocate for metropolitan regions.

- [Job Board](#)

American Society for Public Administration (ASPA)

ASPA is the leading professional membership association for public service.

- [Career Information](#)
- [Student Webinar Series](#)

Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA)

NASPAA is an international association and accreditation body of public affairs schools, also known as schools of public policy and administration, at universities in the United States and other countries.

- [Information on Public Service Degrees](#)

Institute for Local Government ([ILG](#))

ILG empowers local government leaders and delivers real-world expertise to help them navigate complex issues, increase their capacity, and build trust in their communities.

- Webinars, Articles and Subject Area Descriptions on all areas of Local Government

SECTION 8

ABOUT THE ACAO SUBCOMMITTEE

In 2024, members of the ICMA Assistant Chief Administrative Officer Committee formed a subcommittee to create *The First Time Chief Administrative Officer's (ACAO) Guide* to serve as a resource for new, existing, and aspiring assistant and deputy city and county managers. The focus was on understanding the role and the expectations and challenges they may face.

This guide is the culmination of the work that was done over a 12-month period. Along with observations, advice, and stories from five current and former ACAOs who arrived at their positions through different routes, it provides helpful resources for those interested in expanding their professional development and networks in local government.

The subcommittee is a diverse group of dedicated volunteers from all over the United States who represent various forms of local government, experience, and career paths. The words the reader finds in these pages are not ours alone. We sought out suggestions and comments from our colleagues and mentors.

We would like to thank the committee members, subcommittee members, and ICMA members who contributed to the overall success of this guidebook.

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