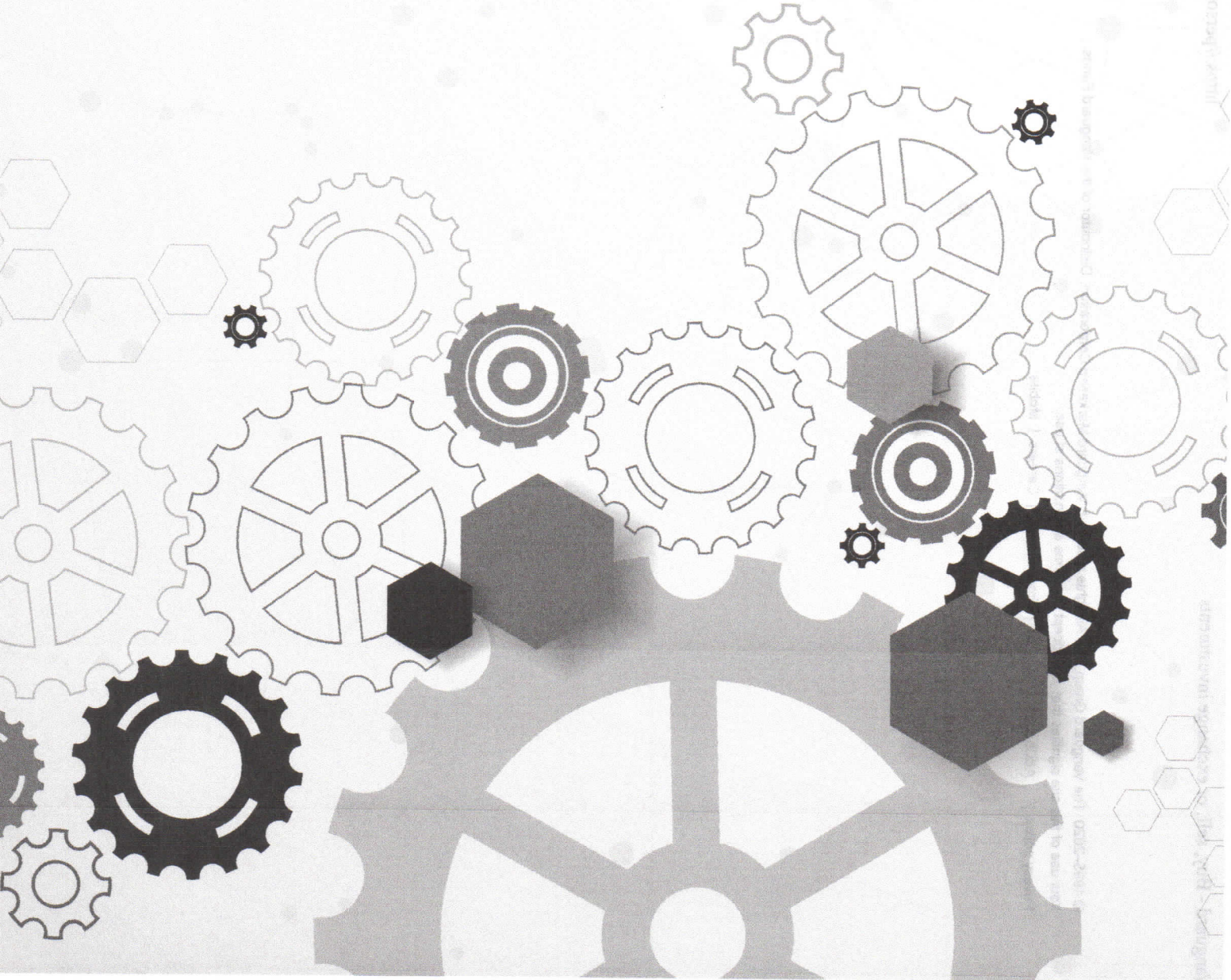


MAKING IT WORK:

THE ESSENTIALS OF COUNCIL-MANAGER RELATIONS

KEVIN DUGGAN AND
MIKE CONDUFF



Chapter 8

“MAY THE FORCE BE WITH YOU”: A SET OF 12 BEST PRACTICES IN COUNCIL-MANAGER RELATIONS

Mastering the essentials



“

... help your newly elected officials learn what policy making is all about ...

help them do meaningful work.

”

If you find yourself at this chapter, you have either been a faithful reader or, like an impatient reader of mystery novels, you've skipped ahead to the end. In either case, we want to send you off with some final thoughts on how to maximize the potential of a great working relationship with your elected officials. Enjoy the list!

1. Always Have Time for Your Elected Officials: *It will be a big problem if elected officials don't feel important or valued by the manager.*

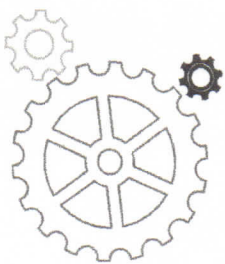
Elected officials don't run for office to feel ignored. It is easy to underestimate how much elected officials look to the manager for cues in regard to how they are valued. With all the demands on the manager's time, it is easy to find it difficult to be available as often as some elected officials would like. Make it a priority to be available and responsive to your elected officials—it is much more important than you might think. Always ask each of them individually how much and how they want and like to be communicated with. Listen to both their verbal and nonverbal (i.e., body language) response.

2. Help Your Elected Officials Become Better Policy Makers: *Make it easier for elected officials to stay focused on what they are supposed to do.*

“Making policy” is not easy. Few elected officials come to their roles with the knowledge and skill to do so effectively. It is frankly easier for them to help you do your job than to do their own. And since they all were elected to “do something” if not busy working on policy issues, they will gravitate to more administrative areas. So help your newly elected officials learn what policy making is all about and how to go about doing it. Create structures (strategic plans, general plans, policy development, legislative goals, etc.) that help them do meaningful work in their area of responsibility—decreasing the odds that they will gravitate to help you do your work since they are not finding meaning in their roles. Help them find “early wins” in their arena and they are more likely to stay in it.

3. Have Clear Communication and Understanding Regarding Your Council's Expectations: *You can't meet their expectations if you don't know what they are.*

While sometimes time-consuming and challenging, it is critical for the manager to have a clear dialogue with elected officials about their expectations concerning the manager's performance. A meaningful conversation on this topic can occur during performance evaluations or in some other setting. Having an understanding with your elected officials that they will “let you know if there is a problem” is not sufficient. You need to proactively seek input and feedback so that you can better understand their expectations of you before you run into issues with your performance not matching their expectations.



4. Never Compete with Elected Officials for Public Recognition or Attention: *You get paid—let the elected officials have the limelight.*

By and large elected officials work very hard for relatively little, if any, compensation. One of the major “rewards” for their service is public recognition for organizational success. It is often too easy for the public and/or press to focus on the manager as the reason for organizational/community success. While it is quite natural to be tempted to accept such praise (particularly if it is well deserved), the contribution of the council (and often staff) should be emphasized. Councils are fully cognizant of what their professional managers are paid for their work. It follows, then, that council members expect the manager to make sure they get the “compensation” of public recognition.

5. Implement City Council Decisions Faithfully: *It doesn't matter whether you like the decision; it's yours to implement.*

We should all know that the nature of our local government democracies dictates that the will of the people is discerned by the elected body. Whether right or wrong (at least from your point of view), councils have the right to make those decisions. While you can appreciate your obligation to carry out the will of the elected officials, you can sometimes do so halfheartedly or with little enthusiasm. If you do so, it will be noticed and will not be appreciated. Your professionalism requires you to implement decisions you disagree with as effectively as decisions you recommended (and this also helps avoid you and the staff being blamed for any lack of success resulting from the board's decision).

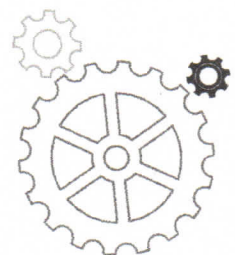
6. Do the “Small Stuff” Well So That Your Elected Officials Can Trust You on the “Big Stuff”: *Pay attention and remember what is important to your elected officials.*

It can be tempting, quite understandably, to put a low priority on what we perceive to be low-priority issues raised by council members (often on behalf of constituents). Whether it's a pothole to be filled or a street tree to be trimmed, it can be frustrating to feel pulled away from “higher priority” responsibilities. However, the more effectively you and your team respond to these “small things” (particularly since these will never seem to be minor concerns to elected officials or one of their constituents), the more credibility you and the organization will establish with your elected officials. It increases the odds that when a significant or complex issue is before them, the elected officials will have confidence in your recommendation. However, if you have not demonstrated the ability to get the “small stuff” accomplished, elected leaders may not trust you and the staff when the “big stuff” rolls around.

“

Your professionalism requires you to implement decisions you disagree with as effectively as decisions you recommended. . . .

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Never forfeit your credibility by appearing to **overly influence a decision...**



7. Always Maintain Your Professionalism: *If you ever make it personal, watch out!*

It is inevitable that you and your elected officials will at times not agree on a course of action. As long as such disagreements remain at a professional level, little damage is usually incurred. However, if such disagreements ever degenerate into what appears to be personal animosity, the ability to maintain an effective relationship is greatly compromised. Even when provoked, do your best to never appear to personally have a problem with your elected official (versus viewing a policy question from a different perspective). Once your elected official believes it has become personal, that perception is very hard to overcome. Treat your least supportive member just as you would your most supportive one, and he or she might just become it!

8. Be Realistic About "Management vs. Policy": *Avoid "I want to play in your yard, but you better not play in mine."*

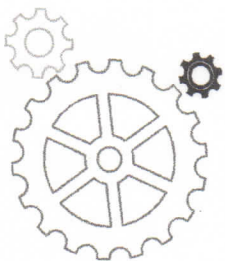
The need for managers to withstand the efforts of elected officials to become directly involved in the management of the day-to-day operations of the city is clearly understood. However, the line of separation can be blurry. It is also clear that leaving the council completely in the dark regarding what is occurring within the organization can lead to serious issues for the manager. Additionally, it is certain that the manager (via recommendations and the like) will influence policy positions. If the manager is going to influence policy, she/he must be willing to find balance in terms of allowing elected officials some reasonable understanding of what is happening administratively in the organization.

9. Present Facts and Information Accurately and Completely: *Avoid spinning at all costs.*

It is completely understandable to become "invested" in your recommendations to your elected bodies. While, fortunately, few in our profession would intentionally mislead the elected bodies to achieve a desired outcome, it is possible to do so inadvertently. Not presenting all legitimate options or not completely and fairly identifying the pros and cons of options can be tempting when you are convinced regarding what direction the council should take. Never forfeit your credibility by appearing to overly influence a decision by not presenting all the relevant facts in a clear and unbiased fashion.

10. Be Realistic About the Number and Types of Issues You Ask Your Council to Tackle at One Time: *Don't try to take on everything at once.*

When we know that there is much work to be done, it can be tempting to bring many issues forward in close time proximity. Whether it



is at one meeting, or a series of meetings in close proximity, it is easy to overload councils with either too much workload or too much controversy. This can lead to poor decision making, and even resentment. Sometimes bad decisions result when a different sequencing of issues or more time to consider the topics could have resulted in a more positive outcome. Don't overload your councils with work or controversy—timing can be everything!

11. If Elected Officials Don't Trust Your Honesty and Integrity, Nothing Else Matters: *Establishing and maintaining trust must be your highest priority.*

Many factors can impact the success you have in establishing and maintaining a successful working relationship with your elected officials. None is more important than trust. If your elected officials don't trust you to be honest and straightforward with them, nothing else matters. You can be the smartest or most skilled manager around, but without trust, little else matters. Never squander that trust by what you do or say. Mistakes can usually be forgiven, violation of trust usually cannot.

“Mistakes can usually be forgiven, **violation of trust** usually cannot.”

12. Every Time Your Council Changes, Your Job Becomes New Again: *Never take the relationship for granted.*

Most managers taking on a new job, especially first-time managers, take nothing for granted. They actively seek input and feedback. They work hard to develop a strong relationship with the council as a whole and with individual council members. The longer you serve in these roles, the more casual you can become in regard to establishing and retaining a positive working relationship. Assume, because it is usually true, every time your council changes it becomes a “new job” for you. Don't forget how you acted (and took nothing for granted) as a new and/or first-time manager. Never take the relationship for granted, even if your council doesn't change.

Final Final Word

It no doubt came as no surprise that a good deal of this book deals with the unique challenges of being a CAO in local government, and in particular, the challenges that can arise in working with and for elected officials. However, we are hopeful that you come away with a sense of how meaningful and important this work is as well.

Between the two of us, we have served as CAOs of local governments for several decades. Both of us feel incredibly fortunate to have been able to play the roles we played in our respective communities, and neither of us would trade the experience for anything. While we both have faced our share of challenging times, they were far outweighed by our positive experiences.

