City Managers Conference Session:
“Pitfalls to Avoid in the City Management Profession”
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Discussing an “Undiscussable”
Presentation Outline

- Why This Matters So Much
- Current Context
- Current Structural Arrangements
- Current Mindsets: Professional and Personal
- Blind Spots
- Red Flags
- Antidotes
- Closing Comments

Why this Matters So Much
A Reminder re Complexity

This is a “VUCA” World*:
- Volatile
- Uncertain
- Complex
- Ambiguous

*ICMA, 2012

Current Context

City Manager

Media/social/print/electronic/blogs
Inexperienced elected officials/polarized politics
Over-stretched/distracted leadership/inexperienced staff/employee talent/retention/unions
Demanding citizens/special interest groups/tensions between business community and elected officials/changing demographics
Public/private partnerships/major capital projects
High finance/limited revenues
Federal/state/local government demands/conflicts/regulations
Homelessness/disasters/economic inequalities
Technology
Current Structural Arrangements

- Terms limits/District elections
- Newly electeds (one-two = big change)
- Diffused responsibility
- Ballot measures/initiatives/elections
- Weak City Manager/Strong Council; Weak Council/Strong City Manager
- Creative problem solving
- Incremental decision making
- No safety net for mistakes
- Pension systems/Drop

Current Mindsets: Professional

- Electeds who won’t take “no” for an answer
- Personal loyalties/relationships
- “Whatever it takes to get it done”
- Profile of the Leader
- Private Sector “does it better”
- Citizens who won’t take “no” for an answer
- Short term mentality
Current Mindsets: Personal

- Highest One Year; Drop
- Cool Projects; "still having fun"
- "Undisciplined pursuit of more"
- Inability to imagine the perspective of other interested parties
- Degree of sophistication about how organizations work
- Staying/Waiting too long
- Denial of risk and peril

Blind Spots

Hubris Born of Success
Blind Spots (cont’d)

Moral Hypocrisy/Double Standard

Blind Spots (cont’d)

Ethical Fading
Blind Spots (cont’d)

The “Want” Takes Over

Blind Spots (cont’d)

Ethical Spinning
“...individuals feel a greater license to engage in questionable behavior after having engaged in worthy behavior.” (Bazerman and Tenbrunsel, 2011)

Perceptions of One’s Own Ethicality

“Are You As Ethical As You Think You Are?”

“I should behave ethically, Therefore I will”

“I should have behaved ethically, therefore, I did.”

**PREDICTION**

**RECOLLECTION**

**SHOULD**

**WANT**

**DECISION TIME**

“I don’t see the ethical implications of this decision, so I do what I want to do”
It is the Interplay...

“I’ve concluded there are more ways to fall than to become great”.


RED FLAGS
Red Flags

- The language you use
- Really cool project; legacy; highest one year
- Incurring downside risk; high infrequent/high risk/low skill
- “Undisciplined pursuit of more”

Red Flags

- Not learning anymore
- Doing battle with an Elected Official
- Changes that matter in the “Current Context”; “Current Structural Arrangements”
- Externalizing blame
Red Flags (cont’d)

• Erosion of healthy debate and dialogue

• Inexperienced staff

• “Unconsciously” competent

ANTIDOTES
Antidotes

• Create mechanisms

• Understand the “bank account”

• Think several steps down the road

• Create a “devil’s advocate” role
  ➢ Team must discuss “undiscussables”

Antidotes (cont’d)

• Time/System One decision-making; System Two decision-making; outside feedback

• Manage your reaction to ambiguity

• “Blameworthy” continuum
"Blameworthy" Continuum
A Spectrum of Reasons for Mistakes
(not all mistakes are equal):

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<th>Praiseworthy</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Testing</td>
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<td>Process Complexity</td>
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Antidotes (cont’d)

- Reframe issue(s) broader; partner with City Council/Board of Supervisors
- Anticipate the “want” self
- Identify hidden, but powerful, values
- Exit gracefully; make it a project
A Word of Caution to Elected Officials

Closing Comments
What Will the 90 Year Old You Say to You?

References

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• ICMA articles on the “Decade of Local Government”, *Public Management*, 2012/13
• Institute for Local Government, ethics articles, www.ca-ilg.org/everydayethics
• Various articles in *Los Angeles Times* and *San Diego Union*
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