

SIX REASONS WHY IT'S BEST TO WORK THROUGH THE MANAGER

I'm a lucky city manager. I work for an excellent city council. Councilmembers take pride in promoting a tradition of community civility. They do their homework, serve for the right reasons, and have a sense of humor. They are supportive of staff, and they trust me. I can talk to them about almost anything. In such a healthy council-staff environment, councilmembers get to know and trust many staffers, and a smart manager wouldn't want to lose the feeling of a friendly, open organization.

So why is it necessary sometimes to remind our active and sincere councilmembers to work through my office or through department heads when seeking information or expressing interests and concerns? And why do I feel so awkward when I do?

Maybe it's because, no matter how diplomatically I express a desire that is consistent with our formal council policies and procedures, it can come across as a trust-and-control issue. And since the councilmembers trust the staff, why shouldn't staff trust councilmembers?

After all, their motivation is typically to avoid bothering me (or department heads) with the small stuff. What's there to hide? I guess this is where I am supposed to exclaim, "But it's not about trust and control!" In truth, however, it is, and here is why.

TRUST AND CONTROL

The jewel in a healthy local government environment is trust. With trust, we spend our time working together to solve problems and to get good things done for the community. Without trust, problems multiply, and the time spent solving them prevents work on more constructive items.

Preserving trust in any relationship, personal or professional, requires that we exercise a prudent amount of control in how we communicate. The council-staff relationship is no exception. In

fact, given the unique pressures and constraints imposed on this relationship, the two groups probably need even more structured guidance than most.

A LOT OF RULES, BUT WHY DO WE NEED THEM?

Fortunately, nearly all local governments have some formal rules in place, and virtually all such rules advise councilmembers to work through city and county managers and department heads on most organizational matters. Even with all the rules, however, something significant is missing.

Based on my research (admittedly not comprehensive, but I did check with ICMA, the League of California Cities, various trainers, and California city managers via an e-mail inquiry), there seems to be no prepared explanation for why such rules are important and how they preserve trust and benefit everyone involved in the relationship.

In the absence of such context, the rules come across as, well, cold rules—a list of dos and don'ts designed to keep everyone in line.

This "context void" seems to be widely perceived by managers, and many of them have asked me to send them anything that I might find on the subject. Because I was unable to find anything already written, however, I have been forced to do a little more work. With the aid of some helpful managers, then, here are a half-dozen reasons why everyone's best interests are served when councilmembers work through the manager and/or department heads to gather information or address concerns.

Reason 1. Because city managers cannot be on top of things if they don't know what the things are.

Councilmembers correctly expect managers to be on top of things. But if councilmembers bypass the manager to make requests of staff or to express concerns to staff, then the manager cannot possibly be sufficiently aware of their interests or concerns. Even the world's greatest local government manager cannot assure a timely response to a councilmember's inquiry if the manager is not aware of

the request in the first place. Sure, staff members can inform the manager of the request, but this roundabout way of communication raises the chances of miscommunication.

Reason 2. Because bypassing the manager can give the impression that there is a problem in the council-manager relationship, and this perception can undermine both the manager's credibility within the organization and the respect that the staff feels for the councilmember. If a councilmember (or members) consistently goes directly to other staff members with issues, these harmful perceptions may evolve: 1) the councilmember does not like to work with the manager; 2) the councilmember does not trust the information provided by the manager; 3) the manager is ducking his or her responsibility and just "passing the buck"; 4) the councilmember does not play by the rules and seeks special treatment; and/or 5) it must be okay for staff to go around the manager because councilmembers do it. Such impressions will weaken a manager's credibility and authority in the organization or reflect poorly on the councilmember, or both.

Reason 3. Because it is not possible for managers to treat all councilmembers equally if the manager is unaware of the treatment that one councilmember is getting. Managers are in the highly unusual position of having many, equal bosses, and the expectation of equal treatment by each of those bosses is not only extremely high but also entirely appropriate.

Equal treatment includes providing councilmembers with the same information, the same levels of support, and the same accessibility to the staff in general. Thus, when an elected councilor goes through the manager in making a request, the manager can judge if the desired information should be shared with all councilmembers.

The manager can also judge whether a request for staff work is consistent with council policy or if the full council should direct such work. If requests are

only inconsistently made through the manager, then the likelihood of inequities cropping up over time is high. This leads us to Reason 4.

Reason 4. Because councilmembers are often perceived as having "awesome power" and, therefore, direct requests can lead to surprising and negative unintended consequences. Councilmembers may contact staff people in a department to make what they perceive to be "simple requests for information," only to find these requests later perceived as orders to do something never intended by the councilmembers.

This is especially possible when direct contacts are made with staff below the department-head level. Councilmembers are typically surprised by such overreactions and by the complications and rumors that can result (because they know they don't have *that much power*). But to the staff member who seldom has contact with the higher-ups, the mayor and councilmembers are as "high up" as they come.

Reason 5. Because direct councilmember contact with staff members below the department-head level boosts the likelihood of getting erroneous or incomplete information. The further a councilmember reaches beyond the manager or department head, the more likely he or she will communicate with someone who has significantly less familiarity with the legislative process, the deeper context of various local government issues, the cross-departmental stakeholders who should be consulted, and the local rules for staff-council communication.

Combine these differences with the "awesome power" phenomenon, and the margin for a mistake in responding to the councilmember climbs substantially. On the other hand, a manager can provide one-stop service, saving time while producing better, more complete information.

Reason 6. Because such direct councilmember contact also can inadvertently cause awkward, embar-

assing situations—or worse—for the staff members involved. After a Reason 5 scenario has occurred, a staff member who later learns that he provided incorrect or incomplete information feels embarrassed. In fact, a staff member who learns that she violated some staff-council communication rule is not only embarrassed but also worried that she might be perceived as acting politically and undermining her bosses.

A staff member who incorrectly completes excessive work at the direction of an individual councilmember may perceive him- or herself to be "in trouble," especially if they have failed to notify their bosses or failed to complete other assigned work as a result.

AN UGLY TRUTH, BUT NOT FOR MOST

There is one unfortunate truth that needs to be recognized: not everyone is sincere or competent in council-manager relationships. There are councilmembers who deliberately try to undermine the system, and there are managers who are not responsive to councilmember inquiries. For such people, this article will not help, and any solution probably needs to be found through a closed-session discussion but not through short-cutting the system.

Fortunately, most elected officials and managers want the system and the relationships to work in the best possible way. To achieve this end, is it necessary for every little thing to go through the manager? No. What is required, however, is an understanding between the council and the manager as to what differentiates a little thing from a bigger thing. This can only be achieved if the elected officials and manager are regularly talking and if there is a true commitment by all to play by the rules.

Such rules are worthy of commitment, and we can help uphold an excellent system while still preserving city hall as an open, friendly, helpful place.

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