

Strategies for Dealing with Council-Manager Role Conflicts

City Managers Department Meeting
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City Manager,
Palo Alto and
ICMA
Boardmember

Introduction and Context for Today's Discussion

Our Panelists of City Managers

Rene Mendez, *City of Gonzales*

Tammy Letourneau, *City of Laguna Niguel*

Melissa Stevenson Diaz, *City of Redwood City*

Kevin Woodhouse, *City of Pacifica*

Discussion Topics

- Issues specific to new city managers
- Councilmembers communicating w/staff versus directing staff
- Managing staff performance
- Staff overstepping into policy arena
- Handling of inappropriate behavior
- Broken relationships between councilmembers

Discussion Topics (continued)

- Councilmembers forgetting versus disregarding rules
- Interaction with California Fair Political Practices Commission (FPPC)
- Helping councilmembers focus on “what” versus “how” of policymaking

A few Take- aways

Before accepting the job:

- Have a discussion with the council regarding their philosophy regarding managerial authority/non-interference
- Research the basis for managerial authority in the organization (charter, ordinance, policy)? How strongly is it worded?
- Incorporate the ICMA Code of Ethics in your employment agreement
- Discuss frequency and method of ongoing contact with each Councilmember. Establishing professional relationships early makes difficult conversations and or conflicts a bit easier

Council/Staff interaction:

- Before problems arise, discuss with the council why it is better and more effective to "go through the manager" (not only for the manager and the organization, **but also for them**)
- Train staff to understand and help communicate the importance of working through the CM.
- Ensure follow-through on issues and be consistent. Confidence erodes if the Manager and/or staff does not follow through

A few (more) Take-aways

General Suggestions:

- If you run into a problem, attempt to address it directly with the involved elected official. Be diplomatic, but clear regarding the problems created
- Be consistent in regard to what boundaries are established (don't treat council members differently!)
- Enlist the City Attorney as a partner
- If necessary (and appropriate), try to enlist assistance from other elected officials such as the mayor--if the mayor is not the problem
- If one-on-one communication is not working, consider raising the issue with the entire council--potentially in a performance evaluation closed session
- Pick your battles with your Councilmembers – a minor transgression may not be worth a full blown difficult conversation about it, but repeated minor ones should be addressed

Questions & Comments from the Audience

Valuable Resources

Making It Work: The Essentials of Council-Manager Relations

A free e-book for ICMA members offers a variety of suggested techniques and strategies

ICMA First-Time Administrator's Handbook

Steadfast guide for first-time administrators

Senior Advisor Program This ICMA & League program makes available to members, the experience, advice and support of respected, retired managers of the profession

<https://icma.org/icma-senior-advisor-program>



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