

I. Getting Started

When assuming your first city manager's position (or beginning in a new city), you will quickly discover that you can be overwhelmed with the situation. For example, you will have new people to work with both on the City Council and in the city organization. You will be responsible for a city organization that has different capabilities and values than your previous organization. You will have new community members to know and recognize. Your code of ordinances will be different than in your previous community. The street names will be different. The soil conditions may be different, so you will have new types of street maintenance problems. You may be in a fast growing city or in a city with a crisis where immediate decisions are demanded. Regardless of the type of city, I promise you that it will be challenging, and it won't be easy. But as one citizen told me in a straightforward way many years ago, "That is why they pay the city manager the big bucks!"¹

At the same time you are adjusting to your new job and community, you should realize that initially, you are politically one of the weakest governmental officials in town - you have no neighbors, fellow church members, or fellow Rotarians to give you support. Of course, you do have the mayor and city council who employed you, but their support can depend upon the positive feedback about you from the community and how timely you implement their policy decisions. An example of quick unfavorable community reaction to a new city manager was in one small community near me where the new city manager granted each employee a day off on their birthday. The conservative rural community did not necessarily agree that such action should ever have been taken, much less in the first week of the new city manager's employment. Needless to say, this new city manager's tenure was very short--it lasted only two months!

(Note: For some tips on what you can do to make a successful transition to your new job, see Appendix IA, "The First 100 Days.")

Approach to Starting Up

One approach to beginning in a new city is to be low-key and deliberate unless the situation requires drastic, immediate action. For example, a weak departmental organization (e.g., a street department with an untrained crewleader who tries to be a jack-of-all-trades, instead of specializing in a particular phase of street work) or improper operational techniques (e.g., using the wrong type of equipment to repair a street) would allow more time for a low-key and deliberate approach. Conversely, gross neglect of duty, dishonesty, or corruption would mandate drastic, immediate action.

Another approach might best be described as the "General Patton" method of beginning management whereby the city manager dramatically takes charge of a city with staff terminations, major policy changes, and departmental reorganizations in the first few months. There is nothing inherently wrong with this style, but it is probably best suited for only a very few city management situations, such as in a city on the verge of bankruptcy or one plagued with scandal. For example, in one city, I terminated the police chief on my third day on the job when he admitted misappropriation of city funds to me.

Regardless of your approach, remember that most cities have been incorporated and have existed for a long time without you. You are a stranger and a newcomer to a city that has survived before you and will surely do so after you. In other words, a little humility can help you if you approach the city with the idea that you can learn something from it.

¹ The citizen was very serious, but I remember thinking at the time that my salary was 1/3 of the local Sonic Restaurant manager!

Determining Priorities

You may find an *impure* (that is, not running according to the textbook) administrative organization in your new city; but as long as it is producing and satisfying the public's demands, let it continue to operate. What is important in one city may not be as important in another community. For example, in a suburban community the placement of basketball goals in front yards may be a major issue, while in a rural community this would be a non-issue. On the other hand, a rural farming community may consider groundwater rights to be of the utmost importance and expect full city participation on the state level in protecting these rights, while in a urban community water rights might be less of an issue. Basically, pick your priorities carefully because you can only handle a limited number of priority battles. When you start changing priorities and making changes, you will have a few administrative and/or political battles on your hands, along with your regular duties.

An organization without direction (i.e., priorities) cannot function effectively and efficiently. It is not sufficient to say that your priority is to provide city services, because everyone knows that. Such a statement is too broad and cannot be implemented effectively and efficiently. There are never enough city resources to fund all city services and/or address all city problems equally, unless the provision of services is to the lowest common denominator of service, or problem solving is minimized to such a degree that little is accomplished. Remember the warning about fighting too many battles at one time. The same applies to city resources and the number of problems. There must be priorities, and these are given by the following priority setters:

1. Mayor/City Council - Legally, by state law and/or city charter, and traditionally, the mayor and city council are the main priority setters. Hopefully, they will do so at budget-making time and not in the middle of the fiscal year, because budget amendments usually do not reflect a full consideration of all the city's problems and needs. As discussed later in Chapter IV, the city budget should reflect the city council's priorities. The adopted budget should be the cumulation of several months work, when all the city's problems and needs are considered and priorities established. In fact, the budget process is usually the only time that a city council looks at the big picture with all the city's needs and problems. When the city council approves the budget, it should be aware that the budget represents the city's priorities for the next 12 months. For example, if housing demolition is not included in the budget, then this means that housing demolition is not a priority for this particular city council in this particular year. If street sealcoating is budgeted for, street maintenance is a priority.

2. Citizen Demands - Without warning, citizen complaints can drastically alter a city's priorities because of the intense pressure on elected and appointed officials. It never fails that, at least 2 or 3 times per year, a citizens' group will alter the City Council's priorities for that year. This is not necessarily bad, because city government is by its very nature the most responsive to citizen demands. City councils are the level of representative government closest to the voters, and they cannot long ignore a problem or avoid voter pressure. There are not 1,500 miles between a councilmember and his constituents, such as exist between a congressman in Washington D. C. and his constituents in Texas. Councilmembers see their constituents daily at the post office, work, church, high schools, baseball games, etc., which means that they hear directly from their constituents face to face. This can make city council priorities very flexible. In fact, if there is a priority that you consider important, then you had best implement it quickly because tomorrow it may no longer be a priority!

A word of caution: always recognize that, regardless of the project or the issue, there will always be people against it. I have found that those in opposition are usually more vocal than the supporters of a project. Think about it. How many people will show up at a city council meeting to demonstrate their support for a new landfill, a sewage treatment plant, annexations, or thoroughfares affecting a small residential neighborhood? Very few. But the whole community will usually benefit from such projects. Perhaps it is easier to be opposed to something because the list of *what ifs* is endless. Those in opposition

can ask the *what if* questions about any project, What if a child is killed?; What if the project doesn't work and my property is damaged?; What if the environment is damaged?; What if X happens (e.g., hurricane, earthquake, flood, fire, tornado, etc.) and the project is damaged or doesn't work?, etc. This is not to say that those in opposition are wrong, but just to alert you that the risk of tyranny by a vocal minority is always a distinct possibility in any city decision-making.²

3. State/Federal Laws - Higher levels of government may dictate that the city perform certain activities such as relocating the sanitary landfill, constructing a new sewage treatment plant, testing for lead in the drinking water, making playgrounds accessible to the disabled, or backpaying all women city employees for past discrimination. When this happens, you have minimal say in your priorities. Unfortunately, more of this is happening now that the federal government is setting new guidelines for everything from biomonitoring to drug testing, without offering financial assistance. In the 1960's and 1970's, the federal government may have mandated activities on the local level, but at least they usually provided the financial assistance along with the mandate. So, you could have both your federal mandates and your local priorities. Today, however, you may have to give up your local priorities in order to take care of these federal mandates.

4. Management (You) - The city staff, by reason of its expertise in city services, should always be ready to establish priorities and to guide the elected officials in determining priorities. I once read where an experienced city manager said, "It's presumptuous for me to say what's more important. My job is to set up the process to get the information to help the community and council make those decisions."³ I disagree wholeheartedly, because a city manager's job is to provide expert knowledge and opinion. If he doesn't do it, then who will? Just setting up the process for community decisions is not enough.

Continual and tactful direction should be the norm, because most priorities are established over a considerable length of time. Ideas and concepts presented to the city council today may be adopted and implemented years later. There is an adage in the advertising industry that states that potential customers must be told 17 times about a product before they will buy it. That is why, even though the public tires of soap commercials, they still will go to the store and buy the soap. You must do the same with the city council if you feel strongly about a particular city issue or project. Tell them 17 times about a needed city project. Eventually they may buy it!

Sometimes, however, a problem is such that you must take strong and deliberate action to ensure that the council understands its importance. Certainly, life-threatening situations, low cash reserves, rapidly deteriorating streets, and an antiquated utility system are examples of problems requiring quick council actions.

Manager - Council Relations

In your relations with the city council, you should operate on a strictly professional level. This means that you do not play favorites with particular councilmembers, you provide the same information to all members, and you accept their directives on a professional basis and not on a personal basis. You should treat the council with respect, not necessarily because of the person in the position, but because of their council position. This must be emphasized because you are working within a democracy where the councilmembers are elected by the voters. You must respect the position and the concept that it represents.

²You may find that there are some people who appear to object to all city projects. Chris Bell with the National Civic League describes these people as NOPEs (Not On This Planet Earth) or CAVES (Citizens Against Virtually Everything). They are not members of organizations, don't play by the rules, and their definition of winning may be to slow progress, embarrass the public officials, and create a level of controversy. They really don't want the system to work. (Presentation to Public Executive Institute, February 1997.)

³"Profile: City Manager: Customers Come First," *Public Management*, (Washington, D.C., April 1991).

Obviously, the above treatment of the council can be very difficult in dealing with some councilmembers who may have no sense of government or fair play. For example, some councilmembers demonstrate no understanding of representative government as practiced in the United States and never want to vote on a difficult issue without “letting the people vote on the issue,” i.e., the councilmember thinks that government by initiative or referendum is the only way to go, because he/she is afraid to accept the responsibility which comes with his/her position. If you believe otherwise, then you must not believe in the “will of the people.” (Ironically, these same councilmembers may also demand that government should operate like a business, while they slow down government’s responsiveness to a snail pace by asking for elections on controversial issues.)

Examples of a lack of fair play include councilmembers who spread rumors about city projects that they oppose and those who are always in the attack mode on each issue that comes before the city council. An example of councilmembers who do not understand the council-manager form of government includes those who believe that they were elected to micro-manage city operations. They forget, or never knew, their roles are policy-making and legislative, not management.

You must continue to work with that councilmember and hope at least to maintain the *status quo*, because you may need that councilmember’s support later on another issue. In other words, always keep your options open by not completely alienating any councilmember. A good example of this was when one of my city councils approved joining the Texas Municipal Retirement System (TMRS) by one vote, 3-2, rather than joining a private insurance company’s retirement program being pushed by a local supporter of the mayor. The swing vote was a councilmember who had previously supported the mayor in opposing projects that I had recommended. Prior to the TMRS vote, however, they had a disagreement on an unrelated matter, and the councilmember voted favorably on my recommendation. If I had responded defensively to his earlier negative votes on my recommendations, he might have voted for the other program or even abstained, and TMRS might not have been approved in that city.

The Political Process

It is an absolute that city managers should not work in the political process that involves the election of city and other local officials, and must avoid even the appearance of election participation. In fact, for city managers who are members of the Texas City Management Association (TCMA) or the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), participation in the election process is prohibited in each respective association’s code of ethics (See Appendix IB). It is best to maintain a low profile during the election process, which usually lasts about 12 weeks, because political motives may be attached to your activities if you are not careful. A low profile is not that difficult in most communities, because councils prefer not to take any action that may upset the local voters the six weeks preceding an election. This is a dead period of time for major city actions, so take advantage of it and keep a low profile. Don’t be so naive, however, to think that the election process has nothing to do with your job as city manager. Be cognizant of the issues in the campaign because they may dictate some of your future priorities. Realize that each candidate runs for office for specific reasons, and these reasons will impact upon the city’s priorities.

On the other hand, political participation in the decision-making process on issues such as whether or not to locate a public housing project in an affluent neighborhood, whether or not to support a bond election for a controversial water/sewer project, whether or not to support the adoption of a new comprehensive plan, or to annex an area into the city will depend upon the dictates of the city council. For example, if the council is supporting a housing project and wants the manager’s support through such means as the provision of data (HUD regulations, infrastructure capability to handle the new project, cost, impact on the neighborhood, etc.) and/or speaking to public groups, then the manager should provide it.

On the contrary, if the council is opposed to a housing project, then the manager should not be working for a housing project openly or behind the scenes.

I must caution you that even if the City Council is supportive of your participation in a bond election or similar type campaign, you may still be considered guilty by association by those political forces in the community who are opposed to whatever the city council is supporting. For example, in my first bond election I made several presentations in support of a bond package that included basic street and drainage projects. On the night it was defeated, I received a call at home from the opposition's head politico telling me, "James, we have you on our list now. We defeated the bond package and you will be next!"

Code of Ethics

Most city managers are willing to implement city council policy directives, as long as such directives do not conflict with their personal beliefs and their professional ethics (See Appendix IB for the TCMA Code of Ethics). If the manager is philosophically opposed to a council's directives and cannot adjust to the council, then the manager should be willing to resign. This is easy to say but difficult to do, because city managers may feel that if they are right about an issue, they should fight for it. Also, sometimes a city manager has a tendency to take a *macho* stand to demonstrate his or her toughness. Certainly no one wants to be accused of being a quitter, but at the same time, the city manager should not want to become an obstacle to a city council with a different philosophy. A consulting engineer once told me that he worked for the city council, and if they wanted the elevated water storage tank painted pink with orange polka dots, he would do it. He might tell them beforehand that silver paint is a little more appropriate and more economical, but if they wanted pink paint, then pink paint it would be.

In order to insure that you and the council fully understand each other, it would be ideal if you were to explain the city management form of government as you understand and practice it during the interview process. Also, it is a good idea to let them know that since you are a member of a professional association such as TCMA, you must abide by its Code of Ethics. Then give a few examples of its code. For example, you do not become involved in politics, you believe in the city manager actually managing the city, you keep the mayor and city council equally informed, and you do not endorse commercial products. In this way, the city council knows exactly what type of city manager it is hiring and does not have false expectations. For example, a city council may really want a weak city manager who will not take the lead on policy decisions and who will hire and fire only after consulting the council; through this explanation, they would know whether or not you fit their criteria.

Distinguish Between Short Term and Long Term Problems

One good method for presenting your city management style to the city council, either prior to employment or soon thereafter, is to describe the type of problems you expect to handle in your capacity as city manager and the type reserved for the city council. You might explain that there are two types of problems facing cities: **administrative** problems which are usually operational in nature and have a short run impact, and **policy** problems which may require major decisions by the city council and will usually have a long run impact.

1) Administrative Type Problems

- ◆ Work schedules for city personnel
- ◆ Departmental reorganizations

- ◆ Personnel actions
- ◆ Purchasing procedures

2) Policy Type Problems

- ◆ Development of a capital improvements program
- ◆ Development of an annexation policy
- ◆ Adoption of city budget
- ◆ Charging user fees for tennis courts, ball fields, fairgrounds, etc.
- ◆ Whether or not to apply for federal grants

Several of the problems above are interrelated - working on one problem will have an impact upon another problem. Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between an administrative problem and a policy problem. The main distinction would be that the resolution or non-resolution of the policy problems will have a definite long-run impact on the city. For example, the city policies adopted in the 1950's for the provision of city services outside the city limits will impact upon the city well into 2000 and beyond, while the organization of the street department in 1958 probably only affected the late 1950's. (Note: Of course, if a city manager reorganizes the street department in such a manner as to preclude the proper patching and maintenance of streets, then this could cause long-term problems which might not be felt for 10-15 years.)

At the same time, a policy issue, such as the annexation of new property into the city, will have an immediate impact upon the city budget and capital improvement program, because the annexed area must be provided with city services.

Get Along With Your Bosses

While your initial success as city manager will depend upon your particular approach during the first months, your long-run success will depend on your relationship with the City Council and your ability to identify and address the city's priorities. If you cannot "get along" with your "bosses", the mayor and city council, then your effectiveness as a city manager will be severely limited. Since much of what a city manager does is dependent upon a good working relationship with the city council, both parties must understand this relationship and must work diligently to make it an effective partnership. Therefore, it can neither be taken for granted nor does it naturally occur. Remember, a good relationship with the city council requires constant work by the city manager.

Even though you get along well with the mayor and city council, if you do not accurately determine the city's priorities and work on these priorities, then what have you accomplished? Remember, longevity does not necessarily equate to the quality of management. Just because you are surviving in your job as city manager and get along with the Mayor and Council does not mean that you are actually managing the city. You must provide direction to the Council and help establish priorities so that you can implement them. If the state is ordering the city to open a new sanitary landfill and the citizens are demanding a new landfill because the old landfill is a nuisance, then this would be an easy priority to identify. However, what if the state is demanding one thing while the citizens are demanding another priority? Or what if the priority is not easily determined because it requires managerial analytical skills and is not easily recognized by citizen groups nor regulated by the state? These last two examples require a city manager who will provide the necessary leadership and direction for establishing priorities.

Surviving to Manage

You are hired to manage your city. You are not hired to find security of employment or to adopt a philosophy of survival. At the same time, you should not practice idealism or theory at all costs, which may stand a minimum chance of success in the community. There is a fine line between surviving for strictly personal reasons and for the good of the community. There is nothing inherently wrong with a survivalistic mentality. In fact, in my first city management job, my priority was to survive at least three years, because the city did not have a good track record for professional city managers.

Depending upon the political situation, survival may be of the utmost importance in order to achieve any professional managerial continuity and stability. In some cities, it may actually foster professional management, because a manager must survive in order to make changes. There have been many inexperienced and/or idealistic managers who accept employment in a locality with the idea of bestowing upon it all their grand plans and managing strictly by the book, but who last only a few months. Were their plans ever implemented? Of course not, but then, they can always self-righteously claim that they stood on their theories and principles and did what was right. But they forget to ask the basic questions: Did their short tenure solve the city's problems? Did their termination improve the status of professional management in the city? The answers are probably "no." If they had worked in the city for a longer period of time, the answers would probably be "yes." Simply put, you must survive today in order to survive tomorrow.

A good illustration of the need to survive is General Collin Powell's explanation of how he learned to cope with Army management fashions:

"You pay the king his shilling, get him off your back, and then go about doing what you consider important. If, for example, you are going to judge me on AWOL rates, I'm going to send a sergeant out by 6:30 AM to bloodhound the kid who failed to show up for 6:00 AM *Reveille*. The guy's not considered AWOL until midnight. So drag him back before then and keep that AWOL rate down. I vigorously set out to better every indicator by which my brigade was statistically judged. And then went on to do the things that I thought counted."

"I detected a common thread running through the careers of officers who ran aground even though they were clearly able--a stubbornness about coughing up that shilling. They fought what they found foolish or irrelevant, and consequently did not survive to do what they considered vital."⁴

Proceeding in this Book

To assist you in determining your priorities, Davis Brinson lists in Chapter II 100 potential issues confronting you as city manager. Chapters III - VI concentrate on major city documents and policies which can give you a sense of the city's overall condition, chapter VII provides anecdotal advice from other city managers, and Chapter VII gives suggestions on how to implement your solutions.

⁴Colin Powell, *My American Journey*, (NY, 1995), p. 213