

LEADERSHIP WITHOUT APPEARING POLITICAL

Kevin C. Duggan

A question of concern since the beginning of the local government management profession has been “To what degree and in what ways can managers be active participants in the policy-making arena without impairing personal or professional credibility?” Serious debate no longer addresses whether managers operate within the political arena. The concept of there being a clear demarcation between administration and policy has few if any supporters. The very nature of our profession involves us jointly with our governing bodies in establishing public policy for our communities. By the sorts of issues that we arise, the information we provide, and the recommendations we forward, we influence policy. While clearly not having the same policy-making prerogatives as our councils, we do participant with them in the policy arena.

Clear policy direction from councils is firmly recognized as essential to our effectiveness. Council policy provides the overall framework within which managers function. The degree to which we receive clear policy direction will vary from community to community and from governing body to governing body. Our ability to function will suffer if a policy leadership void develops. We as managers can have a significant impact on how void is filled.

The degree to which we should become directly involved in the policy-making process is an issue we all must confront. An approach that would be appropriate and successful in one community would be disastrous in another. The more we are perceived as having a direct involvement in policy issues, the more likely we are to be perceived as “political.”

Since each of us must confront this issue and make decisions regarding our appropriate role in our particular community, I have prepared a “list of 10” (a la David Letterman) suggestions to assist managers in evaluating how they can be leaders without appearing political.

1. First of all, provide effective leadership to the administrative organization: ***“Do things right” as well as “do the right things” administratively.***

Our first obligation is to successfully undertake our administrative leadership role. If we don’t bring effective leadership and management to the city internal organization, we will have no credibility in regard to being leaders in the policy arena. We must be able to provide clear direction, a vision, for the organization. We need to be able to maintain high standards of competency and professionalism and ensure that good solid management techniques are utilized. We must evaluate and fortify the culture of our organizations and be clear that organizational and mission values are promoted and communicated.

If is unrealistic to assume that we will have no participation in policy issues until the administrative organization meets all these expectations. Nevertheless, it is also clear

that we make a serious mistake if we focus undue effort on attempting to influence policy if we have not provided sufficient leadership to our internal administrative organizations.

2. Clarify roles: ***“How can I be what you want me to be if I don’t know what that is?”***

It is absolutely essential that the manager develop a clear understanding with the council of the degree to which, and the manner in which, the manager should become involved in policy formulation. Probably no greater source of conflict exists in a manager/council relationship than that resulting from a miscommunication or misunderstanding regarding the manager’s and the council’s views of the appropriate role of the manager in policy development. It is critical that this topic be openly discussed before accepting the manager position and whenever changes occur in the council membership. The manager’s role can be effectively discussed at council/manager retreats and during “one-on-ones” with individual councilmembers.

We should be aware of the fluidity of council perceptions regarding appropriate roles. In other words, the council’s view of what our appropriate role may be can vary from time to time and from issue to issue. We cannot assume that a role that was accepted at one time on one issue will be acceptable at another time on another issue.

The bottom line is to communicate regularly with your council to ascertain its view of the role you are playing in policy development.

3. If a policy leadership void exists, don’t assume that it is your role to personally fill it: ***“You can’t do it for them.”***

As noted earlier, clear policy direction is critical to managers’ effectiveness. We also tend to have strong views regarding what direction our organization/communities should take. It can be extremely frustrating when we perceive a community/policy leadership void. Even when we acknowledge a lack of leadership capacity on our councils, it is clearly not our position to bypass and replace the council in its legitimate policy/community leadership role. No matter how badly councilmembers may be doing in regard to policy leadership, attempting to become the community leader / policy spokesperson is contrary to the tenets of our profession and to basic democratic principles.

4. Help the council be effective in its policy-making role: ***“Since you can’t do it for them, help them do it better.”***

It is not the role of local managers to replace their councils in the arena of policy and community leadership. In the absence of council leadership, the best alternative for managers is to take steps to help their councils to become as effective as possible in undertaking their policy and leadership responsibilities.

The manager can be of great assistance in this regard by establishing a policy-making framework for the council to develop community policy. Rather than just assuming that members will go and develop policies, we can develop a structure within which they can develop and communicate their vision for the community. Techniques for doing this include a formal process for examining organizational mission/values; a formal goal-setting and evaluation process; establishing a framework for getting early input from the council regarding overall policy direction for the annual budget; and developing a yearly legislative agenda or calendar to identify policy issues the council wishes to pursue.

In essence, it is important for us to support councilmembers in helping them to develop their policies. We must be viewed as supporting, not competing with, the council in the policy arena.

Providing an effective structure for council policy making benefits managers as well. The more the council is truly occupied with its policy-making agenda, the less councilmembers will attempt to get involved in administrative/management issues.

5. Avoid being accused of influencing policy unfairly: ***“Just the facts, Ma’am.”***

Managers can sometimes be accused of attempting to influence policy through covert methods, including the management of information. We need to provide information in a way that makes it difficult for us to be accused of inappropriately managing information. This certainly includes providing equal information to all councilmembers on a timely basis. Managers can also be accused of attempting to influence policy inappropriately by artificially limiting legitimate policy alternatives presented to the council. It is particularly important in regard to issues of significant policy impact to offer to the council legitimate alternatives, including the pros and cons of each. While not implying that the manager will avoid making a direct and strong recommendation regarding the issue, it does avoid the impression that the manager is limiting the review of legitimate policy alternatives.

6. Don't be overly protective of administrative / managerial prerogatives: ***“I want to play in your yard, but don't get close to mine.”***

Managers who are not overly protective of administrative / managerial prerogatives are more likely to be tolerated by their councils as playing an active role in policy development. This position does not imply that the council should be allowed to play an inappropriate role regarding managers' traditional managerial/administrative prerogatives. The less we are viewed as overly protective of these prerogatives, however, the less likely the council will strictly interpret the administrative / policy dichotomy regarding the manager's role in policy development. Early input regarding budget, capital improvement, and planning issues, advance communication regarding significant organizational issues are among the ways in which the manager can avoid appearing to be overly protective of his or her prerogatives. At the same time, his or she

can bypass appearing to infringe upon some of the traditional policy-making prerogatives of the council.

7. Avoid the limelight to the greatest degree possible – Don't compete with the council for public attention (especially positive PR): ***"Since we get paid, let them have the limelight."***

Public recognition is a major (if not primary) motivator and compensation for being a councilmember. Managers need to be extremely careful of appearing to compete with their councils for this recognition. While we all enjoy positive public recognition, we should direct as much of that recognition as possible to our councilmembers.

It is important to play up the public perception of the council's community leadership role. The more councilmembers are perceived as active community leaders, the less we will be criticized for being active participants in the policy arena. Avoid at all costs upstaging or outshining the council. It is amazing how successful we can be in initiating discussion on policy issues. What is important is that critical policy issues are addressed, not that we personally get public credit.

8. Make thoughtful and conscious decisions regarding what "policy" issues you are going to take an active role in: ***"You can't take on all the issues all the time."***

Be selective regarding which issues you will publicly adopt and support. "Pick your shots" in order to maximize your influence on the most important issues.

Don't evolve into a role on a issue or in the policy development arena in general via a series of small steps, and then find yourself at a destination where you had never planned to go. Be conscious of being pulled into issues by councilmembers – whether they constitute a minority or a majority of the council – and being used for their own political purposes. Councilmembers often look for others, including managers, to be their political "stalking horse" on tough political issues. While from time to time managers may be willing to play that role, make a clear and conscious decision whether you are going to do so.

In evaluating what role you will play and what issues you will tackle in the policy arena, two factors need careful consideration: the political sensitivity of issues involved and the visibility of your role in those issues. The more visible the role and the more sensitive the issues, the more likely that you will be branded political.

It is critical to understand the possible consequences of your decision on the role you will play regarding particular policy issues or the general policy arena. Have a mature and informed understanding of the consequences prior to making your decision.

9. Know when to withdraw from the policy forum on particular issues: ***"Know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em."***

Once you have made your recommendation and have appropriately advocated it, know when to back off. Do not get caught up in a personal win/lose scenario. Do not overly compete on an issue. Avoid personalizing your positions, the more we take personal ownership of an issue the more likely we will go further than we intended in advocating it.

Know when to withdraw from the public policy debate. Especially when the issue is being discussed at a public meeting, recognize when you have said all that can or should be said appropriately and allow the council to complete the debate and make the decision. It is the councilmembers' stage.

After the decision is made, it is important to know how to lose gracefully, and always avoid second-guessing council decisions after the fact (even if you really were right and subsequent event bore that out).

10. If all else fails: ***“If you’ve already tried the first nine suggestion and they haven’t worked...”***

If you have already tried the first nine suggestions and they have not allowed you to play the leadership role you think is appropriate in policy development without being accused of being political, my tenth suggestion is right up your alley. My recommendation (sure fire) guideline is as follows:

Accept jobs only in local government with self-confidence community-welfare-motivated, intelligent councilmembers who are effective community leaders, who respect your managerial prerogatives, and who encourage your involvement in policy development. A guarantee that only folks with those characteristics will ever be elected in the community would help, too!

I believe the following quotation of Lao-tzu contains an important lesson for managers.

As for the best leaders, the people do not notice their existence. The next best, the people honor and praise. The next, the people fear; and the next, the people hate. When the best leader's work is done the people say, "We did it ourselves."

The Chinese proverb that concludes this article clearly was not written with the topic of the manager's role in policy leadership in mind, but just as clearly it does relate to this discussion.

If you must play, decide upon three things at the state: the rules of the game, the stakes, and the quitting time.