

# FROM A Manager's Freshman Year

Position is  
[usually] amazing

By Jim Schutz

allenges include a lack of affordable housing, traffic congestion, and the deterioration of above- and below-ground local infrastructure. There are such natural disasters as those related to climate change and such unnatural disasters as those related to massive unfunded retirement liabilities. Both can feel like tsunamis.

Add to that the responsibility to solve intractable societal issues like homelessness, and caring for the mentally ill and those with substance abuse problems. The first-year man-

ager may walk around stooped over from the agonizing weight of these and similar problems.

Furthermore, everything is a first. Or at least the first that is 100 percent on your shoulders. First budget, first city council meetings, first council retreat, first key hire, first termination, first review of your performance by the council, and so on.

So how does this play out on a day-to-day basis? What does this really feel like to the first-time manager? Let's "Google Street View" our way into

city hall and directly to the freshman manager's office.

There the manager sits, feverishly trying to get the next council agenda packet out in time, the "World's Greatest Boss" mug already emptied of its coffee three times this morning. The steady stream of unscheduled visitors arrive one after the other, like this:

[First person walks through open office door] "Hey boss, have a second? I need to talk to you about a number of personnel problems I'm having in my department, we just got a grievance on. . . ."

[Next] "Good morning, do you have two minutes? We just got our sales tax report and revenues are way down. . . ."

[Next] "Did you see your quote in today's paper, did you really say that?"

[Next] "Hey, we just got a report of a ton of police cars over at the high school, have you heard anything?"

[City manager shuts door]

[Immediate knock at door, person enters] "All the bids just came in high for our new project, do you want us to go back out to bid, which could drive up the cost even further. . . ."

[Next] "Hi, wanted to let you know NextDoor is blowing up with nasty comments about (insert city effort here), how do you want us to respond?"

[City manager shuts door again, immediate knock. . . .]

Is the above what really happens or just how it *feels* to the first-time manager? The answer might be different for everyone. What I can tell you is the job has gotten more and more complicated in recent decades.

## Outside Forces

The Pew Research Center shows the public's trust in government eroding since the 1960s to historic lows today. In 2017, only two in 10 Americans say they trust the federal government to do what is right always or most of the time. Over roughly the same period of time that trust has been declining, the use of the

Internet has had meteoric growth, and the public's expectation of lightning fast, digital service delivery has increased. Residents can now use their phone to make on-demand purchases in real time that swiftly arrive on their doorstep.

But this is a private company. People don't have the same expectations of government, right?

Wrong. Some 85 percent of Americans expect the same or higher quality from government digital services as they do from their commercial providers, according to a 2016 survey by Accenture. So if I can hit "buy now" on my mobile device and my product shows up, why can't I do the same for my building permit or zoning approval?

**If I could go back in time and whisper in the ear of my freshman self, I would undoubtedly have predictable advice: Try to have more fun. Don't get so stressed or downtrodden by the problems. Recognize not every setback is a referendum on your abilities.**

Local government management isn't just more complicated because of the rise of the Internet and fall of public trust; there are plenty of other factors like the impacts of the Great Recession, the changes in how people get their news and information, workforce demographic changes, and more.

While it is possible that any of those big-picture issues can weigh down a freshman manager, it is the local, personal issues that can be even more difficult.

### **It's Not Like It's Life or Death . . . Or Is It?**

I've been the city manager during floods and wildfires with neighborhood evacuations, during SWAT team actions, vehicle-related fatalities, and bomb threats. Police departments put their own lives on the line to keep others safe.

Fire departments not only put out fires, but they have developed into what

I think of as "mobile emergency rooms" delivering advanced lifesaving care in minutes to anyone who calls. The life and death part of local services can feel extremely real and profound.

In fact, the lowest point of my first year was when a close colleague unexpectedly passed away on the job from a heart attack.

I had wooed him many times in the past to leave his city and join ours—to no avail. He was warm and genuine, made you instantly feel like a friend, and most of all wanted to help the community achieve its goals.

Now, as a new city manager, I was able to ask him to join the management team as public works director. He was

still reluctant. I think what finally turned the tide was the day I drove 45 minutes to his house with my then 10-year-old daughter, a novel titled *Mink River* by Brian Doyle that features two quirky city public works employees as main characters, and, to seal the deal, a six-pack of his favorite New Belgium Brewing Company's "Abbey" beer.

I talked to him about my vision for a new approach to local government. How we need to redesign our services with the customer in mind. How we can use digital and nondigital solutions to build back trust in government.

How we need to break down departmental silos and empower government employees to innovate, take risks, fail fast, learn from mistakes, and iterate new solutions. I told him his style was perfect for this approach as I was seeking bright, caring employees who want to put the community first.

Whether it was our talk that day or maybe the beer, he ultimately accepted the job and was amazing at it for five short months until he passed away minutes before a ribbon-cutting ceremony for our new downtown commuter rail station. Informing a hastily gathered group of all his staff was probably the hardest thing I had to do as a freshman.

Losing him brought home the immense responsibility of leading an organization through grief and loss—and how one must demonstrate strength and resolve even in the most emotionally difficult times.

### **Coping with the Demands**

The new demands of freshman year can take a personal toll, especially if you are the type of person who puts extremely high expectations on yourself and carries around the weight of the challenges. It can get overwhelming.

I have caught myself more than once pondering how much time of your life you lose for every year as a manager. Is it two weeks lost for every year as a manager, one month?

As a new manager, you wonder if these feelings disappear with more experience, or if you just get better at dealing with them. These are things a freshman can't know.

I've sometimes thought that being a manager is a lot like being a major league baseball manager. Even the great ones have periods of adversity or even get fired. The Yankees famously fired the same guy five times.

So much of a baseball team's success is beyond the manager's control, but he can still be fired even after a winning season. Just because some of the fan base is unhappy, or just because some of the owners are unhappy, or just because.

So how to cope and overcome the stress of all the demands? I have found two basic models that work. The model that is best for you depends on your personality.

The first model is to have an enormous ego that allows you to comfortably

assume your actions and decisions are 100 percent right, 100 percent of the time. Therefore, anything that goes wrong is someone else's fault or shortcoming.

With this model, it helps if you do not care much about particular outcomes, and you are more focused on picking up your paycheck. Alas, my DNA strands are not twisted that way.

So for those of us cursed by pensiveness and self-reflection, the suggestions I have to offer are as follows: Get out of your jurisdiction from time to time to increase perspective; make time for your family and friends; exercise; drink red wine; do yoga; meditate; drink white wine; refocus through a hike or vacations to re-energize; or get inspired at an ICMA, Code for America, or ELGL conference.

### Finding the Joy

Looking back with my sophomore eyes, it is getting easier to see that the problems we face here in San Rafael are

not insurmountable but rather just the context in which we work. There are so many wonderful things going on in our community, and I'm honored to lead a stellar team making them happen.

We are getting things done that have been only dreams for many years, even decades. One example is that this year we will have two new fire stations and a public safety center under construction.

And even as we accomplish external projects that are easy for the public to see, we are working just as hard internally, reimagining ourselves as local government employees. We are focusing on modernizing city services and making our city a great place to work. There is so much to be enthusiastic and optimistic about.

### Moving On

For decades, I have said my time in the Peace Corps in West Africa was the period of my life when I learned the most. I can finally say that period has been surpassed with my first year as city manager.

And yes, even though I feel like I was stuffed in a locker once or twice, the position is amazingly rewarding and comes with the ability to work alongside smart, caring people who want to make the community a better place.

If I could go back in time and whisper in the ear of my freshman self, I would undoubtedly have predictable advice: Try to have more fun. Don't get so stressed or down-trodden by the problems. Recognize not every setback is a referendum on your abilities.

Certainly, it is cringe-worthy advice in its obviousness, but somehow inexplicably hard to follow when you are just a freshman. But never fear, I'm a sophomore now. **PM**



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