Strategies for Dealing with Council-Manager Role Conflicts

City Managers Department Meeting
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Ed Shikada
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 Nigel

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
• Councilmembers forgetting versus disregarding rules

• Interaction with California Fair Political Practices Commission (FPPC)

• Helping councilmembers focus on “what” versus “how” of policymaking
A few Takeaways

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.
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
Contacts:
Ed Shikada ed.Shikada@cityofpaloalto.org
Rene Mendez rmendez@ci.gonzales.ca.us
Tammy Letourneau tletourneau@cityoflagunaniguel.org
Melissa Stevenson Diaz mdiaz@redwoodcity.org
Kevin Woodhouse woodhousek@ci.pacifica.ca.us