

Award for Career Development in Memory of L. P. Cookingham



RONALD N. WHITEHEAD

Each year, ICMA presents the Award for Career Development to a corporate member who has made a significant contribution to the development of new talent in professional local government management. The award commemorates former ICMA President L. P. (Perry) Cookingham, who is credited with creating the local government internship. This year, ICMA presents the Career Development Award to Ronald N. Whitehead, city manager of Addison, Texas.

Local government managers work hard to improve the quality of life and service delivery in their communities. Sometimes their influence extends far beyond their tenure as managers and beyond the borders of the communities in which they serve.

During his 20 years with the city of Addison, Texas (pop. 9,000), Ron Whitehead has committed himself to providing the best management

and leadership he can, not only to the community, but also to the people who work there. The result has influenced the quality of local government throughout the Dallas/Fort Worth area and beyond.

Mr. Whitehead's tenacity for mentoring began when he was a local government human resources intern. Although he enjoyed his internship, he felt that he was poorly utilized. It was then that his firm commitment to providing internships that would include a strong mentoring component took hold. He envisioned an approach to internships that required a greater degree of contact and involvement between the intern and the city manager, and that challenged the intern to grow personally and professionally through the use of accountability, self-motivation, and professional mentoring.

Interns in Mr. Whitehead's mentoring program are given a firsthand look at the job of the city manager. They are often asked to prioritize the information on the city manager's desk and are given freedom and authority to attend most of the meetings on his calendar. "Many cities hire interns just to work on special projects, and they are out of sight and out of mind," says one former intern. "Not in Addison. Interns are welcome at all meetings and have a front-row seat to learn about the decision-making process and are encouraged to participate."

It is not uncommon for Mr. Whitehead to ask an intern what he or she thinks about a point of discussion or to defer decisions to the intern, pending his approval. He allows interns to grow professionally by giving them the necessary experience at the appropriate time—an art he has perfected over 20 years of dedication to career development and mentoring.

One previous Addison intern recounts how, when Mr. Whitehead was facing the strong possibility of getting fired, he continued to encourage enthusiasm for a local government career. "He took me aside and told me that I should not let his circumstance change my opinion of a career in local government," the former intern explains. "He said it was an honorable profession and that you should always do the best job you can, but never forget your moral and ethical standards....Here was Ron about to be fired, and he was more concerned about my attitude toward local government than he was about losing his own job!"

Mr. Whitehead's influence is not limited to the city's interns. He has grown professionals from within the city's ranks, encouraging employees at all levels to finish their education and to seek graduate degrees that will help them reach their career goals. He has also chaired the professional development committees for the Texas City Manager's Association, working with colleagues to create a regional mentoring program, and summarizing his mentoring philosophy for an MPA program.

Mr. Whitehead's mentoring of Addison's interns and employees extends well beyond their tenure with that city's government. Another former intern who is now an assistant city manager writes of Ron's profound impact upon his career: "I always try to emulate his approach with employees, his customer service focus, his vision, and his mentoring ability. When I am in a difficult situation, I often find myself asking, 'What would Ron do?'" There is probably no greater compliment to Mr. Whitehead as mentor or testimony to the confidence he instills in those who have worked with him. ♣