

Defining the Roles of Elected Officials and City/County Manager

Understanding the various roles of elected officials and how the CAO and staff can best support them.

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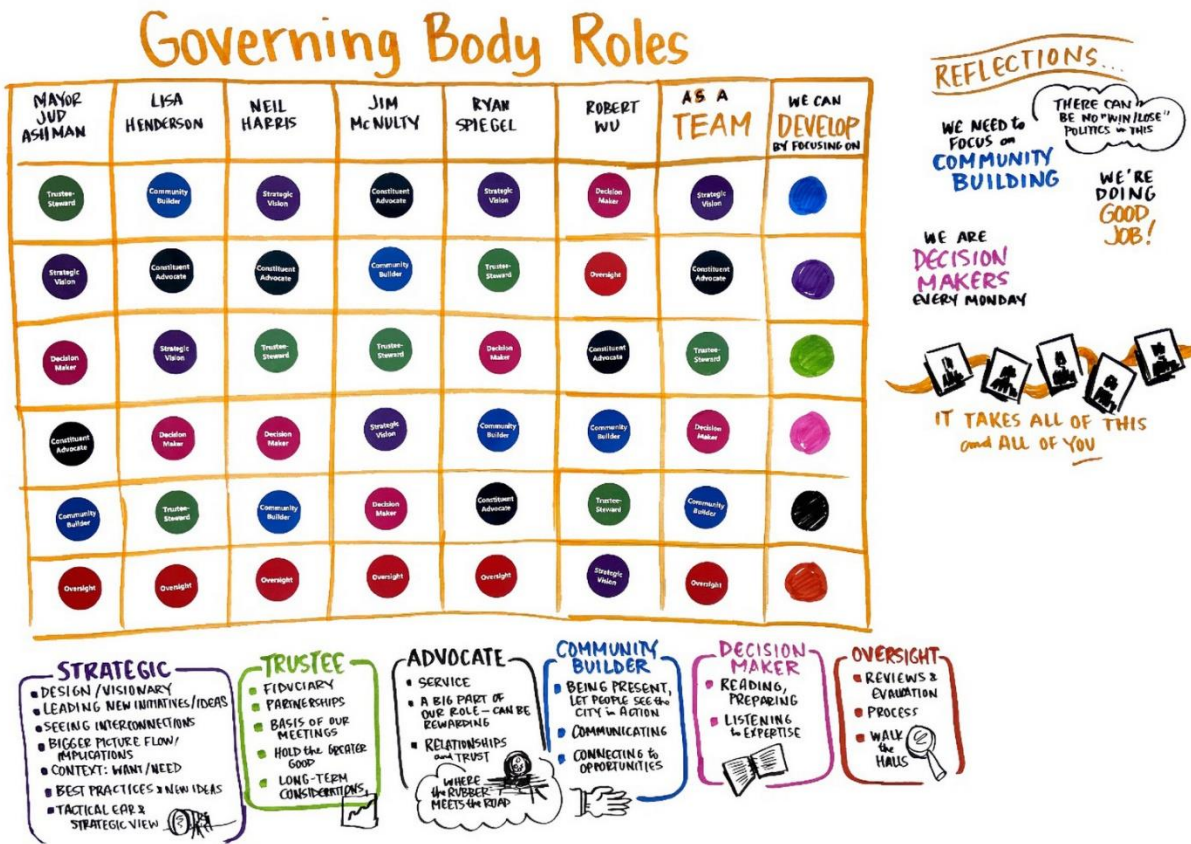


Management is a supporting and essential role in local governance. Management supports the organization, the community, and, of course, the governing body. There is a dance that managers must do with their elected officials as they navigate the curved and blurry line between politics and administration, but this symbiotic relationship is built on the foundational premise that management is a supporting role. To be clear, it is an active—not passive—role. Managers are also leaders, but within the context of their roles as head of the organization and policy advisor to the elected body.

Just as a manager’s role changes with each situation they encounter, the role an elected official plays also shifts and changes. In 2016, Julia Novak and Dr. John Nalbandian began working to define the various roles that local elected officials must play and to identify how those roles relate to effective governance. Since that time, they have worked with dozens of elected bodies to understand these roles, the activities associated with each role, and how elected officials envision they can enhance their own effectiveness.

These insights can be valuable to managers as they define the “support role” and understand what can be done to help their elected body govern effectively together. Support means leading, proposing, recommending, making decisions within the organization, and ensuring accountability. It is not passive and does not mean that managers wait for the governing body to initiate policy- or goal-setting. The manager is crucial in identifying what tools and resources will be helpful for the success of the community—at the governance level and within the organization. It is a partnership. The governing body cannot do it alone, nor can the manager.

Figure 1.



The Roles

The six council governance roles identified by Novak and Nalbandian are Strategic/Vision–Big Picture Thinker, Community Builder–Bringing People Together, Oversight, Trustee–Steward, Decision Maker, and Representative–Constituent Advocate.

The **Strategic/Vision–Big Picture Thinker** role focuses on decisions that can have a significant impact on the community, both long or short term. This role often concentrates on the future and what might make a difference, while seeing possible connections and relationships and thinking beyond present data and constraints.

The **Trustee–Steward** role involves listening to and respecting constituent views. The Trustee–Steward feels responsible to the community as a whole, as well as future residents, and will make uncomfortable decisions that may run counter to constituent wishes if the decision is in the interest of the greater good.

When operating in the **Representative–Constituent Advocate** role, an elected official acts as a “customer service representative.” In this capacity, the elected official is a conduit between residents and local government services. Often, residents see this elected official as most responsive to their individual concerns.

In the **Community Builder–Bringing People Together** role, an elected official focuses on relationships and consensus building. The Community Builder fosters relationships and can work through differences. Community is not just a casual word to the elected official who gravitates to this role.

The **Decision Maker** sees their role much like a judge, wherein information is presented, and the Decision-Maker votes it up or down. This is not an easy role, but often it is a more passive role in contrast to that of the Community Builder.

In the **Oversight** role, the focus is on the accountability of manager/executive to the elected body.

Since their development in 2016, the six governance roles have been incorporated into retreats with governing bodies across the country. During these retreats, the groups discuss the activities associated with each of the roles and then individuals are asked to rank for themselves the roles that come most naturally.

It is interesting to note that *none* the more than 200 elected officials we have worked with identified Oversight as the role that they naturally gravitate toward, and yet this is the role that creates distance/tension between staff and the governing body. The often-toxic nature of public discourse has residents sometimes demanding a vicious watchdog on the governing body to lord over the staff. That approach actually deepens the public's distrust in their local government—if the elected officials distrust staff, how can the general public trust them? Oversight must be seen as a constructive and intentional role that recognizes the governing body's responsibility as an employer and as an entity that encourages public investment in the community.

Once we understand how each individual ranks and identifies with the six roles, we are able to provide an aggregate ranking or group profile. The following is the collective distribution of which roles governing bodies naturally gravitate toward:

1. Representative–Constituent Advocate.
2. Strategic/Vision.
3. Trustee–Steward.
4. Decision Maker.
5. Community Builder.
6. Oversight.

Then they are asked to discuss what roles they should focus more on to enhance effectiveness. The following is the collective distribution of which roles governing bodies feel they should focus on to be (even) more effective:

1. Strategic/Vision.
2. Community Builder.
3. Trustee–Steward.
4. Representative–Constituent Advocate.
5. Decision Maker.
6. Oversight.

The challenge for managers is to support the governing body in each of the roles to enhance effectiveness. Figure 2 allows us to see the juxtaposition of a few key elements of this ranking. Generally speaking, Representative–Constituent Advocate is the number-one role that elected officials naturally gravitate toward and Community Builder is number five. When asked where to focus to enhance effectiveness, Community Builder jumps to number two and Representative–Constituent Advocate moves to number four. Finally, the Oversight role is the lowest-rated role in both scenarios.

The Activities

A quick summary of activities associated with each role is shown in Figure 3. The reality for our elected officials is that there are times when these roles are in opposition to one another. Residents may be asking the council to vote a particular way on an issue because of how that decision impacts them in the moment, but the “Trustee” will consider long-term implications and perhaps make a different decision. When discussing this tension with Nalbandian at a council retreat, one councilmember described this as a mindset they take on when considering

important decisions: “If I think of our residents, the voters, my neighbors, as my customers—then I am their customer service representative; but when I think of them as owners, then I am their trustee.” The Trustee is duty bound to make decisions in the best interest of the community, even despite “customer” opposition to do so.

Figure 3.

Roles	Associated Activities
Strategic Vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic Planning • Determining what is important in the short term • Identifying community wants and needs • Seeing interconnections
Representative—Constituent Advocate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Answering calls and emails from residents • Connecting residents with the local government to help resolve issues
Trustee—Steward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looking at the long-term implications of decisions • Fiduciary role
Decision-maker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading briefing materials • Participating in study sessions • Listening to residents • Voting
Community Builder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being present and listening to individuals and community groups • Convening important community conversations • Celebrating accomplishments • Participating in events
Oversight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducting the manager’s performance evaluation • Reviewing the audit

The Community Builder role deserves special attention since there is noticeable separation from actual and desired ranking. As elected officials think about moving the needle on their own performance as a governing body, they see the Community Builder role as a potential pathway. Parks, gathering areas, community centers, and town squares are physical spaces we can build and maintain that allow people to gather and be connected to their neighbors. Programming those areas with special events and celebrations encourages people to engage directly with the local government and the community.

Convening conversations about important community issues are also an opportunity to reinforce that the local government cares about the events and issues facing the community and wants to hear from residents. The balance, of course, is to create an environment for true civil discourse. Many of our traditional methods of getting public input, such as public hearings where people get three minutes to state their opinion, are not consistent with community building—or even real engagement. Community building is deeper. According to Nalbandian, “win-lose politics have no place if community building is the goal.”

Given the divergence between the actual role a governing body gravitates toward and their desired role, the question is, how do we do this? What can the manager and staff do in this supporting role to help the governing body achieve the best for their community? Our practical experience as consultants and managers suggests the following:

1. Intentionally plan for opportunities for the governing body to fulfill each role, and create a time at council meetings where councilors can share their recent activities in the community. This publicly encourages councilors to reach out.
2. Create systems for efficiently addressing constituent concerns so elected officials can turn these issues over to the staff and not feel like they must be the ombudsman for the public, while at the same time, receiving credit for staff responses.
3. Refer to strategic plans and long-range goals when executing programs and projects to create connections between the daily work of the organization and the priorities of the elected officials. This could mean connecting agenda items directly to governing body priorities.
4. Discuss both short- and long-term consequences of action (or inaction).
5. Support the governing body in establishing ground rules for civility and mutual accountability.
6. Demonstrate accountability to the governing body by updating them on the status of agreed-upon priorities and ensuring a meaningful process exists for performance evaluations.

In Gaithersburg, Maryland, there is a long tradition of strategic planning, financial stewardship, civility, and community engagement. When Tanisha Briley became their city manager, her job was to build on this foundation and “level up” organizational performance. “The challenge was to take an already high-performing governing body and integrate new elected officials into the best part of the governance culture,” she said. “We did that by intentionally talking about the importance of working well together to achieve results and refreshing the strategic plan so the council was connected and committed to the long-term goals of the city.”

A Cautionary Conclusion

As was stated in the beginning, management is a supporting role—with leadership. While their primary focus is the complexity of service delivery issues, being successful in that role means supporting the governing body in each of theirs. The manager must carry them out with intention, being in tune with the priorities of the elected officials, and being effective in translating those into administrative/service delivery decisions and results.

We have facilitated governance conversations with dozens of governing bodies and hundreds of individual elected officials. Only two governing bodies felt it was most important to focus on their Oversight role to improve effectiveness and, in both those situations, the manager moved on within the year. Accountability is an important part of being a local government professional and builds trust between the governing body and the administration.

It is equally important for the manager to identify processes and tools for supporting the governing body in achieving their objectives. It takes a trusting partnership to foster alignment between “politics and administration.” Getting important things done for the community and achieving aspirational goals are most successful within a collaborative mentality on the governing body and with the manager.

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