

Developing the Managers of Tomorrow

More than two years ago Ed Everett, manager, Redwood City, California, launched a rocket. Painted on its side was a challenge that continues to spark talk. The message: The future quality of the profession, as embodied by lackluster assistants, is threatened. Others joined the debate, and assistants thought a bulls-eye target had been glued to them. Actually, everybody fought the fight about and for assistants except the assistants themselves. Now, finally, they have emerged from under the work their managers left them; and assistants, as represented here by the ICMA Assistants Steering Committee (ASC), want to add their two cents worth.

Everett's position, stated at an ASC luncheon and in a subsequent *Public Management* article, discussed how California headhunters rated the caliber of assistant managers in the profession. In short, Everett's observers viewed assistants as "mostly technicians and bureaucratically oriented . . . not leadership-oriented . . . driven by rules and regulations . . . not risk-takers." If assistants were cars, Everett asked, would you consider them, as a group, Mercedes, Chevys, or Edsels? The majority of headhunters did not rank assistants as Mercedes.

Martin Vanacour, city manager, Glendale, Arizona, took exception to the conclusions made by Everett's informal survey. If Everett's findings were true, Vanacour wrote in another *PM* article, then managers need to share some responsibility for the deficiencies of assistants. "If we as managers are not willing to give more opportunities and responsibilities to our assistants, shame on us," ad-

By

Challenging

Assistants

Today

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monished Vanacour.

Rounding out the debate was an indictment of the profession by Bill Kirchhoff, city manager of Redondo Beach, California. His in-your-face article "Babbitt Could Have Been a Manager" depicted a bloated bureaucrat ill equipped to direct a multi-million dollar operation. Compete on a managerial level with the private sector? Forget it. The education of young municipal management professionals, Kirchhoff argued, must be more rigorous in order to "functionally" staff and manage the delivery of public service goods. In other words, today's assistants are filled with too much political theory and not enough practical MBA-type skills.

Reverse the Trend

The egg these managers cracked open was a topic that generated strong reactions. They certainly struck a chord. Clearly, the primary focus of the debate placed assistants, their training, and residually the profession, in an unflattering light. So what's next? If assistants lack the skills needed to successfully move to a manager's job (or perhaps to be one darn-good assistant)—or if these flaws are a systemic virus the assistant carries to his first manager's job—how can we reverse the trend and provide the municipal management field with "the best and the brightest"?

Peggy Merriss, assistant city manager of Decatur, Georgia, and chair of the 1991-92 Assistants Steering Committee, suggests a beginning that captures the sentiment of the committee and other assistants. "It's time we stopped beating ourselves into the ground on this issue and start recognizing, developing, and nurturing examples of professional competence among assistants," says Merriss. Indeed, the next generation of discussion on this issue suggests ways in which managers and assist-

ants can foster individual and organizational excellence by working to develop the talents of assistants. The focus is less on blame and more on methods that assistants and managers can work on together. To kick off what is hoped to be a continuing dialogue on how assistants can achieve excellence in municipal management is some advice from our colleagues, both managers and assistants, who suggest that a good foundation supplemented by opportunity can spur achievements.

The groundwork for the following discussion was a combination of opinions gathered from focus groups sponsored by the ASC, a draft working paper developed by the ASC entitled "Blueprint for Success (Future Assistants)," and an informal survey of approximately three dozen managers and assistants. This advice was attained unscientifically, yet its practicality offers an outline of steps to success.

What tools do assistants need for individual excellence and organizational accomplishment? The ASC explored this issue with its peers. What resulted was the identification of 12 factors considered essential to the healthy professional development of an assistant. The factors are: graduate education; continuing education; manager's direction; level of responsibility; availability of a mentor; professional development opportunities; the assistant's work considered valuable to the organization; the assistant's relationship to the manager; the assistant's relationship to department heads; ability to use creativity in problem solving; work goals clearly defined; and supervisory responsibility.

To further test this list, these factors were presented to a group of managers and assistants to determine if the issues were indeed relevant and to gauge to what degree they were important. No factor was seen as insignificant; all ranked high in importance. Interestingly enough,

on items deemed ultimately important, both managers and assistants agreed on what were the top three factors out of the dozen identified. Those three factors—the assistant's relationship to the manager, level of responsibility, and manager's direction—are the focus of this discussion.

Assistant and Manager Work Relationships

The assistant's relationship to the manager was a factor that both boss and subordinate viewed as extremely important. Certainly, the ingredients to a successful office association are a complex mix. At the minimum, compatible personal demeanors and similar professional philosophies are desirable. The relationship can be characterized as containing complementary roles, wrote Vanacour. His article suggested that managers and assistants "view their roles as tied closely together."

The quotient for an effective pairing of manager and assistant contains elements equal to any other strong partnership. One critical factor to this equation is communication.

Communication, like bread, is the staple and sustenance of productive work relationships. ICMA's publication *Effective Communication: Getting the Message Across* suggests communication "makes organizational and individual actions possible, depending on what the sender thinks the message says and what the receiver thinks the message means." If the manager and assistant can accomplish the deceptively simple task of communicating to each other in a clear and effective manner, organizational goals will surely be the beneficiary. Add to this what assistants say they want from their managers—feedback, direction, and a sense of their own worth in the organization—and the assistant can serve as a crucial link for the manager in both the municipality's formal and informal organization. Information im-

portant to the manager does not always reach him or her because the sender may be intimidated. Assistants can bridge that gap. In this vein, Steve Carter, city manager, Champaign, Illinois, advises assistants to "develop a role as the 'trusted adviser' to the manager."

Broadening the commentary on the importance of communication is the ASC's "Blueprint for Success." It suggests an assertive role for the assistant. The assistant, the paper states, should adopt the role of the "little kid" in the organization by asking questions, challenging the manager and probing organizational values.

Some additional mortar to the manager/assistant manager relationship is dedication, honesty, and trustworthiness, suggests Ron LeBlanc, city manager, Olathe, Kansas. Vanacour's doctoral dissertation on the role relationships between managers and assistants corroborates those characteristics and proclaims them necessary. Vanacour surveyed managers and assistants in Colorado and Arizona for his research. His respondents listed loyalty, trustworthiness, and competency as three of the most important characteristics an assistant should possess. In addition, Vanacour writes, the desirable qualities of an assistant vis-à-vis his or her role to the manager are, in priority order: "Trust, conformity, independence, an inclusion in decision making, affection for each other (interpersonal relationships), and control by the manager (loose or tight)."

Level of Responsibility

In the development of an assistant, an issue equally important to managers and assistants was the level of responsibility. One aspect of this factor was broader and varied responsibility—assistants want to be challenged by different and difficult duties. Some managers, like Vanacour, are more than happy to comply. He suggests "giving more respon-

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Assistants need assignments in a variety of areas, says Susie Reyes, recycling coordinator for the city of Arlington, Texas. Project management, line supervision, and budgetary and departmental responsibilities are a few examples she cites. Reyes' own career decisions mirror that philosophy; she has augmented her menu of professional experiences by leaving the manager's office. During her tenure in Arlington, Reyes moved from the generalist position of senior administrative assistant to recycling coordinator, convinced that specializing would provide training and insight not necessarily gained in the manager's office. "The move has given me an opportunity to be exposed to other areas of public service, other challenges in local gov-

ernment. With any job, of course, you bring a certain level of skills . . . line responsibility has helped me refine them," says Reyes.

Terry Zerkle, city manager, Tempe, Arizona, also recommends not letting assistants get too comfortable in a "manager's staff" role. "I am an advocate of giving assistants line responsibility," says Zerkle. "It will enhance their ability to deal with problems they will encounter as managers." Zerkle believes deficiencies are wrought by assistants not getting line responsibility. "An assistant manager can go directly from a staff role, progress through a series of staff positions, and then become a manager never having supervised anybody . . . and now he's responsible for an entire staff . . . so what does he do if he has problems with a subordinate when he's had no prior experience?"

Zerkle gives his two deputy managers in Tempe direct responsibility for a group of departments; they can, for instance, hire and fire. He concedes that when a manager empowers an assistant to make decisions there is a threat of a loss of control. Yet the benefit, he contends, is that decentralized decision making enhance the organization by making it less bureaucratic and gives the manager quality time to address big-picture issues.

The value of holding line responsibility at one point in a municipal management career cannot be underestimated, concurs Gregory Ford, assistant village manager, Arlington Heights, Illinois. It provides insight into the challenges of "getting a unit of work processed," says Ford. He speaks from having been the personnel director in Skokie, Illinois, for seven years. "I would definitely recommend line experience . . . [because] it gives you the feel for the day-to-day problems department heads and line managers experience. As an administrator, then, I have enhanced my base of knowledge . . . I do not need to be an engineer or

know how to design a road in order to accomplish a street improvement project, but I [do] need to understand what processes the engineer goes through in order to give me a thorough analysis of what I am looking for as a manager."

Giving the assistant greater and liberal responsibilities can engender not only professional growth but organizational rewards as well. An assistant, given the opportunity and authority to take the lead on an issue, will develop a sense of ownership and pride that can enhance the organization. One way to do this is by allowing the assistant to make decisions. "Managers," advises Heide Voorhees, manager, Wilmette, Illinois, "need to delegate 'real' authority and responsibility." One test of authenticity comes from providing assistants the opportunity to succeed. The boss's reward for delegation, suggests one manager, is knowing that when a member of the team shines, so shines the manager. Similarly, assistants need not only latitude to succeed but also the "freedom to fail," offers Camille Barnett, city manager, Austin, Texas. "There's the greatest practical benefit in making a few failures early in life," wrote Thomas Henry Huxley in 1870.

Direction of the Manager

The third most important factor both managers and assistants identified as essential in the assistant's development concerned the manager's direction. Goal setting, expectations, and counsel of the manager are issues important to an assistant. But isn't this part of the natural relationship between boss and subordinate? Yes indeed, and managers and assistants found it important enough to distinguish.

Assistants were particularly piqued by this issue, as expressed in focus groups facilitated by the ASC during the last annual ICMA conference. They made a number of suggestions

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about how a manager can direct the assistant's work: Spend time with your assistant via a formal evaluation process; set measurable goals for the assistant; provide meaningful assignments, not go-fer work; be honest about work performance; be demanding and rewarding; and set a good example. Assistants are quick to add, though—and managers readily agree—that direction from the boss does not mean displacement of initiative. Assistants should not wait for the boss to prompt them on problem solving, says one manager.

Some additional thoughts on effective direction from the manager can be seen in the answers managers and assistants had to the question,

How can a manager help an assistant become a better professional? In general, their answers fell into three categories: 1) provide quality work assignments, 2) provide responsibility (reinforcing the theme previously discussed), and 3) provide coaching.

Providing quality work assignments was defined as giving meaningful work. In no way is the complaint universal, but a number of assistants lament that their duties lack depth, challenge, or significance. Managers must be willing to provide their assistants with a meaty plate of tasks. At the same time, assistants need to assert themselves and elbow their way to the table for assignments. "Assistants should actively seek out new assignments that stretch their experiences in new directions," advises Lisa Takata, management assistant, city of Phoenix, "Assistants should be given assignments that force them to address their weaknesses."

Terry Zerkle offers an example of how an assistant can add to his stock of managerial skills. When he was assistant city manager in Fairborn, Ohio, Zerkle identified a need for himself to have supervisory experience. He simply asked for the opportunity to head up a few departments—and received it.

Giving varied challenges was an additional dimension to providing quality work assignments. In order to provide a broad spectrum of tasks, suggests one manager, assign the assistant primary responsibility, the quarterback position, on two to three key municipal projects. For example, give the assistant responsibility for project oversight on the renovation of city hall. The individual will need to call upon a host of skills as well as develop new ones in order to accomplish the task. Then, diversify the balance of assignments so that a number of competencies are challenged. Be time-specific and goal-oriented. These projects then provide not only variety and a sense of ac-

accomplishment but also accountability—the germ of how a manager can oversee and guide the assistant's performance.

A manager's guidance, encouragement, and honesty about work performance are elements of how the boss coaches the assistant. Coaching was often mentioned, intertwined with the concept of mentoring. How work gets done by the manager and assistant coupled with a professional regard for each other suggests that a powerful link to excellence for the assistant can and should be developed through a mentoring relationship. From all of the sources tapped for this article it was clear that assistants desire the mentoring of their managers, that managers make a distinct and lasting impression on their assistants. Managers, advises one, be a role model

for your assistant.

Encourage Excellence

The rocket Ed Everett sent up was a signal to both assistants and managers alike that the training and skill development of incoming municipal management professionals needs examination. The debate it generated was significant. Like cod liver oil it was difficult to swallow, yet healthy. The consensus is that young public administrators need not only a solid educational foundation but also opportunity from their seasoned peers. It is a responsibility that other professions have adopted for their newcomers. If we give our successors the chance to be better municipal managers than ourselves, then we not only reaffirm our profession's ideals but elevate what defines the meaning of public service.

The ASC's work has identified the elements of excellence that need attention. By no means is it a scientific nor a definitive prescription for what may ail the profession, and it is certainly not a manual on "How to Raise the Perfect Assistant." Rather, this discussion has pinpointed the various issues involved with but three of a dozen factors deemed by managers and assistants alike to be imperative for the success of an assistant; it suggests there is plenty more to be said and done on the issue. In the meantime, managers and assistants are challenged to take stock and encourage opportunities for excellence. **EM**

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