

# The Council Member: How to Be a Team Player

By Charles Wythe Dunn

Too often people do not understand what a team player is. They often think to "get along" a team player must "go along." Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Think of the best offensive guard in basketball. He is a team player, not because of the passive acquiescence implied in "getting along and going along," but rather because he leads the offense. By initiating the offense, he creates scoring alternatives for his team. He is an aggressive leader.

Frequently council members complain that managers and mayors—the executive branch—dominate the council and the council lacks influence in decisionmaking. In short, the council is on the defensive; managers and mayors, on the offensive.

There are two related reasons for the council's defensive posture: (1) failure of the council to take the initiative and (2) lack of information in the council's hands.

How can the council go on the offense rather than remain on the defense?

The answer is in one or more council members' initiating and creating alternatives for the council rather than merely following the alternative proposed by managers and mayors.

## Types of Council Member

Generally three types of individuals who serve on councils: the trustee, the delegate and the politico. The trustee, envisioning his role as merely saying and voting exactly as he feels his constituents want, responds to public opinion. The delegate, looking upon himself as an individual with an independent mind and victions, believes he can decide what is best for his constituents.

### About the Author

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The politico, recognizing the difficulties of being either a trustee or a delegate all the time, may play either role, depending upon the issue and related circumstances.

Many council members, failing to recognize what type of council member they are, function like a basketball player who does not know what offense his team is running. It is very important for a council member to know what type of council member he is and to play that role accordingly. Frequently, council members bring trouble to themselves as well as to the council by shifting from one role to the other. When neither their constituents nor their fellow council members know what to expect of them, their political base erodes and the council lacks the offensive punch they could otherwise bring to council deliberations.

Credibility, an important element in a council member's success, evaporates rapidly when he shifts from one type of council member to another.

Not only is it important to know what type of council member one is, but it is also important to know what type each of the other council members is. Knowledge of this en-

ables a council member to function more effectively in the deliberative process of council decisionmaking.

## Finding Resources

That information is influence and power merely states a truism. If information is a key to influence and power, then resources are the key to information. Knowledge of these resources can significantly enhance a council member's influence and power and, more importantly, create alternatives for the council besides that alternative presented by the manager or mayor.

Foremost, a council member should know what interest groups exist in the city and what capabilities these groups have to provide information.

Another resource is support groups, such as state municipal leagues, National League of Cities, Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations and Committee for Economic Development, which often provide sophisticated research on a range of issues.

College and university resources are probably the most underutilized of any information sources, yet faculty and students in political sci-

ence, public administration, economics, sociology and other disciplines generally relish opportunities to make practical application of their knowledge and research skills. Importantly, this resource is often very inexpensive and, perhaps, free.

Friends and neighbors who have professional occupations, such as law, can also be of great assistance and may provide their services free-of-charge as a public service.

Also, state and federal governments can provide excellent resource information through a variety of departments and agencies.

A council member must anticipate well in advance when an issue will arise and then begin the lengthy process of compiling data, analysis and alternatives. Doing this will enable the council member to be informed.

## Strategy For Using Information

A well-conceived and executed strategy by a council member involves four ingredients.

First, the council member must concentrate his energies on only a limited number of long-range issues. A fatal tendency is for a council member to get involved in every issue when generally only two or three significant and substantial issues should occupy his time.

The reason for limiting one's focus on issues is that time itself will not allow a council member to become an expert on more than just a few issues. By becoming an expert in a select number of issues, a council member will have other councilmembers, townspeople, and the press turning to him for advice and counsel, thereby enhancing his influence.

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### **"Homework makes the difference between members whose views are sought and whose views are ignored."**

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Second, homework makes the difference between the council member whose views are sought and the member whose views are ignored. Adequate advance preparation helps to ensure that a council member can not only participate effectively in debate, but also guide the debate to the conclusion he wants.

Third, the legislative record on an issue is very important. As a council member acquires pertinent information on an issue, he should determine when and how to release it for the purpose of having maximum fa-

vorable impact on the decision he wants the council to make. Editors and journalists often make a good outlet for this information, because they can write columns and editorials based upon it—thus educating both the council and the public at the same time.

Fourth, a well-conceived strategy should consider timing. Good information is often wasted because it is used in an untimely fashion.

## Tactics

The "how to's" contribute much to the successful creation of alternatives and their consideration by the council:

- How to use parliamentary procedure;
- How (and whether) to involve the public;
- How to motivate and involve other council members;
- How to use the press;
- How to present the material.

Many very influential members of legislative bodies have arrived at positions of influence, not because of substantive knowledge of issues, but because of knowledge of parliamentary procedure. The really influential member of a legislative body, of course, becomes a master of both.

To be an effective council member, one should know other council members in depth: their issue interests, their social lives, and what type of council member they are (whether trustee, delegate, or politico). This knowledge enables one

to relate to them in the most effective and successful way.

The press and the council member have mutually compatible needs which do not have to be and generally should not be met because of close friendships. The press needs the council member's information; the council member need the press to communicate. The good council member and the good journalist will not seek to be "bosom buddies" but they will exchange information which is their common bond.

There are various types of communication, but the one which council members often do not use is the very readable outline of one to five pages which highlights the case which a council member wants to make. This technique is good for use with other council members, the press and constituents.

In conclusion, council members need to be team players in order to get something done. But council members don't merely have to "go along," they can get to know each other, get to know council issues through research and use of good resources and make proper use of the information once they have it.

Remember, homework makes the difference in what kind of a council member one can be.