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Council-staff partnership

After eight years on the city council in Lawrence, Kansas, and 20 years teaching government at the University of Kansas, I have found three characteristics common to the high performing council:

- The willingness to address difficult issues; often those that deal with the "big picture" problems in a city;
- The ability or capacity of the council to deal with these issues; and
- An effective relationship with professional staff.

Failure to develop these characteristics results in councils inclined to micro-manage and deal with smaller, more manageable issues like constituent problems. I often ask council members, "If you see yourselves primarily as customer service representatives, who is identifying issues and setting goals and objectives that will result in planning for the public investments in your city's future?"

Council failures often are due to obstacles that even when acknowledged are underestimated. It takes planning and cooperation by the governing body and staff to overcome them. The obstacles are:

- Difficult, "big picture" issues raise questions of competing values that most of us are inclined to avoid because of the conflict they invite.
- Governing bodies operate under a set of conditions that impede the hard work it takes to focus on the big picture.
- There are fundamentally different perspectives that elected officials and professional staff bring to their work. If not understood, these perspectives can breed distrust.

Value Conflicts

We've all had the experience of dealing with a neighborhood group that is passionate in its plea for a stop sign that traffic engineers say doesn't meet professional standards. To the staff member, this is a problem requiring a technical analysis of the facts leading to an objective conclusion; what I call a 2+2 problem. However, the neighbors have different

values that aren't represented in the traffic manual. Politics involves the art of recognizing and balancing legitimate, conflicting values. Questions of values really are "no right answer problems," and they almost always involve difficult choices, which means conflict. I wish there had been more 2+2 problems during my city council tenure!

All big picture problems in cities and regions are questions of competing values: representation, efficiency, individual rights, and social equity. These are four fundamental political values and no matter how small the city, when two or more of these values conflict, the policy making/decision-making process gets messy. There are natural incentives to avoid them especially when smaller, more manageable issues are available to deal with. It's also why I believe it is so easy for council members to see themselves as customer service representatives rather than community builders. It is easier to be effective helping citizens deal with their individual problems on an ad hoc basis than to build and maintain a sense of community by addressing big picture issues.

Overcoming Constraints to Dealing with "The Big Picture"

City Councils work under a set of conditions that impede hard work on hard issues.

- Vague task and role definition
- No hierarchy
- No specialization
- Little feedback or evaluation of performance
- Open meetings

These are working conditions that few of us have experienced prior to coming on the council. When tasks and structure remain vague, it is difficult to know what to do in order to be competent. These conditions produce a lot of uncertainty for council members. Try to deal with value conflicts under these conditions. It is a guaranteed way to produce anxiety! And the natural response to getting anxious is trying to make the offending issue go away and avoiding it and similar issues in the future. A more psychologically comfortable route is to deal with smaller, more manageable problems and constituent services. It is easier to be competent when you define your job in terms of constituent services because that task is relatively concrete.

Parliamentary procedure and voting are the most basic ways we have designed to provide the council with structure. But rarely are they enough. Personal relationships try to fill the gap--loyalty and trust, who one's friends are. These Informal and often fragile relationships among council members become burdened and strained because the formal structures and processes (task definition, hierarchy, specialization, feedback, and multiple forms of personal communication) we rely upon to get our work done in the business world are absent in the council chambers. When the personal relations fail, there is little structure to substitute for the glue they provide.

In addition to the capacity that the individual members might bring to the council, what can be done to add to the capacity of the council as a body and take some of the pressure off of personal relationships?

- Recognize the "legacy value" of making progress on big picture issues
- Develop and agree upon norms of behavior
- Utilize techniques to reduce uncertainty such as goal setting/strategic planning and team-building retreats, practicing group problem solving techniques
- Define the relationship with staff as a partnership in building and maintaining a sense of community.

Properly harnessed, staff knowledge and problem-solving capabilities can be a tremendous help in enhancing the effectiveness of a city council. Let's turn to this relationship next.

Managing the Council-Staff Partnership

There are two obstacles in particular to developing a productive relationship between staff and council. The first is that all council members may not see themselves as members of a team, the governing body. In this case, staff has a difficult time discerning exactly what the council wants. Vague direction from the council neutralizes much of staff's capacity to serve the council. The second obstacle, which is the one I want to explore more fully, is that using the same words, council and staff don't always speak the same language. Thus, communication can be muddled.

Imagine that you are a council member and you have received a request for a crosswalk from a group of senior citizens that lives in subsidized housing. They indicate in their handwritten letter that they cannot cross the four-lane street in front of their apartment building in order to go to church and the Dairy Queen for ice cream! The request is processed routinely by the city's traffic engineer. Based on traffic counts, site distances, accident history and other objective criteria in the traffic manual, the engineer recommends against ANY traffic control at the intersection. So far this seems like one of those $2+2=4$ problems. Then, you as a council member are invited to the apartment house to meet with the residents. What you learn is the story behind the request. They tell you that for the elderly dignity is tied to their mobility and independence. Not being able to cross this street confirms their worst fears, and they seem to be asking, "Isn't it appropriate for the city government to help the older citizens in this community maintain dignity in their life?" Our $2+2$ problem just turned political. It's not that the staff is wrong. Their role and orientation are to the facts, not to sorting out the values. Councilmembers are elected to do that job with support from a staff sensitive to the council's role.

The chart below depicts the differences in politics and administration as contrasting ways of thinking about problems--differences in logic.

Characteristic	<u>Politics</u>		<u>Administration</u>
Activity	Game		Problem solving
Players	Representatives		Experts
Conversation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "What do you hear?" • Storytelling 	City Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "What do you know?" • Reports
Pieces	Interests/symbols		Information, money, people, things
Currency	Power		Knowledge
Dynamics	Conflict, compromise, change		Harmony, cooperation, continuity

Politics involves problem solving, but not in the same vein as it does for administrative staff. The lifeblood of administration is solving problems and delivering services efficiently and equitably. I have never heard an administrator talk about the "game of administration."

Representatives, not experts play the "game of politics," and this is essential to understand. Almost all local government elected officials (including me) are amateur politicians. Most of us do this work as a calling but we don't put the same effort into developing our skills that we did in our primary careers. When I try to act politically, like when a balancing of interests is required, I will probably make mistakes that a successful "career politician" wouldn't.

Officials are usually elected for what they say not for what they, themselves, have accomplished as politicians or for what they know. This is not true for professional staff that comes to their jobs with resumes filled with accomplishments.

Political conversations often center on anecdotes. "What do you hear?" activates the political conversation. The question invites a story. Stories are very important to politics because politics and community building are about values. That's why I am not ashamed to say that what politicians say often is more important than what they know or what they have accomplished. Values are best conveyed between diverse groups through symbols. That's what stories do. They convey symbolically how people feel, and what they value. I can write a treatise about justice, or I can tell a story about police brutality. The former is an academic exercise; the latter is a political one.

"What do you know?" elicits a different way of thinking. What do you know invites a fact-based conversation presumably between experts. Often, it results in the ever-present staff report!

The currency of politics is power. Power is crucial to politics because politics does not take place in the familiar organizational surroundings that most of us are used to. Without hierarchy and expert specialists, it is difficult to know who to listen to and who to respond to. There are no annual performance appraisals and raises and promotions. You have to find ways of letting people know how effective you have been as their representative because there is no organizational structure, no supervisor, and no performance report that does it for you. In its simplest form, political power is the ability to get people to listen to your stories. You have to build a base of power without anyone showing you how to do it.

The dynamics of politics are conflict, compromise, and change. The political world is charged with the passion and the drama of community building. Learn the game, play the game, get things done QUICKLY. The time horizon is so different for staff. Long term associations are difficult to build on conflict. Harmony is more conducive to building relationships and problem solving. Compromise and negotiation are appropriate for making choices about values. But cooperation and continuity are essential to run the long course.

Politics and administration are really different ways of thinking, and someone needs to translate in order for the partnership between council and staff to be effective. In council-manager government that person usually is the city manager. The city manager must take the passion of politics, the stories, the conflict, and disparate thinking of the council and translate them into problems to be solved and policies to be developed in order to productively engage staff.

City managers can be more effective in their role if, first of all, they understand the role and needs of mayors and council members as described above. The manager should recognize (not fight) the natural tendency of elected officials to focus on immediate constituent issues. But city managers should also then work with staff to bring to the council policies, recommendations, and activities like strategic planning that build the council's capacity to address the big picture issues. Don't feed the council small issues and then suddenly expect it to function effectively when it hits a big one filled with value conflicts. Give the council choices that represent different values.

There is nothing easy about governing, and sometimes I wonder why we are so disappointed in ourselves. Politics has got to be messy because there is no easy formula saying what problems are more important than others and whose values should prevail. Too often conflict is attributed to a clash of personalities or motives when actually it is a virtual certainty built into "the system." But it doesn't have to be nasty. I hope this article contributes to a better understanding and less tension as we go about doing the noble work of public service.