

Leadership & Governance: Tips for Success

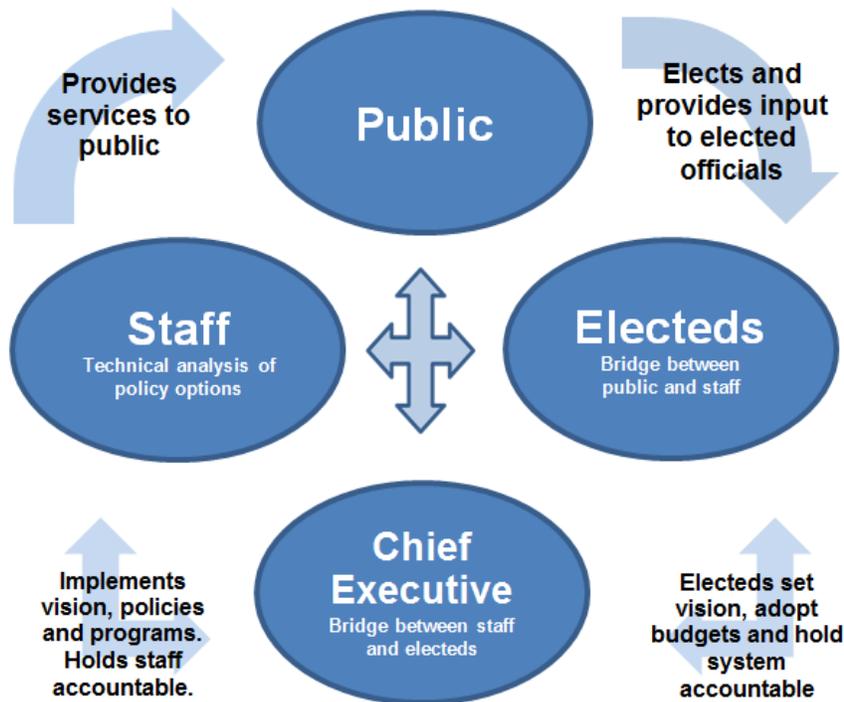
Electeds and Staff Bring a Different & Necessary Perspective

Understanding and embracing different perspectives is part of what makes our democratic institution at the local level so great. Both perspectives are vital when making decisions in the community's interests.

- Elected officials focus on what their constituents value and need from the agency; and
- Staff has technical expertise in policy areas and what can work, given their day-to-day experiences with implementing agency policies, practices and service delivery that can help inform the decision-making process.¹

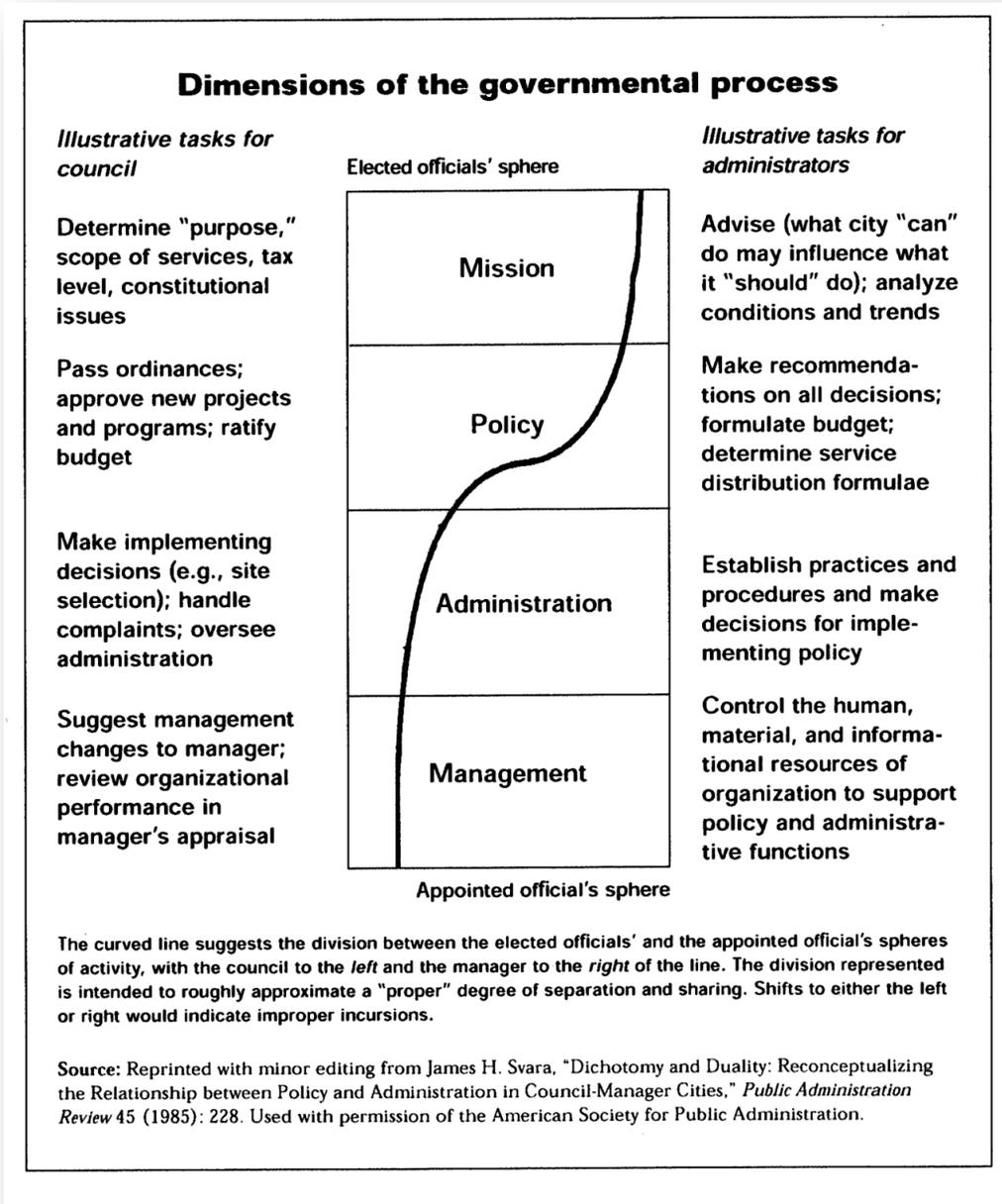
Bridging Function

Elected officials play a key bridging function between the community needs and staff; the chief executive officer in turn plays a bridging function between elected officials and staff.



Role Division

Current thinking is that elected and appointed officials operate in all four dimensions of the governance process: mission, policy, administration and management, although to differing degrees.² The graphic³ below illustrates this phenomenon. The curved line illustrates the division of roles between governing boards and executive staff; how this line looks for each local agency varies.



Role Clarity

A shared understanding of the chief executive's role and the governing board's expectations optimizes the working relationship. This understanding is informed by local charter and ordinance provisions that provide the overall framework for the relationship.

- The process of developing such a shared understanding begins with the hiring process and each participant in the process being forthright about their respective expectations.
- An annual evaluation process is an ongoing opportunity for such communication, particularly as governing board members change.

Staff will be most able to perform to expectations if those expectations are clear and mutually acceptable.

Tips for Governing Board Members

Setting Goals and Priorities. A helpful practice is to have the governing board establish priorities and strategic goals for the organization; such goals and priorities are a tool to guide the chief executive and staff on where to focus their efforts.⁴

Establishing an annual time for board reflection on community priorities would also offer an opportunity to discuss decorum among members and the executive-board relationship.

Limited Resources Means Difficult Trade-offs. An unhappy reality is that there are likely insufficient resources to accomplish everything that the community and elected governing board members desire. This reality creates challenges for the chief executive in proposing a budget as well as well as managing the agency work force.

Finding Common Ground. A key skill for a governing board member is finding areas of agreement and common interests with other board members. Within the parameters of the state's open meeting laws, work with the other governing board members to find areas of agreement on what courses of action best serves the public's interests.

In the event that board members disagree, clear ground rules can quell acrimony before it becomes a public spectacle.

When the Governing Board Changes

Staff's job is to implement the policies adopted by the governing body. This includes implementing changes in policy direction when the philosophy of the governing board changes.

New majorities on boards sometimes impute the policy preferences of the previous boards to staff. This causes them to worry that staff will not be as diligent in implementing changes to previous policies. They sometimes believe staff has to change in order for policies to change.

This is another area where frank and ongoing communication is helpful. Most professional staff understand that policy directions change and that their role is to implement that change, as long as the policy falls within the bounds of the laws and public service ethics.

Allow a certain amount of time for staff and the new majority to get to know one another and see if a productive working relationship can occur.

Understanding that Public Policymaking Involves Value Choices. Policy choices tend to be choices among different values, including the values of fairness, compassion, efficiency, individual rights, common good and others. The “correct” answer is likely to be an elusive goal,⁵ particularly since members of the community as well as other members of the governing board are likely to give different values different weight.

Chief Executive Works for the Entire Board. All members of the body were elected by the community to participate in the agency’s decision-making processes. As a result, the chief executive’s responsibility is to strive for positive working relationships with all members of the body equally and provide information equally to all members of the body.

Communications Needs. Let the chief executive know what kinds of communications work for you. While the chief executive’s job is to share information with all members of the governing body equally (and typically through a combination of written communications and one-on-one meetings), governing body members will often have different communications preferences as to what combination of these two techniques work best for them.

Transparent Decision-Making. The governing board makes decisions (and gives staff direction) at open and well-publicized governing board meetings. These decisions occur after listening to, inquiring of and learning from interactions with all segments of the community and staff.

The Benefits of Collaboration. Be forthright on your objectives and goals with the chief executive, so he or she can do what is possible to help you achieve them (as opposed to “going around” him or her). A chief executive will try to be as responsive as possible to the needs of individuals on the governing board; however understand that significant tasks are likely to require governing body buy in and some tasks may conflict with priorities and policies adopted by the full governing body.

Ground Rules. A helpful practice is for the governing board as an entity to adopt, regularly review and update how the board will conduct its meetings and make decisions.⁶ Such protocols typically address meeting procedures (agenda preparation, how to put issues on the agenda, debate and voting procedures (parliamentary rules) and standards of decorum (civility).⁷

Managing Difficult Board Members. Staff’s role is to provide information to enable elected officials to knowledgeably participate in the decision-making process. However, from time to time, there will be difficult and divisive board members that create a challenging and uncomfortable environment for both the board and staff. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to solve such a problem. In the end, the board must manage its own behavior—not staff.⁸

Staff Preparation. If you have questions, concerns and/or information needs (or know that members of the community do), provide staff a heads up in advance of meetings so staff can be prepared to address them.

Unwelcome Information. One of staff’s least favorite roles is providing information and analysis that will make one or more governing board members unhappy. Typically, providing such information is part of staff’s job to avoid surprising the board. If pursuing a given course of action could have negative outcomes (a lawsuit, unintended consequences or a chance that a given goal will not be achieved), it is

staff's job to let the board know so the board can factor such information and risks into the decision. If possible, staff will also try to identify options and alternatives for reducing the risk of negative outcomes.

Directing Questions and Criticisms. Question, and if appropriate, criticize ideas, policies, programs or outcomes, but not the individuals involved (whether those individuals are fellow elected officials, staff or members of the public). Remember that staff is your tool to accomplish your objectives. Public praise for things you like will motivate; public criticism and embarrassment will discourage. Criticism or information regarding staff missteps should be directed to the chief executive to address.

Responding to Mistakes and Disappointing Outcomes. Mistakes are likely to happen in any organization. If something bad happened, ask what measures can and will be taken to prevent such missteps in the future.⁹

Tips for Chief Executive & Staff

Clear Goals and Priorities. A key task is for the governing body and chief executive work together to assure staff has clear direction on the agency's goals and priorities.

Goal setting workshops can be useful forums for establishing governing board and organizational priorities. This includes holding annual workshops in which goals are set, reviewed, updated and/or retained, as well as direction on how the group wants to be kept updated on progress, goals and priorities.¹⁰ Follow up, of course, is critical to maximizing a goal setting session's value.¹¹

Such clarity enables staff to know where to devote scarce/limited resources in proposing budget and work program priorities for the governing board's consideration.

Documented goals and priorities serve as a reference point when issues and potentially competing priorities come up throughout the year. Priorities may need to change of course; the key is if a new priority is added, an old one must be subtracted.¹²

Engaging a broad range of the community in the conversation about hard choices can help the governing body in aligning agency goals with community wishes. Such processes offer important opportunities to inform and consult the community on what can be difficult tradeoffs due to scarce resources. Such engagement can also make the resulting decisions more enduring.

Focus on the Core Functions. For those areas over which the agency has discretion (for example, non-state mandated efforts without maintenance of effort requirements), the conversation can focus on identifying what is most important for the agency to accomplish. This tends to be an intersection of three things: what the community is passionate about, what the organization can be best at and what resources are available.¹³

Identifying this intersection does not necessarily mean that tasks outside the intersecting area will not get accomplished. Some functions may be more effectively accomplished by other agencies, community-based organizations or the private sector.

Capacity Building. The entire community benefits from well-prepared and knowledgeable local officials. Some tools for assisting with this goal include:¹⁴

- Leadership academies that help the public, including potential future governing board candidates, understand key elements of the agency's work and processes.
- Candidate orientations that provide information about agency functions, pending policy issues, including budget issues and any regulations that apply to the campaigning process.
- Newly elected official orientations conducted as soon as possible after election results are certified. Content should include the nuts and bolts of how to accomplish objectives in their new role, as well as briefings on current issues the agency faces, the status of long-range plans and capital projects, and the budget process. Connecting newly elected officials with former electeds who are respected in the community and can offer advice and share experience is also helpful.¹⁵
- Ongoing education through local workshops, references to helpful information about local governance and policy issues and conference attendance.

Credit for Commitment to Elective Office. One dimension of staff's role is to help governing board members receive the recognition they deserve for their actions as public servants.¹⁶ As media opportunities occur, ensure the electeds are aware so they may receive recognition for their service on community issues.

Evenhandedness. A positive working relationship with all governing body members regardless of personality, philosophy, positions on issues or whether the member is in the majority or minority on the body (remember majorities can change) can be another important success strategy. Communication preference may require that you spend more time with certain members. "Evenhandedness" does not necessarily mean communicating with all decision-makers in the same way.

A Sustained Effort. Successful relationships require ongoing effort and attention. Communication is a central element of this effort.

- Staff's role is to present information and analysis objectively, fairly and without spin.
- This includes willingness, when necessary, to deliver unwelcome information and minimize surprises for the governing board.

When Elected Officials Disagree with Staff Recommendations and Analysis. Professionals recognize smart, conscientious and reasonable people can disagree on the best course of action (particularly given the differing perspectives that staff and electeds contribute to the analysis of what best serves the community's interests).

- Such disagreements are not and should not be taken personally.
- All governing board decisions must be faithfully implemented, even those which differed from what staff recommended.
- Staff should never speak ill of elected officials, even to seemingly sympathetic and discreet listeners. Word of what was said inevitably seems to get back.

Attention to Detail. Doing the small things well helps governing board members trust staff on the big items.

Defining Success. Enjoying good relationships with elected officials is a worthy goal, with a few caveats.

- Be clear on the lines (legal, ethical and professional) over which you are not willing to step, before finding yourself in a difficult situation.
- As difficult as it may be, your professional reputation for competence and integrity in the long term is a more valuable career asset than keeping a particular job.

More Resources

International City/County Management Association and National League of Cities, *Working Together: A Guide for Elected and Appointed Officials* (1999)

International City/County Management Association and National League of Cities, *Leading Your Community: A Guide for Local Elected Leaders* (2008)

This resource reflects the insights and thoughts of a number of individuals, including: Kevin C. Duggan, West Coast Director, International City/County Management Association, Pete Kutras, Retired County Executive, Santa Clara, and Principal Consultant, Municipal Resource Group, LLC, Richard A. Haffey, County Executive Officer, Nevada County, and William Chiat, Director, CSAC Institute for Excellence in County Government.

© 2015 Institute for Local Government. All rights reserved.

References

¹ International City/County Management Association and National League of Cities, *Working Together: A Guide for Elected and Appointed Officials* (1999) at 22.

² *Working Together: A Guide for Elected and Appointed Officials*, at 19-20.

³ Based on the work of James H. Svara in "Dichotomy and Duality: Reconceptualizing the Relationship between Policy and Administration in Council-Manager Cities," *Public Administration Review* 45 (1998): 228. This material is reproduced with permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

⁴ Kevin C. Duggan, A Key Ingredient for Success: An Effective City Council/City Manger Relationship, at 9.

⁵ Julia Novak and John Nalbandian, Preparing Councils for Their Work, *PM Magazine*, August 2009, available at <http://webapps.icma.org/pm/9107/public/feature3.cfm?author=Julia%20Novak%20and%20John%20Nalbandian&title=Preparing%20Councils%20for%20Their%20Work&subtitle=>

⁶ See International City/County Management Association and National League of Cities, *Working Together: A Guide for Elected and Appointed Officials* (1999), at 59. Mike Conduff, Council Relations, *PM Magazine* (June 2012), available at <http://webapps.icma.org/pm/9405/public/council.cfm?author=&title=Council%20Relations&subtitle=>

⁷ See International City/County Management Association and National League of Cities, *Leading Your Community: A Guide for Local Elected Leaders* (2008) at 30-33.

⁸ Julia Novak and John Nalbandian, Preparing Councils for Their Work, *PM Magazine* (August 2009), available at <http://webapps.icma.org/pm/9107/public/feature3.cfm?author=Julia%20Novak%20and%20John%20Nalbandian&title=Preparing%20Councils%20for%20Their%20Work&subtitle=>

⁹ A Key Ingredient for Success: An Effective City Council/City Manger Relationship, at <http://webapps.icma.org/pm/9107/public/feature3.cfm?author=Julia%20Novak%20and%20John%20Nalbandian&title=Preparing%20Councils%20for%20Their%20Work&subtitle=>

¹⁰ Julia Novak and John Nalbandian, Preparing Councils for Their Work, *PM Magazine* (August 2009) available at <http://webapps.icma.org/pm/9107/public/feature3.cfm?author=Julia%20Novak%20and%20John%20Nalbandian&title=Preparing%20Councils%20for%20Their%20Work&subtitle=>

¹¹ Mike Conduff, ICMA-CM, A Great Retreat!, *PM Magazine* (April 2012) available at <http://webapps.icma.org/pm/9403/public/council.cfm?author=&title=Council%20Relations&subtitle=>

¹² Frank Benest, Ten New Rules for Elected Officials in Times of Economic Meltdown (2011) available at <http://www.ca-ilg.org/post/leadership-strategies-times-economic-meltdown>.

¹³ Adapted from Jim Collins, *Good to Great in the Social Sectors*, 2005 at 19 (the "hedgehog concept"). Also recommended by Frank Benest in Ten New Rules for Elected Officials in Times of Economic Meltdown (2011) available at <http://www.ca-ilg.org/post/leadership-strategies-times-economic-meltdown>.").

¹⁴ From Mike Conduff, Council Relations, *PM Magazine* (June 2012), available at <http://webapps.icma.org/pm/9405/public/council.cfm?author=&title=Council%20Relations&subtitle=>

¹⁵ Preparing Councils for Their Work, *PM Magazine*, available at <http://webapps.icma.org/pm/9107/public/feature3.cfm?author=Julia%20Novak%20and%20John%20Nalbandian&title=Preparing%20Councils%20for%20Their%20Work&subtitle=>

¹⁶ This concept is part of the International City/County Management Association's Code of Ethics:

Tenet 6. Recognize that elected representatives of the people are entitled to the credit for the establishment of local government policies; responsibility for policy execution rests with the members.