

VIII. After the Review - What to do?

Once the problems are identified and listed, then what should be done? It is not enough just to list the problems, because identification is usually easier than problem solving, and being an effective city manager means correcting or eliminating the **priority** problems. Please note my emphasis on the adjective “priority.” This can best be accomplished by informing and educating the city council so that it will authorize corrective action.

Community Involvement and Support

If the problem is of such magnitude that community support and understanding is required, then the mayor and city council should also include the community in the process. In today’s political environment, with community power so widely and thinly distributed, it is becoming more commonplace and imperative that the public be involved. Prior to today’s information technology making public information readily available and the news media’s over saturation of the negative, there was “proxy democracy” (where more trust existed between government officials and the public) partly because information was not so readily available. People trusted their councilmembers more and gave them their proxies to represent them. Now people want a direct vote on everything.¹ While a direct vote is not practical on everything, and arguably not what our founders had in mind, it does mean that the people should be interested and given the opportunity to be involved in the process for determining what the plan of action will be.

When I worked as an intern in Bryan, Texas, in 1969, I recall reading articles on the importance of “citizen participation.” These articles were the first indication that government by mayoral or managerial fiat was over. No longer could single groups of citizens, such as a Good Government League, decide on the course of action for a city. Now, citizens, neighborhoods, community groups, etc., wanted a piece of the decision making process. My career began in the twilight of the old system and the dawn of the new, more open system. I have seen the good and the bad.

I once had a mayor who basically decided by fiat that a new public housing project would be located immediately abutting the most affluent neighborhood in the small town. He did not allow public discourse on the matter. In fact, he told a group of citizens from the affluent neighborhood that they could not speak at a city council meeting on the matter. He refused to consider alternatives. He painted those who were opposed to the location as racists. The net result was a divided community because of the flawed decision-making process. The mayor was defeated and the new mayor systematically worked on the process for finding an alternative site that pleased all the parties involved--e.g., the minority community, HUD, the Housing Authority administration, the City Council, and the affluent neighborhood. The process was difficult and required two years, but the result was a new site acceptable to all.

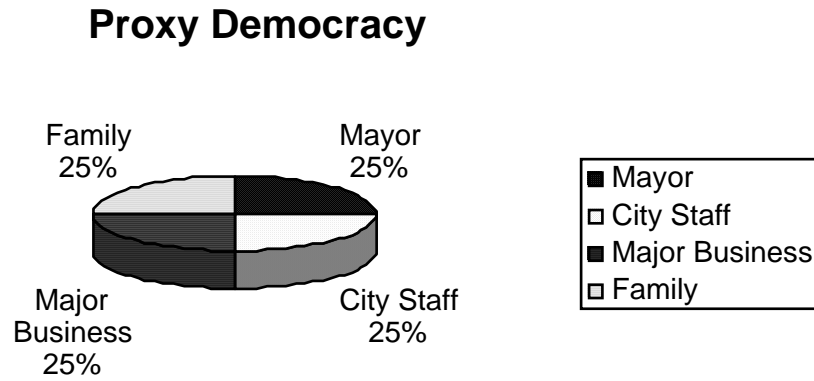
In another city, we went through a three-year search for a new landfill site because the mayor believed that the process should be open. It was more difficult and was not efficient, but it was effective as far as keeping the community together. Admittedly, the final site selected had its opponents--i.e., those people living in that area--but everyone knew the rationale behind the site selection: good soil, no aquifer, mostly unpopulated, etc. There was no mayoral decree that a landfill will be located here regardless of what anyone thinks.

See illustrations below for a comparison of proxy democracy and democracy today that show how community powers have been widely and thinly distributed.

¹ Presentation by Chris Bell, National Civic League

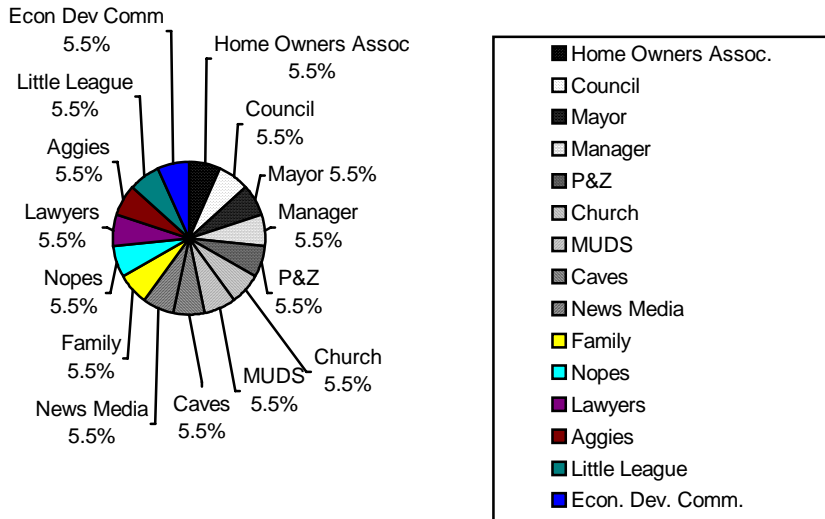
You must strive to keep the appropriate groups in today's democracy aware of what is happening. Some will be more interested than others. And they may need more information. But the key is making the groups feel that they have a voice in what is happening.

***Illustration VIII - A
Distribution of Community Powers***



***Illustration VIII - B
Distribution of Community Powers***

Today



Problem Solving Steps

Just as there is not one correct management style, there is also not one right way to inform and educate the City Council. Each manager will have his/her own style and technique, but the information and education phases of problem-solving should at least include the steps listed below. These steps are based upon the assumption that you will have a city council composed of members who are either not on a "witch hunt" or just simple agenda focused, and who are willing to objectively hear the problem and solve it.

1. Description of the Problem

It is not sufficient to say that the city has a problem, for example, with either a tight budget or street maintenance. Such generalized statements serve no purpose if you seriously wish to inform and educate the Council. Most councils are probably tired of hearing about tight budgets, no money, inflation induced spending, etc., and the real problem will never be cured unless they are specifically informed about the problem. For example, if declining revenues in the Utility Fund causes a tight budget and increases interfund transfers between the Utility Fund and the General Fund, then inform the Council. Frequently I have heard staff members blaming inflation for all expenditure increases even when inflation was less than 3%. These staff members still had the mind-set of the double digit inflation of the early 1980's when inflation was certainly the culprit. (See Appendix VIII-A for an example of problem identification for the City Council.)

Such a specific approach means that the city manager must be well informed about the city and understand the causes behind why certain indicators are changing. Any untrained person can review an income statement and say that revenues are down, or look at a water department report on water loss ratios and say that water leakage is up, but to explain the reasons for these changes is a sign of a good manager.

2. Comparisons

Provide plenty of comparisons with other cities (similarly sized and in the same geographic and socioeconomic categories as your city), with previous fiscal years in your city, and with criteria furnished by professional organizations. If you can demonstrate that your city is facing some of the same problems as other cities, then your City Council may accept the remedies that other cities or you are proposing. Also, comparing your city's indicators to national criteria promulgated by professional organizations can be very beneficial in helping to convince your council.

Even if the City Council does not use the remedies derived from the comparisons, at least you will have a firmer grasp of the problem, and the recommendation for correction is accurate and on firm ground. Certainly do not manipulate the comparisons for your benefit, but let the results fall where they may. There is nothing that can destroy the credibility of a manager faster than for the council to think that he/she is only providing comparisons that justify the manager's recommendation. In fact, you should include a preamble to any comparison asking the council for recommendations concerning the cities sampled, other criteria, or reminding them that each city is unique and there is nothing holy about what other cities do or what this city has done in the past.

3. City Manager's Recommendations

Provide a full explanation of your recommendation for corrective action, with several alternatives and possible results for the council to consider. Be clear, so that the Council will know what you are recommending, and be prepared to provide short and long term costs for either implementing or not implementing your recommendation. Remember, the most detailed recommendation with all the supporting facts can be "shot down" by emotional appeals from "concerned citizens" to the Council. This

can be very frustrating, but on the positive side, one can say that you have planted the seed of an idea for future cultivation. If the problem is real, it will not disappear... regardless of emotional statements.

No-No's For Communicating Recommendations to Your City Council
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1) **Avoid surprises.** City Councils, just like everyone else, hate to be surprised on an issue or a problem, especially when it is the city manager or the staff doing the surprising.

2) **Last train out.** Do not tell the City Council this is their last opportunity to do something, that they will miss the train if they fail to act. (It may be true, but avoid putting the council in a bad public posture.)

3) **Chicken Little Syndrome.** Do not run around telling the Council that the sky is falling, that the city will cease to exist unless something is done.

4) **Never say never.** What is a bad idea or solution today, may be a cure-all tomorrow. For example, in the 1960's, a few city councils and/or managers said that they would never take federal funds. However, when federal revenue sharing came about in 1972, they changed their minds quickly when federal money was so readily available for cities.

5) **Lead pipe cinch.** Never claim that something is a cure-all or a sure solution. It will definitely come back to haunt you. Remember, problems in cities are recycled for future redemption. The new sewage treatment plant you build today may meet today's standards, but it may be outmoded in 5 - 10 years. The new thoroughfare may meet today's traffic demands, but be overloaded in 5 years.

6) **Professionalism Trap.** Do not ask the Council to do something based upon your years of experience or your professionalism. Give them real reasons, not resumes.

7) **Goldie Locks.** Remember Goldie Locks tasting the three bowls of porridge?. One was too hot, one was too cold, and one was just right. Well, do not present your city council with three alternatives each time with one too hot, one too cold, and one just right. Remember they read the book too!

(Note: For additional communication tips, see Appendix VIII B for a Manager/Council Communications Checklist by ICMA.)

4. Implementation

Once you have determined your priorities, made recommendations to the City Council and had them accepted, you must implement your recommendation. You will quickly discover that determining priorities, planning, and making public announcements are very different than the business of implementation. "Having just a vision is no solution. Everything depends on execution."² Without the detailed work of execution, the vision of our elected leaders cannot be translated into real improvements in the quality of our citizens' lives.³ In addition, the council-manager system, one person comes up with an idea, but then the implementation is left to a terribly overburdened city staff to manage.⁴

In the ideal situation, you would be able to devote all of your time and financial resources to the implementation of the recommendation - be it street paving, water line installation, annexation, etc. It very rarely happens this way, because between various citizen demands, staffing needs, and personal crises, priorities of different intensities can overwhelm you. A quick review of any City Council meeting agenda reveals the tremendous number of projects and/or problems facing a city manager at any one time. In order to succeed with the implementation phase of your problem solving, and in addition to performing the actual work on the project, you must do the following:

² Lyrics from the song "Putting it Together" by Stephen Sondheim.

³ Bill Hansell, ICMA Executive Director.

⁴ Bruce Davidson, "Cisneros Reign Had Shortcomings, Observers Say," *San Antonio Express*, May 28, 1989.

1) You must focus on the projects being implemented. Keep them moving so that you can reach closure. There is nothing worse than to motivate a City Council for a major project, start the implementation phase, and then to let the project languish. The result will be a Council that loses its enthusiasm for a project. Also, the longer a project exists and does not reach closure, the greater the risk for new problems associated with the project itself.

2) You must keep the City Council informed on the project.

Parting Remarks

Regardless of your success, you must realize that problems confronting cities are never ending. There is no absolute closure on many of the problems you will find in your city--e.g., crime will not disappear, sewer line infiltration will reoccur, code violations will not go away, etc. This means that cities must recognize that their goal cannot be simply to eliminate or avoid problems. There is not a city in the country--large or small, poor or rich--that is not confronted with a vast array of difficult challenges. The existence of problems is not a sign of failure.⁵ The lack of an effort to identify problems, prioritize them, and then address the top priorities is failure. What you must do is make sure the priority problems are being addressed in a systematic manner. This means using some of the tools identified in this book and applied in the civic infrastructures used by successful cities (See Chapter VI).

⁵ Presentation by Chris Bell, National Civic League