

The Value of Going Back to the

Basics

by Gus Morrison and Jan Perkins

Henry Kissinger was addressing a large audience. A protester stood and began to shout at him. As security began ejecting the heckler, Kissinger stopped them. He said, "Please leave him alone, he is just doing his job. As a protester, it's his job to be concerned with the best possible thing. As a policy-maker, it's my job to find the best thing possible."

After a few council meetings, you discover that sitting on the "target" side of the dais means, among other things, you must be prepared. You learn new acronyms like EIR (environmental impact report), CIP (capital improvement project) and CDBG (community development block grant). You are expected to know local ordinances, state regulations, federal laws and court decisions, all of which guide the council in what it can and cannot do.

On top of all that, council members wear numerous hats: ombudsperson, governing board member, employer, long-range visionary, strategic goal setter, community booster and team member. Adding spice to the mix is the confusion that can occur when someone demands that a council member "fix" something.

Which is the appropriate role for you at the moment?

How does a council member excel in the full range of the job? A strong council-manager relationship is a good way to start. The following are some basic rules to remember.

RULE #1: DON'T TRY TO DO IT ALONE.

You are a member of a larger system. As a governing board, the council sets policy and hires a competent staff to carry it out. It is not your job to single-handedly solve problems brought to your attention. Understand you have only one side of the story when someone complains to you. Your city manager should provide the council with an orderly method of handling citizen complaints and other problems brought to the attention of council members. You should be able to rely on that process and communicate to your constituents that their complaints will be handled by the staff according to council policy.

RULE #2: LEARN TO COMPROMISE.

To be persuasive, you need to be knowledgeable, articulate your views with valid information and listen to others. Sometimes you must realize you cannot achieve all your desires; instead, find an acceptable compromise. There should be an organized method for an individual council member to raise an idea. Some cities have a "council referral" process, through which a council member can bring an item before the council for initial discussion without any staff work. If a majority decides to proceed further with the idea, it gets a hearing at a future meeting along with staff analysis. If not,

it is tabled. In either case, the council member has had an opportunity to raise an issue to her colleagues. The manager takes direction from the council as a whole rather than any individual council member. When there is a disagreement within the council as to direction on an issue, the council should collectively resolve the issue so that it is clear to all parties.

RULE #3: RESPECT OTHERS.

Being effective as a council member requires respecting others, their roles, integrity and abilities. When you treat other council members and staff with respect, communicate well with the manager, and assume the best intent of others, you build relationships that help you get things done.

RULE #4: TAKE THE LONG VIEW.

Focus on improving the community over the long term while paying attention to the needs of today. A vision and multi-year strategic plan provide context and a foundation from which to make decisions. The community has core values and desires, which the council must respect. A vision for the future, setting annual and long-range goals, and evaluating progress toward those goals help the council manage the many demands that come their way. Taking the long view assists council members in staying focused when the slow pace of government is frustrating.

RULE #5: BE PREPARED.

Read the materials provided, come prepared for council meetings, and help res-

idents understand how the system works. When you have questions for staff, ask them before the meetings, even if you wish to have the information provided at a meeting. Learn the processes of government. Remember, it always seems easier when someone else has to do it. Local government is but one of a host of participants with a decision-making role in our communities. The local government environment can be complicated and messy. State and federal laws, court decisions, administrative agencies at all levels of government and local municipal charters are all capable of tying the hands of councils. Problems that may appear to have simple solutions are typically not simple at all. In a democracy, government must move thoughtfully and with the full participation of citizens and stakeholders.

RULE #6: COMMUNICATE THROUGH THE CITY MANAGER.

The council hires the city manager to implement council policy and direction. The manager is responsible for ensuring that employees accomplish the work that supports council priorities. Communicating through the manager provides the best opportunity for all members of council to know that each of them receives the same information. This makes it easy for the council to hold the manager accountable. When individual council members go directly to individual line staff, incomplete information may be provided, and it can result in taking the manager out of the loop on an issue important to a council member. Furthermore, it confuses staff about who gives direction and undermines the manager's ability to hold staff accountable. The manager should be providing the council early alerts on issues and "the good, the bad and the ugly" about what is going on. Many communication tools are available to do this, such as e-mail, regular meetings with the manager, council work sessions, project status reports and weekly updates. As an

employer, an important role of the council is to take the time to evaluate the manager each year in order to ensure that all team members are in agreement regarding expectations, goals and performance.

RULE #7: LEARN SOMETHING EVERY DAY.

We live in a fast paced, complicated world. Council decisions should be made with an understanding of the larger environment in which the city operates. Take advantage of educational opportunities through the League, other local government associations and seminars on city-related topics. Suggest that council members learn together by attending conferences or seminars or by inviting a speaker for a discussion on a topic of importance to your community. Assume that there is much you need to learn, and go about doing it.

RULE #8: GIVE THE COUNCIL A TUNE-UP.

Set aside time for the council to stop riding the bicycle and check it out for loose parts. Any group process needs to be examined occasionally to see where improvements can be made in the conduct of business. An annual team-building process is an opportunity for the council to review its meeting operations, the city's strategic plan, communication on projects or between the council and staff, or any number of issues. It is usually during these sessions that we learn what drives our colleagues, what their personal goals are and how council members can work together to achieve mutual goals. The most effective councils are usually those that have a clear vision, agreed upon goals, a clear work program and a strong relationship with the manager and staff based on trust, communication and accountability.

RULE #9: HAVE FUN.

The council member's job is a serious one - but it can't be serious every mo-

ment. You need to enjoy community events, make opportunities to laugh with your colleagues, and have fun with your family and friends. Do not let the council role consume all of your time or you'll find yourself losing perspective. And do not take disagreements personally. Enjoy this time in your life. It won't last forever. Try to remember that council meetings scare most citizens and they will relax if they find the meetings have moments of fun and humor (for example, at the good-natured expense of a council member). A laugh can lighten up even the most intense meeting.

RULE #10: ALWAYS REMEMBER WHY YOU RAN FOR OFFICE IN THE FIRST PLACE.

We don't know a single council member who wanted to make the city worse during their service. Each of you wants to leave your mark when you are done. You cannot do that alone. It takes you, the rest of the council, the manager and staff, and all the citizens you can involve. When you're finished, we hope you can look back and ask, "How did we get so much done?"

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