

## **THE MAYOR-MANAGER CONUNDRUM THAT WASN'T**

Submitted to *Governing Magazine* by  
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The mayor-manager conundrum allegedly taking place among larger U.S. cities, which according to Alan Ehrenhalt (*Governing*, October 2005) pits strong political leadership against managerial leadership and effectiveness, is not and should not be an “either/or” proposition. For a community to be successful, you need strong political leadership, strong policy development, a relentless focus on execution and results, a commitment to transparent and ethical government, and a strategy for representing and engaging every segment of the community.

While to do all these things well is difficult, many communities *do* get it right, and those that have risen to the top have committed over time to being effective in each dimension. When we look at the measures of success that matter most to communities – population and job growth, income levels, educational attainment, quality of life, public safety, and financial stability – we see that among the top 50 largest cities and counties in the U.S., those that lead in these indicators have had both strong political leadership *and* effective management capacity.

### **The Performance Dividend of Professional Management**

Professional local government management plays a critical role in balancing the demand to operate at the speed of business with the speed of democracy. To quote political scientist and public executive Harlan Cleveland, “how do you get everyone in on the act and still get action?” This is one of the most important dimensions of the performance dividend of professional managers.

In the Government Performance Project, a study conducted in 2000 by *Governing* magazine and Syracuse University’s Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs of the 35 U.S. cities with the largest gross revenues, the two cities receiving the highest overall grades of an A and A- respectively were Phoenix, Arizona, and Austin, Texas. The Maxwell School had this to say about the ongoing success of these two top-ranked communities:

“Why, for example, are Phoenix with the only A overall and Austin with the lone A- the standard setters? Both are committed to rigorous management and performance in all areas of government, leading to countless improvements in delivering services to residents. And both do a good job of involving their citizens in the effort to be effective.”

Having a vision for a community is key to its success and developing and articulating future directions is an essential element of strong political leadership; but to paraphrase a popular corporate adage: “*Vision without execution is hallucination.*” An important element of the value of professionalism is the ability to translate vision into results. Whereas strong political and policy leadership can create a truly inspiring blueprint for a community’s future, successful

public sector organizations such as Phoenix and Austin recognize that the other side of the equation involves the buy-in of our employees and citizen-customers and the efficient execution of the blueprint by an experienced, highly trained management professional.

### **Citizens, Elected Officials, and Managers Working Together**

While some see a powerful mayor as their ticket to faster decision making, the quick fix of empowering the mayor with a city's managerial direction may not be the answer.

Strengthening the position of the mayor at the expense of silencing the voices of the other elected officials and/or citizens will not solve the challenge of inadequate political and policy leadership. Instead, it diffuses the role of the people directly elected by residents to represent them in community decision making. Investing in a single, "go-to" individual may seem attractive, but it may reduce the very accountability and transparency sought by residents and compromise the ability of elected officials to work for their constituents.

### **Lessons Learned from the Corporate Community**

I think it is instructive to borrow a lesson from the corporate world regarding governance. We have seen how too much power concentrated in too few individuals, poor incentive structures, and weak oversight can be disastrous. Reformers have identified many improvements that are being implemented to improve corporate governance. In their new book, *The Recurrent Crisis in Corporate Governance*, for example, Yale University professor Paul W. MacAvoy and shareholder advocate Ira Millstein suggest that only separation of the board and management functions will fundamentally solve the problems of corporate governance. The 2002 Public Company Accounting Reform and Investor Protection Act, a.k.a., Sarbanes-Oxley, also provides for a number of corporate governance reforms.

It is interesting that many of these same principles – independent directors, a chairperson who is *not* the CEO, a strong commitment to the oversight role of the board, transparency of action, and a strong commitment to ethics – are at the core of one U.S. structure of government that combines effective public management with a system of representative democracy that encourages open communication between citizens and their government. More than half of the 40 cities that received a triple-A bond rating as of December 2003 from both Moody's and Standard & Poor's, for example, operate under the council-manager form. It is also the structure used by six of the 10 communities recognized in 2004 by the National Civic League with the coveted All-America City Award, which encourages civic excellence by honoring those communities in which "citizens, government, business, and nonprofit organizations demonstrate successful resolution of critical community issues." Recently the Center for Digital Government and the National League of Cities surveyed local governments and ranked the top 10 cities in four population categories for making the best use of technology to improve operations and better serve their constituents. Eighty-three percent of the highest ranked cities use the council-manager form.

Successes such as these *could* happen under any form of government, but the council-manager form and alternative provisions, as presented in the National Civic League’s 8<sup>th</sup> *Model City Charter*, provide the best approach to ensuring effective political leadership, representation, accountability, and results.

### **Conclusion**

The economic and political challenges currently facing many large metropolitan communities have led some to surmise that the dimensions of strong political, policy, and managerial leadership; organizational integrity; and successful citizen engagement are mutually exclusive. In fact, the opposite is true.

The Government Performance Project and other data I’ve cited support the notion that the combination of these dimensions is important. To be effective in all of them *is* a struggle, but short cuts and simple solutions always fail.

In *The Daily Drucker: 366 Days of Insight and Motivation for Getting the Right Things Done*, revered management consultant Peter F. Drucker says:

“Management has to give direction to the institution it manages. It has to think through the institution’s mission, has to set its objectives, and has to organize resources for the results the institution has to contribute. Management is... responsible for directing vision and resources toward greatest results and contributions.”

Only through the successful combination of strong political leadership, strong policy development, effective and professional management, organizational integrity, and inclusiveness can a community achieve the kind of results that will ensure its future viability and a high quality of life for all its citizens.



*Leaders at the Core of Better Communities*