

Career Compass No. 31: Political Savviness

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In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Benest shares some ideas on how we can become more astute and effective in the messy political world of elected officials.

I am a planning manager with a mid-sized city. When our staff team presents land-use, economic development or affordable housing recommendations to council, they might accept them but sometimes they do not. Typically, we do a good job of providing data and well-reasoned recommendations but once they get to the public hearing, it's as if the data and objective analysis do not matter and politics take over. At times, one small yet connected group can shape the council's decision or completely derail the decision. It is baffling to me and my colleagues.

The political arena seems like an alien world. I don't get politics. How can our team become more politically savvy?



You are correct. The world of elected policy-makers is different from the world of professional administrators. To be more effective in recommending policy or specific development proposals, you must first understand the differences in the two world views.

The Two Worlds of Policy and Administration

John Nalbandian, professor of public administration at Kansas University and former mayor of Lawrence, KS, has done a lot of work differentiating between the mindsets and the drivers of action for policy-makers vs. administrators. Along a variety of dimensions, policy-makers and professional administrators see the world differently. Consider these different ways of thinking and acting:

Dimension	Policy-Makers	Administrators
Selection	Based on political, policy, ideological views or connection to certain constituent groups	Based on abilities

Dimension	Policy-Makers	Administrators
Role	Representative of constituent groups	Professional expert
Issues	Concerns of interest to constituent groups	More organization or community-wide perspectives
Information	Narrative, stories, deeply-felt emotions	Data, plans, reports
Orientation	Making change	Ensuring predictability, continuity amidst any change
Attention to	Pushing a policy agenda	Operational details (Will it work? How will it work?)
	Pleasing voters	Demonstrating competency, achieving results, improving external professional prospects
Time Frame (most of the time)	Short to mid-term	Mid to long-term
Focus of Decision-Making	What I believe	What I know
	Resolving or minimizing conflict among stakeholders	Making the right decision
	Choice that plays well to constituencies (“good politics”)	The right choice
	Questions: “Whom am I trying to serve?”	Questions: “What is the goal?”
	“What will achieve positive impacts?”	“What is effective and efficient way to achieve goal?”

Dimension	Policy-Makers	Administrators
	“Have I heard from all significant groups?”	“Do I have the information?”
	“Is it fair to significant groups?”	“What is our analysis?”
Accountability	To voters on how they represent their interests and fulfill “promises”	To organization, public at large, peers and professional groups on how they achieve goals
Rewards	Winning next election, moving up political ladder, self-satisfaction	Getting next promotion, positive recognition among peers, self-satisfaction

The objective data, your analysis (including options), expert judgments, and recommendations all are necessary but completely insufficient in carrying the day once you enter the political arena of the elected policy-maker. Elected officials will certainly require and care about the data but they will be highly motivated by their own values and ideology and the positions of key constituencies (e.g., neighborhood groups, business associations, environmental advocates, youth sports groups).

Democracy Is Messy

Even though “politics” has a bad name, you can’t have democracy without it. Politics is how democracy happens. Different groups compete for attention, influence, and resources. In a democratic arena, value choices made by policy-makers often compete with technical solutions.

Consequently, you need to understand that “technically correct” decisions may not match community values as determined by elected officials. The “best” technical solution may not be the “right” overall answer for the community.

A seasoned professional gains an appreciation over time that democracy is messy. In a democracy, process may sometimes trump the result.

“Think Politically, Act Non-Politically”

So, how do we become more effective in this messy political world?

Kevin Duggan, former city manager of Mountain View, CA, and current ICMA West Coast region director, wrote in a PM article “Leadership Without Appearing Political” that local government managers need to follow the axiom to “think politically but act non-politically.”

We local government professionals generally know how to act non-politically:

- Provide objective analysis and options for the policy makers
- Treat all elected officials and stakeholder groups equally in terms of providing access to information and responding to their questions and concerns

- Respect the political views of governing board members and acknowledge their interests
- Avoid the picking of sides in political disputes
- Accept policy decisions once they are made even if we do not agree

The other part of Duggan's axiom that we must think politically or strategically is more difficult.

Before I provide some tips on how we can think more strategically, let me emphasize that I am in no way suggesting that you abandon your professional role and become more of a political actor. It is your job to provide professional expertise. You must provide objective data and analysis and sound recommendations. However, you also need to help policy-makers make good decisions that are not only administratively and organizationally do-able, but also politically acceptable.

Eleven Tips To Become More Politically Savvy

Here are some tips for helping yourself and your team develop some political astuteness:

1. GET INTO THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF THE POLICY-MAKERS

Ask yourself and your team the following questions:

- What are the values, motivations, and goals of the different elected officials making the decisions?
- To which constituent groups do the elected officials relate?
- What are the ideologies of the various groups?
- Who are the key supporters or players in the community or within the local government with whom the elected officials connect?

If you and your team do not know the answers to these questions, how are you going to find out?

2. DEBRIEF ALL CITY COUNCIL MEETINGS

After a city council or planning commission meeting, ask your department director to debrief the session with you and your team. While staff people can let off a little steam in such debriefings, the purpose of the discussion is to promote understanding, not griping. Successful department heads usually have good political sensibilities and can help your team better understand the policy view points, political ambitions, alliances, and other relationships which may result in decisions that are not perfectly aligned with your expert judgments.

Periodically, you can also request that the city manager or assistant city manager visit one of your staff meetings, provide a city-wide update, debrief recent council decisions, and help you better sense the political landscape, especially key alliances and the differing policy perspectives on the council.

At these debriefings, you can also evaluate how your staff reports and presentations framed the land use or housing proposal that you presented to the council so that it resonated with the decision-makers (more on this later).

3. DEVELOP RAPPORT WITH POLITICAL ACTORS

To the extent possible, get to know policy-makers as real people. Elected officials are more apt to listen with openness to your professional views if they know you in a social context. Now I'm not suggesting that you invite the council member to coffee or lunch to create a social relationship. However, you can introduce yourself at a community event or before or after a meeting; engage

them in some informal conversation; ask about their work, family and interests; and then share a little bit about yourself.

If you are asked to brief a council member, a planning commissioner or a key stakeholder representative about a specific issue, you can start an informal conversation before or after the briefing to get to know the person.

As a young manager, I started an informal conversation before a meeting with a council member who was quickly becoming a nemesis. In the conversation, I discovered that he too was a Lebanese-American and loved the same foods as we both grew up with immigrant grandparents. The relationship became much easier thereafter (even though he did not always support our policy recommendations).

4. ASK THE POLICY-MAKER WHY SHE VOTED THE WAY SHE DID

John Nalbandian, in a recent Cal-ICMA Coaching Program webinar on the topic of “Navigating Staff-Board Relations,” suggested that when the opportunity presents itself, staff people occasionally ask an elected official why she voted the way she did. Of course, you need to approach this situation with a “curious mind.” You are not asking the elected official to justify why she voted the way she did. Rather, you want to better understand so you can do a better job. If you ask in a nondefensive way that suggests that you want to better understand her viewpoint, you may get better educated on her values and policy perspectives.

5. START WITH THE “WHY”

Once you get a better understanding of the mindsets of the different elected officials, you can begin to make policy recommendations that are both supported by the data and are shaped so they are more politically acceptable. In developing a recommendation, always start with the “why” of the proposal. As Simon Sinek says in his TED-X.com video “[How Great Leaders Inspire Action](#),” people are motivated by the purpose and meaning of any proposed action or pursuit as opposed to the “what” and the “how,” which usually dominate our professional reports and presentations.

For example, before getting into the technical aspects of a proposed mixed-use development, talk about the “why.” Is the mixed-use development aimed at promoting economic vitality, creating new jobs, animating downtown streets, or addressing the city’s jobs/housing imbalance?

6. FRAME THE ISSUE

You need to frame the staff recommendations differently for different decision-makers and/or their constituencies. Again, you must do good staff work in providing solid data and analysis and good options. In addition, you can emphasize a “why” that resonates with the majority of policy-makers.

7. ENGAGE REFERENCE GROUPS AND CONSTITUENCIES

It is essential to authentically engage important constituent groups (especially those connected to policy-makers) in developing a proposal before bringing it forward. Even if you believe that a group’s fears are totally baseless, you must reach out and engage them. If you interact with constituent groups, listen to their concerns, and integrate their interests in a recommendation, you are likely to gain the political support of key decision-makers who relate to these groups. Of course, if constituent groups of different policy-makers all get their “fingerprints” on a land use proposal, you are in the best situation in terms of carrying the day.

Let’s say the university hospital is a key health care provider and employer in your community and desires to expand. How does your team work with the hospital administrators who are concerned about growing their enterprise and becoming more competitive; business community leaders who

are interested in economic development; and adjacent neighborhood groups who are distressed about potential traffic and parking issues? All of these groups will be reaching out to some or all of the planning commissioners and city council members. The more you interact with these politically-relevant groups, the more you get to know their perspectives and concerns, the more you get the opportunity to solve perceived and thus real problems and shape proposals in a politically palatable way.

8. CONSIDER THE “BEST” PRESENTERS

Certainly you or one of the planning staff should present the staff report on a proposed project and provide the staff analysis. However, if you’ve worked with some stakeholder groups that are connected with the various policy-makers, you could on occasion include one or several representatives at the end of the presentation. Whether they support the entire proposal or certain aspects of the proposal, the group representatives can discuss how they have worked with staff to resolve or minimize any concerns.

Remember that a public hearing is the worst mechanism ever devised to engage people. A public hearing must be the culmination of a process of engaging different groups, at which time you show your work even if you have not resolved each and every problem to everyone’s total satisfaction.

9. TELL THE STORY

Elected officials think in terms of a narrative. Providing data, analysis, and expert recommendations is certainly necessary but may be insufficient. What’s the story that makes the analysis and recommendations come alive? With respect to the university hospital expansion, what story will you tell to bring life to the recommended state-of-the-art health care center and its impact on real people, or the new jobs, or the spin-off benefits for the local economy?

10. KNOW WHEN TO PUSH FORWARD AND WHEN TO PULL BACK

Developing this political skill is difficult and takes a lot of seasoning. As a city manager, I often tended to push forward on a decision even when it would result in a major conflict on a split council. I failed to adequately learn when to pull back and present a proposal at a later date when there was more support or a greater readiness to consider the recommendation.

In considering when to push ahead or pull back, here are some questions to ask:

- How important is a recommendation to the community at large, the organization, or the council as a whole?
- Is there a state of readiness on the council to consider the contentious issue?
- Have the staff and partner groups done a good job in addressing some of the concerns and problems identified by stakeholder groups, especially the opposition, to the proposal?
- How mature is the political body? Can they split on a vote and not hold grudges with respect to other council members or the city management?
- Are you too emotionally involved in the issue as a leader?

11. GET POLITICAL ADVICE

As I stated in [Career Compass No. 7 “Creating a Dream Team of Advisors,”](#) you need different coaches for different purposes. While you certainly benefit from a coach providing career advice, you may also need a special advisor for political guidance. Who has ample interaction with policy-makers and can help translate the political world for you? Who can suggest different groups to

engage or different ways to present an issue that will resonate with policy-makers or their political allies even as you provide professional analysis?

Political Savviness Is an Added Value

Guided by senior managers and coaches, your growing political astuteness can make you and your team more effective. However, as John Nalbandian emphasized in the Cal-ICMA webinar, developing political sensibilities is just an added value. Don't forget that your core assets are professional analysis, judgment, and execution.

Your world is one of professional expertise, not politics. So the trick is "thinking politically but acting non-politically." In other words, how do you become more politically astute without becoming "political"?



Career Compass is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's senior advisor for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future *Career Compass*, e-mail careers@icma.org or contact Frank directly at frank@frankbenest.com.