

Friends of Local Government

Policy Paper Series

**LEADERSHIP AND CHANGE:
A PRIMER FOR NEWLY ELECTED OFFICIALS**

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This is the sixteenth paper in the NJLM Foundation's "Friends of Local Government" series. This paper is authored by Robert Casey, a long-time municipal manager and consultant. This a narrative of a presentation given by Mr. Casey at the Mayor Leadership Training seminars offered by the League of Municipalities.

Our hope is that in addition to any education programs offered by the League and other opportunities, newly elected Mayors and other officials, at all levels of government, might follow some of the tips offered by Mr. Casey.

The entire "Friends of Local Government" Policy Paper series is available on the Foundation's website at www.njlmef.org

On behalf of the Board of the NJLM Educational Foundation, we thank Mr. Casey for his contributions and believe you will find this paper informative. We would also like to note the ongoing support of the Foundation's Board for this project, as well as staff from the New Jersey State League of Municipalities, including Bill Dressel and Michael Darcy.

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About the Contributing Author

Robert Casey is a former Municipal Administrator/Manager, who began his career in local government in 1966. He served in four municipalities on a full time bases and provided consulting services or served as a temporary or interim Administrator on numerous occasions. In 1976 Mr. Casey was appointed to the County and Municipal Government Study Commission, commonly referred to as the "Musto Commission" and is currently a member of the Local Government Alignment, Reorganization and Consolidation Commission. He is past Executive Director of the New Jersey Municipal Management Association.

LEADERSHIP AND CHANGE

As an elected official, you are expected to provide "leadership" both to the municipal organization and the community as a whole. Leadership is a great word, but what does it mean?

- To set direction and "tone;"
- To prioritize goals;
- To get your goals enacted by other elected officials; and
- To implement the goals

This sounds great, but the real question is how you go about doing these things. How you can accomplish what you feel is necessary for the municipality? And most difficult of all, how you can get your fellow elected officials to join in the process?

SEVEN KEY POINTS TO MUNICIPAL EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

1. SET GOALS

It is very important that you have a clear understanding in your own mind of your long term goals: where you want your municipality to go over the next year and your term of office. You were elected to accomplish certain goals and you should always remember them. You will quickly become bogged down in the mundane issues of the ongoing activities of your municipality. Do not allow these daily issues to cause you to ignore what you believe needs to be done to improve the municipal operations, to address one or more community issues, or other concerns that you may have. Remember: if the goal was to drain the swamp, don't spend all of your time fighting the alligators.

Some suggestions:

- Establish some time lines to bring your goals to the front in your prioritization of your political life. You may want to break down your goals into subgoals or implementation steps that will lead to addressing the larger goal you have and then to set time lines for these incremental steps.
- Be open to modifying your goals as you become more knowledgeable about the organization and its capabilities - once in office you may find things different from what you expected
- Write down your goals - post them in your office as a daily reminder.
- Share your goals with others - become a preacher, an advocate, use them as your guiding principles.
- Hold an annual special meeting with the elected officials and key staff personnel to discuss everyone's goals and to develop common shared goals for implementation. This could be the most important meeting of the year. Have the right setting, such as a round table discussion. The meeting should be open to the public but elected officials face each other and not the public in a normal auditorium setting. The public can comment at its conclusion. And use a facilitator to keep the discussions focused and limit extraneous discussions and items.

2. WORK THROUGH OTHERS

There are two key processes that govern change municipal government: **Co-Optation and Incrementalism**. The implementation of your goals requires the involvement of others. To affect change you must, as a minimum, have the acceptance of your goals and processes by others, even if you do not have their full support or concurrence.

Co-optation is the process of involving those to be effected by a decision early in the process so that they "buy into" the process and the end result. This is especially true of those who may be in a position to throw a roadblock against accomplishing the goal. To be successful you must anticipate any negative comments /felling that will be generated in these discussion and know how to respond to them or to negative their impact. A good example of this is the famous advice of the "Godfather": Keep close to your friends but even closer to your enemies.

Incrementalism is the realistic way local government works. Change seldom comes in one large process; rather you slowly inch toward change, one piece at a time, one sub goal at a time. Municipal change occurs normally through evolution and not revolution.

3. TO LEAD AN ORGANIZATION YOU MUST FIRST KNOW THE ORGANIZATION

The first thing you must do is to have a good understanding of the actual functioning of your municipal government and what you can and cannot do as an elected official. This may sound strange since each of may believe that you are knowledgeable about this but a reality check may be helpful. You may find that the reality of the position to which you were selected, is far different than you were lea to believe.

You should discuss with your attorney, your administrator or key staff person and even your predecessor (assuming you are on speaking terms) as to what is the actual real world function of the municipality from a legal as well as a pragmatic standpoint, as well as the actual current condition of the municipality from a fiscal, policy and priority basis.

4. RECOGNIZE YOUR STAFF'S COMMITMENTS AND KNOWLEDGE

Your municipal staff is normally a neutral in the political process, in spite of what you may have heard from others who have not been in your position. Yes, there are some positions that may be involved in the political process but you will quickly find that, even though the Auditor is a supporter, his operation in the municipal financial process will be very politically neutral and the numbers will speak for themselves.

Recognize that a good staff supports their elected leadership - regardless of who the elected leaders are. They may have supported the Office of the Mayor in the prior administration **BUT** they will **USUALLY** support the Office of the Mayor in the new administration. This is their job and responsibility. Do not

blame them if you take exception to the discretionary policies of the prior administration. Their role is to provide the guidance for the policies and then to support the policies when they are finally established

Enunciate clearly to the staff the goals and objectives of this new administration. Do not assume that from the campaign or interviews that they should know what you want accomplished and the relative importance of competing objectives. You must tell them and, often, periodically remind them of these and the organization's purposeful direction.

Your staff serves as advocates for their particular function in the government and this is good. There are often disagreements amongst the staff especially in the competition for resources - This is a normal and healthy conflict representing the different perspectives of their functional area. Do not discourage this conflict but use it to further your knowledge of the total needs of the organization.

Your administrator or manager (depending upon the type and form of government) should be the person providing the overview to you on how to implement what you want to do. You should meet with this person on numerous occasions and keep that person in your loop as to what your thoughts are. He/she should have the knowledge of the overall operation of the municipal government as well as the capabilities of your particular staff to assist you in accomplishing your goals. He/she should be the individual that steers the governmental ship in the direction that you and your governing body colleagues chose.

Don't be afraid to seek your staff's comments on your thoughts and plans. You need to know what they know, plus how they believe a particular issue can be handled. You serve as the catalyst to bring up the issue and to keep the discussions focused on the issue. Let them know what you want. Give them the opportunity to study the issue and give them the time and access to get back to you with their conclusions and suggestions.

You must appreciate the existing time and operational constraints on your employees. You may assume office in January and want to immediately move forward with major projects but the staff is looking at a number of legal and financial compliance deadlines that they must meet for the municipal organization at that time. Find out what these are so you will have an understanding of the pressures on them as they may be pulled in two or more directions.

Your goal is to co-opt the staff into buying into your goals and ideas, and make them a part of your team. A word of warning: a good bureaucrat can stop anything you may want to do. I can assure you that they can find many reasons why some thing will not work or why something is not legal or proper. To effectuate change you must have their acceptance or, as a minimum, their acquiescence.

- Meet with the key staff employees and tell them your expectations and goals.
- Provide open communications to the key staff but don't let yourself be bogged down in the mundane - this is what you have an administrator or manager for – to run the daily operation so that you can concentrate on the bigger issues.
- Respect the role and functioning of the staff. You may not like the Tax Assessor and the way the tax rolls impact on your constituents but you have to know his functioning and the regulations governing his functioning before you can make any serious change.

5. CHANGE REQUIRES KNOWLEDGE OF THE EXISTING.

Your new ideas and goals may require a change in existing policy and procedures. Change is good and is a strength of local government but not all movement is necessarily change.

Newly elected officials from private sector backgrounds need to know the difference between the world of private sector and public sector. In the former, everything is possible but that which is prohibited. In the later, your new world, everything is prohibited except that which is specifically permitted. Government is not a good world for risk takers as the actions of people in government are significantly more limited that that of people working in the private sector.

We are constantly evolving our local policies and programs and the way we do things. However, if you want to change an existing policy or procedure - remember this existing policy or procedure normally evolved over time and in response to various competing demands. Remember a "camel" is a dog designed by a committee to reflect all of their desires. The Camel may be an ugly beast but it is very good for the environment in which it is placed.

All municipal policies are camels in their design and maybe in their actual operation. To make change you must first know in depth how the existing systems operate and why they operated in that manner. Who is impacted? Why? When? How?

You must have a good idea of how you want to change the system. What do you want to do?

- Meet with those most directly involved to discuss the present and the future. Challenge them to overcome what you feel are the problems with the existing or to implement what you want. You need to know the obstacles to what you want to do before you start so you can anticipate these difficulties in your planning process.
- Recognize that change often requires compromise to reflect the competing demands that can affect even the simplest of issues. Unfortunately we live in a very intertwined world that is becoming more complicated on a daily basis as we try to accommodate often competing demands. And recognize that "perfection" is a goal and may not be a reality. The greatest obstacle to implementing a great policy is the delay to seek a perfect policy - they don't exist!

6. DON'T MICROMANAGE

Break down your ideas into subgoals or process and set deadlines for components to be reviewed, examined, implemented, etc. Have the staff agree to these target time lines and then meet periodically with the staff to see how things are going. You need to keep a perspective on what is going on and whether it is successful or not - if you become too involved directly you may lose the perspective you need to make changes / compromises etc. needed to accomplish your long term goal.

7. PERSEVERANCE

Most importantly, don't give up "tilting at that wind mill" that you want to change. You may have to nibble at its edges for some time to get to where you want to be but be willing to recognize that even nibbles are progress. Don't initially oversell a change - let everyone know that change will come incrementally and methods could vary as the implementation processes impact existing realities.

FOUR FINAL SUGGESTIONS:

1. Overall it is very important that you maintain a perspective on what is really important for your community as well as yourself personally and to act in a manner that is acceptable to the one person who really counts: the face in the mirror that you examine every morning. Since there are no secrets in local government, you must recognize that any action of yours might become a headline in the future – can you and your family live with that as a headline?
2. Keep open communications with elected officials in other governments. No matter how unique you may feel your issues are, you will probably find others with the same issues and the peer to peer exchange can be very helpful to you.
3. Most Important: watch out for an over commitment of your time. Learn to say no - you can be out every night of the week and all day on the weekends. Set your own schedules so that you retain some free time and personal time and hold to this schedule. It will do you no good if you have a four year term and burn out in the first 6 months.
4. Keep a sense of humor and a perspective of what is really important in your life - hopefully this is not being Mayor. If you do not, you stand the chance of being as crazy as those who are opposing your changes and efforts!

Rich Deaney, a colleague of mine and the former administrator of Ocean City, in a presentation to Mayors several years ago ended his presentation with the following "top 10 list" which I think captures a lot of the above:

- Choose to stop blaming other people;
- Choose not to make excuses;
- Choose to strive for excellence not perfection;
- Choose to everyday do something nice and try not to get caught;
- Choose to learn from the past, plan for the future and live in the present;
- Choose to approach each new day with enthusiasm;
- Choose to share success with others;
- Choose to embody patience and understanding;
- Choose to be open to new ideas;
- Choose to give and receive love easily.