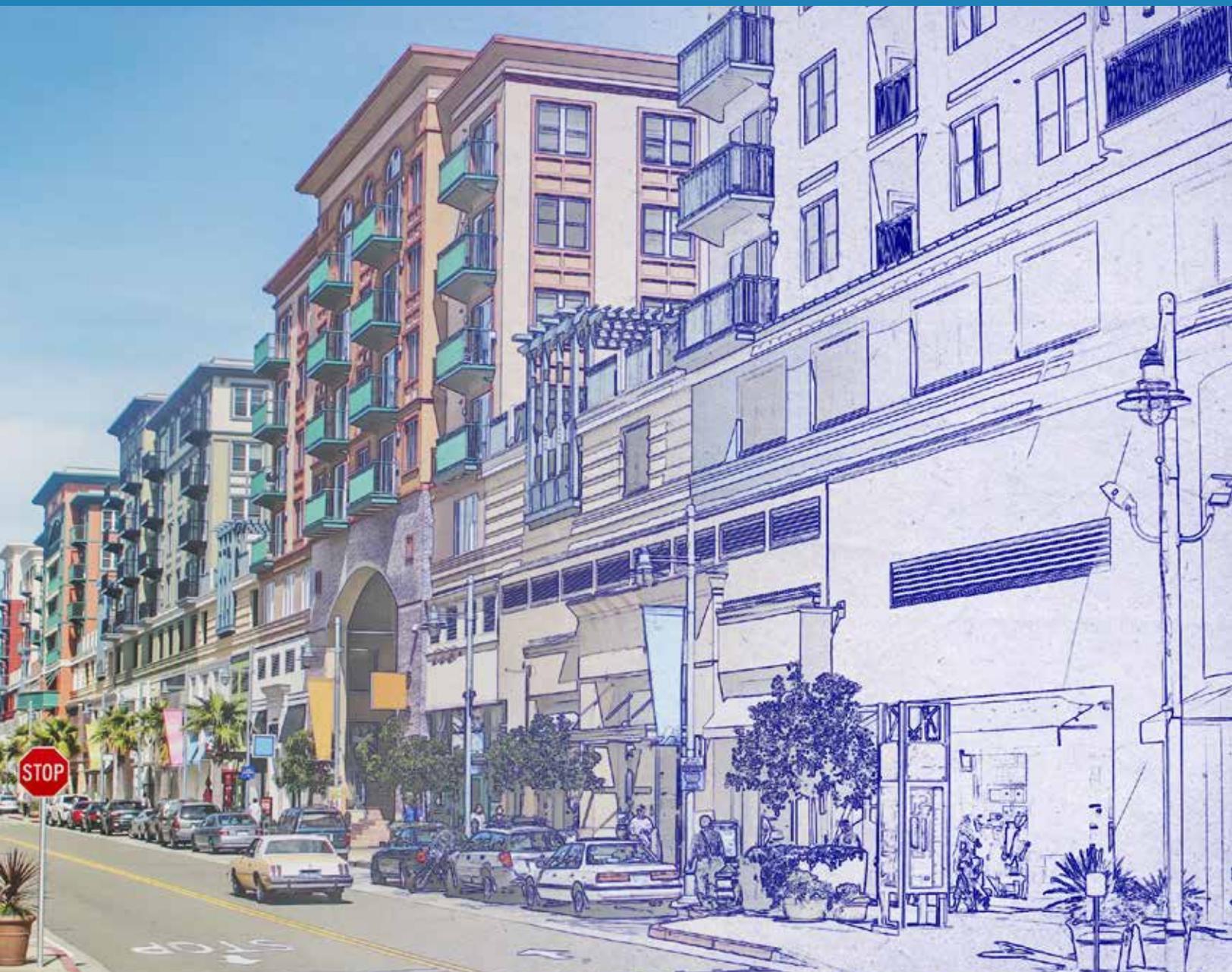


ICMA

THE FIRST-TIME ADMINISTRATOR'S HANDBOOK



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ICMA, the International City/County Management Association, advances professional local government through leadership, management, innovation, and ethics. ICMA provides member support; publications; data and information; peer and results-oriented assistance; and training and professional development to more than 13,000 city, town, and county experts and other individuals and organizations throughout the world. The management decisions made by ICMA's members affect millions of individuals living in thousands of communities, from small villages and towns to large metropolitan areas.

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PREFACE

In 1998, the ICMA Executive Board and President Gary Gwyn appointed twenty-five members to serve on the First-Time Administrator’s Task Force. They were asked to draft a document that would be beneficial to individuals who were about to serve or were already serving in their first administrator position or as the first administrator/manager for a local government.

The initial *First-Time Administrator’s Handbook* was published in 2000. While it served as a valuable reference tool for countless ICMA members, after nearly ten years the ICMA Executive Board and President Darnell Earley appointed a twelve-member task force to review the Handbook in 2009. That task force updated the content and format, which served well for another decade.

In 2018, President Karen Pinkos appointed the third task force, whose members are listed on page ii, to refresh the content of this valuable resource. In keeping with the times and the state of the profession, this Task Force has made a number of further changes to the content and format of this guide and has worked to make the content more available to our profession, including:

- Paring down the content of the written guidebook and creating extensive web-based resources
- Linking the content to other ICMA resources and indexing it by “depth levels” corresponding to administrators’ needs and available time
- Emphasizing the questions that administrators need to ask and the stories of others rather than simply offering prescriptive advice
- Recommending to the ICMA Executive Board that this guide be considered an important resource for the future of the profession and not simply a benefit for ICMA members, with wide distribution through executive recruitment firms and state associations.

While we are proud of the work of this Task Force and the dedication of its members, we want to emphasize that this work is not solely of our creation. We drew not only on the ample content of the two prior Task Forces, but also on the work of the ICMA Regional Directors and on stories from colleagues across the profession.

As with our predecessors, we would like to recommend the resulting work not only to those new to the profession or to their respective positions, but to all ICMA members as a “refresher course” and a reminder to channel the spirit of a new administrator with fresh perspective on organizational challenges.

We would like to thank our fellow Task Force members for their enthusiasm for and dedication to this project. We especially appreciate the work of ICMA staff—and particularly Rob Carty—in helping our grand ideas become reality.

Finally, we encourage everyone who views this resource—in either its written or electronic format—to share it with at least one colleague who might benefit from the perspective it offers.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

At some point in your career, you're likely to face a decision whether to seek and/or accept a position as a chief administrator in a local government. Perhaps you want to advance to the next step on your career ladder—or maybe you've been offered a chief administrator position because the CAO in your community resigned, or because a recruiter identified you as a candidate for the job.

The First-Time Administrator's Handbook is for professionals like you who are embarking on—or contemplating—a first position as a local government CAO. It offers advice and perspectives on the transition, whether you're a recent MPA graduate, a current assistant/deputy manager or department head, or a manager in a private-sector or nonprofit organization or the military.

This handbook also contains useful advice for managers who serve as a community's first appointed professional CAO, although it does not cover some of the unique challenges of that position—such as educating the govern-

ing body and the community about the role of an appointed administrator or navigating the changes in responsibility and authority that may accompany the introduction of the CAO role.

Each chapter and section is organized to help you quickly access information. First, a high-level “airplane view” gives a quick glance at the material. Second, a “bird's-eye view” outlines important principles to give you an overview of the topic. Next, a “beach view” provides a lengthier discussion. Finally, a “deep dive” section provides additional detail and links to online resources that will help you enhance your knowledge and advance your career.

ICONS



AIRPLANE VIEW: Quick glance



BIRD'S-EYE VIEW: Important principles



BEACH VIEW: In-depth discussion



DEEP DIVE: Additional online resources



DO YOU REALLY WANT TO DO THIS?



When you're facing a decision whether to seek and/or accept a position as the top appointed official in a local government, the first question to answer is whether you want to make that transition. This chapter provides guidelines for a self-assessment based on the nature and challenges of the CAO position and the "fit" between you and a community you may serve.

SELF-ASSESSMENT



To help you decide whether you want a CAO position, consider writing a list of pros and cons relating to your current position and an imagined—or actual—chief administrator position. This small but very powerful tool can guide you in assessing career decisions. And the simple but insightful list of pros and cons is a self-assessment tool that can be useful in both personal and professional decision making. Your list can include points related to the nature of the CAO role, how the position(s) fit with your own career goals and values, and how the shift affects your family if you have one and your expectations for a balance between work and the other aspects of your life.



What's Involved in the CAO Role?

Being a chief administrative officer requires a commitment to public service as well as a steadfast commitment to the [ICMA Code of Ethics](#). This job is like no other. As a new manager, you will be at the center of public attention and represent your organization at all times. While sometimes it seems that there is more criticism than praise, it is important to never underestimate the silent majority who support progress in all its manifestations. Ultimately, the challenge of public service offers its own intrinsic rewards.

As a first-time administrator, you can't be prepared for everything. Things happen, so as you do your self-assessment, consider your flexibility and resiliency when faced with situations like these:

- A phone call from the police chief alerts you to a serious incident involving a police officer. This call happens following disruptive officer-involved shootings in another community.
- You thoughtfully deliver a budget that responds to the governing body's priorities only to learn they had no interest in actually funding those priorities.

THE SKINNY: QUICK TIPS AND IDEAS FROM OTHER ADMINISTRATORS

You Can't Make This Stuff Up

As a new chief administrator, consider how you would handle situations like these:

- An elected official is arrested out of state the day of your first strategic planning retreat with the governing body.
 - An elected official has a major medical event and is out for eight months during your first year.
 - A new elected official is the wife of a former employee that you fired early in your tenure.
 - Respected and popular public safety personnel are involved in an off-duty incident involving inappropriate sexual conduct.
 - An elected official lobbies strongly to promote a relatively inexperienced employee to a senior department head position, a departure from previous practice. You've learned that the elected official has a personal relationship with the employee.
 - An elected official demands action against a home-based business for relatively minor infractions when his own home-based business has been discovered to have much more serious violations.
 - An elected official is discovered to be operating a house for rent without having the property inspected and permitted as a rental property.
- Community residents expect that the assistant or deputy manager will seamlessly move into the manager position, believing that "she was doing the job all along."



LEARNING ABOUT THE CAO ROLE

Bonnie Svrcek, City Manager, Lynchburg, Virginia

Ever since I read *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* by Jane Jacobs, I aspired to be a city manager. Simply put, I wanted to make a difference in communities.

A defining moment in my journey was when I was working as a senior budget analyst in Fairfax County, Virginia. I had worked in the Office of Management and Budget for five years and it was time for a change.

Tony Griffin, former city manager of Falls Church, Virginia, had just joined Fairfax County as a deputy county executive. I mustered up the courage to approach him and ask if I could talk with him sometime about city management. “Of course,” he said, “I may tell you things you may not want to hear.” I said, “I think that is exactly why I want to talk with you.” Tony gave me two hours of his valuable time to talk with me about the challenges of local government management. More so, he shared with me the rewards of local government management.

Not long after I met with him, Tony appeared in my office and handed me



a job advertisement for an assistant town manager in another locality in Virginia and suggested I apply. I did apply, and with pride and humility, I was chosen from 146 candidates. Thus began my journey to becoming a first-time administrator.

After serving as an assistant town manager and then a deputy city manager for nearly thirty years, I finally became a first-time administrator in 2016.

- Both the fire chief and the police chief positions need to be filled due to retirements, one expected, one unexpected.

Can I Handle the Emotional Rigors of the Job?

The examples above show that the CAO job is challenging. It can be exhausting. It involves sacrifice. It requires self-awareness. It can

demand emotional toughness and can bring you the best and most difficult days. One way to get a sense of what is required is to find an experienced manager and ask questions:

- Why did you choose this career path?
- What do I need to know to be successful?
- How can I best prepare myself to be a CAO?
- What was the worst day in your career?

- What inspires you?
- How do you balance all the demands of the position?



Resources on the ICMA website ([icma.org/first-time-administrator](https://www.icma.org/first-time-administrator)) will help you take a deeper dive into the topic.

THE FIT: FINDING THE RIGHT POSITION



Once you decide that a CAO position is right for you, your next challenge is to figure out which CAO position is the right one. In addition to assessing yourself, it is important to determine what community is the best fit for you and, if you have a family, what community is a good fit for them as well. Not only must you determine if you're ready for the job and have broad enough experience for the desired position, you must also determine if this is the job for you.



Local government administrators have a strong passion for their work—it's a career choice they make based on a desire to serve the public and make communities stronger and better—and typically not simply a job to perform. When considering whether to move to a new position, especially one where you will be assuming the top role—the chief administrator position—for the first time, it is helpful to consider three critical factors regarding the fit between the community's need and your personal needs to increase the likelihood of success: (1) how well your values align with the needs of the community, governing body, and staff; (2) whether the community is right for your career aspirations and for your life situation (single, married, family, aging parents, other factors); and (3) whether you are prepared to assume the top position.

THE SKINNY: QUICK TIPS AND IDEAS FROM OTHER ADMINISTRATORS

Things to Think About Before You Start a Job

- Ask for what you want when you negotiate your employment agreement, or don't expect to get it.
- Make sure your agreement states the basis for salary increases; don't forget to include professional memberships and ongoing professional development (ICMA, Transforming Local Government, state conferences).
- If your organization has union contracts, you may find it helpful to read them in advance. This can help you discover what limitations you will face with respect to employee discipline, pay raises, time off, and other matters.
- Find out how the hiring vote went; if it was a contentious decision to hire you, there may be hard feelings present and elected officials gunning for you from day one. It's okay if a board member or two didn't support your hire, but feel free to ask why they didn't want you and if they are willing to work with you even though you weren't their first choice.



Aligning Values

It is important to make sure your values align with those of the community, the elected officials, and the staff. Once you zero in on a particular position, you may be able to ascertain the values of a community during the



interview process, or you may need to conduct additional research. Seek out information that will help you determine whether a fit exists between the needs of these groups and your personal values.

Ask the elected officials about their values. What type of leadership style are they seeking, “transformational” or “autocratic”? If your preferred style is “facilitative” or “team-driven,” this position may not be the right fit—even if all other aspects of the position are a match. The greater the alignment between your values and those of the elected officials (and the staff and community) the greater the potential for a successful tenure in the position.

Aligning with the Community

It is important that a community provides the type of lifestyle and amenities that fit your personal needs—and those of your family. Does it provide the educational, religious, cultural, and recreational activities that are important to you and to which you have grown accustomed? If the community is significantly different from your current one—whether in terms of size, demographic characteristics, rural/urban nature, proximity to large metro areas, proximity to family and friends, or other factors—knowing and considering how this will affect you will enable you make a better determination regarding whether this is the right community for you.

Aligning with the Position

As you conduct your self-assessment, you’ll undoubtedly have long periods of self-reflection and discussion with family and friends regarding the nature of the CAO position and your readiness for it. Here are questions to consider:

- Does the position advance your career goals?
- Can you find the appropriate work/life balance?
- Why do you want to work in this particular community?

Finding the right first-time administrator position is all about finding the right fit—with the elected officials and organization, the community, and the position. Reflection and assessment of these factors will help you make the right decision about when to progress to the CAO job.

In the end, only you (in consultation with others) can decide if the leap to the top job is the best for you at this time in your life. For sure, being a first-time administrator can be the pinnacle of your local government management career, but most of all it can be the most rewarding chapter of your career where you are empowered to lead change and build stronger communities.

[Resources on the ICMA website \(icma.org/first-time-administrator\)](https://www.icma.org/first-time-administrator) will help you take a deeper dive into the topic.



I'M EXPECTED TO THIS JOB HOW?



No one is born a local government administrator. Each of us comes to this role by way of a path of some kind. Some of the uncertainties and challenges you will experience during your first time as an administrator may be based on “where you came from” or what you did before serving in this new role.

This chapter offers some tips and tricks – including stories and other resources – based on the experiences of people who moved into local government administration along different career paths. It explores two of the biggest challenges common to all first-time administrators: building and nurturing relationships with the governing body and navigating the political nature of your new role. Finally, this chapter talks about the challenges and considerations associated with time management in the manager’s role and offers perspective on adapting to the new kinds of rewards and view of accomplishment associated with being a manager.



CAREER PATHS

Some common paths to the first-time administrator role include:

- Serving as an assistant administrator in local government
- Managing a business entity in the private sector
- Managing a nonprofit organization
- Serving in the armed forces.

Moving “Up”: From Assistant to CAO



One common path to the role of first-time administrator is a shift from an assistant or deputy CAO to the top position. As you make this shift, you might want to reflect on the differences between your former role and your new one. Here are questions to consider:

- Are you trying to find job satisfaction from the tasks that were rewarding as an assistant? Your role has changed; your rewards will change as well.
- Are you inadvertently micro-managing staff? Often when we are uncomfortable in a new role, we tend to revert to behavior that has been successful (or expected) in the past. What did you appreciate or not

THE SKINNY: QUICK TIPS AND IDEAS FROM OTHER ADMINISTRATORS

Transitioning from Other Positions

- If you’re transitioning from the private sector, be aware that governmental accounting standards are different from the ones you may be familiar with; get up to speed on the [Governmental Accounting Standards Board \(GASB\)](#).
- Don’t hesitate to contact another city or county if you are interested in an idea or program that they have tried; one big difference between the private sector and government is that other governmental entities are accustomed to operating in the “sunshine” and will be willing to share information with you.
- If you’re transitioning from the military, be prepared to meet resistance in most local government organizations if you bring an authoritarian leadership style with you. The military has a very top-down leadership model that relies on the chain of command and unquestioning obedience to lawful orders. Follow the rules, enforce policies, and use your chain of command, but be prepared to explain and discuss things with your new subordinates in local government. Learn to inspire people and not just order them.

appreciate about your CAO’s style when you were the assistant?

- How have the demands of the position changed? Are you spending more time in meetings than you did in the past? Are you too confined to the office when you should be out with staff or in the field? What can you ask of your staff to make this transition easier on you?



Resources on the ICMA website (icma.org/first-time-administrator) will help you take a deeper dive into the topic.

Not Just Business As Usual: From the Private Sector to Local Government



Some managers from the private sector are attracted to similar roles in the public sector. And many of the principles of management transfer from one sector to the other. But public-sector management has significant differences that may come as a surprise to a manager whose career has been corporate.

Here are some of the differences identified by managers who have made the transition:

1. Public expectations for transparency
2. Working in a political arena
3. The pace of activity and change
4. Differences in budgeting practice
5. The need for a mentor in the public sector
6. Differences in contractual arrangements
7. The diversity of responsibilities, especially in a small community.



Resources on the ICMA website (icma.org/first-time-administrator) will help you take a deeper dive into the topic.

From Nonprofit to Public Sector



Another career shift for management professionals is transition from a nonprofit organization to a public-sector one. Here are some of the similarities and differences between the two sectors:

- Administrators in both sectors work at the direction of a governing board and under-

stand their respective roles, manage staff and budgets, often work with cost centers and understand fund accounting,

- On the other hand, nonprofit organizations operate under different legal, regulatory, and code of ethics frameworks. Their administrators probably lack experience with collective bargaining and are accustomed to a narrow focus based on the interests of their organizations, and, unlike public managers, they may influence who serves on the board.



Resources on the ICMA website (icma.org/first-time-administrator) will help you take a deeper dive into the topic:

Serving Your Country in a New Way: From Military to Local Government



A somewhat nontraditional but increasingly common transition is from military leadership to local government management. Military service develops skills in leadership, planning, and decision making, but the change in leadership style can be more radical than it is for individuals who move from assistant to CAO, private to public, or nonprofit to public.

ICMA members who have made this transition note that many military jobs are similar to positions found in local government. In terms of leadership style, they have found that, although their military education emphasized the importance of adjusting leadership style to suit the situation, they still may need to make adjustments in a civilian environment.



Resources on the ICMA website (icma.org/first-time-administrator) will help you take a deeper dive into the topic. Also see icma.org/topics/veterans.



ADJUSTING YOUR LEADERSHIP STYLE

Bruce Harrill, City Administrator, Waynesville, Missouri

I feel that my service as a military officer prepared me very well for the local government administrator role. The army taught me good, sound leadership skills that I put to use on a daily basis. The planning and decision-making process that the military teaches can be applied very successfully to local government projects. The military process to determine and evaluate different courses of action is a very useful tool for local government planning. The professional values that are instilled by military service, such as dedication to duty, integrity, and more, can be critical keys to success in managing local governments.

One important note is that my military education emphasized adjusting the leadership style to suit the situation. Sometimes former military service members may not adjust their leadership styles to suit the civilian world. A “drill sergeant” approach normally does not go over very well with civilians. The military approach tends to be bottom line up front, discussed in a straightforward manner; however, I find that a less direct approach is more useful.



Many military jobs are similar to positions found in local governments, such as public works director and planner. The garrison commander has a role similar to that of a local government administrator. Experience in those military positions helps to prepare for the job in the civilian world.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE GOVERNING BODY



A key factor in an administrator’s success is building and maintaining relationships with the governing body. The composition of the governing body is a “given,” as its members

are elected by residents, and it can change with the next election. As a consequence, the administrator must be both perceptive and flexible.



Because of the importance of the relationship, the administrator is well served by reflecting on the following questions:

- Have you considered who will take the lead, and when, in making the relationship work? What are the consequences of presupposing that individual members will reach out first or offer the support that you need?
- How might an understanding of organizational history and the impact of past decisions assist the new administrator? It can be valuable to learn what has happened—and why—before you arrive.
- Where and on whom will you focus? The role of the governing body is essential in local government. What value are the elected officials seeking to add? How active are they seeking to be? How active should they be?
- Council members want to be informed on the issues and topics of the day. What is your communication strategy and how might it affect the foundation of your relationship with the elected officials?
- How will you establish the value and importance of sharing with the governing body the hard truths—what they need to hear, rather than what they want to hear?
- Is there a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the administrator and the governing body? This is one of the most critical and challenging tasks for the new manager.
- Is there consensus on the definition of policy making and administrative oversight? What process will the new administrator use to facilitate agreement?
- The goals and aspirations of each governing body member are different. What value can be gained from developing an understanding of why each member ran for office, his or her goals for the community, and what each one hopes to accomplish as a member of the governing body? How might that understanding inform the administrator's responsiveness to the individual members?



Resources on the ICMA website ([icma.org/first-time-administrator](https://www.icma.org/first-time-administrator)) will help you take a deeper dive into the topic.

THE POLITICAL NATURE OF THE CAO ROLE



Although the ICMA Code of Ethics prohibits members from engaging in partisan political activity, the CAO position definitely has a political component.

The political aspects include an awareness of the priorities and ambitions of members of the governing body, the interrelations among the members, and the sometimes ambiguous line between policy making and administration.



Here are questions to think about as you explore the political aspects of the job:

- What is the manager's role in the arena of politics? How might demonstrating political awareness and sensitivity improve your ability to be responsive to the needs of the governing body and community?
- Are you able to understand the world of local government from the elected officials' perspective? They might be viewing the same issues and using the same words as you, but are they viewing the issues through the same lens?
- Staff wants and needs an understanding of the governing body's expectations. How will you serve as a bridge between the vision and direction of the governing body and the staff members who develop plans and complete the work? How will you translate and present the direction and needs of the governing body for the organization?
- Others in the organization need to understand the roles and responsibilities of the governing body and the administrator. How will you build and maintain respect for the role of the elected officials? What steps will you take to ensure that the organization understands the value added by, and the challenges inherent in, the role of the governing body and the individual elected official?



- Community members can be very quick to complain when something happens that they don't like, but very few people will get in touch to say, "job well done." Have you considered developing a plan for celebrating success and acknowledging the positive work and contributions of the governing body?
- The manager's role includes helping the governing body be more effective. As manager, how can you focus members' attention on the importance of their team with the understanding that negotiation and compromise are the primary tools of the trade? What are the consequences of not doing so?
- Policy making and administrative oversight are complementary. What process can you use to help ensure that you, the governing body, and the staff come together in a common pursuit of quality governance and effective community building?
- Where do final authority and decision making reside with respect to overall policy making? What are the consequences of allowing other aspects of your role as manager to blur those lines?
- The process and the governing body's decisions deserve respect. How might you ensure that governing body members have

as much information as possible to place them in a position to make the decision and then step back as they carry out their role in the process?



Resources on the ICMA website ([icma.org/first-time-administrator](https://www.icma.org/first-time-administrator)) will help you take a deeper dive into the topic.

TIME INVESTMENT AND MANAGEMENT



One of the biggest and least anticipated changes you'll face as a first-time manager is how to manage your time, both within the traditional "9 to 5" workday and outside the office.



Here are questions to help you get a handle on the challenges of time management:

- Have you considered the time expectations of your new role outside of office hours? Many localities convene meetings



of the governing body and citizen boards during evening hours. Have you spoken with your family about the potential need to miss sporting events, recitals, and school events, and generally be away from them more often?

- What boundaries do you want to set with regard to your time “after hours”? Some managers practically live at the office; others establish clear lines to delineate between their personal life and time and their professional life and time. What steps or solutions can you put in place to ensure that you have the work/life balance that you want?
- How do you see allocating your time to achieve your own and the governing body’s goals? One pitfall that some experience is the transition from a primarily task-based workday to one based on management and meetings. What steps can you take to best manage your time on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis to make progress on organizational priorities?
- Have you thought about how often you feel you need to meet with your department heads and other staff? What about any regular meetings with elected officials?
- Are you comfortable with the delegation of tasks? Even in smaller organizations where managers are more “hands on,” the

ability to appropriately assign work and let go of smaller tasks is crucial to good time management. How can you ensure that your time, expertise, and talents are being properly shared across the diverse needs of your organization?



Resources on the ICMA website ([icma.org/first-time-administrator](https://www.icma.org/first-time-administrator)) will help you take a deeper dive into the topic.

FEELING REWARDED IN THE CAO ROLE



A surprise for many first-time administrators is the shift to a new reward structure. In many cases, the administrator was previously in a position in which a sense of fulfillment came from completing a project in which he or she had direct input. Now the reward is frequently the success of others over whom the administrator has managerial oversight.



Here are questions to contemplate as you consider ways to ensure that you will feel

fulfilled by your work and rewarded for it—in new ways:

- How do you achieve a sense of fulfillment or accomplishment in your role? How often do you feel a sense of accomplishment from a project on which you had managerial input but very little hands-on interaction?
- Are you able to find joy in the successes of others? Often, a manager's role is uplifting and supporting other staff members, the community, and elected officials. How might that role be balanced with a desire for credit or accomplishment?
- Conversely, are you able to share credit and ensure that others feel validated? Often the media, the public, or elected officials will give the manager credit for an accomplishment and fail to mention the many other contributors to a project. What steps can you take to ensure that your team feels appropriately recognized and rewarded?
- Do you tend to stay in your office and let your team come to you, or do you visit them in the field or in their offices? How often do you meet with your team, both one-on-one and as a group? One way to become invested in the successes of others as a manager is to get to know your

team and their projects and priorities. Shared lunches with your management team can help build a rapport and sense of shared reward and efforts.

- Do you know the priorities and goals of your governing body? Achieving the formal goals established in adopted policy documents, as well as consensus goals informally established throughout the year are obvious paths to satisfaction as a manager, be it as a first timer or a veteran.
- How often do you take time to reflect, particularly after major accomplishments or projects? Many times we quickly move on to the next mountain to climb and too often forget to look back at the journey and allow ourselves a moment of reflection and pride.
- Have you considered nominating someone on your team for an award? If you have an excellent employee or team, consider nominating them for an award if they've had a particularly good year or major accomplishment.



Resources on the ICMA website ([icma.org/first-time-administrator](https://www.icma.org/first-time-administrator)) will help you take a deeper dive into the topic.



ONCE YOU GET THE JOB



You've got the job—so what now? This chapter discusses eight basic principles that will help you in your first administrator job.



Here are eight principles to guide you as a first-time administrator:

- 1. Introduce Yourself:** After you have accepted the job, you need to introduce yourself to the community; this includes the organization, businesses, and residents.
 - **Activity:** Prepare a list of who you will meet within the first 90 days.
- 2. Listen, Listen, Listen:** Most of your first year in a new community will be spent listening to people (actually, the importance of listening never stops). Listening will help you identify your organization's capacities and needs and the community's culture and values. Everyone has a story to tell, and you can apply your listening skills with those people you identified in the "Introduce Yourself" section.
 - **Question:** What questions do you want to ask, and of whom?
 - **Question:** What major issues or priorities did you identify from your meetings?
- 3. Review Organization and Processes:** Each community has its own culture and processes. It's important for a new administrator to learn these as quickly as possible. Staff who support you can help you learn the organization's rhythm. In addition, you need to have a firm understanding of key municipal plans and financials.
 - **Question:** What organizational documents do you need to study?
 - **Question:** What processes and schedules critical to your organization can you identify?
 - **Question:** What needs or priorities have you identified as a result of your review?
- 4. Set a Clear Vision and Goals:** Once you have the job, focus on a "game plan" and set a clear vision and goals. More importantly, you have an opportunity to set the tone. Your plans will be informed by your meetings with the governing body, staff, and various stakeholders in the community, as well as your own research and observations.

THE SKINNY: QUICK TIPS AND IDEAS FROM OTHER ADMINISTRATORS

Things to Think About Once You Get the Job

- Meet individually with the elected officials.
 - Meet individually with committee/ commission chairs.
 - Meet individually with senior staff/ department heads; ask them to give an honest appraisal of the strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and opportunities for each of their assigned departments.
 - Schedule an all-staff event to get to know the employees; have a meet-and-greet coffee and doughnut time and mingle with them.
 - Review your new community's ordinances.
 - Familiarize yourself with the organization's meeting calendar.
- 5. Communicate:** Strong communication skills are essential to being an effective manager. You will have to communicate the problems you identify and your plans to address those problems and provide updates about progress made in executing your plans.
 - **Question:** What are the big issues or problems that need attention — in the community, the organization, and with the governing body?
 - **Question:** What can you do to set the tone and lay out clear expectations?
 - **Question:** What is your preferred method and frequency of communication with staff? With the governing body?

- **Activity:** Identify how your elected officials like to receive communications—both as a governing body and as individuals.
6. **Assess and Sharpen Your Skills:** We all have different skill sets, and it’s foolish to think you know everything. A professional recognizes areas where he or she has room for improvement and develops a plan to turn those weaknesses into strengths. Seek continual improvement in yourself to ensure that you’re on top of your game. Identify areas where the community’s needs require subject matter knowledge or skills that are not your own strength. Start sharpening those skills through professional development, and seek staff support while you’re learning.
 - **Question:** What are the areas in which you can improve?
 7. **Maintain a Work/Life Balance:** Now that you have the top seat in the public eye, you will be dealing with newfound visibility. Establish a healthy pace for your work/life balance and identify regional resources, mentors, and peers that can help you.
 - **Question:** What do you do to relieve stress?
 - **Question:** What practices will you apply to maintain a healthy work/life balance?
 8. **Avoid and Survive Pitfalls:** Applying all of the principles above can help you avoid pitfalls or build up enough support to help you withstand any mistakes you make. Develop your key relationships now, to help you weather any missteps. In all cases, stick to the ICMA Code of Ethics.
 - **Question:** Have any of your predecessors in the position been fired? What led to their firing? How can you avoid repeating their mistakes?



INTRODUCE YOURSELF

Identify who you need to introduce yourself to.

- **Question:** What feedback did you receive from those you introduced yourself to?

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Getting to Know Your Co-Workers

- Send new employees a welcome card (perhaps even before they start employment).
- Speak at employee orientations and thank new hires for joining the organization; make sure you explain what matters to you as a leader.
- Even though you may be working with a large number of people, find a way to remember names (if you have photo IDs, perhaps ask someone to create a photo directory for you). Also think of a graceful way to handle a situation in which you don’t remember.
- Host a weekly meeting with small groups of representatives from each department (no more than ten people in a meeting)—or combine small departments; make departments responsible for sending a different person each week; start with in-depth introductions and then facilitate a conversation about the organization’s mission, vision, and values.
- Walk around.
- Share a bit about yourself; if you do it right, it will reassure your co-workers that the new boss is human.
- Especially when you’re new, never talk negatively to anyone; you don’t know yet who is related to whom.

- **Question:** What did you learn through introductions that you can use to identify “early wins”?

LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN

After you have identified members of your community you wish to meet and made yourself available for introduction, the next and most important step is to *listen*. Everyone has a story to tell, and generally people like to talk about themselves and their community, so finding people to listen to is easy. Your challenge will be to listen *actively*.

Being new has advantages and disadvantages. One advantage is that you're free to ask questions. People expect it, and most people love being experts. Another advantage is that you won't always be recognized. This can provide you an opportunity to listen to residents' uninhibited feelings regarding their community.

Some of the best opportunities to listen and learn are in informal settings, like a coffee shop, the library, or high school sports events. The most significant disadvantage is that some may try to take advantage of your lack of knowledge of history, past practices, and policies. As you hear concerns, be careful not to commit to specific action; first commit to research the issue. True listening requires you understand all sides of an issue before making a decision.

Listening will give you the best view of how to engage with the community, where potential conflicts lurk, where potential collaborations exist, and what your priorities should be. Figure out where people agree and disagree, and then search for your own answers.

- **Question:** Based on what you have learned by listening, what are your organization's/community's capacities?
- **Question:** Based on what you have learned by listening, what are your organization's/community's needs?

REVIEW ORGANIZATION AND PROCESSES

As you meet with and listen to various parties, you may hear "That's the way we've always done things." Be attentive and respectful. Each community and organization has been built on years of practices,

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Engaging Employees

- Measure employee engagement at the same time and the same way every year; consider using the Gallup Employee Engagement Survey.
- Provide leadership training for every employee.
- Learn what motivates people to work in your organization.
- If your departments have "all-hands" meetings, try to attend.
- Show up at employee celebrations, such as service award presentations; a great way to appreciate the staff is by learning who has earned recognition.
- Encourage employees to say something to you if they see you out and about; let them own part of getting to know you.
- Think about scheduling small input groups or random lunches with groups of employees or showing up at preset times to greet employees as they come to work, and don't forget doughnuts and coffee.
- Don't talk about your old organization; no one in your new organization cares, and you want to show that you're focused on your current job.
- Learn when to give answers and when to ask questions.

schedules, and procedures and has its own history and culture. In order to integrate, learn the history and identify what is impor-



tant to preserve, and what may need to be changed. As a new manager, you're expected to make positive change, so there will be some willingness for adjustments and modifications. A proper balance will be based on an understanding of the organization's history, culture, and processes.

You will not learn all of these policies and procedures overnight, but incorporate time to study them into your routine. There are a few common practices or disciplines across municipal governments also to consider and learn—especially if you are new to local government. Most municipal meetings are run on the framework of Robert's Rules of Order, which govern how a meeting is conducted. Most states have also adopted an open meetings or open records law that sets forth requirements for keeping meetings free and open to the public, what records are public, and what information can be discussed in a closed or executive session. If your local government makes audio or video recordings of meetings, reviewing those can help you get a feel for the “flow” of meetings.

- **Question:** What did you learn from reviewing your organization's budget/audit?
- **Question:** What major issues or priorities have you identified as a result of this review?
- **Activity:** Write out the budget process for your community.

SET A CLEAR VISION AND GOALS

Once you have identified needs, don't lose sight of them. In order to be successful, you will need a plan. A good plan can:

- Help you prioritize goals during an overwhelming first few months
- Align resources and energy to get things done
- Track accomplishments
- Demonstrate results, whether by identifying low-hanging fruit or by suggesting approaches to larger, long-standing issues
- Help the community, staff, and governing body know you are action-oriented
- Set the tone for your tenure.

There are many ways to establish a plan, and you can decide what works best for you and your organization. Sometimes a combination of approaches works best; other times you may adopt planning styles that suit a specific situation.

Utilizing these approaches will give you the opportunity to be strategic and focused. This sends a message that you are there to get things done and will not just be a “maintenance” administrator. Coming in as a new

administrator, you can set the tone and create positive change with results. In the long run, you will make a difference. Track accomplishments and deliverables to show your effectiveness. As you proceed with any changes, do so methodically with appreciation and respect for your organization and staff. Keep a collaborative spirit and always look for wins and successes you can celebrate along the way.

- **Question:** After doing your homework, talking to people, actively listening, and searching for issues to resolve, where will you focus your energy in your first few months?
- **Question:** What are the three highest priorities of your organization?
- **Question:** How can you align financial and staff resources to develop a robust plan that best suits the needs of the organization and community?
- **Question:** When was the last time your organization participated in a strategic plan?

COMMUNICATE

Communication is a part of everything you do. You will be communicating with employees, elected officials, the public, the media, other governmental jurisdictions, and more. A thorough discussion of communication strategies for each of these stakeholders is beyond the scope of this guide, and plenty of books are available for the interested reader.

- **Question:** What is your preferred way to communicate and how effective is it in this context?
- **Question:** What sort of communication style do you want to encourage in the organization?
- **Question:** How often does your chief elected official like to receive updates? In what manner does he or she prefer those updates (face to face/email/over the phone)?
- **Question:** What communication mechanisms exist in your organization for employees (employee newsletter, monthly “all staff” meetings, intranet)?

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Media Relations

- After you start the job, do your best to build rapport with local media representatives. Reporters are people too; get to know them; take them to coffee.
- Be sure you have a clear understanding of what is on the record and what is off; be careful what you say.
- Always be honest and straightforward, regardless of whether reporters are honest with you.
- Have a great public information officer (PIO); if you don't have a great one, consider who could best fill this role in your organization and whether you yourself could benefit from some training in this area.
- Tap the knowledge of the PIO and the experience of others on the best way to correct the record when the media get it wrong.
- Press releases can be your friends; they're a proactive way to drive the news cycle in your favor.

ASSESS AND SHARPEN YOUR SKILLS

In order to best serve your community, it's important to seek continual improvement. This helps you ensure that your knowledge stays abreast of new developments and puts you in the best position to lead the organization as new challenges arise. In order to focus your professional development, reflect on the question of where you need to improve.

After you have identified areas for improvement, you can create a professional development plan for yourself. Professional development can be included in your employment agreement, performance evaluation, and budget, and it belongs high on your list of priorities. It is incumbent on you to look for targeted trainings or ways to further develop your knowledge and skills.

- **Question:** What method will you use to assess your strengths and weaknesses?
- **Question:** What training resources are available to you in your budget?
- **Question:** Do you have access to a state or regional managers' association that offers training opportunities?
- **Question:** Do you have a mentor? If so, who is your mentor and why do you view that person as a mentor? If you don't have one, does your statewide, regional, or national organization have resources to connect you with one? (ICMA, for example, has [senior advisors](#) and [coaching resources](#) that members can draw on.)
- **Activity:** Develop a professional development plan for yourself.

MAINTAIN A WORK/LIFE BALANCE

As a manager, you can often feel as if you're on an island and the last boat has left the dock. In order to be a productive administrator, it's important to prevent work from taking over your life. Often this can be as simple as setting boundaries, such as scheduling routine breaks or not responding to work emails while you're spending time with your family. This can be different for each manager.

Of course, sometimes the expectations of elected officials can make it difficult not to be available 24/7.

- **Question:** You have risen to the highest appointed position in your community; do you understand the impact it will have on your personal life?
- **Question:** What will you do to help your family understand your new position in the public eye?
- **Question:** What hobbies or activities help you disconnect from work?

AVOID AND SURVIVE PITFALLS

We all make mistakes. Expect and accept that you'll face some tough times, sometimes no matter how prepared you are or what you do. The relationship-building work you do as a matter of course will help you weather the storm when one does occur.

- **Question:** When your organization has its first challenge, which stakeholders in your organization/community can support you through it?
- **Question:** What can you do now to strengthen your relationship with those people/groups?
- **Activity:** Do an internet search for "city manager fired" and read news stories from around the country. What can you learn from these stories?



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AM I THE ONLY ONE?



“Am I the only one who has ever faced this problem?” That question is likely asked by every local government manager and administrator at least once during his or her professional career. The answer is almost certainly no.



Most any challenge, success, or problem you can or have experienced in local government administration has likely been addressed or solved by someone before you. So why is it that we as administrators feel inclined to ask if we're the only one? Often it's because we're serving in a very small community or organization, perhaps physically removed from other colleagues by great distances. In some instances we may literally be one of a handful of staff running the entire organization, wearing many hats and performing multiple jobs.

If you've been hired to manage in a small community and feel as if you've been placed on a deserted island to navigate the waters, this chapter will provide you with quick tips and principles that will help ensure your success:

1. Set expectations with the governing body and staff
2. Draw professional and personal boundaries
3. Put people first, work second
4. Build your network
5. Prioritize your "hats"
6. Make the time for you.



Here are suggestions for how to apply each of the principles.

SET EXPECTATIONS WITH THE GOVERNING BODY AND STAFF

Rolling up your sleeves and pitching in whenever or wherever needed shows humility and leadership. You are the only one, and expectations are likely to be high that you can deliver on almost any issue. To avoid failure and disappointment, it is imperative that you set expectations for yourself, the governing body, and the staff.

THE SKINNY: QUICK TIPS AND IDEAS FROM OTHER ADMINISTRATORS

Orienting New Elected Officials

- As an election approaches, consider organizing a candidate orientation event to review organization priorities and provide basic information.
- Well before election day, host a briefing for all candidates; give a presentation and provide a briefing book. Invite all department heads to attend and answer questions.
- Schedule an orientation for newly elected officials; have them meet with each department head; use a checklist or outline to ensure that the orientation covers important topics (and make it engaging).
- Provide a copy of your local ordinances and/or state statutes describing the duties and responsibilities of local elected officials.
- Before each board or council meeting, reach out personally to each member during his or her first several months in office and offer to review the agenda for the upcoming meeting; continue the practice occasionally during the elected official's first year.
- Provide opportunities for new elected officials to attend classes offered through municipal league or other state organizations.
- If you learn that the governing body doesn't have written policies or a code of conduct for themselves, encourage them to establish one and find a way to facilitate its development.



The Manager/Administrator (You)

You are responsible for the smooth operation and delivery of services to the public. Of course, you come with certain skills, experiences, and abilities. Share these with the elected officials and staff. Also share with them aspects of the job where you are still learning or can improve. Be sure your job description aligns with the expectations of the elected officials, and don't assume they have read or know what your job description says.

Be willing to help and assist both the elected officials and staff in their jobs and areas of responsibility, but do not assume their responsibilities or authorities.

The Governing Body

The elected officials are primarily responsible for establishing laws and policies. They are not generally involved in administrative decisions, such as personnel and purchasing—although in some places they may be. A challenge for the administrator may be to ensure that the governing body is not overstepping the bounds established for it in the legal framework for the local government.

The Staff

Local government staff assist you in carrying out and implementing the laws and policies established by the elected officials. Each staff member should have a job description that outlines the specific roles and duties of the job. It is your responsibility to ensure that each employee understands the duties of his or her job; it is the employee's responsibility to do the job.

DRAW PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL BOUNDARIES

In small places, you may be the most prominent local government official, and this visibility can lead to a blending of your personal and professional lives. You will likely be approached by people wherever you go in town, and at all times, regarding some business pertaining to your work as administrator. While it is important to remember that you represent the city or county at all times and in all places, it will be helpful to establish boundaries between what is professional and what is personal. The following are a few tips to help you:

- When someone is asking you about business during off-business hours, simply tell the person you are not working at the moment but would be glad to assist them when you are working.
- Carry business cards with you. You can give an inquirer your business card and have them email or phone you with their question so you can answer when you are working.
- In social settings, let people know that you are not working.

PUT PEOPLE FIRST, WORK SECOND

In a small community you will find that everyone has a story, and everyone has an opinion about how something should or shouldn't be done. You will be much further ahead in your work if you invite the conversations to happen and remain open to the diverse perspectives that will be shared with you.

Remember that you are probably the newcomer to this community. You can learn valuable information from those who have grown up here, own a business in town, or are otherwise connected to your community. Show respect, ask questions, take notes, learn if there are potential partnerships to be formed.

You can avoid pitfalls and learn what topics are sensitive in the community by speaking with community members. Take the time to learn as much as you can from people, because it will inevitably benefit your work to have learned this information.

Learn about the history of your community from those living and working there. This knowledge can be used in grant applications and in other presentations you will be required to give.

BUILD YOUR NETWORK

While you may feel as if you're the only one in your small community, remember there are administrators just like you in thousands of

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Building a Trusted Network

- Ask each department head to give you names of ten individuals you should get to know early on (name, contact information, reason why it's important to know them). Elected officials could provide you with names, too.
- To build trust, start by listening, but be cautious about trusting what someone may tell you about ongoing problems that "no one" has been able to solve. There is probably a history and a reason why no one has been able to resolve the issue to the person's satisfaction.
- Network widely, but until you've learned the lay of the land, be wary of placing trust in individuals you don't know well.

other places. Reach out to those in your state or region for advice and wisdom. Tap ICMA's resources and take advantage of your state or regional managers' associations as well. Attend conferences and classes.

Reach out to other administrators in your area and go out to coffee or lunch on a regular basis. Rarely are there any challenges or issues that have not already been addressed and likely solved. Access the knowledge of those around you who have this knowledge and experience.

Find a mentor. A mentor does not need to be in the local government management profession but should be someone who will be a good sounding board and provide advice, as needed. As you develop into a more seasoned administrator, be a mentor for someone else.

PRIORITIZE YOUR “HATS”

As a small community administrator you wear many hats and likely perform many jobs in your organization—you may be the manager, clerk, and economic development professional. Take a deep breath. You can do this; just not all at once. Take the time to prioritize.

In order to prioritize effectively, be sure you recognize the difference between what you have to do and what you want to do. Take care of what has to be done first, and then work on what you want to do.

Learn when your brain is best at performing different kinds of tasks, and plan accordingly. For example, some people are better at performing analytical tasks in the morning and better at being creative in the afternoon.

MAKE THE TIME FOR YOU

As the only one, you will inevitably be stretched, pushed, and pulled in many directions by many people and priorities. Take time for yourself to avoid burnout. Go for a walk, take a vacation, leave your electronics behind. Be sure to make the time to refresh, reset, and rejuvenate yourself.

Consider a few of the following tips to maintain a better work/life balance:

- Take regular breaks; leave the office for lunch and go outside.
- Maintain a hobby or activity outside of work.
- Avoid checking your work email outside the office (if possible).
- Spend quality time with your loved ones and friends
- Exercise, eat well, and get enough sleep.
- Meditate, if that’s your thing.
- Use your leave time and get out of town.

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Taking Care of Yourself

- Be the Chief Germ Officer: If you show intolerance for sick people being in meetings, it will catch on—and fewer people will get sick (or if they do get sick, they’ll stay at home and not bring their germs to the office).
- Prioritize your own health, because your organization won’t. Don’t miss doctors’ appointments for work; find ways to exercise.
- Even if it goes against the way you were raised, find a way to take time off without feeling guilty.
- Try not to take it personally if the governing body makes decisions with which you disagree; remember that you didn’t get elected.
- Make time for yourself and your family and stick to it! Go in early or stay later on workdays, but reserve the weekends for yourself and those you love (except when you have unavoidable community events, of course).



Resources on the ICMA website (icma.org/first-time-administrator) will help you take a deeper dive into the topic.



THIS JOB IS KILLING ME



You've been on the job a while . . . and things aren't going so well. What can you do to get things back on track? Or is it time to seek a change of scene?



The key principle here is to clear your head:

- Get out of the office. Go for a drive, or a walk. Schedule a “me day” in the near future, away from technology and interruptions.
- Sleep on it. A night’s rest may help.
- Call a trusted colleague. If possible, meet somewhere away from the office. Really listen to their counsel – they truly understand the unique challenges of the job.
- Reflect on your accomplishments. Are things better because you’re there?

Clearing your head will give you the opportunity to consider things with greater perspective. Nobody makes good decisions without careful consideration, and when you’re facing a situation that could significantly impact your career, you must make sound decisions.

- **Question:** Which colleagues are you most likely to call for career advice? If you cultivate a closer relationship with them, they are likely to feel comfortable providing you with honest advice when you need it.
- **Activity:** If you haven’t done so, start keeping a list of accomplishments and stashing away positive memories.
- **Question:** What are your hobbies? If you have none, or haven’t pursued them in a long time, consider picking them up again or seeking out new ones.



IF YOU NEED TO GET THINGS BACK ON TRACK

If you’ve cleared your head and tried some of the things suggested above, and the problem still exists, it’s time to develop a plan of action. Generally speaking, the problem will likely fall within a few broad categories. What follows is a summary of those broad categories, with a few suggestions for how you might address each.

- I am overwhelmed by work, and it’s causing problems in my personal life either with my relationships, or with my health and well-being.

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How to Feel Less Alone

- Reach out to your state or regional city/county management association; building a network of people with similar experiences can help you through tough times.
- Consider regular luncheons or coffees with other people who may be in similar community roles in other industries, such as school board superintendents, Chamber of Commerce executive directors, or community college presidents. Although they will not appreciate all the stresses of being a city/county administrator, they may share experiences of balancing home life with a demanding public presence.
- Take comfort in the idea that you’re never alone, and someone else always has it worse.
- Don’t be afraid to make mistakes; acknowledge them, correct them, learn from them—and move on.

- I feel that I cannot continue to work with one or more personalities that come with the job. Either my elected officials and I are not getting along, or I have one or more staff or community members who are making my life difficult.
- I feel that I cannot solve the challenges I am facing at work.
- I do not enjoy the work that I am doing.

Here are some pathways to consider:

First, ask yourself whether the situation is likely to change in the near future. If so, you might decide to ride things out. In the mean-



time, pursue activities to manage your stress and maintain your relationships until the circumstances change. For example, practicing meditation can be done in just 10 minutes each day via a smartphone app, which can help with stress. Set aside time in your weekly schedule for at least a few hours of hobbies and exercise. Eat well and drink plenty of water. Healthy habits will improve your mood and keep your energy high while you ride out a challenging situation.

If the situation does not seem likely to change, consider what you can do to make it change:

- Is it possible to delegate tasks to members of the staff, contract something out, or hire additional staff to assist you?
- Can you have an honest discussion with the chief elected official and/or governing body to identify the problem and develop a solution?
- Are there colleagues in other communities you can turn to for assistance? Maybe they have suggestions for how to solve the problem.
- Get inspired! If the problem is that you feel a lack of passion for the work, or are facing a problem you don't know how to solve, consider taking a vacation or attending a conference, such as those sponsored by ICMA or your state association. These can recharge your batteries and give you new ideas.

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Handling Stress and Staying Sane

- Get a health coach and/or a personal trainer.
- Focus on eating well, sleeping, exercising, mindfulness, meditation—or whatever works to help you maintain your health and relax.
- If you don't have a hobby, find one!
- Spend quality time with your spouse or partner; schedule “date nights.”
- Spend time with your children and/or grandchildren.
- Plan at least one vacation trip each year to get out of town. Don't be afraid to be “unreachable”; a good organization, with good leadership, can function temporarily without you—and you can provide a development opportunity by designating someone as acting administrator while you're away.

- Seek out a “passion project” at work. Is there something that can energize you at the office? Maybe it’s leading the charge in requesting a just-out-of-reach capital project or starting an in-house leadership academy.

If you’ve pursued these options, and you’ve not managed to overcome the problem, then it may be time to seek a change of scene. Maybe it’s time to go.

IF IT’S TIME TO GO

If you’ve just had enough and decided to change jobs, commit yourself to “leaving right” by developing an exit strategy that minimizes turmoil and drama for your community and the organization. Your professional reputation will benefit in the long run, as future employers will likely discover if you’ve burned bridges at a previous job.

- **Timing your departure:** Are you proposing to leave now because of personal reasons? It is important to give some weight to what is best for the organization. What will the workload be for the next administrator? Would they be coming in just as a budget

cycle is getting underway, or in the middle of a tricky labor negotiation? Carefully considering the timing of your departure gives the next administrator a chance to succeed.

- **Announcing your departure:** Provide the organization adequate notice so a transition plan can be formed. Give the notice in a thoughtful way—face-to-face, as much as possible. Rehearse, in writing and out loud, how you will deliver the news to elected officials, department heads, employees, colleagues, the media, the community, and others.
- **Transition planning:** What can you do before your departure to make the organization ready for the next administrator? Prepare a binder with thorough briefing on key issues. Identify who will take on any critical processes while the search for your replacement is going on. Clean your office and organize the filing system.



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