

CITY COUNCIL RELATIONSHIPS: Building a Foundation for Collaborative Governance

by Mary Thompson, Corder/Thompson & Associates

Trouble in River City

The City Manager of fast-growing River City, Texas, has been asked by the City Council to make city government effectiveness his number-one priority. Voters in the recent election made clear their anger over politics and bureaucracy getting in the way of service to the citizens. In his initiative to make city government decision making more collaborative and effective, the City Manager faces one key obstacle: the seven City Council members themselves.

Bill, who dwells on the details on each policy issue, is constantly at odds with John, a risk-taker who thrives on taking action. Ruth's abrupt communication style tends to discourage the input of Lynn, who would rather work things out behind Ruth's back. This might be tolerable if Ruth didn't suspect that Lynn was after her Mayor Pro Tem position. Pete, who recently won a Council seat by campaigning against the incompetence of the current Council is viewed with suspicion by everyone. Each council member competes for influence (and undermines the City Manager) by contacting the manager's staff directly with complaints and requests.

The Solution: A Forum to Address Working Relationships

Many city managers know that the key to making city government more collaborative is to start with the city council. "If the council is not comfortable with their differences and styles, they'll tend to have a win/lose approach to dealing with issues," says Jim Baugh, City Manager of DeSoto. "Council members who can see each other as people first and respect their differences are the ones best able to find the compromises." A council's ability to work together effectively can establish a strong foundation for collaborative initiatives throughout the city organization, among other government entities, and with key community groups. Because the city council represents the diverse views of a community, council members have a unique opportunity to set the tone for citywide discussion, debate and decision-making.

Bob Herchert, former City Manager of Fort Worth and consultant to municipal governments, suggests that council retreats can provide the time, structure, and setting to get council relationships on track. "Council members are on a roller coaster - it's easy to get bogged down in the daily issues of potholes and zoning. They need the time to stop and look at the larger issue of how they work together." Although council retreats often address a variety of topics such as strategic planning and staff reports, Texas city managers are increasingly devoting part - or all - of the retreat to building more collaborative working relationships.

Creating the Agenda

How can the agenda be structured to make sure the council gets to tackle the most important issues regarding working relationships? Following are key topics to consider in designing a retreat:

Communication and decision-making styles. One of the major obstacles to effective working relationships is the misunderstanding and tension that arises from different working styles. A council member who is action-oriented is likely to get into conflict with a council member who needs to carefully investigate the specifics of each proposal. A structured exercise or inventory can serve as a catalyst for council members to begin to address, and even value, differences in working styles.

Guidelines for effective working relationships among council members. Council members who can work together to identify obstacles to effective working relationships and then agree on strategies for collaboration are more likely to function effectively even during times of community conflict, crisis or political turmoil. The most important discussion can be a candid exchange of what behaviors get in the way of effective working relationships. Once these issues are on the table, the council can then develop a set of priority goals for working relationships (examples might include trust, respect, open and direct communication, ethical behavior, etc.) Once the goals are agreed upon, the council can work together to develop, and commit to, specific guidelines to support the priority goals.

Strategies for effective council/staff relationships. Many city managers bring key staff people to observe and even to participate in council retreats. Some managers hold retreats specifically designed for staff-council relationships. In many cases, a simple question can lead to a candid exchange between a council and staff about both problems and solutions:

- What does the city manager need from council members in order to do his or her job?
- What do the council members need from staff in order to effectively do their jobs?
- What are the characteristics of effective working relationships between council and staff?
- To maintain focus on council/staff communication in Cedar Park, City Manager Don Birkner includes all city department heads in two of the four annual council retreats.

Skills for collaborative problem solving. A presentation on collaborative problem solving or interest-based negotiation is often a step toward more effective relationships. DeSoto's City Manager Baugh suggests, "The most effective council members are the ones who have the skills to say, 'Although this issue is not important to me, I can see it is important to you; let's find a way to address it.' " In order to master this type of approach to problem solving, the group might learn about and practice such skills as listening, questioning, and identifying interests. Participants may also learn a collaborative problem-solving process which they can then practice later in the retreat as they develop an agreement on working relationships.

Factors for Success

What is the key to a successful retreat to address working relationships? “Get council members’ commitment to set aside a significant portion of time - to put aside their cell phones and agree to really be present.” says Bob Herchert. Cedar Park City Manager Don Birkner agrees: “It is essential to get a genuine commitment to participate from each council member.” Birkner addresses this issue by planning all council meetings, workshops and four annual council retreats a year in advance. College Station Mayor Lynn McIlhane suggests making sure the retreat meets everyone’s needs through initially gathering information on council members’ expectations, or even working with a planning committee of the city manager, mayor, and another council member.

How important is having a neutral facilitator? “On a scale of one to ten, a ten.” says DeSoto Council Member Gil Saulter. “A facilitator is essential to make sure that everyone can candidly share opinions. This also frees up the city manager, mayor or other council members to fully jump into the discussion and not have to worry about managing the conversation.”

Participants need an environment which will help them focus on working relationships and getting to know each other. “Take the group out of town,” suggests City Manager Jim Baugh. “Council members and even city staff need to be separated mentally as well as physically from the day-to-day issues that distract them from looking at the big picture.” “Create opportunities for people to interact informally in pairs or small groups,” suggests Council Member Saulter. “For a city manager to find a few minutes to have a cup of coffee with one or two council members provides an invaluable chance to begin to know colleagues as individuals.”

What happens after the retreat? “The retreat is just the starting point; what makes it successful is the follow through,” says Mayor McIlhane. By writing up their plan for how to work together, a council then has a working document to help maintain focus on their relationships and for re-evaluating the group’s effectiveness. The College Station Council and staff have implemented their discussions from previous retreats through the development of a Council Relations Manual, which includes agreed-upon standards of how council members will treat each other, interact with staff, and interact with the media. The manual is also available to the public.

Finally, Herchert suggests that city managers themselves should have reasonable expectations for this type of council retreat: “You may not hit a home run the first time, but don’t be discouraged; use each retreat to get the group’s input on how to make the next one even more successful.”

This article is part of a series on collaborative processes for municipal government. Judy Corder and Mary Thompson, Corder/Thompson & Associates, Austin, specialize in collaborative approaches to dispute resolution, planning and policy development. For more information or to suggest future topics, call Mary Thompson at (512)458-4427 or send an e-mail message to emmond@aol.com.