

# First-Time Administrator's Handbook



July 2010

**ICMA**

*Leaders at the Core of Better Communities*



# First-Time Administrator's Handbook

Prepared by Kevin Carter

July 2010

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## **About ICMA**

ICMA advances professional local government worldwide. Its mission is to create excellence in local governance by developing and advancing professional management of local government. ICMA, the International City/County Management Association, provides member support; publications, data, and information; peer and results-oriented assistance; and training and professional development to more than 9,000 city, town, and county experts and other individuals and organizations throughout the world. The management decisions made by ICMA's members affect 185 million individuals living in thousands of communities, from small villages and towns to large metropolitan areas.

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## Original Preface

Two years ago, the ICMA Executive Board and President Gary Gwyn appointed 25 members from all areas of the country to serve on the First-Time Administrator’s Task Force. This group was asked to put together information that would be useful to individuals who were about to serve in their first administrator/manager position. This booklet, a product of that effort, is also designed to be of value to individuals who are in the position of serving as the first manager or administrator of a community.

Over the years, many articles have pointed out essential steps to follow, or suggested “do’s and don’ts” for an administrator’s consideration. Whether in a new job as a first-time administrator or in a first-time professionally managed local government, this collection of tips from administrators across the ICMA membership will prove to be a useful guide.

Over two years, the committee met at three ICMA conferences—Vancouver, Orlando, and Portland—to work out the details and guide the effort. Correspondence and e-mail were important to the finished result, as was contact with several state management organizations. The final product is not meant to be viewed as an absolute blueprint for success or an all-inclusive list of what to do to be successful. Rather, it illustrates items that should be considered before an interview, during an interview, before accepting a position, and before starting the new position. It goes on to describe what might be important for first week, month, three to six months, and beyond.

While this document is recommended reading for emerging professionals, a review of the contents suggests that there is much to be relearned by the veteran manager who may have served in several professional positions. Suggestions are offered that are relevant regardless of age or experience.

Finally, appreciation for the invaluable assistance in producing this publication goes to the 25 committee members who worked so hard to assemble and produce this document. The work could not have been completed without the assistance of Betsy Sherman of ICMA, and Carol Zar of the Center for Governmental Studies at Northern Illinois University. It was a pleasure to serve as chairperson of this effort!

Jim Berzina  
City Manager  
Wichita Falls, Texas

## Preface

In 1998, the ICMA Executive Board and President Gary Gwyn appointed twenty-five members to serve on the First-Time Administrator's Task Force. They were asked to draft a document that would be beneficial to individuals who were about to serve or were already serving in their first administrator position or as the first administrator/manager for a local government.

The initial *First-Time Administrator's Handbook*, published in 2000, has been of great benefit to many of our members. It has provided numerous suggestions, backed by personal testimonies, of steps that a first-time administrator/manager should or should not pursue. Many of us wish this guide had been available when we assumed our first administrator/manager positions.

After almost ten years, realizing that the handbook needed to be revised and updated, the ICMA Executive Board and President Darnell Earley appointed a twelve-member task force to review the *First-Time Administrator's Handbook* in 2009. We on the task force leaped at the opportunity. Perhaps as a sign of the times and the advance of technology since the original task force, we were able to revise the entire handbook without ever meeting in person. We used conference calls, webinars, and the ICMA Knowledge Network to share the advice and stories that became part of this handbook. We added new sections to reflect the changes and trends in our profession, such as persons entering local government management directly out of MPA programs or from the military or private sector, as well as advances in technology and communication.

The advice you find in these pages is not ours alone. We sought out recommendations and revisions from our colleagues, mentors, and state associations. This handbook is both for ICMA members and a product of their dedicated work. While recommended for emerging professionals, it is, like its predecessor, a valuable source of information for veteran managers who may have already served several jurisdictions.

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my fellow task force members, who diligently worked on and produced the revision of this document. Special appreciation is also due to ICMA staff, especially Kevin Carter, for their assistance, guidance, and patience during this process.

Let's promote and distribute this handbook to emerging professionals to strengthen them in their role as first-time administrator/manager or as the first administrator/manager for a community. In doing so, we will have encouraged and mentored others in this great profession we have chosen. It has truly been a professional honor and privilege to have served as chairman of this task force and effort.

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# 1. Introduction

Welcome to the world of the first-time local government administrator! You are embarking on a journey that is yours to determine and filled with challenges and opportunities at every turn. We hope that this publication, written by current management professionals for new administrators, leads you in the right direction.

We understand the exhilaration you feel as you assume a new managerial position. Be assured that you are not alone on this journey; you have colleagues who share your zeal, passion, and concern. Remember: the information contained in this handbook is just one example of the professional resources available to you from your colleagues and ICMA.

Whether the position is a first for you or a first for your community, colleagues who have preceded you in such positions have experience and wisdom to share. We hope that this publication is useful to you, identifying pitfalls and trouble spots, suggesting useful resources, and sharing the experience and stories of a variety of managers.

In July 1997, ICMA president Gary Gwyn appointed ICMA members to a First-Time Administrator's Task Force. Discussion began at the 1997 ICMA Annual Conference in Vancouver, where it became obvious that there was more to this issue than initially suspected. Some task force members had been promoted to their first managerial positions from within; others were fresh faces to the community; and still others were first-time administrators because they filled newly created managerial positions. Given this diversity of experience, task force chair Jim Berzina divided the discussion into four areas: first administrator in the community, first-time position as an administrator, promotion to administrator from within, and resources. All these topics are covered in this publication, along with tips and checklists for the first-time administrator.

In 2009, ICMA president Darnell Earley, recognizing changes in the field of public administration, tasked ICMA members to review, update, and expand upon the original document. The Task Force to Review the *First-Time Administrators Handbook* determined that although certain aspects of public service remain

the same, significant changes in the field warrant additional thought and discussion if we are to help newly appointed managers successfully navigate in their new positions.

For example, the task force discovered, through its own research and colleagues' anecdotal accounts, that a number of jurisdictions were appointing administrators from private sector, military, and academic backgrounds. Some members even shared stories of being appointed right out of graduate school. Thus, this revised handbook includes a section for managers coming to the profession from nontraditional backgrounds; the goal is to equip them with the skills they need to succeed and to provide advice from others who have made the same transition.

Whichever category you fit into, you'll find helpful ideas in every section of this publication. While each person's experience is different, similar advice for the first-timer emerges from the differing experiences of the administrators who wrote these chapters:

- Gain the trust of council, community, and staff
- Meet with department heads as soon as possible
- Be yourself
- Get to know other local government managers
- Be ethical, visible, and fair
- Establish good relations with local media.

## The Administrative Balancing Act

As a local government administrator, you are the narrowest point of an hourglass. You are caught in the middle by the nature of your job, and aside from peers in other communities, you are the only one in this position. Above you is a funnel into which your elected officials pour every conceivable idea, criticism, and belief. Below you is a staff for whose actions you are held accountable, whose talents you must maximize, and whose professionalism you must defend to the elected officials.

While you are sorting out these responsibilities, the hourglass is tipped upside down, and you become the person who must filter proposals from staff to council, resolve employee grievances, and ensure internal

equity. Meanwhile, the other half of the hourglass is now looking for expert advice and recommendations on solving community problems. Elected officials want to know why things are done in a particular way, how a service could be improved, and how responsiveness to the citizenry can be increased.

In his keynote address at the 1993 ICMA Annual Conference, Stephen Covey noted that trust is your guiding principle. Trust, which you must earn, is due north on the compass and what you use to navigate the complex territory of municipal management. Elected officials must trust that your advice is honest and complete, and corresponds to community values. Employees must trust that you are impartial, responsive, and there to lead them.

The best tool upon which to build trust with both employees and elected officials is the ICMA Code of Ethics—one of the membership benefits rated as “most important.” Our Code of Ethics separates the professional from the pundit and, combined with the ICMA Declaration of Ideals, provides a solid foundation upon which trust can be built. (Both documents can be found on ICMA’s website, [icma.org](http://icma.org).)

Creating trust between you and your staff requires a variety of skills, particularly the ability to maintain internal equity. Equity in budgeting, promotions, grievance resolutions, and the allocation of your time will be tested regularly. Remaining impartial while achieving the goals of elected officials also earns employee trust.

While the principles of trust and equity are your most powerful allies, your knowledge, skills, and abilities are what brought you to this position. However, they all will be challenged daily. While small-town managers may be more frequently called upon to have technical knowledge of accounting, engineering, or utilities, all managers are expected to have immense interpersonal skills. Remaining isolated from the community to avoid the perception of political activity was once accepted and even encouraged, but today’s administrators must remain connected to the communities they serve. They may be called upon to broker competing interests in the community—perhaps interacting with parents, students, and school officials to address youth violence or meeting with minority groups to ensure that services, employment practices, and policies incorporate the diverse needs of the community.

This interaction necessarily alters the traditional policy–administration dichotomy of the council–manager relationship. The straight line that once separated

these two areas of local government now must bend and flex to provide the best government, not just the most efficient one. To make the most complete recommendations on policy matters as a manager, you must have a solid understanding of the values, demographics, and personalities of the community you serve. Recommendations that take into account only the most efficient solution to a problem may overlook critical value issues that jeopardize a proposal, divide a legislative body, or alienate the citizenry.

Moreover, today’s manager must not only protect his or her staff, but also serve as the conduit for elected officials to know the daily operations and the staff responsible for them. For the council to make informed decisions, its members must have a solid understanding of a department’s makeup, direction, and services.

The budgeting process is perhaps the most visible area in which the policy–administration dichotomy emerges. The budget is both a policy and an administrative document. As the manager prepares a recommended budget, he or she must have a connected, well-informed understanding of the community. For example, a law enforcement budget that emphasizes correctional services, such as jails, halfway houses, and more judges, may efficiently address the issue of crime, but the community may be looking to allocate those resources for a policing program that specializes in conflict resolution, neighborhood relations, and youth intervention.

Similarly, an elected body that is not familiar with an organization’s use of technology may have a difficult time justifying large budget increases for the information services department. Who is using what software and why may be a purely administrative issue, but the elected officials must see how the issue is relevant to the citizens they serve, or the proposal is doomed.

An excellent book on the topic of today’s new manager is *Professionalism in Local Government: Transformations in the Roles, Responsibilities and Values of City Managers*, by John Nalbandian (Jossey-Bass, 1991).

## Function Follows Form

Form of government is always a hot topic within the management profession. As a first-time administrator, you may find yourself in a hybrid or modified council–manager form of government. The pure form is established by a charter that calls for a council of legislators, elected at large, with the mayor or presi-

dent of the council elected from among the council or commission. A majority of the governing body may appoint and remove the manager; the manager has the sole authority to appoint and remove all other personnel, to prepare a recommended budget, and to make policy recommendations to the board. Many variations of this pure council-manager form exist, particularly on the council side of the equation, where members often come from districts or wards. Many communities have directly elected mayors, and many establish the position of manager by ordinance rather than by charter.

This last variation calls attention to the fact that new administrator positions are frequently found in jurisdictions, such as counties and small municipalities, that do not have home rule. Opportunities for a first-time administrator often occur as counties search for a better way to govern or as small communities outgrow the capabilities of volunteer management by elected officials. Such situations open the door to professional advancement and enable ICMA to demonstrate the superiority of the council-manager form of government.

As the first administrator for a new form of government in a community, you may face many situations that managers in established governments may not face. You may have to deal, for example, with commission members who were once responsible for entire departments, with staff who are used to multiple chiefs and feel accountable to none, and with citizens who are accustomed to getting a project done simply by calling a friend who was in charge of a particular department.

The job picture also is colored by today's longer tenure of many administrators, including deputy and assistant managers. Why are people staying longer? One explanation may be the characteristics of younger professionals, who often are part of dual-career marriages. Since moving might impair the career advancement of an administrator's spouse, the administrator may look for promotional opportunities within a single community. The result is twofold. First, metropolitan areas with multiple local governments are attractive since an administrator can find promotional opportunities within a reasonable distance while the spouse remains with a single company. Second, assistants may be more content to wait for promotional opportunities within their organizations since dual careers means dual incomes, and the monetary gain from promotion may not be as important as the stability of family life. And since promotional opportunities in metropolitan areas are extremely competitive, the advantage may well go to an assistant who is familiar with the organization.

Consequently, small communities (less than 10,000 people) and rural communities (more than sixty miles from a metropolitan area of 100,000 or more) may be more likely than large metropolitan areas to offer opportunities for first-time administrators. Moreover, as these administrators refine their skills and acquire more experience, they tend to move to metropolitan areas, so that turnover in these more remote locations is also more frequent.

Those individuals who are promoted to an administrator position from within face their own challenges. How do they implement the new management techniques necessary to fit the position? How do they deal with peers who may have competed for the job? How do they deal with colleagues who are close friends without playing favorites or betraying a friendship?

As the 2009 task force reviewed the handbook, they identified additional career paths to first-time administrator positions, and the challenges and opportunities associated with those paths became apparent. Learning organizational culture and institutional practices is always an obstacle, but it is especially so when one comes from a different background or field. However, this also offers opportunities to do things in a new way and learn from on-the-job training. Hopefully this document will help you answer: How do I reconcile differences with the new organization's culture and develop a strategy for implementing needed change? How do I foster change and implement the latest trends in an established organization unwilling to change?

For those who move into public administration directly from college, the private sector, or the military, learning the laws concerning the operation and oversight of local governments is vital. The way an organization is managed affects its ability to meet the community's needs and satisfy the council's priorities. A better understanding of public administration can improve the quality of life for the citizens you serve (as well as your own).

We hope that your questions and many others asked by first-time local government administrators are answered in this publication.

*Note: Professional managers go by many labels, including administrator, manager, and chief operating officer. The types of the organizations where they work vary as well: they are cities, towns, villages, boroughs, townships, parishes, and counties. For ease of effort, this publication uses the terms manager and administrator, and council and board interchangeably.*

## 2. Tips from the Trenches for First-Time Administrators

Many local government administrators hold the **M**only such position in their communities. They lack a group of peers with whom they can sit down and obtain practical advice. We hope that the following information substitutes for such a gathering. This advice evolved from a brainstorming session at the committee's first meeting and from subsequent thoughts of committee members.

### Assess Yourself

- Determine if you are ready for the top job. Have you had broad enough experience and learned from good mentors? Many successful managers describe the managers they have worked under as their best teachers.
- Check out chemistry to discover if you are a good match with the council, staff, and community.

Administrators suggest asking these questions: What is critical to you in a community? Which factors are essential to you? Is it important to you that the community be in a good financial position, or can you deal with resulting problems? What do you want in your relationship with the mayor and council? Do you like staying behind the scenes (are you internally oriented), or do you prefer speaking to groups and being at the forefront (are you externally oriented)? Be sure that you know what the council expects since misunderstandings can grow into major points of contention later if, for example, a council feels a manager is getting too much press or is not visible enough in the community.

- Realize that those with clear management and moral philosophies succeed more easily as leaders and managers. Knowing whether this accurately describes you enables you to better gauge a good community match.

As one manager put it, "Most of us have core values about how we do business that are not negotiable. Do they match with the community and organizational culture?"

- Determine if you can easily adjust to unexpected circumstances. Managers often fail either because

they could not adapt to surprises or because they were not a good match with the community or organization.

- Don't wear rose-colored glasses. Too many people go into a position blindly, not really knowing what faces them. Taking any job, just to have a job, is not necessarily the road to success in local government management.
- Do not underestimate the potential for problems. First-time management positions may well be in communities with problems or conflicts. Perhaps the vote to hire was a split vote; or maybe there is political unrest, controversy in the community, or financial problems.

### Before the First Interview: Evaluating the Community and the Organization

- Gather as much general information as possible in order to identify the community culture.
- Learn the goals of the community, and determine which are real and which are merely political.
- Read the local newspapers, including back issues that reflect on campaign issues, council member profiles, and results of the last election.
- Become familiar with the demographics and socioeconomic profile of the community.
- Determine the political stability of the community. Get a political history and find out what happened to former managers, council members, and mayors. Is this a settled community, or is it in flux?
- Research the credibility, process, and time frames if an executive search firm is involved in your recruitment. Do not be afraid to question them thoroughly about council and community issues.

One manager was a finalist for a position in a rapidly changing city, so he visited the community for several days before his interview with the council. After thoroughly investigating the community and completing the interview, he concluded that there were more negatives than positives in the situation and decided to withdraw from the process. The executive search

firm called him to say that he had received the highest scores from the council interviews and asked for details about what had led to his decision to withdraw. The candidate and the search firm were able to honestly discuss shortcomings and problems in the community, providing the candidate with new information. As a result, the candidate accepted the position and found substantial success in the new community.

- Discover local rules of the game and determine whether you are willing to play by them.
- Get copies of as many publications, brochures, and handouts produced by the local government as you can, and evaluate their quality and what they say.
- Visit the local government’s website.
- Review copies of all adopted plans. Which ones are in place? How old are they? Are they being followed?
- Read council minutes.
- Gather information about the community’s financial situation. Read the annual reports, review budgets, review audits, and talk to the auditor.
- Talk to relevant people. The school superintendent may be your single, most informative contact. Get perceptions from community members. If public opinion about the local government is not the best, are you prepared for the challenge of changing that perception? Touch base with neighboring managers, mayors, and former managers, if possible. Talk to business people, the head of the local council of governments, and Range Riders in the state. Also talk to consultants who have worked in the local government and read their reports, particularly if they deal with organizational issues. Talk to state league or county association officials.
- Visit the community. Plan to arrive at least one day before the interview to do research.
- Arrange a tour or do a self-tour.

One manager says, “I did not realize the time and effort it would take to establish trust and credibility. During the interview process, the fact that this was a problem never came up. In retrospect, I should have broadened my efforts to get information about the community from outside of city channels. I should have spent more time in the community before and after the interview. I should have done more of my own legwork.”

- Decide whether your personality and goals are compatible with those of the community.

One manager put it this way: “What I tell people is that there are no perfect jobs, there are no perfect commu-



nities, and there are no perfect fits. Some are just better than others. So be honest with yourself. What do you really want, and what can you put up with?

- Understand council dynamics.
- Understand the government structure. Read statutes, the charter, etc., and understand the authority that goes with the administrator’s position. What legal authority establishes the city or town? What establishes the role of the manager? Who reports to the council and who reports to the manager?
- Understand the legal aspect versus the functioning of the position.
- Find out the dates of the next election, the terms of office of the current council, and the intentions of those who are up for reelection.
- Try to get a handle on the issues—for example, has the political culture changed since the last election? Are there explosive issues festering?
- Determine the governing board’s level of involvement and influence in the day-to-day operations of individual departments.
- Ask about the political activity of employee unions.
- Explore quality-of-life issues for your family.
- Be alert to what is expected of your family, such as community involvement.
- Understand residency requirements and be sensitive to this issue even if residency is not required.
- Get a sense of the housing market, including the social dynamics of “who lives where.”

## You’ve Made the First Cut, Now for the Second Interview

- Continue your fact finding; talk to the people you didn’t have time to talk to before the first interview.

- Explore with the council their expectations of you—not just in terms of technical issues but also in terms of time commitment. Explore their views on family time and their understanding of the pressures of two-career families. Try to ascertain if your lifestyle will fit with their conception of the manager’s time commitment. Discuss in greater depth their expectations of your spouse and family.
- Learn all you can about the governing board members: their backgrounds, terms of office, how they get along, who does the agendas, who runs the meetings, etc.

## Managing the Job Offer

- Negotiate a good contract; you will never have a better opportunity to determine a favorable package, including severance provisions.
- Remember ICMA Code of Ethics Tenet 3’s guideline: “Oral acceptance of an employment offer is considered binding unless the employer makes fundamental changes in the terms of employment.”

Administrators suggest that you get good advice on your contract since contract law varies from state to state. Work with your state association if you can. Be sure that the move is something you can afford as a family.

## After You’ve Accepted the Job but before You Arrive

- Send a memo to all staff introducing yourself.
- Learn about your staff, and try to get a handle on their skills. Ask each management staff member to describe his or her position and its role in the organization.

As one manager puts it, “Staffing will make or break your ability to succeed.” Budget and human resources are a top concern, especially for a new organization. If you do not have the skills you need on your team, who can you borrow help from temporarily? Will a neighboring city, university, or large business help? Is human resources set up to recruit fairly and to attract the best candidates?

- Start working with the council to establish performance goals if they were not included in your contract negotiations. Be sure that all parties are clear about their expectations.

One manager asks each council member to prepare a confidential memo to him before he begins work-

ing in the community. He assures them that he will not reveal to anyone else what is in the memo. He asks that the memo include the council member’s answers to these questions: What is the community doing right? What should the community stop doing? What should the community start doing? What is the most important problem or project that needs to be addressed? This approach also could be used with department heads.

- Investigate any pending legal actions by or against the city. Get details of what is brewing and what is hot. Learn about past legal issues, and check if there is a pattern to legal problems.

## What to Do the First Day/Week

- Show up ahead of time.
- Plan to spend most of your time *listening* to people.
- Establish a relationship with your new administrative assistant, if you have one. Let him or her know how you want to operate, and discuss office procedures.
- Schedule time with the assistant manager, if there is one, and start to build rapport.
- Wander around and introduce yourself to people. Don’t wait in your office for everyone to come to you.
- Make sure that you have all the right keys, security codes, and pass cards; make sure that you know the location of the bathrooms.
- Bring something personal into your office to help set the tone and define your style.

Some managers have family photos and their degrees and awards displayed on the walls, while others suggest displaying something to open communication and define personality. One administrator has artwork representing his hobby of sailing. Another displays a childhood photo so that employees can see a more human side of him. Another administrator brings in toys, such as miniature basketball hoops and balls. Another hangs a model of the Starship Enterprise in one corner of his office.

- Establish a system for tracking your activities and accomplishments.
- Establish a regularly scheduled meeting time with the mayor and, if possible, with council members to facilitate communications.
- Put your listening skills to good use and sound out your mayor and council to understand their visions

for the community. Then talk to your auditor, attorney, accountant, clerk, treasurer, engineer, and department heads to get their take on the current status of the community. Figure out where people agree and disagree, and then search for your own answers. Go talk to the local newspaper editor or to citizens down at the local coffee shop. This will give you the best view of what you are getting into, where there are potential conflicts, where there are potential collaborations, and what your priorities should be.

- Meet the news media to introduce yourself and begin to develop a relationship.
- Set up quarterly get-togethers, such as luncheons, with the local newspaper editorialist(s). The point of the meetings is not to steer any particular editorial; rather, it is simply to establish a good working relationship, informally discuss the community's issues of the day, and provide for a better understanding.
- Determine which ad hoc boards and commissions are influential and which are council members' pet projects.
- Identify the processes used by the council to conduct its business.
- Schedule time to meet with each of your department heads. Review the memos you asked them to prepare and discuss your management style and expectations.

One manager tells each department head to schedule a tour. "Show me what you think I should know about the community and your area. You make up the agenda; I want to see it through your eyes."

- Hold a staff meeting during which you discuss your management philosophy.
- Demonstrate to your staff in everything that you do that you care about their concerns.
- Prepare a memo to the council at the end of the week about things that happened during your first week.

Continue sending a memo each week that updates the council about community issues. Try to keep it brief and interesting enough to be entertaining. Share the memo with department heads and staff, and encourage them to suggest things to add to the memo. Depending on the size of the community and the attentiveness of the press, this memo could become something that the media asks to see each week as they search for story ideas. Keep that in mind when choosing what to say.



## What to Do the First Month

- Work to make personal contact with employees, members of the business community, and community and neighborhood activists. Get the "lay of the land."
- Start to meet with the mayor and each council member on a regular basis or at least twice monthly.
- Schedule regular department head meetings. Ask department heads to list their departmental priorities, plus major projects and problems in other departments and the community.
- Summarize this information and keep it handy; plan to use it at the council retreat. (One manager stresses the need to review these lists with a grain of salt, given that some department heads are jockeying for position.)
- Meet with the head of the chamber of commerce and other community leaders. Ask your staff to prepare a list of community leaders, formal and informal, and arrange to visit with each of them.

One manager schedules lunch and dinner meetings to create a less formal mood and to help build rapport. At these meetings, spend a lot of time listening. "This strokes people's egos and, in the long run, helps build the support system that a manager needs," one manager explains. "A lot of people wait and just let this happen, assuming it will occur as a matter of course. But what if it doesn't?" The manager follows each meeting with a short note thanking the people with whom he met.

- Consider setting up informal monthly meetings with reporters.
- Wander around as much as you can.

"This is the time you get to ask any dumb question you want and it will be okay," one manager notes.

“This is the time you can spend learning, meeting people, and interacting . . . and you will never have this chance again.”

- Use a list of projects and priorities created by the department heads as a starting point for goal setting by the council. Translate these goals into tasks and measurable accomplishments and assign them to your staff. Hold each department head responsible for these accomplishments.
- Meet with the treasurer or auditor immediately.

“I made the mistake when I came to [the county] of not asking about audits, and it took me about a month to figure out that they were three years behind on their audits. I have spent the last two years riding my auditor to get caught up. I might even suggest [you] ask to see the audit before [you] take the position.”

- Develop a schedule of half-day quarterly retreats with department heads to plan the first quarter of activity. Be clear about who is responsible for accomplishing the council’s goals.
- Work to define a few quick wins: things that can be fixed, improved, or accomplished during your first few months. Then celebrate these successes.
- Schedule a council retreat for the near future to set goals and objectives for the community and the manager.

If the council is reluctant to participate in a retreat, sell its importance by pointing out that everyone has different needs and priorities, but there are limited resources. By using the retreat to set goals, members are guiding the work plan for the community and setting priorities for the next budget. One manager stresses the importance of putting the council through this exercise early “while they still love you.”

- Involve a facilitator to help. If the council is fairly healthy and works well together, this should not be a difficult process. If the council is not healthy, include some leadership training to benefit each individual and to assist in teaching teamwork and decision-making skills.
- Spend time with the police chief and the fire chief.
- Attend civic club meetings to introduce yourself to the community. Be open to speaking to clubs and using other opportunities to become known in the community.

One manager took a community survey and set up a table outside the busiest local grocery store. Just by standing at that table, he was able to introduce himself to hundreds of people, reinforcing the percep-

tion that he cared about the citizens. He also collected dozens of complaints about potholes and other neighborhood problems that had been irritating people for a long time.

- Hold a general meeting for all employees and consider having them monthly.
- Develop a network with nearby local government managers.
- Decide if you are going to make immediate changes.

Two opposing philosophies exist on initial changes. One says that a new administrator should do nothing more than paint curbs and stop signs in the first four to six months, since it takes that long to learn the culture and values of a community. The other approach favors changing something, no matter how small, immediately to show that you are in charge. “On your first day, move the potted plant by the front door,” suggests one manager. Other ideas include changing titles, the council communication process, or the arrangement of furniture in the lobby. One manager relates how he changed where the manager sits during council meetings, moving off the dais and to the staff table.

- Review all human resource processes. Are the processes fair, impartial, and working to ensure that you hire the best staff?  
  
“The importance of good staff cannot be overestimated,” notes one manager. He overcame pressures to hire well-connected locals by setting up a multipart screening process that tested for skills. While locals had a chance to participate, only candidates with good skills made it through the process with scores high enough to be considered for hiring.
- Evaluate the benefits of an employee survey, keeping in mind that a survey raises expectations that things will be changed. Are you really prepared to make changes?
- Prepare a rough plan for your first six months. Check off goals as they are accomplished.

## What to Do the First Quarter

- Attend a retreat with the council—unless an annual retreat is already scheduled. Assist the council in setting goals for the year. State these goals in public, involving the staff.
- Plan for making changes, with buy-in of council, department heads, and employees.
- Create teams to develop, market, and implement



changes in the organization.

- Plan to attend one meeting of every local government board and commission, introducing yourself to members and learning the role that each board and committee plays.
- Do quarterly performance checks with department heads. Are they accomplishing goals set by the council?
- Decide in which community organizations or activities you will participate, taking into account your understanding of the community's culture and values.

Some managers join a local professional service club; others coach youth sports or work with the United Way. You should become involved in something in the community, allowing people to know you as a person in a capacity other than as manager. Remember that choosing what to join is an opportunity to position yourself and to define how you are perceived by the community.

## Marking Your First Year

- Measure progress against goals.
- Celebrate and publicize successes. Be sure the council gets credit for accomplishments and progress.
- Set up another retreat to establish next year's goals.
- Arrange for the council to conduct a performance appraisal of the manager. Few people enjoy this process, and more councils avoid it than actually do it annually. However, it is the best way to document successes and needed changes.
- Review your personal and professional success. Is the match with the community going well?
- Consider if you want to stay past the minimum two-year commitment or whether you need to begin to gear up for another job search.

## Making the Right Moves

- Always remember to put people first. This means being keenly aware that every person has a story, every person has an opinion, and every person has a voice. Hear them out whether you agree with them or not. This is the most valuable thing that you can do as a new administrator. It shows them respect and it will result in them respecting you as well. Mutual respect can lead to collaboration and compromise rather than to obstruction and con-

flict. In a world that is not black and white, putting people first can create many more success stories.

- Never surprise the council. Never let them look foolish in public because they did not know something. Continually communicate with each council member, being sure that each gets the same information. Stress to your staff that "don't surprise the council" is a top priority and that they can ensure that the council is not surprised by making sure that the manager is never surprised.

One manager says, "Although I sometimes disagree with a council member's thoughts, expressions, and/or actions, that person was elected by a majority of those that voted in his or her district. I sometimes know I'm 'right' on an issue, but, theoretically, the voters knew what they were doing when they elected him or her and I can't justify questioning the will of the voters. Since council sets our policies and I administrate them, I usually don't enter discussion on agenda items in public session unless I am asked my opinion. However, in some particularly unique or critical situations, before the meeting starts, I will ask a member of council if he or she will request my thoughts on a matter during open session."

- Encourage continual communication throughout the organization.
- Keep the council together. Help them succeed as a team. Be open, available, and responsive.

At the first one-on-one meetings with council members, one manager tells each that "the council is supposed to be a team—let me help you." Others stress the need for honesty and explain that they are committed to ensuring that all council members get the same information. Emphasize your intention to implement the policies set by the council, explaining that you do not have a personal agenda on political issues.

- Work on council relationships. Communicate every chance you get, realizing that council members vary in how much communication they expect and need. Some members do not see communicating as a two-way street and expect regular calls from the manager. Learn their comfort levels and then use that to stay in contact.
- Stress customer service and building a positive work environment—teamwork and the golden rule—over and over when meeting with department heads.

One manager not only tells this to each department head but also stresses it at larger meetings with employees. He also ensures that he is the first person

that every new employee meets the first day on the job, and he explains these two values at that time.

- Never underestimate the fishbowl. You are in the public eye and people are watching and talking. Never write anything or do anything that would not look good on the front page of the newspaper. Prepare your family for whatever level of public scrutiny will exist; you cannot expect them to be anonymous and must help them develop coping mechanisms.

In a small community, you are a big fish in a small pond. You can expect people to interrupt your dinner at a restaurant or call you at home late at night. You need to find humor in that, or it will drive you crazy. One manager tells the story of a university neighborhood plagued by late-night student parties. The neighbors set up a phone tree so that whenever there was a late party, dozens of them called the manager at home to say, “I can’t sleep, so neither will you.” It was effective. The manager changed the police priorities regarding such complaints. Seeing the humor in the situation helped him keep the issue in perspective.

Another manager relates how the media followed her to the hospital when she went into labor and pushed cameras in her husband’s face when they left the hospital with their baby. She later moved from that small city to a very large city and was struck by the change. Her family was relieved to find that they were mostly unknown and that they could go to a park, for example, where no one would recognize or interrupt them.

- Keep to the high road. When mud starts flying, it’s tempting to lob some back, but don’t.

“Getting dirty undermines your credibility and undercuts a sense of professionalism,” one manager says. “It’s better to take the high road whenever you can.” However, don’t ignore everything. Correcting misinformation is always a good idea.

- Expect that your role includes being a contact point for people who are upset and sometimes abusive. Learn to defuse anger and get to the real problem. Learn to search for win-win solutions. Take time to study the issues so that emotions have time to settle and all options are exposed for consideration.
- Stay neutral, treating all council members similarly. Taking sides with parts of council leads to divisions.

Most managers stress the importance of treating all council members the same, working to develop an equal rapport with each, and ensuring that they always

get the same information. One manager explained how he has had to insist, more than once, that he would not enter a confidential relationship with a council member, stating that any information given to one council member goes to all council members.

- If there are outright confrontations between council members and the manager is pulled in, rifts are created that make it impossible for the council to function as a team.
- Learn about council-staff relationships. Are there staff people who are in constant contact with council members? Be aware of any special relationships that exist and understand how that communication works to assist or undermine your work with council and staff.
- Remember that not everyone is cheering for you.

No matter how good you are, how deserving or hard working, you will not be able to please all the people all the time. It cannot be done. It is impossible. One manager suggests, “Keep your antenna out for criticism. You need to be aware of who is not working for your success.”

- Keep your sense of humor, have patience, and keep things in perspective. When job pressures and stresses get to the point where you can no longer laugh, this is a sign of trouble.
- Take care of yourself; you’re no good to anyone else if you don’t.

“Remember, the job is not about you; it’s about doing what’s right,” explains one manager. Another says, “The manager needs to be the one person in the organization who can walk away. You need to care, but not care too much, not become obsessed. You can’t be afraid to be fired.” Yet another notes, “If every manager could go into the job with the idea of being independent, it would be easier to take what comes and do the best you can.”

## Avoiding Pitfalls and Trouble Spots

- Don’t work too much. Most managers spend far more time with work than they do with their families. Find a healthy balance.
- Don’t bluff or cover up.

One manager observes that the first-time administrators who get in trouble usually are those who bluffed, who tried to be know-it-alls, or who tried to cover up mistakes. “That destroys credibility fast,” he says. Managers who insist on doing something their way rather than listening to the community also end up

in trouble. “You need to be a chameleon. The council hires you for your expertise and experience, but it will still want to do things its own way. It needs to do things its own way.”

Another manager advises, “Don’t do things you’re not qualified to do.” He tells a story of a manager who tried to save his community money by running a street improvement project himself, even though he was not an engineer. It was a disaster.

■ Beware of hidden agendas.

On the first day, meeting one-on-one with the council, one manager was stunned when the vice mayor said, “The first thing you need to do is fire the police chief, and I have the council votes lined up to make this happen.”

The manager convinced the vice mayor that more research as well as legal advice was necessary. Buying time allowed the manager to learn that the chief had never been through a performance evaluation. Discussions with other members of the council showed that an incomplete understanding of the issue existed. In the end, the manager had the support of the majority of the council to deal with the situation another way. While these actions temporarily created a rift between the vice mayor and the new manager, they clarified who had responsibility for personnel matters and defined a strong role for the new manager.

“There is a perception that you are there to do what the council wants,” this manager says. “But we are hired for our expertise as well.” In this instance, I explained that there was a need to document performance and explore the legality of the options. I asked, “Why do you want the chief fired?” When the vice mayor told me, I asked if the council had ever told the chief this. It had not. Then I explained that it is my job to oversee personnel. I stuck to my guns, and I stuck to the process. Sticking to the process will keep you out of trouble.

■ Undertaking too much change too fast equals failure.

Managers need to remember that they are not brought to the community to change its values. The manager’s business is to reflect the policy objectives and values of the community. As one manager puts it, “You need to resist the temptation to change the world. I’ve heard of managers eager to impress, who show up with a ten-point plan to make changes. That’s a big mistake. You need to listen to the community, and let change come from within. At the same time, you do have people watching you who are expecting you to do something. So be sure to identify some short-term achievable successes.”



■ Don’t develop personal friendships with council members, a situation that may be more likely in smaller communities where social circles are smaller. Maintaining a unified council that can successfully work together as a team is more difficult when friendships with the manager interfere.

Council-administrator friendships “always lead to heartache,” one manager explains. “Others on the council suspect that the friend gets additional information and favoritism.” Another manager points out that if the friend on the council falls out of favor with the community, the manager falls as well. The flip side also is true. If the manager becomes the focus of controversy, the friend on the council suffers as a result. One manager says that even though he had known the new mayor for years and had been friends socially, once the mayor was elected he stopped calling him by his first name and always referred to him as “Mayor” or “Mr. Mayor,” emphasizing the change in roles. He also stopped socializing with him.

■ Don’t get too isolated. Administrators vary in their comfort levels when it comes to relations with staff and council members. Conflicts of interest can arise from personal relationships, but it is possible to err by becoming too isolated. Managers who develop no personal relationships and are not seen as part of the community can become targets more easily than those who build networks of support within and outside their organizations.

One manager reminds us to be decent and respectful to people. When there is a close call on budget or other items affecting your employees, always give them the benefit of the doubt. “You don’t have to overpay your employees but you need to look out for them to the extent possible. You will be surprised the dividends in loyalty it will pay. Employees can make you or break you. Some administrators treat them as the enemy, and that is suicide.”

- Realize that you cannot know the pressures and stresses until you are on the job. It is impossible to have insight into all that will be demanded of you until you are the top administrator. Even managers who were promoted from within make this observation.

One manager calls himself naive for having offered to continue doing his job as finance manager as well as being the city manager. “But the council was smart enough to know that I would have to hire someone before long, and they were right.”

- Don’t forget the media.

One manager talks about the importance of understanding the two levels of media. The beat reporter, who covers the local news, is only one level, he explains. The second level is composed of the editors and publishers who write editorials and direct coverage. “This second level sways public opinion,” he says. “They are the policy and opinion makers. You need to cultivate a relationship with these people too, so that when they have a question, they feel comfortable calling you. They are, to some degree, influenced by who they know and who they talk to, just like anyone else.”

This manager says that he learned the importance of this the hard way when, despite a good relationship with the local beat reporter, the local paper’s editorials were constantly negative toward the city. He came to realize that since he did not know the people writing the editorials, he had little chance of affecting what was written. “I was too aloof and felt I did not want to muddy my hands. Now I know you need to build that relationship. You cannot assume that they will give you the benefit of the doubt if you do not know them,” he notes.

- Remember that politics is the number one killer.

One manager laughingly describes his job as “keeping the three council members who don’t like me away from the four who have not made up their minds.” The bite of truth in that joke is that the future of any manager always hangs by just one vote. The multitude of facts, rumors, and perceptions that affect any vote is what is usually meant by politics. It is never possible to be entirely in control of the politics, but successful managers keep a finger on the pulse of local rumors and opinions and work hard to be perceived as impartial and fair. In the end, it might make no difference. But as one manager puts it, “If you believe what you are doing is right, then you can take comfort in that.”

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## Moving to the Top of the Class: On Becoming the Chief Local Government Administrator

**Joseph S. Portugal, city manager, McGregor, Texas**

*Written in 2000 when Joseph was city manager of Weatherford, Texas*

You may have asked yourself why anyone would want to become a local government manager. Or perhaps you have settled that question and believe that the real issue is how to survive as a manager. With twenty years of public service at the time of my initial appointment as manager, twelve of which were in local government, I sometimes wondered if such an event would ever happen. When I finally was hired as manager, I was thrust into almost every imaginable situation. Relying on previous experience, insight gained from veteran managers, and divine guidance, I learned to measure my steps judiciously yet responsively.

As a new manager, I assumed responsibilities in a community of approximately 6,000 people in north-eastern Texas. The community seemed to provide ample opportunities for residential and commercial development. The surrounding landscape included three major highways, a natural rolling terrain with two creeks, and foliage that highlighted the change of seasons. The climate was mild by most standards.

However, I soon found out that the political climate was anything but calm. Prior to my arrival, the city had employed four managers in seven years. With the revolving door, there was a prevailing wind of no growth, accompanied by an aging infrastructure, the absence of a comprehensive plan, dwindling economic development prospects, and numerous missed opportunities.

The new council had been united in its belief that the community needed to move forward, and it wanted a qualified manager to lead it and the citizens in creating a vision for the twenty-first century. So the council hired a professional search firm to find a professional manager, a search that resulted in my hiring.

Along with this history, I also had to manage a situation where the previous manager and his wife worked at the senior center. This person had spent only one year as manager, was not a dues-paying member of either the state or national associations, and apparently had no previous managerial or other local government experience. Yet, as a former manager, he was seen as credible by some in the community, and since day one, almost every decision I made was questioned.



Following a brief assessment of the overall situation and the legacy of the previous managers, I decided that the first order of business was gaining the respect of the council and the staff. So I listened to the commentary and watched the behavior of those involved to learn about the key issues.

Initially, I pledged to the council that minimal changes would be made during my first six months, especially where personnel was concerned, so that I could fully evaluate staff members' capabilities. I also told the council that operational guidelines, procedures, and processes would be revised only if needed to enhance efficiency and effectiveness in delivering services.

Then, a survey of the city limits revealed infrastructure needs that required attention. Generally, the community had been allowed to proceed on its own without much direction or thought about the future. The zoning and subdivision regulations, such as they were, had not been enforced. Streets and drainage suffered from the absence of an identified capital improvement program.

General concerns, noted by the consultant hired to recruit the new manager, included allegations of micromanagement by the previous council, low morale among the employees due to pay and benefits issues, council meddling in operational areas, deteriorating equipment and resources, and favoritism toward certain citizens.

Given the revolving door for managers, the consultant asked the current council whether it wanted to lead or be led in developing a plan for the future. The council responded that it was willing to be led by the right manager to create consensus among interest groups to better serve the community. Their ideas included preparing a comprehensive plan, annexation plan, park plan, and thoroughfare plan, and completing a major highway project.

I retained a professional consultant to lead the council and the staff through a strategic planning session in which both groups met on separate days to discuss their feelings, needs, and ideas about where the community was headed. Following the administration of a personality inventory and various team-building exercises, each group developed its own mission statement.

To the surprise of both council and staff, the independently developed mission statements were virtually identical. Thus, the council and staff were similarly motivated to move the community forward and to begin delivering what many citizens had expected when they elected the new council.

Upon becoming manager, I learned that the city would be receiving a state-funded comprehensive planning grant. This grant was the catalyst needed to help the council and staff capitalize on their newfound momentum and work together to develop a plan for the future. Their actions let the community see that the council, staff, and new manager were working together for the benefit of the citizens.

Challenges to the administration always occur within a first-time administrator's initial six months. Citizens who feel displaced, those who actually were displaced by election results, and others who believe that they have an ax to grind mount assaults on city hall. Sometimes a reason for their concerns exists; at other times individuals are merely testing the mettle of the new manager and how she or he responds. Whatever the case, this is a critical period.

Achieving consensus is sometimes particularly difficult in smaller communities, where everyone seems to know one another. In these circumstances, gaining the confidence and respect of the council and staff may be especially important. Once that has been accomplished, a new manager needs to cultivate influential community members who can provide insight and background information about particular situations. Because this process is tenuous and can be full of land mines, the new manager is best advised to respect and maintain confidentiality.

As a new manager, you are somewhat alone and should therefore establish a network of neighboring managers who can be of assistance. Within two months of my employment, I had already visited with the managers of the four largest cities in the county. We agreed to meet monthly for lunch and to participate in an information exchange.

Regardless of coursework, professional seminars, management conferences, association meetings, and networking with professional managers, new administrators can still find themselves in precarious situations. As large and diverse as our profession is, no single individual can possibly have all the answers to every situation. Therefore, it is important to have another source of support when times become difficult, as they frequently do.

For me, an abiding personal faith and quiet time for reflection are beneficial in dealing with tough situations. In the management profession, relying on faith is a known quality although it is not often the subject of articles or seminars. When days seem trying, a manager needs an outlet for feelings. I have been well served by quiet time for reflection at home or in the office, before anyone else arrives at work. While such respite does not guarantee that your tenure as manager will be free of challenges, it may provide you with peace of mind. Whatever mechanism you choose for reflection, I submit that it is a necessary component of the managerial temperament. Ultimately, it sustains the hallmarks of our profession: honesty, integrity, and professionalism.

After two years on the job, I see employees who believe that government can control growth and development in an orderly manner. In place is a visionary outlook that is based on a comprehensive plan, complete with zoning and subdivision regulations. Water and sewer infrastructure, street improvements, and a new sports complex that provides much-needed recreational opportunities all speak to the community's quality of life. A new beautification board and park board ensure that local citizens are stakeholders in their community and provide a new generation of appointed leaders to maintain the momentum. While there are always issues to address, the community has discovered its identity and has a plan for the future.

In learning about their own needs for self-respect, the employees have become a culturally diverse, yet singularly focused work unit that draws praise from citizens and council alike. They have benefited from a council-approved, two-step compensation plan; an annual awards luncheon; and the development of

a city manager's advisory committee (CMAC) that provides constructive commentary to management. Employees who participate on the CMAC address customer service requests and have established a peer review system to celebrate their success. Their articulated mission and tangible contributions to the community provide evidence of their newfound strength.

As a new manager, I realize that above all else, I am the center of public opinion. While at times it seems that there is more criticism than praise, it is important to never underestimate the silent majority who support progress in all its manifestations.

Time, experience, and faith have taught me to be persistent and purposeful. Ultimately, the challenge of public service offers its own intrinsic rewards.

The following suggestions may help you become oriented in your new position:

1. Assess the expectations of the council by canvassing members' opinions concerning the job you were hired to do, and determine the benchmarks for measuring your success in meeting their expectations.
2. Engage a professional consultant to assist you in conducting a strategic planning session with the council and staff to ferret out concerns and develop an overall vision for the community.
3. Determine the infrastructure needs of the community and, if necessary, retain a professional planning consultant to prepare a comprehensive plan.
4. Attend various community functions and interact with people to gain insight into the attitudes, beliefs, and concerns of citizens.



5. Visit with neighboring colleagues, where feasible, to establish a network of support and a sounding board for situations you may encounter.
6. Establish a personal regimen of quiet time to reflect upon issues before you and to determine the directions in which you should travel.
7. Celebrate the success of the organization in a way that allows the council and staff to participate and enjoy the moment, reinforcing continuity and consensus.
8. Inform the public of progress being made and of benefits to their overall quality of life.
9. Cultivate the mission of the organization through efficiency and effectiveness in delivery of services to citizens.
10. Rejoice in the opportunity to make a positive contribution to local governance.

### 3. Handling a Promotion from within an Organization

When an opportunity to seek the manager's position within the organization arises, some assistants are hesitant to take the next step. However, you may already have many of the necessary core skills. You probably have knowledge of and experience with key services, documents, and related management concerns (e.g., capital projects, financial plans, economic development strategies, personnel issues). Recognizing that you have this foundation and the value it brings to your organization should mitigate any hesitancy you might have in seeking to become the new manager. Tim Wiberg, village administrator of Lincolnwood, Illinois, suggests that "when you start questioning the decisions made by the manager and you think you can do the job better, it is probably time to step up."

When you make the move to the manager's position in your organization, there are positives and negatives to consider. You have an advantage in that you don't have to figure out how to navigate the organization, learn who the players are in the community, fathom the personalities of your elected officials, and deal with related challenges that arise with the unknown. In some cases you can hit the ground running much faster than a counterpart from outside the community.

However, a newly arrived manager may benefit from a more forgiving learning curve because, as one manager notes, there is "no honeymoon period when you are an internal promotion." The negatives include the need to define your new role and authority with department heads, former peers, and community members. One manager found that dealing with personnel issues could be one of the biggest challenges facing an internally promoted candidate. Several managers advise that when it comes to the organization and staff, you have to "make your expectations known early on." Others found that using performance goals to create a new culture is helpful; such goals made it clear that former peers would have to change and

adapt because "your first responsibility is to the organization." For those employees who are resistant to change, deliberate strategies to encourage them to adapt and succeed must first be applied. Then, if they still appear unable to adapt, it is in the best interest of your organization for them to find positions elsewhere that are more aligned with their goals.

In your new position, you will also lose the insulation you previously had from the elected officials. This has been a particularly difficult lesson for some new managers to learn. Ryan Spitzer, town manager of Glasgow, Virginia, advises recent MPA graduates to "remember that each day is new, and just because the council did not like an idea one day does not mean that it will not back you up on an idea the next day.... Take each day in stride, forget battles lost, and work toward the next issue. Do not take defeats personally.... Remember, you were hired to be the professional among politicians, and you should conduct yourself in this manner."

Having been part of the organization already may make you anxious to make changes right away. Several managers advise being patient. They caution not to set unrealistic goals for yourself or the organization, to itemize what you want to accomplish, and to prioritize the list. Art Osten Jr. of Fox River Grove, Illinois, provides this advice for the new manager: "Never miss an opportunity to keep your mouth shut. Don't feel you need to fill every silence during a committee or public meeting. People need time to absorb your ideas and 'come along' with you. Don't drag them."

A final advantage that the promoted-from-within manager has is a preexisting support network. Seek advice through the mentors and the networks of other colleagues with whom you already have relationships. As the stress level increases and the stakes get higher, these relationships are not just a lifeline professionally; they can benefit your personal well-being, too.

The following perspectives are from managers who were promoted from within.



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## Heads or Tails? Moving from Assistant Manager to Manager in the Same Organization

**Kelly Arnold, town manager, Windsor, Colorado**

*Written in 2000 when Kelly was city manager of Laramie, Wyoming*

Like the traditional assistant manager, I had always aspired to be a manager. Mind you, during my seven-year tenure as assistant in Laramie, Wyoming, there were many times when I thought that the assistant manager position was just fine. My predecessor was manager for over fifteen years, and I witnessed the trials and tribulations of a long-tenured manager. I often thought that being the tail of the manager's office was not all that bad.

When my predecessor left the manager position, I had to decide whether I was willing and ready to flip the coin and become the head of the organization. Of course, everyone wanted to know that answer as soon as the manager's resignation was announced. Even though I knew deep down in my heart that it was a position that I wanted, I was noncommittal and assumed the interim manager reins.

What was most important during the interim phase was my business-as-usual posture. The main priority and focus of the council was filling the manager's position, so council members did not want to deal with change or any other major organizational issues. During this phase, I had time to evaluate the organization, develop my interest in the position, and determine what I would do as a manager. As an interim manager, you are thrust into the spotlight, which allows you to immediately evaluate how you will do in the long run of being in the light that brightly shines on every manager. Staying politically neutral and showing the true professionalism that you have developed as an assistant are important during this time.

Spending time with your family to make sure that they are committed to the life of a manager is also important. So many changes occur, particularly in relations with friends and in everyday occurrences, such as grocery shopping. In addition, we had to be sure that we were committed to at least another three to five years in a community in which we had already lived for over seven years.

In Laramie, a consultant was hired to do a search-and-interview process. During this period, I established my relationship with the council and organization as the interim manager, allowing them time to evaluate my performance and personality as a manager. When the search process was completed, the council concluded that I was the best person for the position. I was fortunate to have a council that trusted me and with whom I had developed a positive relationship.

I have witnessed similar processes in other communities where different decisions were made about hiring the interim manager as the new manager. In the long run, the best decisions for all parties are usually made.

From here on out, your life as a former tail to a head changes immensely. Just by the stature of the position and title, your relationships from the past change, and new relationships are established. Even though I was prepared, such occurrences were the most difficult thing about the position change. After about two and a half years as manager, I have finally accepted the changes and am totally comfortable in my position. Although there are still times that I long to be a tail in the organization, the desire to be a good manager and provide the best service to my community quickly banishes any longing for the past.

Even though the transition of an internal candidate to manager is not the norm, I would encourage all assistant managers to seriously consider the opportunities that abound with making the transition to manager when the opportunity arises. We have great insight that can provide the community with a smooth and quick transition. Most importantly, moving from assistant manager to manager within the same organization allows you time to mature as a manager in a familiar organization before taking on new challenges later in your career.

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## Surviving the Transition from Assistant Manager to Manager

**Allan Weegar, city manager, Hurst, Texas**

Preparing for a job interview when you are the inside candidate is really no different than when applying for a manager's position in another community. In both cases, the aspiring assistant must make sure that he or she is familiar with all the issues that face the community before sitting for any interviews with the council. Do not approach the interview with the attitude of "I already know everything" or "They already know what I can do, so I do not have to prove myself."

The preparation required depends on how closely you were in the loop on major issues and decisions facing the organization. The council expects more insight from an assistant who has been privy to the issues. An outside candidate may speculate on how a situation might be handled, but the expectations are high for an assistant who has probably been involved in addressing the issues with the manager.

Do not take preparing for the interview lightly. Since you may have the inside track, or even inside information regarding hot issues, make sure that you are prepared to answer questions regarding local concerns. The council will critique your answers very carefully because you have been part of the management team trying to solve them. Even if you were close philosophically to the previous manager and learned your managerial style from him or her, make sure that your own philosophy and individuality come out when you are responding to interview questions. "I would handle the issue like so-and-so" is an interview turnoff.

You may be offered the job and then asked what you believe is equitable compensation. Because you already are an employee, the council may look at your appointment as a simple promotion or grade change. Do not allow yourself to be hired below market value because of your assistant position; instead, seek a fair starting salary and benefits package, and try to get a commitment for future growth. This can be done by written or verbal agreement, with a written agreement the preferred way to document the commitment to future salary and benefits. Most councils are open to discussing an employment agreement, so if you desire such an agreement, take advantage of their willingness.

Since you are a current employee, some of your bargaining power may be lost, but look at this as an opportunity and seek future, instead of immediate, compensation and benefits. Examples of negotiations that might make the council feel more at ease could include agreeing to an additional salary increase after six months or additional future benefits, rather than asking for everything immediately upon appointment. You will find that the council appreciates your commitment and the knowledge that you expect to be learning and developing throughout the first year of your management tenure.

What happens on your first day, in the first week, in the first six months? Besides gaining the respect and confidence of the council, you need to work on gaining the respect, trust, and confidence of the organization. Change always generates insecurity and trepidation, so gain your management team's confidence and respect immediately.

Begin setting up meetings with each department or division head to review your management philosophy and style. They may have worked with you throughout your tenure in the organization, but they still need to hear from you what your management style is going to be. This step also is important because you can find out what concerns others have and gain insight into their management styles. These are two-way discussions, and your managers need to come prepared to discuss their work program and goals for their departments.

Visit as many operating departments as you can and be visible to your employees. Any time there is a transition, questions abound, so be available and open to discussing these areas as needed. If you have employee groups, set up meetings and provide your thoughts on key issues.

The impression that you convey during the first year is the key to your success in gaining the respect of your employees. Be visible, open, and genuine.

Besides interacting with your organization, get out and visit in the community. Be available to meet with neighborhood groups, the business community, the chamber of commerce, and other organizations. This provides an opportunity for them to review your goals and objectives for the organization and see how

they may fit into their own needs. Moreover, these organizations need to see you in action and develop their own opinions about your skills, leadership, and personality. Many times these groups have perceptions of city hall, either good or bad, and you are being measured by how the previous manager handled situations. Building upon or overcoming past impressions takes time.

Do not present yourself as a clone of the previous manager, however popular she or he was. The organization and community are looking for individuality. Even if you were very close to the administrator and he or she was your mentor, you still have your own personality and your own management and leadership style. You cannot be someone you are not, and the community, elected officials, and your organization will quickly discover if you try to be someone other than yourself.

Do not come in and reorganize just to put your stamp on the organization. Areas may need to be changed or tweaked, but take your time and do your homework. The organization is expecting change, but the quickest way to alienate everyone is by jumping in quickly without laying the groundwork for organizational change. Defuse any uncertainty by studying all options. Visit again with your departmental managers to see what their thoughts and needs are and how their departments may fit into any possible reorganization. Provide them with your thoughts on where you see the organization is headed and how they may play a part. Also, keep your council informed about any changes.

Develop a list of your organizational goals and objectives see how they relate to the current work program. As soon as you can, present your list to the council for its ongoing evaluation of your performance. Keeping the council informed about your attainment of these goals is important; do not wait until your annual evaluation, which may be a year later. It is always good to get the council's feedback so that you are not caught unaware when problems arise.

Remember that the council will inevitably measure you against the previous manager. If the previous manager was very popular and respected, your task

in gaining the confidence of the council may be more difficult. You will find that the council soon accepts your leadership style and personality only if you are yourself. Do not try to imitate others' styles; develop your own.

As an assistant, you may not have had many opportunities to visit with other managers. Even if you are active in professional organizations, develop peer relationships with other managers in the area or within your local city management organization. These relationships can provide you with a wealth of support, advice, and counseling and can serve as a peer network to assist you in your professional and personal growth.

Taking care of yourself is a critical component of the entire process of moving up to the manager's position. A lot of stress occurs in the first year, arising from the transition and the extra demands as you develop your management team. Demands on your time come from the council, the staff, and the community. Typically, as an assistant manager, you already live in the community, so the stress of moving does not compound the transition. You also are probably active and known in the community, so developing community and business relationships do not take as long as when you were new to town. Use the extra time for stress reduction and family participation.

Along with the normal transitional stress that you face in changing jobs, your family also undergoes the stress of the transition. The number of meetings that you must attend increases, and the demands on your time go up dramatically. Don't give up the things that you like to do because of these additional demands. Continue to provide time for your family and yourself. Take time off as needed to rejuvenate yourself and gain perspective. If you are working yourself hard, it takes a toll on you mentally and physically. You have to make time for personal endeavors and not let the job be the driving force of your existence. Elected officials usually realize that you may be spending more time at the office because you are in the development and learning process; they should also be supportive of your personal needs.

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## Assessing Whether You Want the Top Spot

**Joe Casey, deputy county administrator, Hanover County, Virginia**

A passion for public service is an inherent trait for employees who are promoted toward the ultimate post of manager. In many cases such promotions arise in one of two ways: (1) a supervisor is given an acting or permanent position, which creates a vacancy in his or her prior position, or (2) an opportunity is provided that may not be in the direct chain of command (e.g., director in one department, given responsibilities over different departments). Both pathways can lead you toward accession to assistant manager (the “number 2 spot”). However, once you achieve this promotional stature, a different promotional path may emerge when the managerial position becomes vacant.

While in the assistant spot (which may be one of several assistant administrator positions), a manager has the opportunity to develop managerial traits (e.g., experience, maturity, networking ability). This is also a critical point in the employee’s career in which personal development traits and time commitments (e.g., family, hobbies, volunteering) also need to be recognized and respected. Achieving this balance between personal and professional life can help ensure that workplace stress is managed and mitigated, and that quality aspects of life can be attained and fully appreciated. In many cases, those in the number 2 spot may have greater freedoms to enjoy personal activities than the manager, so long tenures in such positions may actually be a wise investment of time. The by-product of such time is a person who is able to share in his or her children’s lives, become further vested in the community, and be further sought out as a knowledgeable and respected source.

From a personal finance standpoint, the number 2 spot may also improve retirement planning as “years of service” factors in with the job security that is sometimes associated with the assistant position. In some cases, the concern of financial security or desire to keep the children in the same school system deters assistants from seeking the manager’s position too quickly. The timing may be best when children are in their later school years, college education costs are funded, and base retirement financial security goals are reasonably met. Ideally, the manager will gracefully retire at a point when the assistant is best positioned professionally and personally to easily assume



an acting position and is, by default, the recognized manager by elected officials, the workforce, and the community.

Even the best-laid plans become disrupted when the manager’s timeline ends abruptly as a result of unanticipated career moves, political pressures, or personal reasons. When this happens, it is incumbent for the assistant to strategically assess whether rising up to meet the challenge of first becoming an acting manager and then seeking the position of manager is what is best for all concerned. In making this assessment, there are a few key aspects to recognize:

- Your current relationships with friends and colleagues may change when you’re in the top spot.
- You need to have the emotional strength and self-esteem to handle being rejected for the full-time position or living with the possibility of being fired. Both are common concerns that managers face in our line of work.
- Remembering the passion and commitment to public service that likely brought you to local government, you need to determine how or if seeking the manager position will help you leave your legacy.

## Final Words

- Remember the positive: You already know the community, the organization, and the challenges.

- Accept the challenge that department heads, former peers, and community members have to adjust to your new role and authority. Meeting with them and outlining expectations helps to ease the transition.

“There is no honeymoon when you are an internal promotion,” declares one manager. Another points out that being an insider means that you may know about staff members who are not doing their jobs or who are in the wrong positions. Dealing with personnel issues could be one of the biggest challenges facing an internally promoted candidate.

“Remember, your first responsibility is to the organization,” another manager suggests. “I found that, in some instances, my former peers made it difficult for me to be the boss. I had to learn to bite the bullet, even if that meant stepping on the feelings of my former peers. I had to buckle down and be the bad guy, doing things such as correcting a former peer in

public. Once I did it, it got easier.” Another manager describes setting up performance goals that made it clear that former peers would have to change and adapt or choose to leave the organization.



## 4. Handling a Newly Created Position

### Before Accepting the Position

- Determine the intended objectives and political circumstances around which the position was created.
- Do a self-evaluation: Am I patient enough to start from scratch? Do I have a vision for the community? Can I be content to implement that vision over a period of time?
- Clarify, as much as possible, your position in the chain of command both with council and with staff—a particularly important step for a first-time administrator position without benefit of “the plan.”
- If no office space exists (not uncommon in a newly created position), create some without stepping on anyone’s toes.
- Identify core staffing needs since you may be starting from scratch, and develop access for recruiting for these positions as soon as possible.

### After You’ve Been Offered the Job

- Determine how the elected body conducts business. You may need to assess whether current procedures are complying with state law, including open-meeting laws and open-records requirements.
- Assist the council and mayor in educating the public on the administrator’s role in their community.

### Once on the Job

- Fill previously elected positions made vacant by the change in government structure; this provides needed support as long as it is clear that you are now in charge.
- Honor the past. Empathize with problems that the council was trying to deal with that led to your hiring. Solicit the council’s version of what the issues were and how it attempted to resolve them.
- Remember that a 60–40 referendum vote means that four out of every ten people in town didn’t want a manager.

- Remember that the elected officials are used to being in charge. Solicit their advice whenever possible to ease the transition to this new form of government.
- Remind yourself that the best part of being a first-time administrator is creating a new organizational structure and building a team. Properly approached, the efficient operation of the organization can’t help but increase.
- Get to know managers in the area both as a personal support network and because they are likely to know what the issues were that led to the change in government.

### Avoiding Pitfalls and Trouble Spots

- Realize that you represent change to a lot of people; their negative reactions to you are not necessarily personal but reflect their fear of change.
- Beware of having “savior” expectations. At the same time, remember that many believe that this new person (you!) will quickly solve all problems.
- Take time and patience to create a management team and instill a team philosophy. Employees have been used to running their own show; a new person overseeing and coordinating things is not always a welcome addition.
- Be alert to potential conflicts of interest that are particularly prevalent in small towns where relatives of elected officials often work for the local government. Managing these situations can be tricky.
- Work on roles and relationships. Council members and employees may be used to working together closely with employees and routinely lobbying elected officials for pet projects.
- Don’t be afraid to admit mistakes.
- Don’t get discouraged. You want to win the war, so a few strategically chosen losses are okay.
- Consider that being the first administrator means that your public style defines the community’s perception of an administrator’s role and function. You carry the weight of your profession and its professional association on your shoulders.

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## You're Number One: The First Administrator in the Community

**Richard Hierstein, retired city manager, first administrator in Knoxville, Iowa; Owatonna, Minnesota; and Pekin, Illinois**

The first administrator in a community has opportunities greater than most administrators enjoy. Since altering the form of government was a call for change, people generally are willing to be helpful and supportive if they are asked for their input before changes occur. However, any first administrator in a community that has changed its form of government needs to follow the same practices as other new administrators, gaining understanding and information during the initial weeks on the new job. For example, like your colleagues, you must approach and listen to elected officials, employees, and the public. A goal-setting session with elected officials and department heads is especially helpful.

But the first-time administrator encounters several special situations. The community needs to know what to expect with the change in form of government: that elected officials are responsible for setting direction and policy, with the administrator strengthening the effectiveness of the mayor and council. Elected officials need to have the changes reinforced. Department heads and employees need to learn that they are truly a team whose cohesiveness and cooperation can make a tremendous difference for everyone in the community.

To strengthen effectiveness, the administrator must be fully in charge of operations, given that undercutting her or his responsibility has serious consequences for effectiveness. We know that the lines between policy and administration are certainly not crystal clear, but we need to impress the community with the importance of the distinction, and opportunities to demonstrate that distinction present themselves early on. Handling the first opportunities properly should minimize future problems since no matter how discreetly situations are handled, word quickly gets around.

In my first experience as a first manager, that initial opportunity came in the first few weeks. A department head went to the outgoing mayor with a request that his personnel be given an extra day off at Thanksgiving. The mayor granted the request without conferring with me—the city manager—or with the council, an action that went beyond the mayor's authority and contrary to established policy. By the time I became



aware of the situation, several employees had planned trips around the expanded time off.

I first confirmed with council members that such action was not done with their knowledge and consent, and that none of them was aware of anything like this happening in the past. Next, I talked to the department head to confirm what had happened. Since he had been used to the mayor occasionally granting requests that violated policy, he claimed to see nothing unusual with the mayor's actions. We discussed proper procedure and the problems that could arise. He was given the opportunity to inform his people that the extra holiday had not been properly granted and would therefore not be possible. We arranged to allow persons who would be inconvenienced by the change to take the day off and make up the eight hours within the pay period.

In each of the three communities where I have been the first manager, I have dealt with violations of policy by elected officials. Although these violations usually involve policies that existed before the position of manager was established, the new manager inherits the continuing problems created by the violations. In one case, a council committee chair had taken actions that should have had approval by the full council. In another, the mayor issued a letter exempting the police and fire departments from a personnel policy approved by the full governing body.

Ensuring that basic policies are properly recorded and followed is a related priority for the first-time administrator. This process can involve team build-

ing with department heads: having them assist with the assembly or review of a personnel policy has a number of significant benefits. Their participation allows them to find out that other departments knew about the preferential treatment that their departments had received in the past and also shows them the hard feelings that were generated by such activities. All are given a stake in working together for policies that are in everyone's best interest. It also gives the manager a chance to learn that some different treatment can be appropriate and accepted.

Team building with department heads is generally a rewarding process for a first-time administrator. I

had one situation in which the department heads had never met as a group prior to my arrival. At least two of the heads had significant problems dealing with each other. While the occasional conflict between them could be frustrating, the results of their cooperative efforts were far better than either could have achieved alone. When the group completed its work on the initial five-year capital improvement plan, all department heads were genuinely satisfied with the finished product. They had openly discussed conflicting interests and arrived at compromises that everyone agreed were in their own long-term best interests as well as those of the community.

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## **A Rural Perspective on Breaking the Barriers to Professional Management as a First Administrator**

**Ann K. Capela, city manager, Inkster, Michigan**

*Written in 2000 when Ann was administrative coordinator of Walworth County, Wisconsin*

For both the administrator and the community, taking on the first-time administrator challenge can range from being extremely rewarding to being very unproductive. For me, it has been very rewarding, with my greatest pleasure coming after I had served slightly more than two years in the community: a local newspaper's editorial said, "Capela moved the county forward."

But what do you do in the beginning? What do you do after visiting the community, attending the regular getting-to-know-you events, finding a small office in the basement of the building, and scrounging up a few pads of paper from a somewhat skeptical staff? My advice: contact your nearest professional manager and acquire some frame of reference on who is who in the community and what events led to the decision to bring on a professional manager.

Building trust is the most difficult task in a rural community that tends to be close-knit and skeptical of new ways of doing things. No magic formula exists. The process requires time, being diligent in the organizational restructuring of the governing body (how the business of the body is conducted), and, above all, being prudent and ethical in your dealings with all who come to you for help or advice.

You quickly need to answer three major questions:

- How is the business of the governing body conducted?

- What is the internal organizational structure?
- How does the organization interact with the community?

Encompassing all of the above is your relationship with the local media.

So, first you need to identify how the governing body is structured and how its business is conducted. In the case of the rural county where I worked, the county was governed by twelve standing oversight committees in management, which recommended action to the full board. The board then acted by resolution, simple motion, or ordinance.

I found a problem in how the meetings were conducted—notably, in their timing and sequencing. Committee meetings were set for whenever those present decided it was convenient for the majority to meet, or whenever it was the "custom and practice." (Note this phrase: it became the explanation to many of my queries of "why are we doing this?") I established a consistent business cycle for the governing body by getting members to agree to a simple calendar of scheduled committee meetings, with the board meeting as the anchor. I accomplished this by sending a calendar at the end of the month to all members of the board and those requesting public notification, and by posting all notices on the bulletin board outside of the administrator's office.

Within a year, I was receiving phone calls from



spouses who were planning ahead and wanted to know what was on the calendar for the month. Moreover, the business cycle allowed department heads to plan ahead in providing information requested at previous meetings. The media were pleased that there was some assurance of consistency and that they could plan news coverage.

In retrospect, the second issue—understanding the internal organizational structure—was my greatest challenge. How do you map out a structure where there is no formal structure? When the statutes are silent, there is only custom and practice. An organizational chart outlining the relationships and the flow of authority is a must, and fitting the professional manager into this chart and flow of authority is crucial to every first-time administrator. In county government, the governmental structure is trifurcated and those officials who are elected or appointed vary from state to state; thus, making this fit is the first course of action for a first-time administrator in determining the organizational structure. The next step is determining which county functions are musts (legally mandated), which are optional, and which are custom and practice.

Third, you must always figure out how the organization's functions relate not only to each other internally but also to the larger community. Important external bodies often include other governmental bod-

ies and agencies with which your organization has financial relationships; for counties, this often includes university extension offices.

The relationship between you and the media can be your greatest asset and a link to the community in building needed trust. An open relationship with the local media is essential to spreading the good news about how the new, professionally managed structure works for the community and benefits residents. For me, media contacts included a monthly half-hour radio show after every county board meeting.

Know thy open-meetings law! An open-door policy should be the rule, not the exception. Remember, unless issues are exempted by the open-meetings law, they are matters of public record.

The three questions that I posed above, when answered, help to produce the trust needed by the new first-time professional administrator in a rural community. In addition, when you look back as a professional, you will be rewarded by knowing that you have changed how the governing body does its business, changed the internal structure of the functions, changed how the functions relate to each other, and changed how the community receives your successor. Following my tenure, the county chose to hire another professional and to this day is still operating with a professional administrator.

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## Being First: We've Created a Position Just for You

**Drew Corn, town administrator, Northlake, Texas**

For the community that creates an administrator position for the first time, expectations run the gamut. Contrary to what I originally thought when accepting the job as first administrator of Northlake, the first and foremost expectation of the council was for operational consistency. The greatest frustration on the part of the town's elected leaders was the lack of follow-through. I was quickly reminded that most elected officials are part-time volunteers; this is even more the case in smaller towns. Often their work and family obligations conflict with meeting deadlines, attending intergovernmental meetings, and completing seemingly endless paperwork. For the most part, the Northlake council had a clear vision of where it wanted to go and what it wanted to be. My role was to assist the community in reaching this vision through

day-to-day oversight and administration.

My own expectations were more focused on my technical abilities. I was recruited from a mid-sized city, where I had served as budget director, and I had assumed that I was to bring this very complicated and award-winning budget process to the small town of Northlake. I soon realized that my time was split between so many different activities that I was unable to concentrate on the budget as I had been able to do in my previous city. This brings up another important expectation. You may have been recruited for a particular area of expertise, but you are obviously expected to handle all areas related to administering a city or county. In order to accomplish this, you must analyze your organization: what areas of expertise do you have covered, and to what areas must you bring in additional support?

If you are in a small community with limited resources, you will not have all the necessary staff positions to cover all areas. And as I realized almost immediately, you cannot cover all areas at once. So you need to develop a plan for adding professional staff as resources become available. And because you can seldom hire part-time employees in more specialized fields, you must wait for adequate and reliable resources to become available before you can hire a full-time position. Often consultants can help you bridge the gap while you are waiting for adequate resources. However, consultants often work for many different entities; they cannot always drop everything to assist you, and they are seldom down the hall. As mentioned, part-time employees are a possible interim (and often long-term) solution. In the case of Northlake, our needs were much greater than our resources, and we had to work hard at keeping the hours of part-time employees within budget. Part-time employees were right down the hall, but some creativity and consideration were needed to work around their schedules.

Developing and growing your staff involves another expectation that the council and the community has of you: professionalism and ethics in your actions and those of your staff. You, of course, must exhibit these traits, but you must also ensure that they are strengthened by your hiring decisions. Because of the newness of your position, you are often thrust into a role of defending and justifying the council-manager form of government even if, as was my case, the position was created by ordinance and not by charter. Administrators in newly created positions are often under increased pressure because an unsuccessful administrator may cause the elected officials to reconsider their move to create the position. Whether you want to or not, you serve as trial run for a community's foray into professional administration. Your actions and, by extension, those of your staff become evidence for the community's decision to continue along this path or reverse course. Communities with long traditions of professional management do not have quite the same pressure when it comes to hiring decisions.

Another expectation held by my council that really caught me off guard was to grow and develop my network and associations. I had previously worked in organizations that viewed professional associations as nonessential, and when budget constraints arose, as they invariably do, conferences, workshops, and memberships were the first things to be cut and the last to be reinstated. I was very fortunate that my council understood the importance of networking, especially for a small community with limited resources and

for an administrator who had never held the position before. Another surprise was the assistance and advice I received from administrators in the area—often from managers who were in neighboring communities that were competing for the same developments, grants, and projects. I was made aware in my first months at the helm that other administrators must first carry out the goals and directives of their governing bodies, but barring no conflict with this primary directive, assistance to fellow colleagues was freely given (and, on my part, eagerly accepted).

Even though your community has created an administrator position and you are the first individual to sit in the chair, there are obviously other individuals within the organization who had been providing various levels of administration and oversight. In Texas, typically the first employee is the town secretary, and this individual will have been there long before you arrived. In many situations the secretary will not report to you. Understanding the secretary's role in the organization as it was prior to your arrival is crucial in the sharing and ultimate transitioning of many administrative duties. And there may be other staff members who were already with the organization before you came, such as a police chief or public works director. As with any organization, you should spend time and effort developing trust and rapport with existing staff, but you should also realize that, like the council, these employees are not used to having an administrator in the organization, let alone a new boss. In addition, where they once may have reported directly to the council, you have now come between them and the council in the hierarchy. You also must take into account the personal and professional relationships among members of the governing body.

Your relationship with the elected body must be constantly monitored and assessed. Communication, both formal and informal, is crucial to your success. As a management assistant in the Dallas City Manager's Office, I was often frustrated by the painstaking wording and numerous rewrites of council agenda items until Mary Suhm (at the time an assistant manager) commented that the council agenda and the annual budget were the two most important methods of communication that a manager had with council. Simply speaking, the budget shows the governing body your plan to enact their policies within the resources given, and the agenda shows them how you will accomplish this through their approval of certain actions. But even within these formal communication processes, informal communication is necessary. Being available to individual council members for questions they may have on an

agenda item or a budget request could avoid misunderstandings. Every manager I observed dropped everything to take a call from a council member, not only because that was his or her boss but also because a few minutes of conversation could save hours of debate during budget hearings or council meetings. You always want to be on the same page as your elected officials from day one. In a newly created position, you and the council will need to develop a system that works best for each party; one size does not fit all. Each council member may prefer a very different communication method. Know their preferred methods and use them.

However, during the transition of day-to-day operations, the most important individual in the organization to communicate with is the chief elected official. This transition can be very complex because the official is going from serving in both a policy and administrative role to serving in just a policy role. I was very fortunate to have a mayor who worked with me and was very forthright and communicative. In hindsight, I was frankly not ready to take over all town activities at once, and there were many ongoing projects for which I did not have the luxury of time to be “caught up to speed.” I was given authority in bite-sized pieces. In my case, the mayor was the chief executive prior to my arrival, and we evolved into a power-sharing transition. As a wise, now-retired manager once told me, the mayor can be your best friend or your worst enemy.

In the end, what helped me the most in transitioning from a manager in a very large city to a director

in a mid-sized city to an administrator in a small town is that I had very few preconceived notions. A peer in a neighboring community who was Roanoke’s first administrator, Jimmy Stathatos, put it succinctly, “I think it really helped me that I hadn’t been a CM before. I had worked for council-manager cities, obviously, but I didn’t have any habits that I needed to change.” Communities that are creating an administrator position are, in a sense, starting fresh. But they are also taking a risk, and they want (and possibly need) somebody who has an open mind or, at the minimum, a very flexible and adaptable personality.

You will most likely be the highest-paid individual in the organization working for an elected body of unpaid volunteers. You may also have the highest level of education among the staff. Many on staff and in the community will be looking for you to fix problems or to give you their problems, often one and the same. At the end of the day, you are a public servant hired to provide administrative oversight and leadership. Everyone will have certain expectations of you, which will possibly conflict with those of others. You might be asked to settle old scores, take risks no one else would take, or go in directions opposite to that of previous council policy. While the staff and your peers are always important to your success as an administrator, especially if you are a first-time administrator, ultimately you work directly for the elected body as chosen by the community at large. Implementing the council’s policy will be the measure of your success.

## 5. NONTRADITIONAL ROUTES TO MANAGEMENT

Ten years ago ICMA appointed a First-Time Administrator's Task Force to research and prepare a handbook designed to serve as a guide for newly appointed administrators. The result of that effort has provided those new to the profession with a practical, commonsense outline of testimonials and how-to's in the interest of helping these individuals assimilate into their positions.

Today ICMA has once again asked a task force of local government professionals to examine the handbook and determine what revisions are needed to bring the document up-to-date for today's newly appointed administrators. Since the development of the original effort, the local government profession has experienced many changes. Among them is the emergence of nontraditional appointees to the profession from a host of different backgrounds, trades, and experience levels.

Given that phenomenon, we would be remiss not to account for this new nontraditional avenue to the profession. When I first entered local government, the

standard path to becoming a manager was administrative assistant, to assistant to the manager, to assistant or deputy manager, and, finally, to manager. While this is still a route that those entering the profession may take, nontraditional entrance into the management field is becoming more a consequence of the retirement of veteran managers.

Accordingly, this section documents the entrance of these nontraditional managers into the profession. Examples include individuals from the military, public education, the private sector, and, most notably, recent MPA program graduates. Whatever the path, the time-honored traditions of ethical service, commitment to democracy, and an understanding of the delicate balance of council-manager relations are still keys to a successful management career. It is for this reason that the handbook acknowledges the nontraditional managers' ascendancy to the top position and the challenges that they have experienced.

—Joseph S. Portugal, city manager,  
McGregor, Texas, ICMA-CM

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### From the Classroom to the Manager's Office

#### Ryan Spitzer, town manager, Glasgow, Virginia

College has undoubtedly taught you all you need to know about searching for information and critically and rationally putting that information together for the betterment of a community. However, as I have found out, college stops short there and cannot teach you about the intangibles about a job. Here are some recommendations from what I learned in my first year on the job:

- Know the community before you take the job. You should do research on the locality about the way of life of its people, what services they expect, any issues that may be present at the time, etc.
- Once you get the job, form relationships with your council members. This is important because you have to work with these people on a regular basis. It is also important to understand their mentality and thought processes on issues.
- Do not be afraid to ask questions. Asking questions is very important because, as a new manager, you will not know everything. Local knowledge that longtime employees and council members have will be invaluable. Also, talk with other managers in your state or region because they have all been through the same ordeal, maybe just on a different scale. If you do not reach out to others, you will not be able to grow in the profession.
- Form expectations up front with council members. This is important. Have a meeting with each one when you get to the locality, and then meet with the entire group so that you can learn what they expect from you and what you expect from them. They should set the policy while you manage the operations to get them there.

- Stay above the politics. Probably one of the best and worst aspects of the job is that every day there is something new coming across your desk. This is good because it makes each day worth coming in to work and keeps your brain stimulated. However, you also have to remember that each day is new, and just because the council did not like an idea one day does not mean that it will not back you up on an idea the next day. Do not get discouraged if they reject an idea of yours; it is your job to just present the different options and what you think is the best recommendation. This does not

mean that they have to agree with you, and they will not agree every time. Take each day in stride, forget battles lost, and work toward the next issue. Do not take defeats personally. This was one of the hardest lessons that I had to learn, especially since I was not used to getting ideas shot down. Remember, you were hired to be the professional among politicians, and you should conduct yourself in this manner. Do not get caught up in each battle; look at it in the long term and make your collective actions better the community.

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## Youngest Employee and Town Manager

**Reid Wodicka, town manager, Elkton, Virginia**

I graduated from James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, in May 2009 with a BS in public policy and administration. In certainly nontraditional fashion, my graduation was five weeks after I started my position as town manager of Elkton, Virginia. During college, I had worked for the local county fire department part time, and until later in my college career, my goal had been to work full time as a firefighter and, maybe eventually, as a fire chief somewhere. In my junior year, Bob Holton, the town superintendent (many towns in the area call the manager “superintendent”) of Bridgewater, Virginia, was my professor in the program’s public personnel management course. During that semester, we developed a friendship, and he asked me to consider a career in local government management. So that I could learn more about what it took to be a local government manager, Bob asked me to intern with him and eventually work toward a paid part-time position as my skills developed. I did that, and about nine months later, the town manager position opened up in nearby Elkton. I am twenty-three years old and, currently, am the youngest employee in the organization.

Prior to the current mayor, there was a mayor who did not believe in the council-manager form, even though the charter clearly stated that that was how the local government was to operate. Therefore, there had been no manager here for nearly two years. There was no true organizational structure, no established goals for the town, no planning; the budget was an unsolved mystery; and the town and county could not agree on any issue. Despite the warning of everyone in my life that Elkton was just “too much for *anyone* to handle,” I interviewed for the job and was offered it a few days later at the unthinkable high salary of \$45,000 per year. To say the least, it has been a roller coaster since. While it is difficult to categorize all the challenges that a first-time administrator will meet, I have generally grouped what my major challenges have been since I started here.

I will say that overall I have an excellent, dedicated staff, the vast majority of whom have the best interests of the community in mind and support me in the decisions that I make. However, there have been a number of holdovers who are less than enthusias-

tic about working within the system that I am slowly developing. Two individuals in particular have created an especially challenging environment for my new career. These two individuals were department heads who had gotten used to not being accountable for their actions or for the performance of their departments. Simply put, since there was no manager, there was no one looking at the job they were doing to determine if it was satisfactory. Each had become complacent, used to accomplishing tasks on his own timeline, making decisions that may have been easier rather than right. I believe that every action should be accomplished with excellence in mind and confess that I think mediocrity is unacceptable.

Some run-ins occurred during the first couple of months, as a result of which, one of the department heads has left the organization and one is still here but is slowly beginning to become a team player. Especially for a person who is entering the profession in a nontraditional manner, it can almost be assumed that you will have at least one or two employees who are not completely accepting of the idea that you are here to stay and that you can be a legitimate advocate for the locality. Although these individuals will cause problems, sleepless nights, and general headaches, it is imperative that you continue to treat them with the same respect that you treat other employees. While it may seem easy (and maybe even logical) to lash out against them, doing so will only reduce your ability to lead the other staff. If you show that you are interested in working with these disgruntled individuals, one of two things will occur. First, and this is the one we hope does not happen, the person will not be able to adapt, at which point either he or she will leave or you may be forced to dismiss the person. Second, and this is a better choice, the person will see that you are a fair and honest individual and will begin to be a productive member of the staff.

In a similar light, you may also be tempted to ignore such employees, giving in to their negative attitudes and letting them do whatever they want. It is important that rebellious employees be held to the same standards that other employees are held to, even though it causes problems. Showing that you are a fair manager will help you build relationships with

other members of your staff, earn legitimacy with the council, and build a reputation as an honest professional. Personnel issues can be particularly troublesome because personal relationships can be difficult to handle as a new manager. While you should strive to have a friendly relationship with every employee, you must at the same time maintain a professional distance. Recognize that these people are working for you and that you must hold them to the expectations that you set forward. Be flexible, but do not allow yourself to be run over by what we in Elkton refer to as “temper-tantrum kids.”

Elkton tends to be the town in the region that the media find most entertaining to watch. Recently, however, one of the other towns in the area has received some negative press. The manager has been there for about twenty-five years but has a new set of council members who are causing some pretty serious issues. I tell this story because regardless of how much experience you have, it is always possible that the citizens will elect council members who are less than easy to work with. The fact that you are coming from a non-traditional background only compounds the challenge of working with some of these people. While we hope that most people run for elected office for the good of the community, we all know that there are some people who run simply for some personal need to be important. You have to deal with these people just as much as you deal with those who are easy to work

with, and it is important that you are able to meet their needs.

Particularly if you are coming from a nontraditional background, it is likely that some will be skeptical about your ability to do the job. In fact, when I was hired in Elkton, a council member resigned over my appointment, stating that I did not have enough experience to handle all the problems. He was probably right at the time, but several months later, this former council member spoke to me and expressed that he was, in fact, pleased with the job I was doing. I tell this story to convey that while there will be some people who do not want you to succeed or do not think that you are capable of succeeding, you must continue forward with what you and the council think is the right direction. You will probably be right in the long run, and while people may give you some negative feedback at the start, if you are making fair and honest decisions and if you are responsible, most people will see that you should, in fact, be in the position for which you were hired. Simply speaking, you are going to have to weather the storm. You will have to do so many times during your career as different issues arise, so be aware and do not allow the tornadoes to overwhelm and defeat you. Public management is a difficult job, and it is not for the fainthearted. Your name will be cursed regardless of your decision, but you must always hold your head high and be the bigger person.

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## From the Military to the Manager's Office

**Roger Mumby, city manager, Gatesville, Texas**

Everybody entering the exciting field of public administration enters with a unique background and educational experience. I started a second career in public administration after serving in the military, and I have been asked to describe this transition process. Each transition from the military to local government is also unique. *All military service is different, so there is not a cookie-cutter model for making the change in employment.*

I entered the army in 1966 during the draft and the Vietnam war. I graduated from San Diego State University with a bachelor's degree in business administration and a major in accounting. This education was certainly helpful years later in local government. I attended Officer Candidate School and was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Armored Corps. I attended flight school in 1972 and was a rated aviator for the remainder of my career. In 1979 I attended the University of Missouri in Kansas City and received a master's degree in public administration with a major in organizational behavior. In addition to the normal public administration subjects—for example, governmental accounting, revenue and general obligation bonds, etc.—we studied extensively in organizational behavior. This education was key to my success in the remainder of my army career and was certainly critical in the transition to my new career after the army.

I served in various military assignments, in both armor and aviation, for thirty years. When I retired from the army in 1997, I was able to be selective with the positions offered and to make the transition to local government management. I served in my first community for nine years, and have now served in my second community for over three years.

If you are considering moving from the military to public administration, your military experience makes you qualified for the move. Whether you served as an officer or an enlisted person, and whether you served for three years or thirty, your leadership experience in the military directly translates to working for the citizens in our communities.

The following is a list of suggestions for anybody considering moving from the military to local government. Some of these can be inferred from the previous discussion:

- Join the state local government management association and ICMA, and actively participate in their educational programs. Most organizations want their managers to be active and will pay the dues.
- Read and study your charter and the state constitution that governs general law communities.
- Read the complete code of ordinances.
- Have your governing body define your priorities and then jointly develop a performance plan for you. Ask for a performance review each year to ensure that you are meeting its expectations.
- Meet with all your department heads within the first two weeks of employment. Have each one take you to his or her office for a tour, and meet as many of the employees as possible. I told my department heads to show me “the good, the bad and the ugly.” Ride along with the police department, fire department, utility department, etc. Be visible. Visit work sites where your people are fixing water leaks, operating your water plant, having classes in your fitness center, and wherever else your people are serving the community.
- Schedule a weekly meeting with department heads. If you have a volunteer fire department, include the fire chief if he or she is willing.
- Have the council set the priorities for the next year's budget, and actively involve the department heads in its development.
- Make a point of visiting businesses, the school superintendent, and managers of other organizations (hospital, county judge, etc.). Introduce yourself, ask how the local government is serving them, and ask for recommendations. Do repeat visits every year or so.
- Speak to any organization that asks. Develop a “State of the Community” presentation that describes what the local government is doing. Many of these things are basic to leadership, but most are a different way of operating than what you experienced in the military. The challenges that you will face in transitioning from the military to local government will depend on the jobs that you performed in the military. The main challenge that I faced was understanding how the council-manager form of



government works and how I, as the manager, work with an elected body to perform the missions. It is important that you understand your role and the role of the elected officials, and develop a good working relationship.

I am proud of my service in the army, and I enjoyed working with the great soldiers and civilians for the thirty years that I served. I am equally proud of the great people with whom I have been lucky to serve in communities for the past twelve years.

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## Adjusting Your Leadership Style

**Bruce Harrill, city administrator, Waynesville, Missouri**

I feel that my service as a military officer prepared me very well for the local government administrator role. The army taught me good, sound leadership skills that I put to use on a daily basis. The planning and decision-making process that the military teaches can be applied very successfully to local government projects. The military process to determine and evaluate different courses of action is a very useful tool for local government planning. The professional values that are instilled by military service, such as dedication to duty, integrity, and more, can be critical keys to success in managing local governments.

One important note is that my military education emphasized adjusting the leadership style to suit the

situation. Sometimes former military service members may not adjust their leadership styles to suit the civilian world. A “drill sergeant” approach normally does not go over very well with civilians. The military approach tends to be bottom line up front, discussed in a straightforward manner; however, I find that a less direct approach is more useful.

Many military jobs are similar to positions found in local governments, such as public works director and planner. The garrison commander has a role similar to that of a local government administrator. Experience in those military positions helps to prepare for the job in the civilian world.

# Appendix A: PM Bulletin Board

The following answers were received in response to the *PM Bulletin Board* question posed in the March 1998 issue of *Public Management*:

If you have served as the first administrator or manager of a local government, what tips do you have for colleagues who might accept a similar position? What helped you with the local government's transition to a new form of government?

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- If the position is as an administrator, you should insist, before accepting it, that the administrator will be able to call the shots on a daily basis. Department heads who are out doing their own thing without reporting to the administrator can only cause confusion. Someone has to be in charge.
  - Establish a plan of goals and objectives if one doesn't already exist. The local government may have struggled along without any vision prior to establishing the position. A plan can be useful in documenting that the transition was effective and that things are being done.
  - Get out of the office into the local coffee shop, and get to know the residents. Sell the plan there.
  - Visit with your supporters frequently, but don't ignore those who aren't big supporters. Winning over the latter can be helpful.

What helped me with the transition was previous experience in establishing two other positions in Kansas, and the base of support from a council majority and other individuals in the community who were in favor of the change.

Best of all, if you last more than two years, you're doing great!

—Rick Shain, city administrator,  
Medicine Lodge, Kansas

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I was the first city administrator of a city in 1967, which was also my first position as a city administrator. While

that was a long time ago, there are certain things about that experience that still are vivid in my memory:

- Try to ascertain in advance whether all the elected officials were supportive of establishing the new form of government. If a significant minority were opposed, or if a key player, such as the mayor, did not favor the change, then you might want to consider not seeking the position.
- Before you decide to take a first city administrator position, check to see where the local news media were on the issue during the decision-making process to change forms of government. If there are strong local media, they can be useful during the initial stages of your tenure if they have supported the professional administrator concept, because they will want you to be successful.
- In my case, there were some elected administrative positions—city clerk and city collector—that remained as elected positions even after the city administrator form was adopted. The people in these positions were difficult to work with because they saw the city administrator and the new form of government as a potential threat to their tenure.
- If a city has been managed without professional assistance for a number of years, don't expect to be able to correct all its management problems immediately. It may be difficult to get department directors to become part of the team, and they may see proposed changes as criticism of their previous management.

—Kent Leichter, city manager,  
Crestwood, Missouri

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In response to the question, I offer the following thoughts after having been the first administrator in three communities:

- Be prepared. Learn as much about the community, its elected officials, and your employees as quickly as you can. Do your own assessment. Don't buy into someone else's opinions about people or needs.

- Be pleasant. Don't begin by dictating how things are going to be. Transition is always difficult, but when you have existing employees who have been "in charge" prior to your arrival, it will be easier to adapt if your attitude is one of cooperation rather than control.
- Be thorough. Know your role. Know your business. See that good policies and procedures are put into place and then follow them. Treat everyone fairly.
- Lead gently but forcefully. This is a big change for everyone, and even the elected officials who hired you are not really prepared for what you will be doing.
- Be patient. Things will smooth out and progress will be made.

There is a special challenge in serving in the role of first administrator, and I really enjoy that challenge. Hopefully, those who have followed me have found a good base established.

—Ann Daniels, *city administrator,  
Riverside, Missouri*

It is critical, above all else, to ensure that the council, staff, and administrator fully understand their representative roles in the organization. This goes beyond the drafting of a job description; your role must be understood, believed, and supported. In exchange, you must be willing to take command; fear of failure must not be used as an excuse for a lack of leadership on your part. As a first-time administrator/manager, you have the opportunity to build a strong organization that will reap benefits far beyond the next budget for years to come.

—Scott A. Botcher, *city administrator,  
Delafield, Wisconsin*

As the first village manager of Waynesville, Ohio (the antiques capital of the Midwest), I offer the following tips:

- Pay attention to history. Find out what motivated the community to choose a manager/administrator form of government in the first place. This will tell you a lot about the community's expectations of you.
- Develop your listening skills. As you are introduced in the community, listen carefully to what is said (and not said) about the community's needs and desires.

- Pay close attention to developing management systems. Try to develop a consistent way of approaching people, problems, and concerns. Remember, the next manager will have to make sense out of the systems you put in place. Take time. Think ahead!
- Enjoy your unique position! There can be only one first manager in a community. It can be fun to blaze your own trail.

—Kevin Harper, *village manager,  
Waynesville, Ohio*

When serving as the first administrator or manager, I have some suggestions that could prove useful in assisting a municipality in its transition from the government of the past to the new form. Underlying, overriding, and permeating all the suggestions are the twin concepts of patience and understanding.

It is critical to keep in mind that the "rules of the game" have changed for elected officials, government employees, and the people of the community. The rules have changed for everyone. Everyone, that is, except you. You are familiar with the new form; you are the professional, potentially a leader of the new form. But community members need your understanding of the new rules and your patience as they become accustomed to the changed environment. They also need your ability to educate, inform, and eventually lead the community toward acceptance and enthusiasm for the professional management of local government.

—Melinda R. Carlton, *county administrator,  
Kent County, Michigan*

As the first full-time administrator of Rochester (population 4,300), I offer this response. Prior to accepting a position as the first administrator, go through a "feeling-out" process with your prospective employers. Explore every potential issue, including lines of authority, and, most important, develop a set of written, measurable expectations. What is your employer's expectation of you in the management position?

On what level is the elected leadership prepared to delegate decision-making authority? Are they willing to hand you the reins, or are they more likely to stand over your shoulder, micromanaging? Do they firmly believe in the policy-versus-administration dichotomy? If there is a new charter, do they understand the role of the administrator?

As the first administrator, you need to understand these perceptions before taking a position. There is a good chance that if you are the first-time administrator, the elected leadership may not know what they want. In the absence of a charter or other legislative document, it is your job to define the position. Just remember that, in some cases, this information can be difficult to come by.

—Russell J. Dean, executive secretary,  
Rochester, Massachusetts

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Tips for the first-time administrator:

- Realize that you represent change to a lot of people; their negative reactions to you are not necessarily personal but reflect their fear of change.
- Plan on speaking to as many civic clubs and organizations as possible in your first three to six months; people will relax if they think they're getting to know you and if you appear to be a "reasonable" sort.
- Assemble the town staff in one place as soon as possible; introduce yourself, and tell them to continue doing exactly what they are doing now. Tell them that you don't plan to fix what isn't broken but that you do need some time to look at the entire organization. Have a question-and-answer period so that they can start to get some idea of the kind of person you are. Rumors and fears will flourish if your employees are kept in the dark about you. On the other hand, the town's employees can be some of your most important supporters.
- Make a point of going to each volunteer organization that supports the town and meeting with them. The most important could very well be the volunteer fire department, but all the volunteer organizations have a significant impact on the well-being of your town.
- Meet the mayor and each council member at his or her place of business. You don't need to get into heavy details on what you will be doing; the point is that they see another side of you outside the office.
- Strive to keep your family life as normal as possible; make it clear from the interview that your

home life is key to avoiding burnout and that your family will be a part of the community but are not to be put under the same public scrutiny as you will encounter.

- Find a local church that you and your family can attend; you will be tested in many ways, and your church can be one of your best supports when your character and integrity are questioned and trashed by people of ill will.
- If your town has not done goal setting before, set up a special meeting to get the mayor and council on board as to what they see as the top ten goals for the town in the coming year and what they will do to support these goals. These top ten goals will then become the guide for you and the staff in the first year, helping you focus your attention and efforts. Moreover, the inevitable complaints will be more easily seen as the special pleadings for the well-connected inner cliques that they are.
- Keeping focused on the town's goals is vital to your long-term effectiveness and success.
- Seek out every reasonable savings in conducting town business and every appropriate grant that would support town business or goals. At the end of the year, these savings can be considerable. Add together all savings and grants, and express that figure as a "return on investment" in your salary. For instance, if your salary is \$50,000 and you save and/or bring in a total of \$1 million, then the return on investment is 20-to-1.
- Cultivate good relationships with members of the press. They can be among your most consistent supporters. One way to do this is to set up a press table at the location of council meetings. It need not be elaborate, but a table—with its own lights, writing pads, supplies, and folders containing all the documents and materials being discussed during the meeting—will make reporters' jobs much easier and ensure that major points raised in the meeting will be reported correctly.
- Develop your own long-term list of what you think needs to be done, but realize that timing is everything.

—Tom Cannon, town administrator,  
Dandridge, Tennessee

## Appendix B: Additional Advice

The following answers were received in response to the same questions posed, more than ten years later, to state associations and over social media sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter:

If you have served as the first administrator or manager of a local government, what tips do you have for colleagues who might accept a similar position? What helped you with the local government's transition to a new form of government?

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My bit of advice to those who are going to become the first professional manager/administrator is to act with a bit of humility and grace.

As the first administrator in a city, I often found myself being approached by many people who simply lacked a reference point or came with a predisposition on the position. When explaining what the position is and what the position does, remember that you are the spokesperson for the entire profession.

Explain what the city council is getting with someone full time handling the little things, such as checking to see if the bonds can be refinanced and interfacing with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency regarding brownfield grants that your city has just received. Remember to not present yourself as the know-it-all and to accept with grace when people want to argue against professional management. Often these arguments seem to be personal attacks, and it is easy to bring the rapier out and start a duel, but instead try and do a little active listening. See if you can find out their fears, as often these arguments are from the standpoint of a fear of the unknown, and see if you can address them, or at least restate them back to the person, so that he or she knows that you are listening. I would also encourage you to hand out business cards to let people know that they can contact you with questions. People have come to accept that government will be closed and unavailable. Change that perception: be willing to listen.

—Richard Downey, city administrator,  
Rock Falls, Illinois

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Communication with the city council and your department heads is both critical and a valuable two-way street. Building a strong working relationship with your peers in nearby communities can also be extremely helpful.

In addition, you need to keep in mind that your position is also new to your city council and department heads. They may not know how to work with you, nor how to work through you in order to get things done. You will need to be patient, and to teach everyone how things need to work. The current book for first-time administrators will be helpful to you and can be very helpful to them.

—William Cooper, city manager,  
Hamtrack, Michigan

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My first job as a city administrator was with a city where I was the first administrator. My chief objective was to “do no harm to the profession.” After I was hired, I determined that I wanted to be the first in a long line of professional managers. The council that hired me did not give me full authority over all the departments. They still wanted some control.

My first months were devoted to helping the department heads get things done. I needed to gain their trust so that they would recognize the city administrator as someone to whom they could go for help. Once they recognized that I wasn't about to “get them,” they figured that we were working for the betterment of the city and they put themselves under my authority. I made mistakes, and the council and staff were gracious as I learned to be a manager.

I stayed five years and got itchy feet. The community still has professional management.

—Larry Paine, city administrator,  
Hillsboro, Kansas

# Appendix C: The ICMA Code of Ethics: A Commitment to Integrity

**Martha Perego, director of ethics, ICMA**

The success of any leader rests largely on his or her ability to be a person of high integrity. For the administrator leading a local government, it's critical that your actions, in both your personal and professional life, build trust with those you serve. The ICMA Code of Ethics, first written in 1924, sets the ethical standard for local government managers and professionals. The values imbedded in the code define your responsibility and obligation to the elected officials, your community, your employees, and even to your profession.

New to the role as an administrator, you will certainly encounter and need to deal with a wide range of ethical situations. Much of the advice you have read thus far is actually grounded in the core values and principles of the ICMA Code of Ethics. The importance of treating governing body members equally and staying out of politics is a bedrock principle of the profession (Tenet 7). Treating employees fairly, making all personnel decisions based on merit, and actively creating a diverse workforce is vital to building a strong, ethical culture in the organization (Tenet 11). Maintaining transparency in decision making and actively sharing information helps to build trust and confidence with the public we serve (Tenets 4 and 10). Being alert to potential conflicts of interest, gifts, or investments that can undermine your credibility is key to upholding the universal principle that true leaders seek no favor (Tenet 12). Please take the time to read the ICMA Code of Ethics and put a copy of the code on your office wall to remind yourself daily of your obligation as a professional.



ICMA members agree to hold themselves to the high standard set by the ICMA Code of Ethics and to submit to a peer review of their conduct should any allegation of improper conduct be raised. By joining ICMA and committing to the code, members truly distinguish themselves from others who may hold the title of administrator but do not adhere to high ethical standards.

One of the best member services that ICMA provides is ethics advice. Regardless of the issue, you can contact an ICMA ethics expert for reliable advice and strategies for resolving ethical dilemmas. It's confidential and for a new administrator, priceless! *PM Magazine's* monthly "Ethics Matter!" column, the Knowledge Network, ICMA conference sessions, and Web events are more resources for ethics advice and inspiration for building strong individual and organizational ethical standards.

# Appendix D: Resources

## Books

“Green Books” (ICMA).

For over fifty years, these textbooks have been the authoritative source on local government management for practitioners, teachers, and thousands of cities and counties in the United States and abroad. With titles that deal with the entire range of local government functions, each book is an indispensable reference in its field, offering authoritative managerial coverage.

*Analyzing Your City: An Orientation Plan for New City Managers*, rev. ed., James Thurmond (Texas City Management Association, 2002).

An indispensable guide for the new city manager and an essential refresher for the city manager who is relocating.

*Hitting the Beach: A Survival Handbook for the Job-Changing Public Manager* (ICMA, 1994).

Designed for managers at every career stage, this handbook covers a number of topics relevant to managers early in their careers.

*Job-Hunting Handbook for the Local Government Professional* (ICMA, 1997).

This handbook focuses on career planning, résumé writing, the interview process, and compensation negotiation. It is an excellent resource for young professionals seeking their first manager’s position.

*Local Government Management: Is It the Career for You?* (ICMA, 2001).

Providing insights into the local government management profession, this is a good resource for anyone considering a career as a manager or administrator.

*Managing Local Government: Cases in Effectiveness*, 3rd ed., ed. Charldean Newell (ICMA, 2009).

As the perfect complement to ICMA’s bestselling *The Effective Local Government Manager*, 3rd edition, this book challenges the reader with real-life dilemmas and sticky scenarios.

*Managing Local Government Services*, ed. Carl W. Stenberg and Susan Lipman Austin (ICMA, 2007).

The practical, comprehensive guide for meeting the

new demands in today’s world and ensuring the best service possible. Includes a valuable collection of more than sixty-five online supplemental materials.

*The Profession of Local Government Management*, Roy E. Green (Praeger, 1989).

This book offers an in-depth look at the roles played by professional local government managers within the changing circumstances of American community life. Using data from three extensive surveys of recognized professional administrative officers, Green analyzes the local government profession over a thirteen-year period. He focuses on the changing roles and functions of local government managers, covering such topics as trends in professional roles, career mobility patterns, the values of professionalism, the impending impacts from a spouse’s career options, and public constraints on professional associations.

*Professionalism in Local Government: Transformations in the Roles, Responsibilities and Values of City Managers*, John Nalbandian (Jossey-Bass, 1991).

An excellent book for today’s new manager that highlights the evolution of local government management, the merging of the policy–administration dichotomy, and the debate over professionalism of the individual versus the strict council-manager form of government.

*The Public Executives Complete Guide to Employment Agreements*, Ron Holifield (ICMA and The Innovation Groups, 1989).

This guide discusses the merits of an employment agreement, how to evaluate if a particular job makes sense, and more.

*Survival Kit for Local Government Managers*, Jenifer Gilliland and Don Morrison (Local Government Institute, 2010).

The intent of the survival kit is to provide the local government manager with the tools and resources to deal with every aspect of public employment. The kit contains useful information on negotiating employment agreements; handling the interview process; managing relationships with elected officials, staff, media, and citizens; and coping with employment separation.

## Newsletters

*ICMA Newsletter*, ICMA.

A biweekly newsletter containing local government job openings and information on ICMA activities and the profession.

*Job Opportunities Bulletin for Minorities and Women (J.O.B.)*, ICMA.

A biweekly newsletter that features local government job vacancies, career planning tips, and more. The newsletter is targeted toward women and minorities but has information of interest to all.

## Periodicals

*PM—Public Management*, ICMA.

A monthly magazine featuring concise, timely articles on the profession of local government management.

*Governing*, Congressional Quarterly, Inc.

A monthly magazine with a primary audience of state and local government officials that features articles on a wide range of local government issues.

*PA Times*, American Society for Public Administration.

A monthly newspaper with articles covering issues in public management.

## Professional Resources

### **ICMA Code of Ethics**

The ICMA Code of Ethics, adopted in 1924, provides a set of professional standards to guide and assist local government administrators and is an essential resource for every local government administrator, particularly first-timers. ICMA assists members with ethical dilemmas and enforces the ICMA Code of Ethics. The program is an excellent resource for new administrators who face uncertain ethical situations.

### **ICMA Fund for Professional Management**

The ICMA Fund for Professional Management is committed to educating students and citizens alike about the role and benefits of professional local government management. Established in 1985, the fund has supported communities as they organized to adopt or retain professional management, as well as broader civic education initiatives such as statewide civic education textbooks for students.

### **ICMA Range Rider Program**

The ICMA Range Rider Program draws upon the expe-

rience of a volunteer group of retired local government managers to advise members who may be in transition or seeking career advice.

### **ICMA University**

The ICMA University is a professional development program available to all members of ICMA. In this program, ICMA members can self-assess their professional skills and knowledge, and design continuing education programs tailored to their unique needs. The program takes advantage of resources offered by universities, institutes of government, state and regional organizations, national organizations (including ICMA), and other providers of training for local government managers.

### **ICMA's Voluntary Credentialing Program**

The ICMA Voluntary Credentialing Program is a means of defining and recognizing an individual ICMA member who is a professional local government manager qualified by a combination of education and experience, adherence to high standards of integrity, and an assessed commitment to lifelong learning and professional development. Managers are recognized by ICMA through a peer review credentialing process, and this self-directed program offers an opportunity for interested ICMA members to quantify the unique expertise they bring to their communities.

### **Members in Transition**

When a member is fired, forced to resign, or otherwise involuntarily separated from local government service as a manager/administrator or senior staff member, ICMA provides an array of personal and financial support.

### **State Associations**

Most states have professional associations that provide assistance and resources to local government managers and administrators. State associations can provide a local support network for the first-time administrator as well as offer educational and professional development opportunities.

## Organizations

**International City/County Management Association, 777 North Capitol Street, NE, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20002; 202-289-4262; [icma.org](http://icma.org)**

ICMA is the professional and educational organization representing appointed managers and administrators in local governments throughout the world.



**Alliance for Innovation, 502 E. Monroe Street, Suite C 124, Phoenix, AZ 85004; 888-496-0944; transformgov.org**

The Alliance for Innovation is an international network of progressive governments and partners committed to transforming local government by accelerating the development and dissemination of innovations.

**American Society for Public Administration, 1120 G Street, NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC, 20005; 202-393-7878; aspanet.org**

ASPA is the professional association of public administrators, representing over 10,000 practitioners, scholars, teachers, and students.

**Local Government Institute, 4009 Bridgeport Way West, Suite E, Tacoma, WA 98466-4326; 800-277-6253; lgi.org**

LGI is an independent, nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the quality of local government.

**National Forum for Black Public Administrators, 777 North Capitol Street, NE, Suite 807, Washington, DC 20002; 202-408-9300; nfbpa.org.**

As the association of black public leadership, NFBPA's mission is to strengthen the capabilities of black public administrators and to promote the appointment of black Americans to executive positions in local government.

**National League of Cities, 1301 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20004-1763; 202-626-3000; nlc.org.**

NLC is the country's largest and most representative organization serving municipal governments.







*Leaders at the Core of Better Communities*