

# The Council-Staff Partnership: A Team in Service to The Community

by John Nalbandian, Ph.D.

After eight years on the city council in Lawrence, Kansas, and 20 years teaching government at the University of Kansas, I have found three characteristics common to the highly effective city council: 1) The willingness to address difficult issues — often those that deal with the “big-picture” problems in a city; 2) The ability or capacity of the council as a team to deal with these issues; and 3) An effective relationship with professional staff.



Failure to develop these characteristics results in councils who are inclined to micromanage and deal with smaller, more manageable issues such as constituent problems. I often ask council members, “If you see yourselves primarily as customer service representatives, who is identifying issues and setting goals and objectives that will result in planning for the public investments in your city’s future?”

Council failures are often due to obstacles that, even when acknowledged, are underestimated. It takes planning and cooperation by the governing body and staff to overcome them. The obstacles are:

- Difficult, big-picture issues that raise questions of **competing values**, which many people are inclined to avoid because of the potential conflict involved;
- Governing bodies operate under a **set of conditions** that impede the hard work it takes to focus on the big picture; and

- Elected officials and professional staff bring fundamentally **different perspectives** to their work. If not understood, these perspectives can foster distrust.

## Value Conflicts

Most council members have had the experience of dealing with a neighborhood group that is passionate in its plea for a stop sign that traffic engineers say doesn’t meet professional standards.

To the staff member, this is a problem requiring a technical analysis of the facts leading to an objective conclusion; what I call a “2+2 problem.” However, the neighbors have different values that aren’t represented in the traffic manual. Politics involves the art of recognizing and balancing legitimate, conflicting values. Questions of values really are “no right answer problems,” and they almost always involve difficult choices, which lead to conflict.

All big-picture problems in cities and regions are questions of competing values: representation, efficiency, individual rights and social equity. These are four fundamental political values and, no matter how small the city, when two or more of these values conflict, the policy-making/decision-making process gets messy. There are natural incentives to avoid them, especially when smaller, more manageable issues are available to deal with. It also may be why it is so easy for council members to see themselves as customer service representatives rather than community builders. It is easier to be

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effective helping citizens deal with their individual problems on an ad hoc basis, than to build and maintain a sense of community by addressing big-picture issues.

### Overcoming Constraints to Dealing with the Big Picture

City councils work under a set of conditions that can impede work on difficult issues. They include:

- Vague task and role definition;
- No hierarchy;
- No specialization;
- Little feedback or evaluation of performance; and
- Open meeting requirements.

Few council members have experienced these working conditions prior to coming on the council. When tasks and structure remain vague, it is difficult to know what to do in order to be competent.

These conditions produce a lot of uncertainty for council members. Trying to deal with value conflicts under these conditions is guaranteed to produce anxiety! The natural response to anxiety is to make the offending issue go away, and to avoid it and similar issues in the future. A more psychologically comfortable route is to deal with smaller, more manageable problems *and* constituent services. Council members find it easier to be competent when their job is defined in terms of constituent services, because that task is relatively concrete.

Parliamentary procedure and voting are the most basic methods designed to provide the council with structure, but they are rarely enough. Personal relationships try to fill the gap with loyalty and trust, and knowing who one's friends are. These informal and often fragile relationships among council members can become burdened and strained because the formal structures and processes (task definition, hierarchy, specialization, feedback, and multiple forms of personal communication) we rely upon to get our work done in the business world are absent in the council chambers. When the personal relationships fail, there is little structure to substitute for the glue they provide.

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### Hear More About This Topic At the Annual Conference

John Nalbandian will be leading a workshop at the League's annual conference, "Enhancing Council-Staff Relations," on Monday, Oct. 11, 1:30 to 4:30 p.m.



### Adding to the Council's Capacity

In addition to the capacity that the individual members might bring to the council, what can be done to add to the capacity of the council as an effective governing body and take some of the

“Staff knowledge and problem-solving capabilities can be a tremendous help.”

pressure off personal relationships? Strategies include:

- Recognizing the “legacy value” of making progress on big-picture issues;
- Developing and agreeing upon norms of behavior;
- Using techniques to reduce uncertainty, such as goal setting/strategic planning and team-building retreats, and practicing group problem-solving techniques; and
- Defining the relationship with staff as a partnership in building and maintaining a sense of community.

Properly harnessed, staff knowledge and problem-solving capabilities can be a tremendous help in enhancing the effectiveness of a city council.

### Managing the Council-Staff Partnership

There are two specific obstacles to developing a productive relationship between staff and council.

- The first is that all council members may not see themselves as members of a team: the governing body. In this case, staff has a difficult time discerning exactly what the council wants. Vague direction from the council neutralizes much of staff's capacity to serve the council.

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- The second obstacle is that while using the same words, council and staff don't always speak the same language. Thus, communication can be muddled.

### The Senior Citizens' Request For a Crosswalk

Imagine you are a council member who has received a request for a crosswalk from a group of senior citizens living in subsidized housing. They indicate in their handwritten letter that they cannot cross the four-lane street in front of their apartment building to go to church or the ice cream parlor. The request is processed routinely by the city's traffic engineer. Based on traffic counts, site distances, accident history and other objective criteria in the traffic manual, the engineer recommends against *any* traffic control at the intersection. So far, this seems like one of those 2+2 problems mentioned earlier.

Then, you as a council member are invited to the apartment house to meet with the residents. What you learn is the story behind the request. They tell you that for the elderly, dignity is tied to their mobility and independence. Not being able to cross this street confirms their worst fears, and they seem to be asking, "Isn't it appropriate for the city government to help the older citizens in this community maintain dignity in their lives?"

The 2+2 problem just turned political. It's not that the staff is wrong. Their role and orientation are to the facts, instead of sorting out the values. Council members are elected to do that job with support from a staff sensitive to the council's role.

The chart above depicts the differences in politics and administration as contrasting ways of thinking about problems due to differences in logic.

### Comparing Approaches

	Politics	Administration
<b>Orientation</b>	Playing the game	Problem-solving
<b>Players</b>	Representatives	Experts
<b>Conversation</b>	"What do you hear?"	"What do you know?"
	Storytelling	Reports
<b>Pieces</b>	Interests/symbols	Information, money, people, things
<b>Currency</b>	Power	Knowledge
<b>Dynamics</b>	Conflict, compromise, change	Harmony, cooperation, continuity

### Differences in Problem-solving Approaches

Politics involves problem solving, but not in the same vein as it does for administrative staff. The lifeblood of administration is solving problems and delivering services efficiently and equitably. I have never heard an administrator talk about the "game of administration."

Representatives, not experts, play the "game of politics," and this is essential to understand. Almost all local government elected officials (including me) are amateur politicians. Although most of us do this work as a calling, we don't put the same effort into developing our skills that we did in our primary careers. When I try to act politically, when a balancing of interests is required, I probably make mistakes that a successful "career politician" would not.

### "What do you Hear?" vs. "What do you Know?"

Officials are often elected for what they say, not for what they have accomplished as politicians or for what they know. This is not true for professional staff who come to their jobs with resumes filled with accomplishments.

Political conversations often center on anecdotes. "What do you hear?" frequently activates the political conversation. The question invites a story. Stories are very important to politics because politics and community building are about values. That's why I am not ashamed to say that what politicians say is often more important than what they know or what they have accomplished. Values are best conveyed between diverse groups through symbols. That's what stories do. They convey symbolically how people feel and what they value. I can write a treatise about justice, or I can tell a story about police brutality. The former is an academic exercise; the latter is a political one.

"What do you know?" elicits a different way of thinking. It invites a fact-based conversation presumably between experts. Often, it results in the ever-present staff report.

### A Different Rewards System

The currency of politics is power. Power is crucial to politics because politics does not take place in the familiar organizational surroundings that most of us are used to. Without hierarchy and expert specialists, it is difficult to know to whom to listen and to whom to respond.



There are no annual performance appraisals, raises or promotions. As a council member, you have to *find* ways of letting people know how effective you have been as their representative because there is no organizational structure, no supervisor, and no performance report to do it for you. In its simplest form, political power is the ability to get people to listen to your stories. You have to build a base of power without anyone showing you how it's done.

The dynamics of politics are conflict, compromise and change. The political world is charged with the passion and the drama of community building. Learn the game, play the game, get things done quickly. The time horizon is very different for staff. Long-term associations are difficult to build on conflict. Harmony is more conducive to building relationships and solving problems. Compromise and negotiation are appropriate for making choices about values. But cooperation and continuity are essential to staying the long course.

#### **The City Manager's Role**

Politics and administration encompass really different ways of thinking, and someone needs to translate in order for the partnership between council and staff to be effective. In council-manager government, that person usually is the city manager. The city manager must take the passion of politics, the stories, the conflict, and disparate thinking of the council and translate them into problems to be solved and policies to be developed in order to productively engage staff.

City managers can be more effective in their role if, first of all, they understand the role and needs of mayors and council members as described above. The manager should recognize (not fight) the natural tendency of elected officials to focus on immediate constituent issues. But city managers should also then work

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with staff to bring to the council policies, recommendations, and activities such as strategic planning that build the council's

capacity to address the big-picture issues. Don't feed the council small issues, then suddenly expect it to function

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### For More Information



For more information on council-staff relationships and related topics, the League offers the following resources:

- *Mayors and Council Members Leadership Guide (1999)*. This book provides strategies and tips for effective leadership and covers topics ranging from effective meetings to council-staff relations;
- *Guidelines for a Successful City Council-City Manager Employment Relationship (1994)*. Published by the California City Management

Foundation, this publication is designed to provide an overview of the employment relationship between a city council and a city manager.

To order, call the League's fax-on-demand service at (800) 572-5720 and request document 11, the publications order form.

The California City Management Foundation is committed to fostering positive council-manager relations. Toward this end, the foundation is pleased to have been involved in securing this article. *Western City* thanks the California City Management Foundation and the City Managers Department of the League for their assistance in bringing this information to *Western City* readers.

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effectively when it hits a big issue filled with value conflicts. Give the council choices that represent different values.

There is nothing easy about governing, and sometimes I wonder why we are so disappointed in ourselves. Politics *has* to be messy because there is no easy formula to tell which problems are more important than others and whose values should prevail. Too often, conflict is attributed to a clash of personalities or motives when actually it is a virtual certainty built into "the system." But it doesn't have to be nasty. I hope this article contributes to a better understanding and less tension as we go about doing the challenging work of public service. ■

### Don't miss These Sessions On Leadership at the Annual Conference

The League's annual conference, Oct. 10-12, 1999, in San Jose, will offer a number of session addressing leadership issues for city officials, including:

- Preparing Civic Leaders for Tomorrow;
- City Collaboration to Increase Influence;
- Practical Ethics for Local Officials;
- Enhancing Council-Staff Relations;
- Performance Measurement and Accountability;
- And More!

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